

Who are the English Martyrs?

Canonised on 19 May 1935:

St John Fisher

St Thomas More

Canonised on 25 October 1970:

The Forty Martyrs of England and Wales are a group of Catholic, lay and religious, men and women, executed between 1535 and 1679 for treason and related offences under various laws enacted by Parliament during the English Reformation.

The English martyrs in this group are:

- Saint [John Almond](#)
- Saint [Edmund Arrowsmith S.J](#)
- Saint [Ambrose Barlow O.S.B](#)
- Saint [John Boste](#)
- Saint [Alexander Briant S.J](#)
- Saint [Edmund Campion S.J](#)
- Saint [Margaret Clitherow](#)
- Saint [Thomas Garnet S.J](#)
- Saint [Edmund Gennings](#)
- Saint [John Houghton O.Cart](#)
- Saint [Philip Howard](#)
- Saint [John Kemble](#)
- Saint [Luke Kirby](#)
- Saint [Robert Lawrence O.Cart](#)
- Saint [Anne Line](#)
- Saint [Cuthbert Mayne](#)
- Saint [Henry Morse S.J](#)
- Saint [Nicholas Owen S.J](#)
- Saint [John Payne](#)
- Saint [Polydore Plasden](#)
- Saint [John Plessington](#)
- Saint [Richard Reynolds O.Ss.S](#)
- Saint [John Rigby](#)



THE FORTY MARTYR-SAINTS OF ENGLAND AND WALES
from the painting commissioned by the General Postulation and executed by Mrs. Daphne Poffen

- Saint [Alban Roe O.S.B](#)
- Saint [Ralph Sherwin](#)
- Saint [Robert Southwell S.J](#)
- Saint [John Southworth](#)
- Saint [John Stone O.E.S.A](#)
- Saint [John Wall O.F.M](#)
- Saint [Henry Walpole](#)
- Saint [Margaret Ward](#)
- Saint [Augustine Webster O.Cart](#)
- Saint [Swithun Wells](#)
- Saint [Eustace White](#)

Beatified on 15 December 1929:

In addition to these canonised martyrs, the 107 Martyrs of England and Wales are a group of clergy and laypersons who were executed on charges of treason and related offences in the Kingdom of England between 1541 and 1680.

England before the Reformation

Before the Reformation almost everyone in the British Isles and Ireland was Catholic and part of the Roman Catholic Church. The ancient parish churches in our villages are witnesses to these times when communities worshipped together as one Church. Many of these village churches we have today were built in Saxon and Norman times, 600 – 1200 AD. Eg St Andrew's church in East Hagbourne was built in the early 1100s.



Christianity was introduced to the British Isles during the Roman occupation. The Berber writer Tertullian wrote in 300 AD that Christianity could be found "even in Britain". But after the fall of the Roman Empire and the invasions of pagan Angles and Saxons, it mostly died out. In 597 AD, Pope Gregory I sent St Augustine to convert Britain. He landed in Kent and Christianity spread from there.



Around the same time Irish missionaries, led by St Aidan, set about converting the North. Locally, St Birinus, sent by Pope Honorius I, preached the Gospel to King Cygnalis of the West Saxons in 635 AD. The land for Dorchester Abbey was given by King Cygnalis when he was baptised in the river Thames there. Dorchester was the centre of Christianity in Wessex, until eclipsed by Winchester.

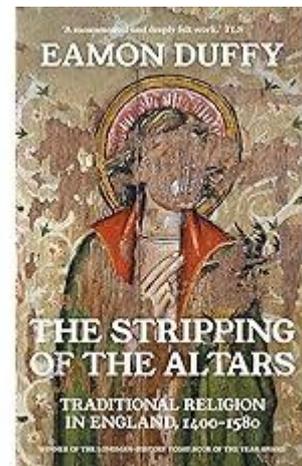
Roman Catholic Christianity was central to the lives of everyone before the Reformation. Holy Days were holidays. Much of the land was owned either by the King or by abbeys and monasteries, so influenced local and national economies. Care for the sick and for the poor were provided by the local abbey or convent. Family law and the law of sanctuary were overseen by the Church. There were many centres of pilgrimage throughout Britain. England's devotion to Mary was known throughout the Church and England was referred to as Mary's Dowry.

There is an excellent book about life in England before and during the Reformation: ["The Stripping of the Altars" by Eamon Duffy](#).

The Reformation

The period of history known as the Reformation is complicated, driven by both politics and deep religious conviction on all sides.

In 1534, the English Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, which declared King Henry VIII supreme head of the Church of England, rather than the Pope in Rome. Between 1536 and 1541 he ordered the Dissolution of the Monasteries, seizing their land and wealth and selling them off to nobles, gentry, etc. Financial provision was usually offered to the monks and nuns but many resisted. Bl. Hugh Faringdon OSB was the last abbot of Reading Abbey. He refused to sign over the abbey to the king and was hanged, drawn and quartered in front of the abbey church in 1539.



During the reign of Elizabeth I, in 1585, it became treason to be a Roman Catholic, to reconcile another to Roman Catholicism and for a Catholic priest to enter the country, as well as for anyone to aid or shelter him. Nevertheless, young men travelled to Europe from England, trained as priests and returned to minister to the remnant "recusant" Catholics and to work for the re-conversion of England to Roman Catholicism. Many were caught and martyred, along with those who helped them.

Penal Times

Following the Reformation Parliament began passing laws, known as the Penal Laws, discriminating against non-Anglicans, particularly Catholics, who, because they recognised the authority of the Pope over that of the monarch, were considered enemies of the state.

In England, Catholics were fined weekly for not attending Anglican church services and it was illegal to worship using Roman Catholic liturgies, inherit property, purchase land, hold public office, hold military office, sit as an MP, attend Oxford or Cambridge universities, teach or send their children abroad to be educated. The laws were harsher in Ireland.

Roman Catholic families tended to gather together and live in small pockets around the country, including clusters around Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cumberland and Westmorland. Landed gentry who managed to hold onto their land and houses are more widely spread and there are a number of important examples in our pastoral area and surroundings.

There followed a slow journey towards freedom of religion and conscience, with the gradual repeal of anti-Catholic laws during the late 18th and 19th Centuries. Until very recent times, Roman Catholics continued to experience discrimination and social exclusion throughout British society. Cardinal Basil Hume's time in office, 1976-1998, saw Catholicism become more accepted in Britain than it had been for 400 years. 1995 saw the first visit of Queen Elizabeth II to Westminster Cathedral. He also read from the Bible at the installation ceremony of Robert Runcie as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1980. In June 1982, Pope St John Paul II was the first Pope to visit the UK in 400 years, where he visited Canterbury Cathedral, founded by St Augustine, and prayed with Archbishop Runcie for Christian martyrs of all denominations.



Local history

These local houses have a rich history of faithfulness to Roman Catholicism:

Stonor Park: where St Edmund Campion hid and ran his printing press.

Hendred House

Milton Manor

Mapledurham

You can also visit the ruins of Abingdon Abbey and Reading Abbey, two of the largest abbeys in England until the Dissolution. St James's church in Reading incorporates stone from the former abbey.

An excellent book has been written by Tony Hadland on our local area's penal Catholic history: "[Thames Valley Papists: from Reformation to Emancipation, 1534-1829](#)"

Oxford martyrs

Fr George Nichols, Fr Richard Yaxley, Thomas Belson and Humphrey Pritchard were executed for their Catholic Faith on 5 July 1589 at Holywell gallows in Oxford. There is a commemorative plaque at 100 Holywell St in central Oxford. More information:

https://www.oxfordhistory.org.uk/streets/inscriptions/central/catholic_martyrs.html

All the martyrs of the Reformation (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) are commemorated on a memorial erected inside the University Church of St Mary-the-Virgin on 19 June 2008.