

British History Series: Episode 18: Henry VIII and the Break From Rome

This handout summarizes a fascinating period of British history, focusing on King Henry VIII, his quest for a male heir, and the dramatic break with the Church of Rome.

Henry VIII Ascends the Throne

- **1509:** Henry VIII becomes king at age 17, following the death of his father, Henry VII.
- **Tudor Stability:** Henry VII had ended the Wars of the Roses and secured a peaceful succession — rare after a century of conflict.
- **Unexpected Heir:** Henry VIII wasn't meant to be king — his elder brother, **Prince Arthur**, was.
- **Arthur's Death:** Arthur died young after marrying **Catherine of Aragon**, leaving her widowed in England at age 17.

The Marriage to Catherine of Aragon

- **Political Alliance:** Henry VII wanted to maintain ties with Spain by marrying Catherine to Henry VIII.
- **Papal Obstacle:** Biblical law forbade marrying a brother's widow. The Pope initially refused.
- **Diplomatic First:** Catherine acted as **Spain's ambassador**, the first woman in European history to do so.
- **Annulment & Marriage:** After Catherine swore her first marriage was never consummated, the Pope granted annulment.
- **1509 Marriage:** Henry and Catherine married and were crowned together on Midsummer's Day.
- **24-Year Marriage:** Their marriage was the longest of all Henry's — three times longer than the rest combined.

The Quest for a Male Heir

- **Dynastic Anxiety:** Henry feared instability without a male successor.
- **Losses:** Catherine gave birth to a son who died after six weeks, plus multiple miscarriages.
- **Princess Mary:** Born in 1516 — but no reigning queen had ever ruled England.
- **Illegitimate Son:** In 1519, Henry's mistress, Elizabeth Blount, gave birth to **Henry Fitzroy**, openly acknowledged and titled Duke of Somerset and Richmond.

Henry's Dilemma and Succession Options

By the 1520s, Catherine was in her 40s. Henry considered three options:

1. Marry Princess Mary

- Mary was legitimate and could marry a European prince.
- But it would take decades for her child to grow up and rule.
- A child from Mary would not be a Tudor.

2. Legitimise Henry Fitzroy

- Papal approval was needed — unlikely due to Catherine's powerful nephew, Emperor **Charles V**.
- There were also other Plantagenet descendants in the background.

3. Annul the Marriage & Remarry

- Henry claimed Catherine had consummated her first marriage, making their union sinful.
- He argued the Pope had erred — but Charles V blocked the annulment through papal influence.

The Break with Rome

Wolsey's Fall

- **Cardinal Wolsey** failed to get the annulment and was removed from power.
- Henry seized his palace (Hampton Court) and fortune.

Protestant Ideas Rise

- Figures like **Martin Luther** challenged Catholic teachings:
 - Salvation by **faith alone**
 - Mass as **symbolic**, not literal
 - Bible over liturgy
 - Criticism of relics/shrines

Irony: "Defender of the Faith"

- In 1521, Henry wrote against Luther — the Pope rewarded him with this title (still used today).

The Church as a “Fifth Column”

- 800 monastic houses in England paid taxes to Rome and followed papal courts.
- Henry saw them as **wealthy, disloyal, and untaxed**.

Royal Spending Habits

- Henry was chronically broke, spending lavishly on:
 - Feasting, jousting, jewels
 - 2,000 tapestries vs. Scotland’s 200
 - Navy and military campaigns

Clash with the Pope

- With no male heir, mounting debt, and love for **Anne Boleyn**, Henry prepared for confrontation.

Thomas Cromwell and Acts of Parliament

- **Cromwell’s Rise:** A lawyer turned chief advisor who used Parliament to push Henry’s reforms.
- **Parliament’s Mood:** Open to church reform and anti-papal sentiment.

Key Legislation:

- **Act in Restraint of Appeals (1533):** No religious appeals to the Pope — the King had final say.
- **Marriage Annulled:** Cranmer (now under Henry’s control) annulled Henry’s marriage.
- **Catherine Demoted:** Became “Princess Dowager.”
- **Catherine’s Loyalty:** Defended England during war and won **Battle of Flodden Field**.
- **Death & Legacy:** Died three years later. Her tomb reads: *“Catherine, Queen of England.”*

Henry’s Further Actions and the Line of Succession

- **Marriage to Anne Boleyn:** Took place within three months of the annulment.
- **Birth of Elizabeth:** Anne gave birth to a daughter, **Princess Elizabeth**.
- **Act of Succession (1534):**
 - Declared **Mary illegitimate**

- Named **Elizabeth** the heir

Triple Attack on the Church (1534):

- **Act of Supremacy:** Declared the **King** as **head of the Church of England**
- **Act of Submission of the Clergy:** Clergy had to swear loyalty to the King
- **Treason Act:** Punishable by death to deny Henry's supremacy

The Quest for an Heir Continues

- **Anne Boleyn's Fall:** Executed in 1536 after failing to bear a son.
- **Jane Seymour:** Engaged one day later; gave birth to **Edward VI.**
- **Jane's Death:** Died 12 days after childbirth, the only wife buried as a queen.

Further Acts of Succession:

- Declared both **Mary and Elizabeth illegitimate**
- Ensured Edward (and future Seymour children) had undisputed claim

A Brief Reflection

Henry VIII's pursuit of a male heir and control over the Church reshaped England. His break with Rome sparked the **English Reformation**, dissolved monasteries, and permanently shifted religious and political power from the Pope to the Crown — setting the stage for centuries of change.