The Causes of the Spanish Armada – An Overview

It was the last straw. In 1588, Philip II decided to end the English problem once and for all by sending a great fleet – an Armada – from Spain to invade England, topple Elizabeth I and restore the old faith.

In 1587 also, Drake attacked the Spanish fleet in Cadiz harbour in Spain, destroying many ships. This action was referred to as ‘singeing the King of Spain’s beard’. Philip II, the Spanish King, was furious and ordered the rebuilding of the fleet.

In 1587, Mary, Queen of Scots, in exile and already imprisoned in England by Elizabeth was executed for plotting to take the English throne in a Catholic conspiracy.

From 1585, England was helping Dutch Protestants to fight Spanish rule in the Netherlands.

By the 1580s, Elizabethan ships captained by Drake, Raleigh and Frobisher amongst others, the so-called ‘Elizabethan seadogs’, were capturing and plundering Spanish ships and ports in the Caribbean and the Atlantic.

Many were caught, interrogated under torture and executed by the Elizabethan secret service set up to combat the Catholic threat from inside and outside England.

Jesuit priests were sent secretly to England in the 1580s from abroad by the Catholic church to undermine the Elizabethan religious settlement by fomenting rebellion and administering secretly to the remaining Catholics.

Increasingly, in the 1570s, Spain, Europe’s Catholic superpower, saw England as a dangerous Protestant ‘rogue state’.

As a result, anti-Catholic laws known as recusancy laws intensified in England as a response to a perceived increased threat after the Pope’s action.

In 1570, after a decade of disagreement on the control of the church, the Pope excommunicated Elizabeth which meant that all English Catholics should no longer obey and show allegiance to Elizabeth.

On coming to the throne in 1558, Elizabeth I, Henry’s youngest and only surviving offspring, attempted to reconcile Protestants and Catholics in a new Church of England or Anglican Church which was officially Protestant under the Queen’s control but which also made concessions to Catholics.

On Edward’s death Henry’s eldest daughter Mary Tudor – or so called ‘Bloody Mary’ – inherited the throne in 1553 and turned the clock back to Catholicism, largely by force, burning a large number of Protestant heretics (those who refused to return to the Catholic faith) but she died in 1558.

Henry’s son, Edward VI, a boy king ruling with Protestant advisers, turned Eng