



Two C13th towers guard the entrance to the 'Vieux Port' of La Rochelle from the sea

LA ROCHELLE & LA REFORME

The Protestant Reformation in France - a view from Oxford

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What do Oxford and La Rochelle have in common? Not much, it has to be admitted. The influence of one on the other should not be over-stated. Nevertheless, there are enough points of connection to merit comment. Particular acknowledgements for the content of this article go to the Musée Rochelais d'Histoire Protestante in La Rochelle, and the Musée Ernest Cognacq in St. Martin-de-Ré, the principal town of Ile-de-Ré, the island sitting just offshore from La Rochelle and now joined to the mainland by an impressive bridge.

1. THE THREE MUSKETEERS

Which boy has not at some point enjoyed this swashbuckling French book? The heroes are the Musketeers. The villain is the scheming Cardinal Richelieu. The French king, Louis XIII, is weak. The Queen (Anne of Austria) is having an affair with the English Duke of Buckingham. Towards the end of the book, the Musketeers are sent to La Rochelle, to assist the royal forces, led by Richelieu, in the Great Siege of 1627 and 1628 against the factious town of La Rochelle, who are being supplied by English naval forces led by the Duke of Buckingham. The book makes Buckingham a larger than life character who speaks fluent French and is good with the ladies. It is based on real historical figures and events, particularly the Great Siege. In fact, there is a plaque in the church in St-Martin-de-Ré (see right) commemorating two Toiras brothers killed in July and September 1627 defending the Island against the 'anglais commandés par le Duc de Buckingham.' The Duke failed to take control of Ile-de-Ré in spite of his 100 ships and 7,000 men.



Plaque in the church in St-Martin-de-Ré

2. PEOPLE

While we will return to the Duke of Buckingham later, we need to step back to understand the background of La Rochelle and the surrounding region, beginning with the role of three kings (all called Henry as it happens) but not quite in numerical order.

- (a) **Henry II.** We are going a long way back before the Great Siege, but La Rochelle's dual heritage helps explain how its history evolved. Henry II was a significant English King. He had a palace in Oxford, on what is now Beaumont Street, where his sons Richard Coeur-de-Lion and John were born. Both became Kings of England in turn. The language of Henry's court was French. In a fit of pique, he was famously responsible for the martyrdom of his childhood friend Thomas-à- Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Henry's edict in 1167 forbidding English students from going to Paris to study led to the burgeoning of Oxford University, the oldest in the English speaking world. Significantly, his wife (and Richard and John's mother) was the redoubtable



Site of Henry II's palace in Beaumont Street, Oxford

Eleanor of Aquitaine. Following their marriage, much of what is today France (but was not then), including La Rochelle came under English rule. Henry fortified the city and it became the chief Atlantic sea port, with a special charter and a mandate for trade. It grew to become the third largest city in all of what we now call France, with a population of 27,000 at the time of the Great Siege.

- (b) **Henry VIII.** This is the English monarch most closely associated with the Reformation. His desire for a divorce from his Spanish first wife, Catherine, led to his declaring himself in 1532 the Supreme Head of the Church in England, in place of the Pope. This was the birth of the Anglican church.



Henri IV of France

- (c) **Henri IV (of France)**, known as Good King Henry, ruled France from 1589 to 1610. He was the first Bourbon king. His reign in France overlapped with the English Queen Elizabeth I, known (with pleasing symmetry) as Good Queen Bess. Both European monarchs, they had similar issues to contend with, but with different outcomes. After Elizabeth's reign, England was firmly established as Protestant. After the end of Henri's reign, the Treaty of Nantes was repealed and France firmly established as Catholic.

Things could have been different. Henri had a Spanish Protestant convert mother, Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre in Spain, who brought him up as a Protestant. Henri had signed the Treaty of Nantes in 1598, granting significant religious and civil freedoms to French Protestants (also known as Huguenots) and ending the wars of Religion while he himself became Catholic. "*Paris is worth a mass,*" he is reported to have said.

- (d) **Henrietta Maria, Henri IV's (French) daughter**, married Charles I and lived in Merton College in Oxford during the English Civil War. Henri's grandchildren included no less than three important monarchs: Charles II and James II of England, and the Sun King himself, Louis XIV of France, who built Versailles. Louis' nemesis, the Duke of Marlborough, built Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire during the reign of Queen Anne (another direct descendant of Henri IV of France).



Charles I & Henrietta Maria, Magdalen College

So much for monarchs. How about the movers and shakers in European Christian history at the time? Eight of them appear in the engraving below in the Musée Rochelais. Here are some of them.



- (e) **John Wycliffe**, bottom right corner. He was English and the Master of Balliol College, Oxford. Known as the 'Morning Star of the Reformation', he lived entirely in the 14th century, during the 100 years war with France, which itself propelled Wycliffe to the attention of the then English King. There is a lot more about him in my article ['Wycliffe at 700'](#)

- (f) **Jan Hus**, top left corner, was Rector of Prague University in Bohemia. Wycliffe's ideas were brought there by Peter Payne, a Principal of St Edmund Hall in Oxford who had to flee. Hus was

martyred in 1415 by the same Council of Constance which ordered the exhumation and burning of Wycliffe's body.

- (g) **Martin Luther**, German, bottom row, 2nd from right, is the most famous of the reformers. He nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517. By training he was a monk.



Signatories to the Confession de foi de la Rochelle

- (h) **Jean Calvin**¹, French, bottom row, 2nd from left. Unlike Wycliffe and Luther, he did not have a political protector. The only way he escaped martyrdom was by exile to French-speaking Geneva where he lived from 1536 to 1564. By training he was a lawyer. Calvin's Geneva (sometimes dubbed 'the Protestant Rome') had an important influence on John Knox, the most famous Scottish reformer, and Thomas Bodley. Bodley was an Oxford graduate, a contemporary of Elizabeth I and then James I of England, and was responsible for Oxford's famous Bodleian Library which opened on 8 November 1602.

- (i) **Theodore Beza** (not in engraving) was Calvin's chosen successor in Geneva. He was moderator of the VIIth Synod of the Reformed Church in La Rochelle in 1571, which convened with the authority of the French King Charles IX. It is known as the '*Synode des Princes*'. The Synod ratified the famous '*Confession de foi de La Rochelle*'². Famous Protestants in La Rochelle who signed the confession included the young Henri IV (at this point only King of Navarre), his mother and Admiral de Coligny³. This brings us back to La Rochelle, the setting for the Great Siege.

And last but not least..,

- (j) **George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham** (see right). We now return to this larger than life character. He was second only to the King during the reign of James I, and continued to have a leading role under his son, Charles I, until the Duke's assassination at the early age of 35 by a disgruntled ex soldier⁴. Both the Duke's sexuality and his Protestant credentials are ambiguous. It is probably safe to say that he always acted in his own best interests.



The peacock feather on the left - a clue to his character?

3. PLACES

This section is shorter.

- (a) **Ile-de-Ré**. Nowadays, it is a holiday destination popular with the French and not as crowded as the Mediterranean coast. The principal products of the island are salt and wine⁵, but it is also famous for its oysters and other sea-food. The principal town is St-Martin-de-Ré, which still has impressive star-shaped fortifications designed by Louis XIV's military architect, Vauban. The fortifications are reminiscent of Malta and Oxford's fortifications during the English civil war.



¹ Edward VI wrote these memorable words to Calvin. "*It is a great thing to be a king, and especially of such a country; and yet I doubt not, that you regard it as above all comparison greater, to be a Christian.*" Quoted in S.W. Kershaw, *Protestants in France in their English Home*, London 1885, p. 17

² '*La Confession faite d'un commun accord par les Français qui desirent vivre selon la pureté de l'Evangile de notre seigneur Jésus-Christ*'. Duplicates were kept in Bern and Geneva.

³ Letter from Elizabeth I to her Ambassador in Paris. "*Greet the Admiral affectionately in our name, and assure him that the wisdom and constancy which he has displayed hitherto and his whole behaviour have deserved and won for him the admiration of the world.*" *Protestants in France*, p. 31

⁴ The assassin features in the *Three Musketeers* as the love interest of a spy

⁵ The producers are known respectively as '*les sauniers*' and '*les viticulteurs*'.



(b) **La Rochelle.** As mentioned above, an international trading maritime city, historically prosperous and bastion of the Protestant movement in France, and still strategic enough to have been Germany's submarine base during World War II. It was the last city in all of France for the Germans to surrender – only on 8 May 1945 (VE day).

(c) **Nantes.** This city is two hours' drive north from La Rochelle and is near the mouth of the River Loire, France's longest river, where it enters the Atlantic. This was the site of the Treaty of Nantes in 1598 (known as the Edict or 'Edit de Nantes' in France) and, after the French revolution, of the infamous 'Noyades' (drownings) of the rebels of the Vendée region.

4. DATES

It may be simplest to show these in table form.

Date	La Rochelle	Oxford	Other
1152	Opening of English market follows Henry II's marriage	Henry II at Beaumont Palace, Oxford	Henry II marries Eleanor of Aquitaine
1300s	Building of port towers ⁶		100 years' war with France
1382		John Wycliffe expelled from Oxford	
1415			Jan Hus burnt at the stake
1517			Martin Luther's 95 theses
1555-6		Latimer, Ridley and Cranmer all burnt at the stake in Oxford	
1559	Confession de foi de la Rochelle (ratified in 1571)		
1560			Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre, becomes Protestant
1572			St Bartholomew's Day Massacre
1598			Treaty of Nantes
1600s	Protestant churches built in St Martin, Ars and La Flotte on Ile-de-Re.		Assassination of Henri IV (1610)
1627	The Great Siege of La Rochelle		
1642-1646		Queen Henrietta Maria in Oxford	English Civil War. Charles I's court moves to Oxford.
1685	Protestantism goes underground in Ile-de-Ré		Revocation of the Treaty of Nantes
1689			Toleration Act in England. Protestants William and Mary on the throne.
1787			Edict of Toleration in Paris
1789			French Revolution
1814/5		Peace inscription ⁷	Battle of Waterloo
1844			Alexandre Dumas writes the Three Musketeers
1850 +	Liste d'abjurations / Protestant recantations		
1927			End of 'La Bagne'

⁶ La Tour Saint-Nicolas and Tour de la Chaine

⁷ 'PEACE was proclaimed in the City of OXFORD June 27 1814' inscriptions on the Plain and Carfax Tower in Oxford, visible to this day. In hindsight, they were premature. Napoleon escaped Elba. Waterloo was the following year

1927	George Simenon at Café de La Paix		
1944	Execution of Mayor		

5. THE GREAT SIEGE OF LA ROCHELLE

“The Great Siege of La Rochelle (1627-28) effectively ended the final Huguenot (French Protestant) rebellion against the crown [of France] and was a marker in the rise of the Absolute Monarchy.” (Encyclopedia Britannica⁸)

France's wars of religion were the backdrop to the Great Siege. 1571, the year of the Synode des Princes, may be considered a Protestant highpoint. At that time it is estimated that 10% of France was Protestant.⁹ The following year, the marriage in Paris of the Protestant Henri to the Catholic queen Marie de Medici was the bait for a trap carefully laid by Marie's mother Catherine. All the Protestant 'big names' had travelled to Paris for the wedding, including from La Rochelle. Predominantly Catholic Paris turned on them, incited by Catherine. This became a pogrom across all France – except in La Rochelle where there were no Catholics to carry out the pogrom. Henri almost lost his life in Paris. Admiral de Coligny was killed. This is known as the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre. It took place on 24 August 1572.



Medallion commemorating the Treaty of Nantes in 1598. Left: Catholics with crucifix, Centre, Henri IV on horseback, Right: Protestants with Bible

By 1598, Henri has decided to convert to Catholicism but in order to end the religious wars, announces the Treaty of Nantes. He thereby incurs the wrath of both hard-line Catholics and Protestants, and it is a Catholic zealot who assassinates him in 1610.

Henri's son Louis XIII is the King of the Three Musketeers. Orchestrated by the ruthless Richelieu, the Catholic Crown wants to put an end to Protestantism once and for all. La Rochelle is a problem, and so is the Duke of Buckingham, who can't resist attacking the French King, although whether in petty rivalry over the affections of the French King's wife, or because of Protestant convictions, it is not clear. Charles I, the new king of England, had only been married¹⁰ to Louis XIII's sister for two years, so he is hopelessly conflicted, not for the last time.

Buckingham never had control of Ile-de-Ré. However, he was able to supply La Rochelle without difficulty until Richelieu successfully built a dike or 'digue' across the harbour. In the course of the siege, of 27,000 inhabitants of La Rochelle, 20,000 died or fled, a devastating number. It was the death knell of Huguenot resistance.

6. THE 'EGLISE PROTESTANTE UNIE DE FRANCE' TODAY

What might have happened had Richelieu been less ruthless, had La Rochelle held out and had Protestantism won out in France? One reply might be, '*For answer, see England.*' It has been argued that the Reformation, the English Civil War and the evangelical awakening of the 18th century in England, with leaders such as Wesley and Whitefield, all helped bring about social change without the excesses of the French Revolution and the Terreur. Did the empowering ideas of the Reformation and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 take away (in England) many of the grievances of the common man which remained for our French counterparts in 1789? One will never know.¹¹

⁸ Britannica.com/event/Siege of La Rochelle, accessed 29.9.2025 at 14.55

⁹ John McKay, *a History of World Societies*, 2018, p. 430

¹⁰ The wedding with Henri IV's youngest daughter took place in Notre Dame in Paris on 1 May 1625, when Henrietta Maria was only 15. Even more unusually, Charles did not attend - she married a proxy (not Buckingham this time). It was almost two month before they began living under the same roof.

¹¹ There is an '*old and continuing debate about the social and political significance of Methodism. In its crudest form it has been expressed in the familiar proposition that Methodism (or evangelicalism in*



Liste d'abjurations / Protestant recantations

Here is what we do know happened.

The Treaty of Nantes was revoked in 1685. It became illegal to be a Protestant.

Many Protestants left France. They went to what is now USA¹², England, Switzerland and South Africa¹³. They were often skilled, wealthy and educated, and it was a boon for those other countries.¹⁴

By 1850, many Protestants returned to the Catholic faith. It was either that or join the new secular post-revolutionary France. The liste d'abjurations is a sad document.

Today there are 1.5 million Protestants in France, being 3% of the population, in 480 congregations. The United Protestant Church of France was formed in 2012 in its current form.

My impressions from conversations with Protestants in the Museum are that they are proud of pacifism, are proud of their collections of Bibles, are grateful for the separation of church and state in 1905 in France, and rejoice at any increase in faith and religious observance in France, be that Catholic or Protestant. Certainly there is not a sense of mission, or desire to 'evangelise' or 'reform' the Catholic church any longer. This is either welcome progress in Christian maturity and unity, or a 'cop-out' of the values of the Reformation, depending on your point of view.



A 95 year old guide in the Protestant Museum

7. OTHER OBSERVATIONS

- (a) **The quiet revival.** Is there any social change happening in France similar to the one in the UK identified earlier this year in the well-publicised Yougov survey commissioned by the Bible Society?¹⁵ At first glance, vital Christianity in France seems a lost cause. And yet... When Notre Dame cathedral in Paris was recently rebuilt following the fire, it was proudly re-opened, not as a museum, but as a worshipping community. A catholic publication reported 17,800 baptisms in France at Easter 2025, the highest since records began in 2002. "*Adult baptisms alone have jumped 45% in the last year, totalling 10,384. The 18-25 age group now leads the way.*"¹⁶ On our return to England via St Malo, the priest at the cathedral reported to us a four-fold increase in spiritual enquiries, principally in the 18-25 age group.
- (b) There is a lovely early 1900s café in La Rochelle called '**Café de la Paix**'. It was frequented by Georges Simenon, who wrote the Maigret series of 'cosy crime' books. It reminded me a lot of the Café Iruna in Pamplona which was Ernest Hemingway's base.

general) saved or helped to save England from revolution.' Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, London 1992 p. 379. See also the views of Professor Bernard Semmel.

¹² New Rochelle (in New York state, USA) was a Huguenot settlement, named after La Rochelle

¹³ Evidenced by the Huguenot wine brand from South Africa, and SA French names like rugby players Francois Pienaar (Captain of SA's world cup winning team), du Toit and de Klerk

¹⁴ Unfortunately a huge brain drain for France. Peter Comont, former pastor of Magdalen Road Church and now at Trinity Church, Oxford, has a Huguenot surname. Our friend Joy Fowler's maiden name, Pettit is also Huguenot. Anna Vines is pictured later with her family's Huguenot Bible, used to record family events, being outside the Catholic church system of recording births, deaths and marriages.

¹⁵ "31% of non-church goers say they would attend church if invited by a friend or family member, rising to 34% among 18-24 year olds. Over a fifth of non-churchgoing 18-34s say they would read the Bible if recommended by a family member or friend they trust." The Quiet Revival: Gen Z leads rise in church attendance 7 April 2025 www.biblesociety.org.uk/research/quiet-revival?

¹⁶ France to see a record 17,800 catechumens baptised at Easter, with requests still 'pouring in'. www.catholicweekly.com.au article 14 April 2025 accessed on 3 November 2025 at 20.01



A 'Huge' Huguenot family Bible in Oxford, with family records going back to 1685

(c) Before WWII, St Martin-de-Ré had a sorry part to play in the story of **French transportation** of convicts to its colonies, a practice known as 'La Bagne' ('shackles' in English). England of course was just as guilty in how we populated our own colonies. Black and white film footage in the Musée Ernst Cognacq shows convicts being led from the town prison to the ships from which few ever returned, even after their 'sentence' had expired, because while they were given 'free' passage out there, it was not free on the way back! This continued until, amazingly, the Salvation Army ('Armée de Salut') arranged means of profitable employment in e.g. French Guiana, in 1927, to break the vicious cycle of crime and poverty.

(d) Another modern day Protestant martyr was **Léonce Vieljeux**, La Rochelle's mayor in 1939. He and his wife were members of the Protestant church in La Rochelle and paid for the replacement of the church building's stained-glass windows in 1930. However, he refused Nazi orders to fly the swastika over the town hall following the French capitulation. He was sent to a concentration camp and executed in 1944.

- (e) They say a picture is worth 1,000 words. Sometimes in Oxford I find myself asked to explain the Reformation 'in simple terms', especially to non-European visitors. I cannot think of any picture which so completely distils the Reformation as 'La Balance', a 1562 engraving¹⁷ in the Musée Rochelais, and so I end with that, a valuable French contribution to my tours explaining Oxford's own Christian heritage.



"La Balance" 1562. Catholic attempts to outweigh the Bible with St Francis himself, the keys of St Peter and the papal tiara are doomed, even with another monk and a devil helping!

¹⁷ Huijeh Allardt, *La Balance*, Gravure au burin 1562