

# Shakespeare in his Historical Context

## Before Elizabeth

King Henry VIII wanted a son, because he believed women could not rule well. When his first wife Catherine of Aragon had a girl (Mary) he asked the Pope for a divorce. The Pope refused, so Henry made himself Head of the Church of England. His second wife, Anne Boleyn, had a girl too (Elizabeth). Anne was executed. His third wife died giving birth to a son (Edward). Henry had six wives altogether. To get more money, he shut all the monasteries, which were very rich. The monks had taught children, so most schools closed. After Henry's death, Edward VI was only a boy. His advisers founded new schools and made England more Protestant. Edward died young, and his sister Mary became queen. Mary married Philip of Spain and made England Catholic again. Protestants were burned as heretics. She also died without children, so Elizabeth became Queen Elizabeth I.



## TIMELINE

Henry VIII	1509
Luther begins the Reformation	1517
Henry becomes head of Church	1534
Monasteries dissolved	1536-9
Bible in English	1539
Edward VI	1547
Mary I	1553
Elizabeth I	1558
Shakespeare born	1564
Spanish Armada	1588
Essex's rebellion	1601
James I	1603
Gunpowder plot	1605
Shakespeare died	1616
Thirty Years' War in Europe	1618
Charles I	1625
Civil War	1642
Charles I executed Commonwealth	1649
Restoration Charles II	1660

## The people and Parliament

A lot of old land-owning families (the nobles) were becoming less important. Nobles met in Parliament in the House of Lords. The merchants in the towns were getting richer. Most ordinary people worked on the land or in a trade. They learned their trade as apprentices, then worked in another town as journeymen before becoming masters. Householders could vote for representatives in Parliament in the House of Commons.



## Elizabeth's government

Elizabeth ruled the country with the help of her advisers at court in the Privy Council. Parliament provided her with money from taxes. She used a mixture of charm and strictness to rule. She knew what was happening in the country through government officials and a network of spies.

## Enemies abroad

Elizabeth tried to keep peace by diplomacy and charm, but in 1588 Philip of Spain tried to invade England to bring back the Catholic Church. His 'Armada' was defeated by English ships and the weather. Catholics in Ireland rebelled against English rule there.

## Religion

Under Elizabeth, the Church of England was independent from Rome. It combined elements of Catholic and Protestant beliefs. The Bible and Prayer Book were in English. Church attendance was compulsory. But some extreme Catholics (Papists) and extreme Protestants (Puritans) rejected the Anglican compromise.



## Enemies at home

Some people (often because they wanted the Catholic Church back) plotted to kill Elizabeth and put her cousin Mary Stuart (who had been Queen of Scotland before the Protestants there drove her out) on the throne instead. Elizabeth finally had her executed. Later the Earl of Essex tried to rebel against Elizabeth. Nobles guilty of treason were beheaded. Ordinary traitors were executed in public by hanging, drawing and quartering.

## Voyages

Famous sea captains like Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Martin Frobisher sailed to distant lands. They stole treasure from the Spaniards in the Caribbean. Raleigh founded a colony in Virginia. Trading companies started to trade in North America and India.



## The succession

Elizabeth did not marry and had no children. When she died, Mary Stuart's son James, the Protestant King of Scotland, became King James I of England too, uniting Scotland and England. During his reign there was a Catholic plot to blow up the King and Parliament, after which Catholics were persecuted, and Puritans left the country to worship in their own way. Some were given land in Northern Ireland, while others went to America as the Pilgrim Fathers. James's daughter Elizabeth married Elector Frederick of the Rhineland. James's son Charles became king, but quarrelled with Parliament. After a civil war, he was executed in 1649 and England became a republic under the Puritan Oliver Cromwell.