



Bletchingley Conservation and Historical Society

How Politics Affected the Church in Bletchingley

In 2018 the Rev Phaedra Pamphilon-Green spoke to the Bletchingley Conservation and Historical Society about how over a 1000 years of constant faith and society could be undone in just a few decades and how matters affecting the whole country had an immense impact on the lives of people in Bletchingley.

The Rev “Phe” started with how Christianity in England arrived in the late 2nd Century AD and the role that the Romans (particularly Emperor Constantine) had in the subsequent development of the religion. Over time the Christian faith flourished, despite other, “pagan”, invasions (such as the Vikings), when churches were plundered and priests had to flee. The arrival of William the Conqueror (a Christian) in 1066 with his powerful Norman acquaintances cemented the power of the Church and saw new stone buildings for churches, schools and entertainment centres. The earliest part of St Mary’s Bletchingley dates from this time. Although the King, William was not the leader of the Church – this title was held by the Pope as the head of the Catholic Church. This system survived well until the 16th Century, and then....

Three individuals, Martin Luther in Germany, John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli in Switzerland, presented an alternative to Roman Catholicism and the Reformation began to take place, helped by the new invention of the printing press. In England, there was little interest in these new ideas; Henry VIII was granted the title “Defender of the Faith” in 1521 following the publication of his book dismissing Luther’s arguments.

However, Henry’s desire for a male heir soon changed all that. His wife, Catherine of Aragon, had had seven pregnancies but only one was successful – a girl, Mary. Henry was now smitten by Anne Boleyn and he was convinced if he could marry her then a boy would be born. The Pope refused to annul the marriage to Catherine but eventually in 1533 Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, with legislation drafted by Thomas Cromwell, declared Henry’s marriage null and void leaving him free to marry Anne (which in fact he had already done in secret). Henry and Cranmer were immediately excommunicated by the Pope. Shortly afterwards, Elizabeth was born.

The split from Rome now started in earnest and under the Act of Supremacy in 1534 the Church of England came under the direct control of the King – not the Pope. It became an act of treason for anyone to believe otherwise – including for our forefathers in Bletchingley. Henry was content to keep England Catholic but Thomas Cromwell helped push through changes against the old religion and its accusations of idolatry. The Ten Articles published in 1536 were to “establish quietness and unity amongst us” using the Holy Scriptures as the basis for the new religion. The subsequent

destruction of the monasteries meant the destruction of the Roman Catholic religion in England; it also meant the redistribution of the wealth from the Church – mainly to Henry and (often) to individual clergy members.

Henry's son, Edward VI (by Jane Seymour) had been raised as a Protestant and started to make the nation's change to Protestantism more real when he came to the throne in 1547. The Bible was now in English (not Latin) and there were no more pilgrimages to (Catholic) shrines. The Book of Common Prayer was issued in 1549 and priests were allowed to marry; statues were removed from churches, prayers for the dead were banned. What turmoil there must have been for the parishioners of Bletchingley. But then....

In 1553 Edward died and Mary (Catherine of Aragon's only child) came to the throne. She, quite unsurprisingly, hated the changes and immediately set about turning the church back to Catholicism. Church services (including the Mass) were restored and newly married priests had to leave their wives. The Act of Supremacy was repealed making the Pope leader of the Church again. Protestants were hanged. Where did this leave the people of Bletchingley? But then....

In 1558 Mary also died having married Prince Philip of Spain in the hope of stopping the Protestant Elizabeth succeeding her. The plan did not work as Mary had had no children, and Elizabeth I came to the throne and continued Edward's reforms. The country has been officially Protestant ever since.

But where did this now leave the parishioners of Bletchingley? Totally confused like the rest of the country. However, there were two men affected more than others. Benedict Mulsho was rector of Bletchingley until 1547 (Catholic to Protestant) and William Wakelyn until 1554 (Protestant to Catholic) and again in 1559 under Elizabeth (Protestant). They had to preach sometimes in Latin, sometimes in English; they could marry, they couldn't marry (Wakelyn had a wife & children); there was a new Prayer Book and Bible, then there wasn't; the churches statues were removed and sold; there were five different liturgies (including one where the Pope had to be formally abused). The rectors were supported by the local lord of the manor, Sir Nicholas Carew and later Sir Thomas Carwarden. Sir Nicolas had been a popular statesman with Henry but fell from grace after showing sympathy for the (Catholic) Catherine's plight – even more so after Anne's own downfall and he was eventually found guilty of treason. He had owned Bletchingley Place which was subsequently given to Anne of Cleves by Henry after their divorce. She was Protestant but then returned to the Catholic faith under Mary - and would no doubt keep a close eye on the local church.

It is recorded that in 1554 the congregation wanted to use the more Catholic (old) style ritual of taking the Host to the Altar of Repose on Maundy Thursday to be watched over but the then rector disagreed as he thought this would be seen as idolatry by the reforming Protestants. The Historical Association were slightly surprised to be asked if anyone remembered the conversation. But yes, someone did - as the very same subject was discussed this Spring as to which church ritual should be used at Easter 2018.