Westminster Abbey
Learning

Henry VIII's Reformation story – teachers' notes

Thank you for downloading this resource. We hope that it will be a useful teaching tool in your classroom.

As we continue to grow our free catalogue of teaching resources, we'd really appreciate a few minutes of your time to let us know what you liked and what could be improved. Please complete this five-question survey.

This resource has been designed to explore the Reformation of Henry VIII in a story format with audio and animated illustrations. We recommend that you present the PPT in the app version.

As you click through to each slide, the narration will begin playing automatically. Each audio file is between 19 and 33 seconds long. Please ensure you have the volume turned up on your computer.

Animations have been timed in relation to the story on the audio, so please wait for them to finish before moving onto the next slide. You might also wish to spend some time talking over the questions asked, or what you can see in each image, before continuing the presentation.

These teachers' notes provide further information and context for each slide.

SLIDE 4:

Today, we are going to find out about a place called Westminster Abbey and one king who changed everything. Westminster Abbey is a very old church in the centre of London which has stood for over a thousand years. It took over 500 years to build what you can see today. It's not just a church, but also a place where people live. Who do you think may have lived here when it was first built?

Ask students what they can tell about the building in this picture e.g. it is old, grand, very big etc.? They might recognise it as a church.

Westminster Abbey was first built in 960 AD and was a Benedictine monastery. When Edward the Confessor became king in 1042, he established the Palace of Westminster as his seat of government and rebuilt the Abbey in stone.

Construction of the current church began in 1245 in the reign of Henry III, with the west towers being completed in 1745.

SLIDE 5:

Hundreds of years ago, religious men called monks lived at the Abbey. Monks are men who have made special promises to God to live their lives as part of a community, with hundreds of communities of monks all over the country. They chose to spend their time praying to God and working to help others, living together in monasteries. Some would have created beautiful hand-written religious books, while

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others looked after valuable religious objects, such as golden chalices, or cups, used in Christian worship.

Although there are still monks today, before the Reformation there were around 260 monasteries in England and Wales, with many hundreds of other kinds of religious houses. It is estimated that around 12,000 people were in religious orders (monks, nuns, priests, friars etc).

Most monks would never leave the monastery after they joined, and the youngest could be just seven years old. The monks at Westminster followed the Rule of St Benedict, and lived under the authority of the Abbot.

By Henry VIII's time, Westminster Abbey was very wealthy. It owned much land and received gifts from pilgrims visiting the shrine of St Edward.

SLIDE 6:

Some monks also worked in the monastery gardens, tending to plants that could be used for medicines. They would have grown chamomile to cure colds, lavender to help people sleep and rosemary to push away evil spirits. Monks would also have given food and money to the poor, welcomed visitors and cared for the sick.

Monks would have been assisted by 'lay brothers' - men who worked in the monastery but who had not made vows. These would have worked in the fields and farms, growing food for the monastery.

SLIDE 7:

Westminster Abbey, where these monks lived, is also the place of coronations, where monarchs have been crowned since the year 1066. A coronation is a special Christian service where a king or queen is crowned. Prayers are said, and the king or queen promises to rule wisely, with the help of God. The king or queen sits upon the Coronation Chair and the crown is placed on their head.

Coronations still take place on the beautiful mosaic Cosmati Pavement in front of the High Altar at Westminster Abbey. The Coronation Chair was made in 1301 and has been used at nearly every coronation since then. In 2023, King Charles III was anointed and crowned whilst seated on the chair.

SLIDE 8:

In 1509, it was the turn of the man who changed everything – King Henry VIII. Have you heard of him? King Henry VIII walked through the Abbey, with all eyes watching him, until he reached the space where coronations have taken place for hundreds of years... and still take place today. After he was crowned at Westminster Abbey, the monks prayed for him and Henry looked forward to the day when his own son might be crowned too.

Henry was the second son of his father, Henry VII, but became heir to the throne when his elder brother, Prince Arthur, died suddenly in 1502. Arthur had been married to Catherine of Aragon, a Spanish princess, as part of a political alliance.

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SLIDE 9:

Henry had a daughter called Mary but was desperate for a son. Queens had never been able to rule England on their own so Henry tried to divorce his wife, Catherine, and marry again in the hope of having a son with someone else. Henry and Catherine had been married for nearly 24 years! He spoke to the Pope, who was the Head of the Catholic Church and one of his friends, but the Pope refused to let Henry get a divorce.

Henry married Catherine of Aragon, his brother's widow, as soon as he became king in 1509. Over the course of their 25 year marriage Catherine gave birth to a daughter, Mary, and a son, Henry Duke of Cambridge, but he lived only a few weeks and was buried beside the high altar in Westminster Abbey.

SLIDE 10:

But Henry didn't listen to the Pope. He made himself the Supreme Head of the Church of England and he gave himself permission to divorce Catherine. Catherine wasn't very happy, but Henry sent her away and she was never allowed to see him, or her daughter, Mary, again. How do you think it made them feel?

Because he had no surviving son, Henry believed he had sinned by marrying Catherine since the Bible said you should not marry your brother's wife. He sent his chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey, to Rome to ask the Pope to declare the marriage unlawful, which would leave Henry free to marry again. But the Pope refused, believing that the marriage was valid. This made Henry very angry!

Catherine never accepted the validity of her divorce and refused to acknowledge Henry's new wife as queen. Technically, they relationship was an annulment, rather than a divorce, since Henry stated that they had never actually been married because of her previous marriage to Arthur.

She lived under house-arrest and died in Kimbolton Castle in Cambridgeshire and is buried in Peterborough Cathedral.

SLIDE 11:

Henry's decision to ignore the Pope and divorce Catherine had a huge impact. It led to the English church being re-formed with the king as the Head and not the Pope. This is why the events around this time are known as 'The Reformation'. Have you heard of that word before?

The main change was the introduction of the Great Bible in English to the churches. Daily worship remained the same for ordinary people and they were not expected to change many of their beliefs.

SLIDE 12:

Now that Henry had made himself the Head of the Church of England, he closed all the monasteries. Across the country, many were torn down and left in ruins. What do you think happened to all the wealth and riches the monasteries owned? Who would look after the sick and the poor now?

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The closure of the religious houses between 1536 and 1541 is known as the dissolution of the monasteries. The wealth of the monasteries became the property of the king, and he used it to reward his supporters, to pay for wars against France and Scotland, and to build up England's defences.

Although everyday worship did not change much, the impact of the dissolution of the monasteries on ordinary people was huge. Monasteries had provided employment, social and medical care.

SLIDE 13:

While lots of monasteries were in ruins, Westminster Abbey survived. Why do you think this might have been? Perhaps it was because it is also the burial place of Henry VIII's parents, as well as many other monarchs and important people. What a lot of change from just one king! His decisions mean that every British monarch is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England, including our current king, His Majesty King Charles III. And all coronations are religious services which take place in Westminster Abbey.

Westminster Abbey was lucky to survive. As the coronation church and burial place of kings, the building was left intact, although many treasures were sold off. Henry VIII chose not to be buried there when he died in 1547 but his longed-for son, Edward VI was crowned there, followed by Henry's two daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, and all three of them were buried at the Abbey.

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