

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF
Arthur Hildersham
PRINCE AMONG PURITANS

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Lesley A. Rowe



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This book is dedicated to Victor, Imogen, Oliver, and Joshua, and to the memory of my parents.

Notes on the Text

In most instances, unless indicated, I have modernized the spelling and the grammar of quotations from the original sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources. Hildersham's last name was often written as "Hildersam" at the time, and I have left this spelling in the title of Clarke's biography. Titles of books generally have been left unaltered, except for modern capitalization and occasional changes from Roman to Arabic numerals. Dates are rendered according to the Gregorian calendar, which was introduced in 1752, with the year beginning on January 1—not on March 25, as in the old Julian calendar. Thus Hildersham's death is given as March 4, 1632, not 1631, as his monument indicates. All quotations from Hildersham's *Lectures upon John* have been taken from the second edition of 1632.

Why Bother with Arthur Hildersham?

Arthur Hildersham is, to a large extent, a forgotten Puritan. Since Samuel Clarke compiled a thirteen-page account of his life in the seventeenth century, there has been no biography of Hildersham.¹ Although his name appears in many collections of godly lives, the entry is usually brief and based solely on information derived from Clarke. No longer in print, except for short extracts, Hildersham's sermons do not have a place on our bookshelves alongside those of his contemporaries. Ask people in our churches to name leading lights of the Puritan movement, and few would include Hildersham in their list. In fact, most present-day Christians have probably never heard of him.

But this certainly was not the case in the late sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century. During his lifetime, Hildersham was one of the most revered and prominent Puritan figures. He was related to royalty and many of the highest noble families in the land. His leadership of the Puritan Millenary Petition, presented to King James I on his accession to the English throne in 1603, reflected the esteem Hildersham's brethren had for him. Among his closest friends he counted men like Thomas Cartwright, Richard Greenham, John Dod, John Preston, John Cotton, William Gouge, and William Bradshaw. Ashby-de-la Zouch, the town in which he ministered for over forty years,

1. Samuel Clarke's "Life of Master Arthur Hildersam" appeared in his *The Lives of Two and Twenty English Divines* (London, 1660) and also in his *A General Martyrologie* (London, 1677). Citations refer to the former, unless otherwise stated.

was regarded as a beacon of the Reformed faith. Even after his death in 1632, Hildersham's opinions and example continued to be influential for the next generation of spiritual leaders, including the New England settlers, the Westminster divines, and Richard Baxter.

Why, then, have we neglected Hildersham, despite the renewed interest in our Puritan forefathers that occurred in the second half of the twentieth century? The answer lies in the fact that this revived appreciation has been print-driven: we have rediscovered the Puritans primarily through reprinted sermon collections. We delight in sermons that are pithy, full of striking quotes and metaphors drawn from everyday life that lodge in the memory and the heart. And here we find the difficulty with Hildersham, for he is less accessible to the modern reader. By the standards of his age, Hildersham published relatively little anyway—two large sermon series, one shorter volume, and a small treatise on the Lord's Supper—and his style can be off-putting initially for someone seeking a spiritual “quick fix.” Although the thorough and rigorous nature of Hildersham's sermons richly repays the patient student, even C. H. Spurgeon, who highly valued Hildersham's works, was forced to admit, “he is copious and discursive, we had almost said long-winded.”²

However, his story, combined with a study of his printed works, is rewarding in a number of ways. Hildersham is a guide who can help us better understand the rapidly changing and often confusing religious scene of the later Elizabethan and early Stuart period. He faced challenges and big questions that are still relevant, such as the following: What is a true church? What is the nature of true worship? When is it right to separate from a church? How should we relate to other believers who hold different opinions? How far are we bound to obey our consciences, even when it brings us into conflict with the state? Although we may not agree with all of Hildersham's conclusions, his way of thinking through issues according to biblical principles is instructive. Hildersham's response to his frequent suspensions from the Church of England (he was prohibited from preaching and, on occasion, even imprisoned)

2. C. H. Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries* (London, 1890), 99.

provides valuable lessons on enduring persecution and inspires us to greater Christian commitment. In Hildersham's view, preaching was the highest calling; but when the pulpit was closed to him, his pastoral heart made him seek other means, such as education and charity work, to continue to serve his people. His example of faithfulness in godly living despite restricted circumstances reminds us that he was "doing what he could when he might not do what he would."³

There is often a temptation to spiritualize heroes of the past by concentrating solely on their preaching. The exclusion of their ordinary lives, mundane domestic routines, and business affairs can sometimes leave us feeling inadequate and guilty by comparison. This study of Hildersham will attempt to redress that imbalance by painting a well-rounded portrait of a man who lived for his Master not only in the pulpit but also in daily life, in "secular" activities, in friendships, and in trials.

A Note on the Title

Hildersham undoubtedly would take issue with the title "*Prince among Puritans*" on both counts: "prince" and "Puritan." His self-effacing nature is one reason so little has been written about him. A serious and humble man, his aim was always to direct others to Christ, not to himself. It was his second birth, rather than his first, that gave him cause to rejoice. Like many other godly men of his time, Hildersham requested that no sermon praising or elevating him should be preached at his funeral. Nevertheless, the high regard in which his brethren held him, as well as his noble birth and royal blood, make the appellation "prince" a fitting one.

As far as the name "Puritan" is concerned, it was originally a term of abuse coined by opponents of the godly cause. Hildersham himself called it an "odious" name. But he was prepared to accept another derisive label used by his enemies, that of "Precisian." This referred to his desire to adhere to the Word of God in every precise detail, both in

3. Cited in Matthew Henry, *The Lives of Philip and Matthew Henry*, ed. J. B. Williams (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 271. This was written of the ejected minister Rowland Nevet of Oswestry, who continued to live among his people even after he was silenced.

his theology and in all aspects of daily living. Just as the early church eventually adopted the scornful label “Christian” as a badge of honor, “Puritan” now has been purged of offense and invested with esteem. Surely Hildersham would forgive us.



Beginnings

(1563–1576)

Elizabeth I had been on the English throne for five years when the man she would refer to as “cousin Hildersham” was born in 1563. It was a time of considerable religious uncertainty. Although the Elizabethan Settlement had clearly pronounced England to be a Protestant country, many were unsure how this would work out in practice. The previous two reigns of Elizabeth’s half-siblings, Edward and Mary, had witnessed great spiritual upheaval: first a radical Protestantism had been declared the official religion of the state, then Catholicism was reintroduced. Elizabeth herself was a young, unmarried woman when she became queen, and who could say that her reign would not be just as short-lived or tumultuous as the ones before? Despite the increasing number of ordinary people who had embraced Reformation doctrines, many others remained confused or uncommitted. In large areas of the country, preaching ministries were scarce (sermons were as rare as black swans, a contemporary declared), and ignorance about the Bible and the gospel prevailed. Some people retained their loyalty to the old ways of the Catholic faith and traditional practice, while others saw hope of further reformation in the new regime. In 1563, England was a land divided in terms of religion and unsure what the future might hold.

Into this unsettled and ambivalent world, Arthur Hildersham was born on October 6, 1563, at Stetchworth, near Ely, in Cambridgeshire. Subsequently renowned for its association with horse racing, the area is green and rural, with swooping valleys and stretches of springy

heathland. A deep track known as the Devil's Ditch cuts through the adjacent land. In Hildersham's time, Stetchworth itself was a small village, with forty-six householders recorded in the parish in the year of his birth. He was born at Patmers manor, for Arthur's father, Thomas Hildersham, was a gentleman of some standing in the community, and he also owned another estate in the adjoining Dullingham parish. (The lands of Patmers later became known as Place Farm, but by 1814 the farmhouse, which had stood at the northern edge of the village in 1770, was gone.) In 1483, the old manor of Patmers comprised 140 acres of arable land, four acres of meadow, and ten acres of underwood. These two Cambridgeshire manors, Patmers and Madfreys, had been settled on Thomas Hildersham in 1544 and previously had been held by his father, John, in 1536. They were in the possession of John's father, another Thomas (Arthur's paternal great-grandfather), at his death in 1525.¹ Clearly, on his father's side Hildersham came from solid and prosperous gentry stock, with roots stretching back some way in the soil of East Anglia. It seems likely that the family much earlier had some connection with the settlement called "Hildersham" eight miles southeast of Cambridge, but this link has not been proved. A heraldic visitation of Cambridgeshire that took place in the late sixteenth century further corroborates Thomas Hildersham's status as a "gentleman of an ancient family." The report of this visitation supplies details of a Hildersham coat of arms ("a chevron between three crosses flory") and a family crest ("a tiger [leopard] couchant argent, collared and lined or [gold]").²

Nothing is known about Thomas Hildersham's first wife, but his second, Anne Pole, Arthur's mother, could boast an even more distinguished and famous lineage. Anne was a direct descendant of the Yorkist royal line: her great-great grandfather was Richard, third Duke of York, who had been heir to the throne before his untimely death in battle, in 1460. His son, Edward IV, became king in his place, but the Plantagenet

1. A. P. M. Wright, ed., *The Victoria County History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 6:172–74. See also Cambridgeshire Record Office, R59/281/2, Stetchworth Court Rolls, 1548–58.

2. John W. Clay, ed., *The Visitation of Cambridge Made in AD 1575 Continued and Enlarged with the Visitation of the Same County Made by Henery St. George Richmond—Herald, Marshall and Deputy to William Camden, Clarenceulx, in AD 1619* (London, 1897), 115–16.

hold on the crown of England had ended with the death of Edward's brother, Richard III, in 1485 on Bosworth battlefield, the last significant engagement of the War of the Roses. Plantagenet blood flowed in Anne's veins, and she was also related to the Tudors and many of the highest families in the land. Her cousins Katherine and Winifred Pole were, respectively, married to Francis, second Earl of Huntingdon, and Sir Thomas Barrington, of Hatfield Broad Oak. By naming her son Arthur, Anne was honoring not only her own brother, Arthur Pole, but reminding others of her royal connections: princes of both the Plantagenet and Tudor dynasties bore the name, as did the ancient, mythical King Arthur himself. The only known oil portrait of Arthur Hildersham, painted in 1619 when he was fifty-six years old, reveals recognizable Plantagenet features (which their Tudor successors inherited)—pale, red-gold hair and an aquiline nose set in a long, thin face—that seem to have descended to him through his mother.

Although Hildersham was very much a gentleman, he knew that, spiritually speaking, these social advantages ultimately counted for nothing. "None of us," he warned many years later, "have cause to glory in or be proud of our parentage and birth," for such titles had no lasting value. Indeed, pride in human distinction could be a great stumbling block to salvation. "Oh then," he lamented, "the madness of them that rest and glory in their first birth...and never seek to be born again, to be born of God."³

Because of these family connections, Elizabeth I was prepared to recognize Arthur Hildersham as a "cousin" and refer to him as such at her court. Those links may have been rather distant, but the more recent family tree also boasted a very prominent branch. Anne Pole's uncle, the older brother of her father, Geoffrey, was Cardinal Reginald Pole, Queen Mary's archbishop of Canterbury. Educated in Rome, and at one time a possible candidate for the papacy as well as a potential successor to the English throne, Reginald Pole died on the same day as his royal mistress, in 1558. Despite recent attempts to rehabilitate his reputation by emphasizing his humanism and commitment to Catholic reform, his

3. Hildersham, *CLII Lectures upon Psalm 51* (London, 1635), 286.

name will always be associated with the terrible campaign of Protestant burnings that took place in England between 1555 and 1557.

Reginald Pole's staunch Catholicism lived on in his niece, for Anne Pole and her husband, Thomas Hildersham, remained devout Catholics even after Elizabeth ascended the throne and outlawed their religion. It was probably their shared faith that had drawn them together in the first place. Gentry families like the Hildershams were able to sustain their Catholicism within the privacy of their households, procuring the services of priests to perform the Mass when they could. Some were prepared to put in an appearance at the local parish church in order to keep the authorities off their backs or even have their children baptized there if a Catholic priest was not available. We do not know whether Thomas and Anne Hildersham did this with their children, for the relevant parish registers of Stetchworth St. Peter's have not survived. In any case, if they did attend their local parish church, it is unlikely that they would have heard anything to challenge their spiritual convictions; in 1561 (two years before Arthur's birth), the vicar of St. Peter's was recorded as being a non-graduate and not licensed to preach. We do know that the Hildershams were zealous in their family devotions and in their determination to bring up their children as Catholics. The young Hildershams were taught to say their prayers in Latin, according to the Roman rite.

It was the custom for sons of the gentry to be sent away to school at a young age, perhaps six or seven. Social considerations ultimately governed Thomas Hildersham's decision about an appropriate education for Arthur; his aim was to "find a good school, where many gentlemen's sons were taught."⁴ The establishment he settled on was Saffron Walden School in Essex.⁵ This school, which could trace its original foundation back to the fourteenth century, had a fine reputation for educating its pupils in a manner based on that operating at Winchester and Eton. It had been refounded in 1549 as one of the first of the eigh-

4. Clarke, "Life of Hildersham," 144.

5. See W. R. Powell, ed., *The Victoria County History of the County of Essex* (London, 1956), 2:518–25, and the anonymous *A Short History of Saffron Walden School 1317–1928* (available in Saffron Walden library).

teen King Edward VI grammar schools, when a connection with Queen's College, Cambridge, had also been established. Among its pupils in the late sixteenth century were the three renowned Harvey brothers, Gabriel, Thomas, and Richard, who became famous, respectively, as poet, satirist, and astrologer. Saffron Walden itself was a bustling market town in the late sixteenth century, taking its name from the cultivation of the saffron crocus, which supplied the dye for the wool upon which the prosperity of the town was based. It was also used as a medicine and in cooking. It is easy to imagine the young Hildersham riding into the town from his home further north, through purple fields ablaze with crocuses and the church of St. Mary the Virgin, a prominent landmark close to the school, on the hill ahead of him.

Thomas Hildersham found the social and educational credentials of the school impressive. Perhaps he was unaware of the spiritual convictions of the master, John Disborow, who was a godly man and a committed Protestant, or perhaps Disborow, a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge, who took up his post at Saffron Walden in 1573, did so after Arthur Hildersham had already started as a pupil.⁶ Whatever the case, in the providence of God, the boy was brought under the influence of gospel truth for the first time. Disborow ensured that the "grounds of the Protestant religion" were clearly taught within the school's curriculum. Prayers, sermons, and catechism all formed an integral part of school life.⁷ Challenged by the biblical message, Hildersham put his faith in Christ's saving death and was converted. Later, he was to reflect that "childhood is the fittest age to be wrought upon" by the means of grace. Indeed, as the example of John the Baptist showed, "the youngest infant is not so incapable of saving grace, but that God is able to work it even in them."⁸ Many other young men were experiencing a similar change at various schools throughout the land. Two prominent laymen, Sir Nathaniel Barnardiston and Sir Henry Vane, for example, were

6. For details of Disborow's life, see J. Venn and J. A. Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigienses: A Biographical List of All Known Students, Graduates and Holders of Office at the University of Cambridge, Part I: From the Earliest Times to 1751* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922–1927), 2:44.

7. Clarke, "Life of Hildersham," 144.

8. Hildersham, *Lectures upon Psalm 51*, 296–97.

reported to have been converted during their school days, and they went on to become strong supporters of the godly cause.⁹ William Gouge, who subsequently preached for many years at Blackfriars in London, was said to have been “possessed with an holy fear of God” while a scholar at Eton.¹⁰ It is possible that Arthur Hildersham’s brother, Richard, also attended Saffron Walden School and was equally challenged by the gospel, for he espoused Reformed convictions as well. At school, boys who shared a common love for Christ forged friendships that, in many cases, proved to be lifelong. Joseph Hall, the godly future bishop of Exeter and Norwich, developed a close spiritual bond with his classmates Hugh Chomeley and William Bradshaw at Ashby school in the 1580s, and their friendship lasted as long as they all lived.¹¹

It is apparent that John Disborow took a special interest in his keen and able young pupil. Disborow encouraged Hildersham not only in his academic studies but also in his spiritual development. He felt a real affection for Hildersham, enjoyed his company and conversation, and took great care of him. With the majority of their pupils being such young boys, schoolmasters had both tremendous responsibility and great opportunity concerning the boys’ physical and moral welfare. In many cases, the influence of teachers in these formative years seems to have been more important even than that of the child’s parents. It is unknown whether Thomas and Anne Hildersham were aware at this early stage of the radical change in their son’s beliefs. However, it seems likely that if they were, they did not consider it lasting or deep; otherwise, they would surely have removed him from the school. Of their other children we know frustratingly little. We have already noted that Arthur’s brother Richard also renounced Catholicism, but we do not know if there were any other siblings. A Winifred Hildersham, who will appear later in the story, may have been a sister, but it is also possible that she was Richard’s daughter.

9. J. T. Cliffe, *The Puritan Gentry: The Great Puritan Families of Early Stuart England* (London: Routledge and Kegan, 1984), 16.

10. Clarke, “The Life and Death of Doctor Gouge,” in *A General Martyrologie*, 235.

11. Levi Fox, *A Country Grammar School: A History of Ashby-de-la-Zouch Grammar School through Four Centuries 1567–1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 17–38.

By the time Hildersham was thirteen, he was ready to proceed to university. This means that he would have mastered the rudiments of the school curriculum—Latin, Greek, rhetoric, logic, and grammar—and was considered capable of coping with the next stage of his education. It was not unusual for boys of the time to go to university at such a young age, but Hildersham's accomplishments show that he was a bright and hard-working scholar.