

Christians in Britain

The first mention of any Christians in Britain is Tertullian's tract against the Jews, written about 208, in which he speaks of parts of Britain, inaccessible to the Romans, which had yet been conquered by Christ; while Origen, writing about thirty years later, includes Britain among the places where Christians are to be found.¹

The Romans had come to Britain as early as 55 B.C.E., and over the years, they had brought some Christians with them. A man named Alban is the earliest Christian in Britain known by name, as well as the first documented British martyr. He was a soldier in the Roman army, stationed about twenty miles northeast of London. He gave shelter to a Christian priest who was fleeing from persecution, and was converted by him. When officers came to arrest the priest, Alban dressed himself in the priest's clothes and gave himself up. Alban was tortured and martyred in place of the priest in the year 209.

We know that a contingent of British bishops attended a council of the church in 359. We also know that they were driven to accept an imperial offer of money to pay their expenses, even though all of the other bishops refused to do so in order to preserve their independence. Apparently, the English church was yet quite poor, unlike European counterparts.

From the end of the fourth century, we have clearer evidence of personalities who shaped the expression of the Christian faith on the British isles. A man named Pelagius left Britain about 380, never to return. As he was condemned as a heretic by the great Augustine of Hippo, perhaps that was a good thing. Anglicans are frequently accused of being "semi-Pelagian" to this day. The monk Ninian came to Britain in 397 as a solitary missionary, and established a monastery in Galloway (southwestern Scotland). Patrick, the son of a Roman "decurion" or local administrator, was abducted in England and taken to Ireland as a slave. He escaped, became a monk then a priest, and returned to the scene of his captivity to preach the gospel. He was consecrated bishop in the year 432. Patrick was not the only one to cross over from Ireland to England. A monk named Columba left Ireland in 563 and founded a mission on the island we now call Iona, off of western Scotland. From there, his disciple Aidan crossed the country and began a ministry in Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, off the east coast of England—a place that is inaccessible at high tide, even today.



St. Augustine
of Canterbury

Up to this point, the conversion of Britain was disorganized, haphazard, and under-funded—often accomplished by monks. In 596, the pope (Gregory the Great) selected one of his own monks by the name of Augustine to lead an expedition to England. They landed in County Kent (on England's southeast shore), and within a few weeks had converted King Ethelbert of Kent.

Augustine subsequently sailed for Gaul, where he was consecrated a bishop, and returned to England as the first Archbishop of Canterbury (chief among all the clergy of the English church).



Shrine of St.
Alban, outside
London

¹ John Moorman, *A History of the Church of England*, 3.

By the middle of the seventh century, the church was still somewhat chaotic in England. From the south, we had the spread of official Roman Catholicism, but in the north there were a variety of Christian groups founded by various Celtic figures, with varying degrees of loyalty to Rome. In 663, Oswy, the king of Northumbria, celebrated Easter at a time when his wife was still keeping her Lenten fast: his date for Easter was calculated according to Celtic tradition, hers Roman. A synod (or deciding council) was called in the town of Whitby, and the English voted to come into line with Western Christendom, adopting the customs of Rome. The synod was held at the mixed abbey founded by a wise and powerful woman named Hilda. She had both monks and nuns under her rule, living separately but worshipping together. Among those who helped persuade the synod to adopt Roman customs was Cuthbert, the so-called “wonder worker of Britain,” whose mortal remains are buried at Durham Cathedral.

Two notable scholars of the English Church deserve mention here: the Venerable Bede and Alcuin. Bede wrote the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in 731, and for this is rightly called “the father of English historians.” It is from Bede’s history that we know details of Augustine of Canterbury and his rich correspondence with Gregory the Great. A liturgical scholar, Alcuin was commissioned by the Roman emperor Charlemagne to help establish the Roman rite as the norm of the newly consolidated empire. (There was still considerable diversity.)

Dunstan, a monk of Glastonbury, helped re-energize English monasticism in the late tenth century, and for his work was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. Edward, son of Ethelred the Unready, was crowned king of England in 1043, when a monarchy all England was restored after a period of distress. Edward was both king and monk, and one positive monument of his otherwise-desolate reign was the building of the first abbey at Westminster, which was dedicated in 1065.



With the Norman conquest of England in 1066 came considerable change, including new styles of architecture and greater conformity of English religious practices with continental ones. Under Anselm (Archbishop of Canterbury 1093-1109), the

church struggled with issues of power and authority, with Anselm championing the pope over the English monarch. Henry II, the king of England from 1154 to 1189, struggled bitterly over primacy with his archbishop, Thomas à Becket. Becket was murdered inside Canterbury Cathedral in 1170.

A growing nationalist feeling resulted in various acts of Parliament, beginning in 1351 with the *Statute of Provisors*, which declared invalid all papal appointments to positions in the English church. A monk at the time wrote, “Lord Jesus! Either take away the pope from our midst or lessen the power which he presumes to have over our people.” William Langland, in *Piers the Ploughman*, attacked the clergy for abuses which disgraced the church and divided the nation in about 1360.

In 1509, Henry VIII assumed the throne. Although teachings of Luther were being discussed in English universities, Henry was a staunch supporter of Rome. He was dubbed “Defender of the Faith” by the pope for his loyalty, and the English monarch retains this title to this day. Yet,

By the year 1527 Henry had been married for eighteen years, but although Katharine had borne him at least three sons and two daughters all, except one of the daughters, had died in infancy. Katharine being now forty years old it was becoming obvious that the chances of a male heir were slight. England had never been successfully ruled by a woman, and the outlook was serious indeed. Katharine had previously been the wife of Henry's elder brother Arthur who died in 1502, and Henry would not in the normal course of events been allowed to marry his deceased brother's wife. But in this instance the influence of the parents was so strong that the pope, Julius II, had been persuaded to grant a special dispensation. Then disaster had succeeded disaster, and the king was not the only one who began to wonder whether the whole thing had not been a mistake.²

Henry, you see, was convinced that God was punishing him for adultery, citing Leviticus 20:21. By 1531, Henry was becoming desperate, at age 40 with no male heir. (In a misunderstanding of medicine dating back to Aristotle, the gender of a child was considered the woman's doing, and thus Henry sought a way out of the marriage he now considered sinful.) Henry had made the acquaintance of a Cambridge tutor named Thomas Cranmer in 1529. Cranmer suggested that the legality of Henry's marriage to Katharine of Aragon should be decided by the universities of Europe, and most of their responses were favorable to the king. Beginning in 1532, bills were passed by Parliament, each carefully designed to cut one of the threads that bound England to Rome.



In 1533, Cranmer (by then Archbishop of Canterbury) declared Henry's marriage to Katharine null and void on May 23. Five days later, Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn was made public, and on June 1 Anne was crowned queen. On September 7, Anne's first child was born, the princess Elizabeth.

Henry VIII
Defender of the Faith

Henry was desperately short of money for his extravagant court, and needed to build his military forces because of threats from papal loyalists on the continent. Now titled "Supreme Head of the Church" in England, Henry acted to dissolve the monasteries, so he could seize their assets. Henry's marriage to Anne also produced no male heirs, and he subsequently had her beheaded. His third wife, Jane Seymour, gave birth to Edward VI, a sickly boy who was crowned king of England at the age of 9 when Henry died in 1547.

² Moorman, *History*, 164.