

St Andrew's Church, Canterbury in the Reformation



The Old Church of S^t Andrew.

*A walk in and about the city of Canterbury with
many observations not to be found in any
description hitherto published, the second
edition, by William Gostling, M.A. 1777*

The Henrician Reformation 1529-1547



Portrait of Henry VIII. © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford

In the 1520s, Henry VIII's desire to continue the Tudor dynasty through a male heir led to his decision to divorce his wife of 20 years, Catherine of Aragon, and to marry a younger woman, Ann Boleyn. However, the Catholic Church in Rome refused to grant him his wish, so Henry took matters into his own hands: the English Church broke from Rome, and the King became the supreme Head of the Church of England through the Act of Supremacy in 1534.

In 1539 The Great Bible was published, the frontispiece of which shows Henry seated domineeringly on a throne above his subjects: every parish church was ordered to have a copy, and St Andrew's would have been no exception.

However, while Henry VIII is remembered as the great instigator of the English Reformation, it would be difficult to describe him as a committed Protestant. There were few doctrinal changes of any significance during his reign; the passing of the Act of Six Articles on the 10th June 1539 reaffirmed some key tenets of Catholic belief, including transubstantiation, the necessity of the clergy to be chaste, and the continuation of private Masses.



The Great Bible, 1539. © British Library Archive

There is local evidence of the latter in the will of St Andrew's parishioner Margaret Fokes (1542):

'I will that an honest priest shall sing in the church of St Andrew for my soul, my husband's soul for one year after my decease. I will that there shall be done for the health of my soul... masses.'



A Pope celebrating Mass, late 15th century. (Royal 14 D. I f.399. S. AUGUSTINE, De civitate Dei, in FRENCH: the translation and commentary made by Raoul de Presles for Charles V of France). © British Library Archive

The St Andrew's churchwardens' accounts also reflect this continuation of Catholic practices right up until the end of Henry's reign, with considerable amounts received from parishioners throughout the 1540s for 'ye wast of mortuary tapers and torchys' during funeral rites. Catholics believed that lighted candles should surround the body to guide the soul on its way to the afterlife and also to ward off demons.

Even by 1546, the will of a Canterbury woman Joan Warlowe contains very strong Catholic beliefs such as the invocation of the saints and in particular the Virgin Mary:

'Lord God forsake me not for my sins the which be many and great but merciful God wash them away by the merits of thy blessed passion and so beseeching the help and intercession of all saints and especially the help of our blessedful Lady Mother of Mercy.'

The Counter Reformation of Mary I 1553-1558



Queen Mary I by Hans Eworth, 1554. © National Portrait Gallery, London

The radical Protestant reforms of Edward VI were not to last. Upon her succession to the throne in 1553, Mary I sought to re-establish Catholicism in England and in October 1553 a bill was passed that repealed the previous king's religious injunctions and restored the situation to the final year of Henry VIII's reign. Catholic practices were once again placed at the heart of Church of England liturgy - altars were restored, images and pictures were once again set up, and Mass began to be held in parish churches across England.

The churchwardens' accounts for St Andrew's reflect this reversion to Catholicism. In 1554-55, the church sold its Bible to 'Bassocke the booke binder' for six shillings, and the communion book was sold for twelve pence.

Thus, the Protestant emphasis on studying the written word of God was replaced by a Catholic focus on imagery: in the same year's records a carpenter was paid twenty four shillings and four pence to carve a rood and Lent cross and twenty shillings was paid to 'Jansone for pantinge the rude [rood] and the cloth of Marie and John for the Lente Crosse'



St Andrew Martyred, St Andrew's Church, Stoke Dry. © T Marshall

(the carved figures of Christ on the cross flanked by Mary on right and St John on his left was known as the rood, deriving from the Anglo-Saxon word for cross, and it would have been placed above a screen separating the nave and chancel in every medieval parish church in England until their destruction under Henry VIII).

In the accounts for the following year, this same Jansone is then paid ten shillings 'for payntyng of Seynte Andrews.'

Throughout the records for Mary's reign, there is also frequent mention once again of money spent on wax for candles and lamp oil to light up the various images and paintings that would have reappeared in the church.



This Doom painting from St Peter's Church, Wenhaston, Suffolk, is an outstanding example of early 16th century Catholic imagery and depicts The Last Judgement with Christ seated on the rainbow at the top of the painting. Similar imagery would have reappeared in St Andrew's during Mary's reign. (Wikimedia Commons)

The Church in the Reign of Elizabeth I 1558-1603



Elizabeth I in Baziliologia : a booke of kings : beeing the true and lively effigies of all our English kings from the conquest vntill this present.

© British Library Archive

Elizabeth I moved quickly to re-establish Protestantism as the official religion of England upon taking the throne in 1558, although her reforms were less radical than those of Edward VI. The historian David Starkey has described them as creating a Church that was 'Protestant in doctrine, Catholic in appearance.' While attending Mass was forbidden, and altars were replaced with communion tables, other Catholic traditions such as placing a crucifix and candles on the table were permitted, as was the wearing of traditional vestments.



A 17th-century communion table in St Laurence Church, Shotteswell (Wikimedia Commons)

Nonetheless, during Elizabeth's long reign, there was a sense of a permanent chasm opening up between the medieval Catholicism of England's past and the 'middle-way' Anglicanism favoured by the Queen. The St Andrew's churchwardens' accounts for the first two years of her reign include payment to goodman Lawncelot for taking down the rood, the sepulchre, the high altar, and the little altars that would have served as shrines to saints or as chantry houses for private masses. The same Lawncelot was also paid for defacing images around the church, and goodman Jhonson received two pence for 'putting out ye payntyng on ye walls.' In the accounts for 1560-62, four shillings, eight pence was paid for 'ye comynyon table' (a communion table), and in the following year a 'communion cuppe gylte' (a gilt communion cup) weighing twenty-two ounces was purchased, pointing to a strengthening of Anglican liturgical practices at a parish level.

More permanent architectural changes occurred in 1565, which saw the 'taking up of the stepes in the chaulonsell [chancel]', and again in 1571 when four shillings, four pence was paid 'for pulling downe of the roodelotte'.

Therefore, it was in Elizabeth's reign that St Andrew's church finally broke free of its medieval, Catholic past - and in its place came the Anglican vision of the Protestant faith that remains to this day in England and worldwide.



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