

## Christ Church Dunstable—Leaders' training

# Christianity in Britain Part 1— from AD 43 to 1689

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Julius Caesar landed first in the autumn of 55BC and then in the summer of 54BC. The original inhabitants are known as Celts, though the Romans called them Brittones. Their religion was Druidism. Their 'bad press' is undeserved. Diodorus Siculus, a first century BC Greek historian, affirmed: 'Some who they call Druids, are very highly honoured as philosophers and theologians.' After AD 43 the Romans returned and stayed for over 300 years. The people were 'Celts'. The land was known as Albion (Latin for White). The Romans called them Britons. The religion was Druidism.

### Conquest by Rome AD 43

General Plautius. Within four years he had subdued most of the south of England. The Roman Empire controlled over two million square miles and almost a fifth of the world's population.

While the Romans were consolidating their hold on Britain, the Christian message had spread far beyond Jerusalem, reaching across Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) and into Greece. Twenty years after the conquest of Britain, Paul had reached Rome, where the gospel had evidently preceded him, and he planned to visit Spain (Romans 15:24, 28). Many texts in the first few centuries tell us of the evangelistic travels of the apostles and others.

### Caratacus and Pomponia

Caratacus was captured and sent to Rome with his family, where they were exiled to live in Rome. The wife of Plautius was Pomponia Graecina Rufi. She came from a very auspicious dynasty of *Ruffi*. The Roman historian Tacitus (b.AD56) informs us that:

'Pomponia Graecina, a notable lady, the wife of that Plautius who had returned from Britain [to Rome] to the honour of an *ovation*, was charged with being tainted with that "foreign superstition" and was committed to her husband for his judicial verdict.'

Pomponia's son by her first marriage was Pudens Rufus. The Roman poet Martial informs us that Pudens Rufus married one of Caratacus' daughters, Claudia. Martial also informs us that Linus, a son of Caratacus had been captured and brought from Britain. According to Irenaeus, the church leader at Lyon in Gaul in AD 180, a Linus had led the Christians at Rome since AD 58, a year or two before Paul arrived in the city. Possibly, Claudia and her brother, Linus, were led to faith by Pomponia herself. And these three—Rufus, Linus and Claudia—joined Paul in sending greetings from Rome to Timothy (2 Timothy 4:21).

In Romans 16:13 Paul does not mention Rufus' mother by name—the only unnamed person in list of 30 people—in order to protect her identity.

Another son of Caratacus, Cyllinus, was allowed to return to Britain to rule over the Silures in South Wales. He and another sister, Eurgain, founded Christian schools in England.

**Joseph of Arimathea** There are many references from the 8<sup>th</sup> century up to the research of John Taylor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Joseph founded a small church community at Glastonbury in AD 63.

**More evidence for the Gospel early in Britain.** Tertullian (c.AD 155) the Gospel had reached *'the places of the Britons—which are inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ...'*

Origen (Alexandria AD 245) *'The land of Britain has received the religion of Christ'... When, until the coming of Christ, did the land of Britain accept belief in one God?'*

Eusebius (AD 330) *'The Apostles passed beyond the Ocean to the Isles called the British Isles'*

AD 314 three bishops, a priest and a deacon from Britain attended the Council of Arles.

### **Lucius—the first Christian king in Britain (110? – 201?)**

Bede (5<sup>th</sup> century) claimed that in 156 Lucius wrote to the bishop of Rome asking how he could best teach his subjects the Christian faith. Many pagan temples were converted into Christian churches (Westminster Abbey and St Peter's, Cornhill.)

### **How did the Gospel spread?**

The early evangelists planted a large wooden cross, later carved with Bible stories, and preached. As people were converted, they gathered into communities for protection.

Many Christian evangelists to these islands:

Ninian b. 360 in SW Scotland. Evangelised widely across Scotland.

Patrick b. c.387 in Wales? Evangelised Ireland.

Columba b. 521 Evangelised Scotland and Ireland and left many Christian communities.

Aiden of Lindisfarne b. 590 in North England

Illtud, Samson, Gildas and many others in Wales and West:

In 597 Augustine was sent by Pope Gregory to bring the existing churches under the domination of the church in Rome. He failed and died in 604.

**Invaders!** From the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century, Angles, Saxons and Jutes infiltrated from northern Germany and Scandinavia. Vikings arrived from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Many Christian communities were massacred, and monasteries, manuscripts and crosses destroyed.

### **Alfred and the foundation of a nation**

From 789, Scandinavian Vikings ravaged the eastern seaboard of England. By 874 only Wessex remained free from Viking domination. Alfred retreated and regrouped. After many battles, he forced the Danes to surrender and concluded a treaty with Guthrum in 878.

Alfred set the nation on a sound parliamentary and local government foundation and began his legal code with the Ten Commandments. Many safeguards of our personal rights, including trial by jury. Alfred helped to create England as a united nation. English and Danes were now to be treated equally.

Scholars, sculptors, artists, carpenters, architects and metalworkers were invited from the continent to settle; he encouraged education, the translation of good books, including parts of the Bible. 'His legacy to the country and to the world was his conception of what a Christian on the throne could be.'

## **Another Rome arrives in 1066**

The churches across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland were fiercely independent and no foreign church dictated either their beliefs or traditions. Unfortunately, at the Synod of Whitby in AD 664, the representative of the papacy, Wilfrid, convinced some English churches that the bishop in Rome was the successor to Peter and must be obeyed. But most churches in the north remained independent of Rome.

Under William of Normandy from 1066, the Anglo-Saxon church became the French-Norman church. French became the language of State and Latin the language of Church. The Church of Rome across Western Europe became increasingly corrupt, and the Gospel light was largely extinguished.

In Ireland the Christian communities had no connection with England or Rome, until Henry II invaded and called a council of the Irish clergy at Cashel in 1172 that the Irish churches were compelled to submit to the Roman Church.

In Wales the churches were independent until Edward I invaded North Wales and by the Statute of Rhuddlan in 1284 the independence of Wales and the Celtic churches ended.

Scotland remained independent and by 1540 had declared itself a Protestant nation—and independent of England until the Act of Union in 1707!

### **The Church of Rome became more and more corrupt.**

Roman Catholic Church extended political, social and religious power across England. Owned half of all landed estates and twenty-thousand pounds a year went to Rome. A population of some two million supported thirty thousand clergy. As its wealth increased so its spirituality slipped down at the same rate.

Erasmus, the Church of Rome's greatest theologian and scholar of the day, cried out against the state of the priesthood. Pious Dean Colet of St Paul's in London also.

### **Times they are a-changin'**

In contrast to Roman Catholic belief, the spread of evangelical truth: Scripture alone, for Faith alone, by Grace alone, through Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.

The continent of Europe was stirring: Peter Waldo (France), Jan Huss (Bohemia), Geert Groote (Holland), Martin Luther (Germany), John Calvin (France/Switzerland). And many others

### **John Wycliffe (1384) and the Lollards**

Wycliffe disputed the penances, purgatory, relics and idolatry of Rome, infallibility of pope. Wycliffe's first 'tract' *The last age of the church* followed, then: *Objections to Friars*. Wycliffe gave England its first translation of the Bible (from Latin Vulgate by Jerome in C4<sup>th</sup>).

**William Tyndale and his contemporaries.** Translated the New Testament from the Greek in 1526, and much of the Old Testament from the Hebrew by 1534.

### **Reformation the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries**

Thomas Bilney, Hugh Latimer, Robert Barnes, Thomas Cranmer (later Archbishop of Canterbury), Nicholas Ridley, John Frith and John Knox (Scotland).

By The Act of Supremacy (1534) Henry VIII was proclaimed 'the only Supreme Head in earth of the Church of England'. In 1538, Henry ordered that every church in England should display a copy of the Bible in English.

Turbulent years followed throughout the reigns of Edward VI (Protestant), Mary Tudor (Catholic), Elizabeth I (Protestant), James I (Catholic), Charles I (who lost his head), The Civil War (to establish the authority of a Protestant/Puritan parliament) and a brief interlude under Oliver Cromwell as Lord Protector. Charles II (determined to re-establish the Roman Catholic authority), and James II (ditto).

Finally, William and Mary sailed from Holland in 1688 to preserve the Protestant faith and establish a free Parliament. James fled, defeated at the Battle of the Boyne (1690), the Bill of Rights (1689) established a free parliamentary monarchy and England a Protestant Christian nation.

*Christianity in Britain from the first century by Peter Green*  
*William Tyndale—England's greatest Bible translator*

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## **The Prots' progress!**

How the Protestant and Catholic support swung from Henry to William (1509–1689)

Henry was a Catholic  
but Eddy was a Prot.

Henry VII (1509–1547). Persecuted both but died a Catholic  
Edward VI (1547–1553). Protestant but died young at 15.

Mary turned the clock around,  
though Lizzy stopped the rot.

Mary I (1553–1558). Reintroduced burning for 300 Protestants.  
Elizabeth I (1558–1603). Prot. Created CofE with 39 Articles.

Jimmy persecuted both  
and Charlie lost his head.

James I (1603–1625) Pilgrim Fathers and 'Gunpowder Plot'.  
Charles I (1625–1649). Executed by a Protestant parliament.

Then Ollie brought the Prots a rest  
and said 'no kings' instead.

Parliamentary (Protestant) Government (1649–1660).  
Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector (1653–1658).

The people got fed up with this  
and called back Charlie's son.

Charles II (1660–1685). Extravagant and immoral. The Act of  
Uniformity (1662) forced many puritans out of the CofE.

The pope was very satisfied  
when Jimmy followed on.

James II (1685–1688). Monmouth's rebellion defeated.  
Attempted to restore Catholicism and failed.

Then Willie sailed across the sea  
and settled things for good.  
*A Bill of Rights* said, 'Prots are in'  
and that's how things now stood.

William III & Mary (1689–1702). Both Protestant. Invited from  
Holland. Mary was James' daughter! James fled into exile.  
1689 The *Bill of Rights* established a Protestant monarchy  
and independent parliament.