

Appendix

The English Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries

The English Reformation and the Dissolution of the monasteries took place against a backdrop of new 'Protestant' theological thought which, from the beginning of the 16th century, questioned Roman Catholic beliefs and practices and sought to introduce change. The originators of these ideas were based in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, but they had taken root in this country, particularly in eastern England and in Cambridge University.

A foretaste of the Dissolution came as early as 1524-28 when Henry VIII's Chancellor, the Ipswich-born Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, closed down 29 very small and scarcely viable religious houses (five of them in Suffolk) in order to fund the foundation of a new educational establishment in Ipswich to be known as Cardinal College.

The Reformation actually came about because of the desire of the king, Henry VIII (1510-1547) to divorce his wife, Catherine of Aragon, because she had failed to produce a male heir. In spite of Cardinal Wolsey's efforts to persuade him, the Pope would not allow an annulment of the marriage. Wolsey's failure led to his downfall and the end of the Cardinal College scheme.

By 1533 the king had taken matters into his own hands, he had satisfied himself that his marriage to Catherine was invalid and he married Anne Boleyn. The years 1534-36 saw the series of Acts of Parliament whereby Henry severed the connection between the English church and Rome and made himself Supreme Head of the church in England.

The monasteries, with their strong links with Rome, opposed Henry. He dealt with them by closing them down. First a complete valuation of all the religious houses, the 'Valor Ecclesiasticus', was undertaken and completed in 1535. The lesser monasteries were closed in 1536, the friaries in 1538 and the greater monasteries in 1539. (The greater monasteries were those with an annual income exceeding £200; in Suffolk these were Bury, Butley and Sibton). A number, anticipating their fate, closed down before those dates. All the monastic property went to the Crown, but very rapidly Henry began to sell it off as he had foreign wars (mostly brought about by his actions against the Roman Catholic church) to finance. Alongside the Dissolution, changes were made to the way in which religious worship was to be conducted. Statutes in 1536 and 1538 reduced the number of sacraments and introduced the English language and most notably the English Bible into church services instead of Latin.

Henry back-pedalled a little on his reforms towards the end of his reign, but his son Edward VI (1547-53) accelerated matters. In 1548 chantries, religious guilds and colleges of priests were suppressed. Under Edward the English Prayer Book was imposed, incorporating great changes to the theology and ceremonial of church services. Priests were allowed to marry. Between 1547 and 1550 the destruction of shrines, paintings and all religious images and the removal of stone altars was ordered. In fact many stained glass windows and 'Popish' inscriptions survived that onslaught, only to succumb to the Puritan iconoclasts nearly 100 years later.

The short reign of the Roman Catholic daughter of Catherine of Aragon, Queen Mary (1553-58), brought some respite in the rush to reform (though the 30 Suffolk Protestants who were burned for their faith would not have seen it that way).

After the Protestant Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558 a flurry of further legislation – the Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity of 1559 (making the monarch Supreme Governor rather than Supreme Head of the church) and the adoption of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion in 1563 (given statutory force in 1571) ensured that the English church became, and remained, a Protestant church – not as Protestant as in some parts of northern Europe, but definitely not Roman Catholic.

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