Henry was a prince among princes. A musician, a man of culture, an athlete and deeply religious, as the King's second son he was probably destined to be the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Pope had awarded him the title 'Defender of the Faith' for his defence of the Catholic Church against the teachings of Martin Luther. But all that changed in 1509 when Henry became Henry VIII, King of England.

Henry and the Pope

Henry had an older brother, Arthur, who was the natural heir to the English throne.

In order to seal a treaty with the King of Spain, Arthur was betrothed to the Spanish King's daughter, Katherine of Aragon. But Arthur died, Henry became King and to preserve the existing treaty the Pope gave Henry a special dispensation to marry Katherine.

After 18 years of marriage their only living child was a girl - Mary - and Henry needed a son to secure his throne. He therefore applied to the Pope for permission to divorce Katherine.

At any other time he probably would have got what he wanted since it was not unusual for the Pope to give such permission to kings and men of power. But the Pope at that time was under the 'protection' of the King of Spain and the King of Spain happened to be Katherine's nephew.

For two years the Pope put off the decision. Finally Henry's patience ran out, probably goaded by the fact that Anne Boleyn was about to give birth to his child.

He declared himself to be 'The Supreme Head of the English Church so far as the Law of Christ doth allow', appointed his own Archbishop of Canterbury, divorced Catherine and married Anne.

A few days later Anne gave birth to another daughter, Elizabeth.

For the average English citizen all this was a non-event. The bishops were still the bishops of the Church of England. The clergy were still celibate - as much as they had ever been - and the Mass was still said in Latin. The Pope was no longer Head of the Church of England but that mattered little to the ordinary English Christian. It was a political change, not a religious change. In the parish churches things went on as usual.

The real changes started to happen when Henry died and his son Edward became king.

Edward and Mary

Edward VI was just nine years old when he succeeded to the throne. The country was governed by his two Protectors, both of whom had been influenced by the Reformation of the Church in Europe. In Edward’s name they ordered the Archbishop of Canterbury to reform the English Church.

Now the parish churches began to see the changes. The services of the Church were said in English for the first time; the Bible was translated into English; Archbishop Cranmer compiled an English Prayer Book; and dozens of silly superstitions that had been acquired by the Church during the age of depression were swept away.

Cranmer would have taken the reform even further but in 1553 Edward died and his half-sister Mary, the embittered daughter of Katherine of Aragon, came to the throne.

Immediately the old unreformed Catholicism was reinstated in England. The Archbishop and the leaders of the reform movement were thrown into prison and Mary set out to purge all signs of the Reformation from her kingdom.

It was an age of martyrdom. Many died rather than revert to the old ways and it looked as though the Church of England would return to the papal fold. But in 1558 Mary died and her step-sister became Queen Elizabeth I.

Elizabeth I

It is to Elizabeth, the daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, that we owe the foundation and shape of the modern Church of England.

Elizabeth had survived the reigns of her half-brother Edward and her half-sister Mary. She had experienced the excesses of the Protestant reform and of the Catholic restoration and she was determined not to make the same mistakes. She therefore set out to steer a path between
those who wanted the Church to break completely with the past and those who wanted the Church the way it had always been - the famous Via Media or Middle Way.

Once again the Pope’s representatives were banished from England, but so too were the more extreme of the Protestant reformers. Elizabeth restored the English Prayer Book, allowed the clergy to marry, ordered the destruction of all ‘monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry and superstition’, and defined the faith of the Church of England in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion.

Perhaps Elizabeth’s ‘Middle Way’ is best exemplified in her Prayer Book where the words for the Administration of Holy Communion from both the Catholic and the Protestant Prayer Books are simply combined to read, ‘The body of our Lord Jesus Christ which was given for thee preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving’.

Thanks to Elizabeth, the reformed Church of England managed to preserve its national independence while still maintaining its continuity with the historic Apostolic Church. The reformed Church still held to the apostolic Gospel, creeds, ministry, scriptures and sacraments but she now had ‘her face washed and dried with a rough towel’.

Further reform

It would be good to be able to say that the Church of England has never had need of further reform. Unfortunately that has not been the case.

By the eighteenth century the Church of England was no longer the only Church in England. It was the Church of the nation, the only Church established by law, but this status was not necessarily an advantage.

The Church was seen by many to be little more than a Department of State. It was accepted that the Church had a cultural and political role but it was becoming obvious that it was failing to meet the spiritual challenges of the age. Geared to a rural model of ministry she had little to say to the millions crowding into the cities as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution.

A number of reform movements, each quite different in its approach to the problem, rose to the challenge.

Those who belonged to the Evangelical Movement had a vision of reform grounded in the scriptures. They called for a return to a real, rather than a nominal, Christianity. Many of its members - notably John Newton, the slave trader turned Priest, and William Wilberforce the parliamentarian - lived out their new-found faith by challenging the evils of society. The abolition of the slave trade was largely due to their efforts.

Others did much to bring about the reform of the draconian factory laws. Still others were marked by their missionary zeal. They founded the Church Missionary Society and gave solid support to the fledgling Sunday School Movement to bring basic education to the masses.

The members of the Oxford Movement centred their vision of reform on the Church. They called for it to be, not a Department of State, but an independent force for good in society. The strength of the movement can be gauged by two petitions presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1834 calling on him to reform the Church and on the bishops to assume greater leadership. Those petitions were signed by 7000 clergy and 230,000 laity.

The Oxford Movement was responsible for a remarkable revival in the Church. A new wave of missionaries set out to proclaim the Gospel to the nations. Others led the way in ministering to the slum dwellers of England’s great cities. Still others revived the monastic life as part of the Anglican experience.

The Christian Socialists formed a third movement for reform. They pursued a vision of God at work in society; of the Church at work in the world. They were concerned not just to minister to society’s victims but to eradicate those ills which caused people to become victims.

In practice, all these ‘movements’ were not so well defined. Each was influenced by the others and membership would often overlap. Enough to say that, together, they had a major influence on the English Church, on English society, and on our modern civilisation. And they initiated the missionary endeavour which resulted in the world-wide Anglican Communion.

Think about it

*When an Anglican is asked, ‘Where was your Church before the Reformation?’, his best answer is to put the counter-question, ‘Where was your face before you washed it?’.*

- Archbishop Michael Ramsey