



Who was Thomas Cranmer? What role did he play in helping Henry VIII to split from the Church in Rome?

Not much is known about the first forty years of his life. Born in 1489, he was recruited, away from Cambridge University, around 1526 (by Cardinal Wolsey), but even the facts surrounding that event are covered with the mists of history.

The traditional story, which scholars doubt on several aspects, goes like this ([according to Jesus College](#), at Cambridge University, where Cranmer studied and from which he graduated with a Doctor of Divinity):

The story given in these early lives has passed into common currency and, for want of anything better, has been repeated continually and with little variation ever since.

It runs as follows: on the death of his father in 1503, when Thomas was only 14, his mother sent him to Cambridge [University] where he became an undergraduate at Jesus [College], though he took, for whatever reason, an inordinately long time to obtain his B.A. which eventually he did in 1511, proceeding to the M.A. without further hiccups in 1515.

Meanwhile, sometime between 1511 and 1515, he became a Fellow of Jesus, but thereafter fell in love with, and married, a daughter or cousin (called Joan) of the inn-keeper of the Dolphin in Bridge Street, with the consequence, as inevitable in the 1510s as in the 1560s and '70s, that he lost his fellowship.

To make ends meet he accepted appointment as Reader (i.e., lecturer) at Buckingham College, the hostel for Benedictine monks from the East Anglian abbeys who were studying in Cambridge - a hostel whose buildings were later to form the core of Magdalene College.

The marriage was, however, short-lived for wife and child died in child-bed. Soon afterwards the Master and Fellows of Jesus welcomed the new widower back to the College where he was re-elected a Fellow and remained, taking his due share in the work of the University and its Divinity School, becoming a D.D. in 1526, before being lured away [by Wolsey].

Around 1530, Cranmer—with the help of Edward Foxe—begins to gather scholarly works, from centuries past, to determine whether Henry VIII has a legitimate basis to assert that England does not need to take all its spiritual orders from the Pope (in Rome).

When supporters of the King's plan, to declare England's independence from papal authority, grow in number, it becomes clear that even if the separation occurs, the highest-ranking member of the Church in England has to bless the King's plan to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn.

The highest-ranking member of the clergy, in England, is the Archbishop of Canterbury. The office-holder of that position in early 1533, is William Warham who disagrees with the King's approach.

However ... when Warham dies, in 1533, the Pope—then Clement VII—affirms Thomas Cranmer's elevation as the new Archbishop of Canterbury. Perhaps Clement does not realize how closely aligned to the King's position Cranmer really is.

Soon after he assumes his new role, Cranmer agrees that the King has grounds to divorce Catherine of Aragon. The Pope excommunicates Henry VIII, when he divorces his Queen, but it no-longer really matters to Henry. The Anglican Church is now born, and the British monarch becomes head of the Church in England (instead of the Pope).

The stage is now set for significant cultural changes in Britain. If Cranmer could have seen the future, as it unfolds during the following decades, one can only wonder if he would have stayed with the choices he made during the 1530s.

Gerlach Flicke (1495–1558) created this portrait of Thomas Cranmer as he appeared circa 1545. The oil-on-panel measures 38.7 × 30 inches (98.4 × 76.2 cm) and is maintained, today, at the National Portrait Gallery.

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