We don’t know how the Church first reached the British Isles.

Legend has it that Saint Paul or Joseph of Aramathea founded the Church of England but legend also says that Jesus visited England during the forty days following his Resurrection. More probably, Christian soldiers in the Roman army took their faith to Britain and passed it on to the inhabitants of ‘that cold and barbaric land’.

We do know that there was a Church in Britain by the year 208 CE and we know that by 314 CE that Church was important enough to send three of its bishops to a Church Council at Arles in Southern France.

Unfortunately most of the records of this early British Church were lost during the next two centuries. When the Roman armies withdrew from Britain and the Picts, Scots and Saxons invaded the land, the British people fled to the mountains in the south and west of the country, taking their Church with them. There, British Christianity continued to thrive. It developed into the important Celtic Churches of Wales and Ireland whose later missionary endeavours were responsible for the conversion of England.

Columba, Augustine and Aidan

In 563 Columba, a monk from the Irish Celtic Church, set out from Ireland with twelve companions to establish a monastery on the remote island of Iona.

From Iona they commenced a mission to the pagan Pictish kingdoms of northern Britain; a mission that was so successful that, by the time of Columba’s death in 597, Iona had already become an important centre of religious and political influence.

In that same year a company of forty monks was sent out from Rome with instructions from Pope Gregory, the Bishop of Rome, to convert the British people.

Augustine, the leader of the company, was no hero. He heard such fearsome stories about the ferocious Britons that he abandoned his mission and turned back to Rome. But Gregory was adamant. So Augustine and his frightened companions eventually arrived in England. There, much to their relief, they were received with honour.

The Anglo-Saxon King of Kent, Aethelbert, was a pagan but his wife was Christian and she had already restored the ancient Church of St Martin at Canterbury. The king’s subsequent conversion did much to ensure the success of Augustine’s mission in the south of England.

He was not, however, so successful with the pagan tribes of the north. The conversion of the north belongs to Aidan, another Celtic monk.

Oswald, the King of Northumbria, had been educated by the Irish monks of Iona. When he became King in 634, it was natural that he should request their help to convert his subjects.

One monk tried but gave up the mission as ‘hopeless’. Aidan then volunteered for the task. He set up his monastery on the lonely island of Lindisfarne and from there he carried out a successful mission to evangelise the wild tribes of the North.
The Church in depression

For a while the Church in England flourished. Monasteries were founded and these became centres of vigorous missionary activity. But that missionary zeal began to flag and the monks began to devote themselves to lives of luxury and ease.

An English historian who has studied the dietary data from the kitchener’s records at Westminster Abbey has estimated that the monks had a food and drink allowance amounting to a colossal 7,325 calories a day. This included a beer ration of a gallon a day, and on the 60 feast days every year, a litre of wine as well.

There were those who tried to revive the zeal of the Church.

In the thirteenth century a mission of Friars, the followers of St Francis of Assisi, had some success until they too succumbed to the general malaise.

And in the fifteenth century the followers of an Oxford professor, John Wycliffe, made themselves unpopular - at least with the clergy - by preaching against the wealth and laziness of the monks ‘with their great bellies and their red fat cheeks’. Their contempt was nothing new.

For centuries the morals of the clergy had been the butt of bawdy tavern songs. But now there was a new and informed awareness of the disease in the Body of Christ. The Printing Press was up and running. For the first time books were freely available in quantity - over 100 editions of the Bible were published between 1450 and 1500 - and scholars all over Europe were beginning to question the scandal and to agitate for the reform of the Church.

The Reformation of the 16th Century

The event that sparked the reform of the Church was the sale of an Indulgence to finance the building of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. An Indulgence was supposed to allow ordinary people to add to their own account the extraordinary virtue of the saints of past ages; a kind of heavenly life insurance policy.

Martin Luther, a German monk and the Professor of Holy Scripture at the University of Wittenburg, objected to the Indulgence. He had found his own peace with God through his study of the scriptures.

He realised that there is nothing we can ever do to earn God’s love; that God’s love is freely given by a God who loves us just as we are. The thinking behind the Indulgence - that we can buy God’s love - was therefore offensive to Luther.

On All Saints’ Eve, 31 October 1517, he nailed to the door of the castle church at Wittenburg a placard inscribed with ‘Ninety-five Theses upon Indulgences’ and declared his readiness to defend these theses in public debate.

Luther had no intention of starting a revolution and, normally, this relatively insignificant event would have gone unnoticed. But the Church was ripe for reform and would-be reformers flocked to Luther’s banner.

By 1520 his name was known throughout Western Christendom. People were eager to buy his books and pamphlets and his ideas spread like wildfire. The Pope issued a Papal Bull condemning some of Luther’s writings as heretical and calling on the faithful to burn his books. Luther responded by burning the Papal Bull. For that act of defiance he was excommunicated; cut off from the sacraments of the Church.

But it was too late. In 1529 a group of German princes lined up behind Luther and delivered a Protest - the origin of our word Protestant - against those who would stop the Reformation of the Church. They formed a new political league and under their protection Luther began to reform the German Church.

Martin Luther’s example was followed by other reformers all over Europe so that by the middle of the sixteenth century the Reformation was an established fact.

Except in England.

Think about it

Jan van Leyden announced that a new world order [anabaptism] had been revealed to him and promptly began to implement it. Money was abolished; polygamy was legalized; marriage was made compulsory for women. Those who dissented faced execution.

- Alister E. McGrath, Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution: