

Key Question 5: Why were the Catholics such a serious threat to Elizabeth?

KEY EVENTS/ TIMELINE

1568
Mary, Queen of Scots arrived in England
1569
The Rebellion of the Northern Earls
1570
Elizabeth’s excommunication
1571
The Ridolfi Plot
1574
The first arrival of seminary priests in England
1580
The first Jesuits arrived in England
1583
The Throckmorton Plot
1586
The Babington Plot
1588
The Spanish Armada

KEY PEOPLE

Edmund Campion – Jesuit who was executed for preaching Catholicism in England
Mary, Queen of Scots – focal point of Catholic plots to overthrow Elizabeth, executed in 1587
Sir Francis Walsingham – organised Elizabeth’s secret service, uncovering many plots
King Philip II of Spain – funded some of the plots against Elizabeth and eventually sent the Armada in 1588
Richard Gwyn – a Welsh Catholic, famous for being executed as a go-between for travelling Catholic priests and local Catholic families

KEY EVENTS EXPLAINED

The rebellion of the Northern Earls The Earls of Westmoreland and Northumberland planned to replace Elizabeth with her catholic cousin, Mary, Queen of Scots. They rode into Durham with 4,500 men, stormed the cathedral, destroyed Protestant Bibles and Prayer Books and celebrated a Catholic Mass. Elizabeth sent the Earl of Sussex with several thousands troops to quell the rebellion, leading to many rebels retreating. The Earl of Westmoreland managed to evade capture by fleeing to Flanders. The Earl of Northumberland was eventually captured and executed in 1572. Elizabeth dealt with rebels harshly, executing over 800 as a warning to other potential rebels.
The Papal Bull In 1570, Pope Pius V declared that Elizabeth was a heretic and was excommunicated by way of a Papal Bull as a result. This Bull removed Catholics from loyalty to Elizabeth and called upon them to help remove her from the throne. Most English and Welsh Catholics preferred to remain quiet about their religious faith and remained loyal to Elizabeth despite her excommunication. Despite this, Elizabeth took no chances and passed a series of Treason Acts in 1571, making it illegal for anyone to question her position true as Queen of England and Wales.
The Ridolfi Plot In 1571, a Catholic plot aimed to replace Elizabeth with Mary, Queen of Scots. The plot had been organised by the Italian banker, Roberto Ridolfi, for a Spanish army to land in England, overthrow Elizabeth and replace her with Mary, who would then marry the Duke of Norfolk and turn England Roman Catholic again. Some of those involved were tortured and revealed that the Spanish ambassador, de Spes, was involved in this plot too, as well as Philip II of Spain and even the pope himself. Norfolk was sentenced to death for treason and de Spes and Ridolfi were both expelled from the country. Elizabeth refused to punish Mary, despite requests from her Privy Council and many MPs.
The Throckmorton Plot The Throckmorton Plot itself took place in 1583, involving a young English Catholic, Francis Throckmorton, acting as a go-between for Mary, Queen of Scots, and the new Spanish ambassador Francisco de Mendoza. When Walsingham uncovered the plot, Throckmorton was arrested and tortured. He revealed that the Duke of Guise was planning to invade England with an army of French Catholics from the Spanish Netherlands, backed by Spanish and papal money, but was adamant that Mary knew nothing of the plot. He was sentenced to death for treason and de Mendoza was expelled from England. Mary was moved to the more secure Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire, and was banned from having visitors. She also had all her letters carefully checked by Walsingham and his spies.
The Babington Plot In 1586, Walsingham uncovered yet another plot to overthrow Elizabeth, but this time he claimed to have proof that Mary had been directly involved. The Babington Plot involved another young Catholic Englishman, Sir Anthony Babington, who planned to organise an invasion force from Spain to assassinate Elizabeth and replace her on the throne with Mary. Babington sent coded letters to Mary, updating her on the progress of the plot, which were uncovered by Walsingham’s spy network. Mary’s replies proved that she was directly implicated in this plot – it was the proof Walsingham had been waiting for and led to her execution. Babington was arrested by Walsingham in August 1586. He and six other conspirators were executed in September 1586.

KEY VOCABULARY

Jesuits – Roman Catholic missionaries whose aim was to destroy heresy
Recusants – Individuals who refused to attend church services following the Religious Settlement
Council of the North – Set up after the Papal Bull to enforce Elizabeth’s authority in the north of England
Seminary Priests – Priests trained in Roman Catholic Colleges

SUMMARY

After a harmonious beginning to Elizabeth’s reign, devout Catholics began to direct their anger towards the Religious Settlement in the late 1560s. Many were able to practice Catholicism in secret and plot against Elizabeth with help from abroad. Thanks to Walsingham and his network of spies, plots against Elizabeth were quickly found out and dealt with. Mary, Queen of Scots was the biggest threat to Elizabeth as she was the focal point for Catholic plots and seen as a direct replacement. Mary’s execution in 1587 did not mean Elizabeth was safe from all threats as King Philip II of Spain launched his Armada the following year. Even though Elizabeth faced significant threats from Catholics during her reign, it is important to remember that most of her subjects were loyal to her.
