

## 1. Formative years

**K**ing James I of England was angry. His patience finally snapped when he received yet another delegation of Puritan preachers urging him to grant greater religious toleration to men of their persuasion and to make further reformations in the English state church. The king had already been confronted by these issues on several previous occasions following his accession to the throne of Elizabeth I in 1603. Now he had had enough. Pressed once more on the subject at a conference convened at Hampton Court Palace early in 1604, he could only snarl contemptuously, 'If this is all your party have to say, I will *make* them conform or I will harry them out of this land ... or worse.'

Such ugly threats were not immediately fulfilled, but fulfilled they certainly were before the end of the reign of this king, known as 'the wisest fool in Christendom'. Some of the noblest and best citizens in the land were to feel the lash of his drive towards total conformity of religion and eventually be 'harried' out of the country.



*James I (1566–1625)*

Eight years later—years when religious intolerance was steadily increasing—a daughter was born to a Puritan couple, Thomas and Dorothy Dudley, a child they named Anne. Thomas Dudley, born in 1576, had been orphaned at a young age and had subsequently come under the influence of wealthy Puritan patrons. Early converted to God, he soon demonstrated an earnest and inflexible zeal for spiritual truth, laying down firm biblical guidelines for his life. Moving to Northampton, he entered the

service of the Earl of Northampton as manager of his extensive estates. Before long Thomas married Dorothy Yorke, a wealthy and well-connected young woman.

Their first child, Samuel, was born in 1608, followed by Anne in 1612; then three more daughters, Patience, Sarah and Mercy, were added to the family during the next few years. Living in their own cottage on the Earl of Northampton's estate, the children had enjoyed a pampered and privileged childhood. But all was suddenly to change in 1620, when Anne was eight. Thomas Dudley announced that the family would be moving from Northampton to Sempringham, Lincolnshire, where he had obtained a fresh appointment, this time to act as steward to Theophilus, Earl of Lincoln.

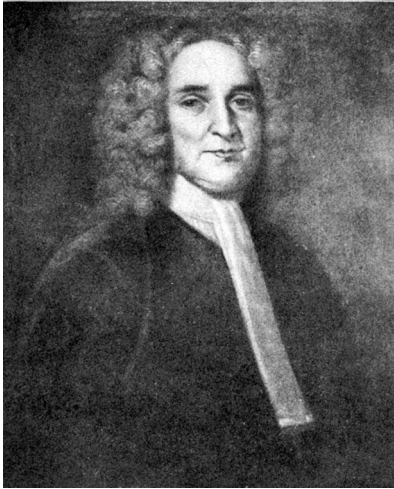
Theophilus had inherited the title when he was only twenty, following the early death of his father, but with it he also inherited

the burden of the family finances, which were in a chaotic state. With strong Puritan persuasions himself, Theophilus urgently needed a like-minded, capable and trustworthy steward to sort out his affairs and help to balance the books. Thomas Dudley came to his notice. An astute businessman, Dudley seemed the right choice for the task, and so it proved as he set about transforming the earl's interests.

The rambling Lincolnshire estate to which the Dudley family was introduced was a contrast to life in Northampton. The household was lively and active, for Theophilus had eight siblings all still at home, cared for by a retinue of fifty or more servants. The dowager Countess Elizabeth, the earl's hawk-eyed mother, a woman of staunch evangelical principles, was clearly in charge, supervising the whole family.

For eight-year-old Anne Dudley, an intelligent and studious child, the greatest pleasure of her new home was the books. The Earl of Lincoln's library was crammed with volumes—history, literature and religious writings—and it would seem that Anne had liberty to read to her heart's content. Added to this she had the privilege of sharing in the tuition provided for the earl's five younger sisters, some of whom were little older than Anne herself. The countess was advanced in her thinking for the times and strongly believed in educational opportunities for girls, a circumstance which held benefits that would influence Anne's entire life.

But of even greater benefit for Anne was the nearness of the new family home to Boston, and therefore to the ministry of the great Puritan preacher John Cotton at St Botolph's Church. Each Saturday afternoon covered wagons stood ready to carry the family the fifteen miles that lay between Sempringham and Boston. The three-hour drive along muddy lanes through the

*John Cotton*

low-lying Fen Country brought them at last into the bustling market town of Boston and to the Earl of Lincoln's Boston home. Here they spent two nights enabling them to join in worship with the congregation at St Botolph's.

John Cotton's searching ministry left a permanent mark on Anne, for she was a serious child. From an early age she had been troubled by her sins and often could not

sleep at night until she had confessed them to God in prayer and felt his forgiveness. Writing many years later she records:

In my young years, about 6 or 7 as I take it, I began to make conscience of my ways, and what I knew was sinful, as lying, disobedience to parents etc. I avoided it. If at any time I was overtaken with the like evils, it was a great trouble, and I could not rest until by prayer I had confessed it unto God.

Clearly Anne had been carefully taught God's moral law both by John Cotton and also by her mother Dorothy, whom she would describe as 'a true instructor of her family'. Although little is known of this self-effacing woman, Anne's later words point her out as a good mother, a woman of quiet godliness, who must have encouraged her children to read the Bible regularly at an early age. Anne herself found 'much comfort in reading the Scriptures', but in common with small children everywhere she could as easily forget, or find herself not bothered to read or pray. Then with



*St Botolph's Church, Boston, England*

pangs of conscience she realized her neglect and redoubled her efforts.

The year 1620, when the Dudley family moved from Northampton to Lincolnshire, was one that would prove highly significant in

Anne's life for another reason. For in September 1620, 102 men, women and children set sail aboard the *Mayflower* bound for the New World. Most were seeking religious freedom although some were emigrating largely for political or economic reasons. Fifty or more who sailed that month were English Separatists, known as such because of their desire to separate themselves from a compromised national church and form small independent gatherings of believers. Driven out at last by the intolerance and rigid demands of the Church of England—a fulfilment of the king's threat—they were seeking a land where they could worship God in peace. These Separatists endured a stormy sixty-six days at sea, often driven many miles off course. At last on 21 November the Pilgrim Fathers, as they later came to be known, cast anchor off the tip of Cape Cod, now Provincetown, Massachusetts.

But for young Anne Dudley these things were little more than an adventure tale; nor could the child begin to guess their relevance to her later life. For now her days were absorbed with the excitement of learning both from her highly literary father and from the lessons she enjoyed, together with those books she could read. Hers too were the trials of many childhood illnesses, far more serious in those days than now. In all these things God was working out his purposes for Anne. Probably at the age of nine or ten, she records 'a long fit of sickness which I had on my bed'. And in her convalescence, as the vacant hours slowly passed, the invalid began to think more deeply and to pray in a new and more urgent way. 'I often communed with my heart,' she tells us, 'and made my supplication to the Most High.' And God heard her prayers, for she added that he 'set me free from that affliction'.

In common with many young people, Anne admits that such periods of serious reflection proved only transitory, and she confesses that 'as I grew up to be about 14 or 15 I found my heart



more carnal and sitting loose from God and the vanity and folly of youth take hold of me'. At such an age many high-born girls of this period would be contemplating marriage, and it may well be that Anne's 'vanity and folly' had some connection with twenty-year-old Simon Bradstreet, who had arrived at Sempringham several years earlier. Fresh from Emmanuel College, Cambridge, a college established thirty-six years earlier primarily for educating men of Puritan conviction, Simon was a man of strong spiritual commitment. He had been chosen by Thomas Dudley to be his aide and understudy in managing the Earl of Lincoln's affairs.

Although Anne was only ten when Simon first arrived, a friendship between the two clearly developed as Anne matured. His dark hair, dark eyes, quick mind and spiritual zeal fascinated young Anne. Biographers have wondered whether Simon's sudden removal from the Sempringham estate to serve the crotchety Duchess of Warwick had something to do with Anne's increasing affection for the young man, eight years her senior. This must be mere speculation. It is more probable that a fresh appointment was sought for Simon because at the age of fifteen Anne succumbed to the fearsome scourge of smallpox—a killer disease, particularly among younger people. Anne's life hung in the balance for some months and the removal of Simon may well have been for his own protection.

The fear of the disfiguring pockmarks that often scarred a sufferer for life must have distressed Anne as she tossed backwards and forwards on her bed. Even if she survived, would anyone ever wish to marry a girl like that? But she could also see a divine hand behind her affliction. In her weakness and need she cried out to God for his mercy, this time not just for healing from illness, but for forgiveness of sin:

About 16 the Lord laid his hand sore upon me and smote me with the smallpox. When I was in my affliction I besought the Lord and confessed my pride and vanity, and he was entreated of me and again restored me.

Even though she would accuse herself for not being grateful enough for her recovery, there is no doubt that Anne's experience of God's compassion and forgiveness was genuine and brought with it a renewed and spiritual mind. Her appearance was probably not severely marred by the pockmarks she had dreaded, for she makes no further reference to the condition.

More than this, she had the joy of Simon Bradstreet's return to Sempringham and in 1628, when she was still only sixteen, Anne married the twenty-four-year-old Simon. In a later tribute written by Anne to her husband, she describes the depths of their shared love:

If ever two were one, then surely we.  
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;  
if ever wife was happy in a man,  
compare with me, ye women, if you can.  
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold  
or all the riches that the east doth hold.  
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,  
nor aught but love from thee give recompense.  
Thy love is such I can no way repay,  
the heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.

Even today these lines are considered to be among the tenderest and most beautiful of love poems in all literature.