

Source B

And here out of our records I shall mention some of the images and relics to which the pilgrimages of those times brought devotion and offerings such as the milk of our Lady, the bell of St Guthlac and the belt of St Thomas of Lancaster, the coals that roasted St Lawrence, the ear of St Malchus and the blood of Jesus Christ brought from Jerusalem to Gloucestershire, being kept for many ages. This last has brought many great offerings to it from remote places, but was proved to be the blood of a duck, every week renewed by the priests. Besides which it is possible to see an image of St John of Osulston who was said to have shut up the Devil in a boot.

From Lord Herbert of Cherbury's *Life and Reign of King Henry VIII*, published in 1649

Source C

My body is to be buried in the palace near the chapel that I caused to be made in the south aisle of St Magnus' Church.

For tithes forgotten: 3s 4d.

For masses to be said in the church for my soul, my wife's soul and all Christian souls, every month for one year after my death: £6.

Every Friday for a year after my death 3s 4d to be given to prisoners in Newgate one Friday, those in Ludgate the next Friday. The very best canvas for shirts and smocks for the poor people in Bedfordshire. £100 towards the making of an altar table.

The will of Richard Berne, London 1525

Donations

The common people showed their devotion and loyalty to the Church through bequests in wills to parish churches as well as monetary donations for the upkeep and rebuilding of local churches. Professor Andrew Pettegree, a modern historian, writes that in Suffolk during the fifteenth century, 'something approaching 50 per cent of parish churches were substantially remodelled, as citizens poured the new wealth generated by a successful wool trade into their religious lives'.

Lay confraternities were popular as people grouped together to say prayers for the souls of dead relatives in order to speed their passage through purgatory. Another modern historian, Susan Brigden states that there were 176 such confraternities in London alone in the fifteenth century. Therefore the picture that has been constructed here is of a population with a deep and unquestioning commitment to the Catholic faith.

How far was the Church in need of reform?**Source D**

These are [...] ravenous wolves [...], devouring their flock. The goodliest lordships, manors, lands and territories are theirs. Besides this, they take a tenth part of everyone's wages, a tenth part of [all goods] produced, and even every tenth egg from poor widows. And what do these greedy, idle, holy thieves do with all these yearly exactions they take from the people? Nothing but suck all rule, power, authority and obedience from you [Henry VIII] to themselves!

From Simon Fish's *A Supplication for the Beggars*, published in 1529

Source E

People always hear Mass on Sunday and give generously to the Church and to the poor. There is not a parish church in the kingdom that does not have crucifixes, candlesticks and cups of silver, as well as many other ornaments worthy of a cathedral.

From a description by an Italian visitor to England in 1500

Source F

It is from stupidity and the darkness of ignorance that there arises a great and deplorable evil throughout the whole Church of God. Everywhere through town and countryside there exists a crop of oafish and boorish priests, some of whom are engaged on ignoble and servile tasks, while others abandon themselves to tavern haunting, swilling and drunkenness. Some cannot get along without their wenches; others pursue their amusement in dice and gambling all day long. There are some who waste their time in hunting and hawking, and so spend a life which is utterly and wholly idle and irreligious even to advanced old age.

From an extract from a sermon preached by William Melton, Chancellor of York Minster, in 1510

Source G

The Church was full of weaknesses and abuses; reforms had been talked about for a very long time. The parish clergy were often ill-educated and ignorant, unable to understand and sometimes even to read the Latin of the services; often too, they were wretchedly poor. Coming from the same class as their flocks, they could rarely command the respect that a better education or a slightly higher standard of living would have produced. The higher clergy were wealthy and worldly and resented by their own inferiors; many of them practised those abuses against which pope after pope, and council after council, had issued their edicts.

G.R. Elton, *England under the Tudors*, 1955

Questions

- 1 What problems do Sources D–G suggest existed within the English Church on the eve of the Reformation?
- 2 Why were Church services in Latin? What difference would it have made were those services in English?

What were the causes of dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church?**Uneducated priests**

Some parish priests were uneducated and therefore unable to deliver the traditional services to their lay flock. They could not understand the significance of the Mass and were unable to recite basic parts of the liturgy such as the Lord's Prayer.

Clerical abuses

At a higher level, some bishops were accused of serious breaches of Church discipline. Humanist reformers such as Thomas More and John Colet drew attention to common clerical abuses such as:

- simony – to purchase a clerical office from a leading cleric or prince
- pluralism – to hold more than one clerical office at the same time, usually for material benefit
- non residence – bishops who did not reside in their diocese but still collected tax
- nepotism – donating a clerical post to a member of one's family
- sexual misconduct – ignoring clerical vows of celibacy.

Mini case study: Thomas Wolsey

Thomas Wolsey, Lord Chancellor from 1515 and Henry's chief minister until 1529, hardly set a fine example in this respect. Wolsey was Archbishop of York, while holding several other bishoprics at the same time and serving the King in high political office into the bargain! Wolsey also used his position in the Church to secure benefices for his illegitimate son, Thomas Winter. The enormous wealth that Wolsey amassed in the process made him an obvious target for anti-clerical sentiment, especially after he lost Henry's trust in 1528. Indeed in 1529 an anti-clerical common lawyer called Simon Fish wrote a tract entitled *A Supplication for the Beggars* (see Source D on page 18). It was a vicious and satirical attack on the corruption of the clergy. Bishops were accused of exploiting the wealth of ordinary lay folk in order to fund their lavish lifestyles.

Monks and nuns

Bishops and priests are collectively referred to as the secular clergy, whereas monks and nuns are regular clergy. Monks and nuns lived in their own communities and did not interact with the ordinary people as much as the secular clergy. They devoted their lives to God through prayer and contemplation.

In 1509 there were roughly 800 **religious houses** in England. Many, especially in the north of England, continued to play an important part in the local community in terms of education and caring for the poor and needy as well as saying prayers for the souls of the dead. Yet, some houses were in a state of disrepair with numbers dwindling and moral standards dropping. Some abbots had grown extremely wealthy from land rents and were effectively living the lives of country gentry.

Benefit of the clergy

A privilege of the Church that aroused anti-clerical sentiments at the beginning of the sixteenth century was benefit of the clergy. This allowed for members of the clergy who had committed serious crimes to escape trial in secular courts. Such a system of immunity was open to abuse and miscarriages of justice.

Definition**Religious houses**

Places of worship and work for religious orders such as Augustines or Benedictines. Includes monasteries, abbeys, friaries and convents.

Mini case study: Richard Hunne

One particular incident, which occurred in London in 1514, demonstrated the anger that benefit of the clergy provoked among the laity. Richard Hunne was a well-off London merchant who challenged the Church authorities over the exorbitant mortuary fees he had been forced to pay in order to bury his infant son. In response the Church drew up charges of heresy against Hunne and had him arrested. While awaiting trial, Hunne was found hanged in his cell. The officials of the bishop of London claimed that Hunne had committed suicide whereas Hunne's supporters were convinced

that he had been murdered. To make matters worse, the Church found Hunne guilty of heresy posthumously and confiscated his property as a result. The bishop of London's chancellor was implicated in the affair and although the matter was investigated by the King's Council, no one was held to account for Hunne's death. The case caused uproar in London and heightened anti-clerical feelings in the capital. The Hunne Affair, as it became known, epitomised for many Londoners the corruption of the Church and stoked the flames of anti-clerical sentiment for several years.

Conclusion**Source H**

Such, then, in bald outline was the situation of the English clergy during the early decades of the sixteenth century. Their power and influence in society was more apparent than real. They were beginning to lose their once effortless intellectual ascendancy. They stood in no favourable posture to wage any conflict against the growing pretensions of the laity and of the State. Their leaders lacked inspiration, unity and loyalty to the supranational concept of Christendom. While the Papacy as yet needed to reform itself before it could inaugurate reform within the national churches, our English Church remained too full of conflicting interests, too complacent in its conservative and legalist routines to reform itself.

A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*, 1964

Source I

Late medieval Catholicism exerted an enormously strong, diverse and vigorous hold over the imagination and the loyalty of the people up to the very moment of Reformation. Traditional religion had about it no particular marks of exhaustion or decay, and indeed in a whole host of ways, from the multiplication of vernacular religious books to adaptations within the national and religious cult of saints, was showing itself well able to meet new needs and new conditions . . . when all is said and done the Reformation was a violent disruption, not the natural fulfilment, of most of what was vigorous in late medieval piety and religious practice.

Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 1992

SKILLS BUILDER

- 1 Make a note of what Dickens and Duffy say about the state of late medieval Catholicism. How do they disagree?
- 2 With such conflicting opinions, how do we know which historian to trust? Can they both be right?
- 3 Look at Source J. Where does Whiting stand on this debate?

Source J

In the south east, it is true, there are signs of a partial weakness of Catholic enthusiasm before the Reformation; here the Dickens/Elton model has a measure of validity. Outside this region, however, devotion generally remained strong: in most parts of England it is the Haigh/Scarbrick model that seems the more applicable.

R. Whiting, *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion in the English Reformation*, 1989

There were some grounds for complaints against the Church, but anti-clerical feelings were not widespread. Yes, anti-clericalism was probably greater in the south-east than in the rest of England and discontent with the Church was periodically heightened by affairs such as the Hunne