

Arthur Hildersham

Arthur Hildersham, whose monument is to be found in the Lady Chapel, was born on October 6th 1563, at Stetchworth, near Ely, in Cambridgeshire. His father, Thomas Hildersham, came from solid and prosperous gentry stock. Thomas's second wife, and Arthur's mother, was Anne Pole.

Arthur must have been a clever student, mastering the school curriculum of Latin, Greek, rhetoric, logic, and grammar by the age of thirteen, and he went on to Cambridge University. There he was influenced by some of the leading Protestant thinkers of the time, and became a Protestant. However, Arthur's father disinherited him when he refused to enter the Catholic priesthood and, penniless, he was forced to leave the university.

He was rescued by his cousin, the godly **Henry Hastings**, (known as 'the Puritan Earl'), third Earl of Huntingdon, who became his patron. The Earl paid for him to continue his studies and then invited him to become lecturer at Ashby de la Zouch in 1587. Arthur gave lectures in the church every Tuesday morning. People came from miles around to hear him speak, and he was well-loved in the town.

Eventually he became Vicar of St Helen's. However, his puritan beliefs got him into trouble



with the Bishops in the new Church of England, and even with King James I. Some ceremonies had remained when the Church of England had developed out of the Catholic church on Henry VIII's break with Rome: to this day this Church still baptises with the sign of the cross, kneels for communion, and the clergy wear a white surplice. Arthur refused to conform to these practices, and from 1613 to 1625 (the year of James I's death), he was banned from preaching in the church. He underwent more than one spell in prison and was heavily fined, all for following his conscience. During this time, though, he continued to help the people of Ashby.

For the last seven years of his life, Arthur was restored to the ministry and allowed to preach in St Helen's Church

again, delivering his great series of 152 lectures on Psalm 51 and 108 lectures on the fourth chapter of John's Gospel. He was highly involved with the establishment of Ashby Grammar School and had an influence on generations of schoolboys. By this time he was recognised locally and nationally as a patriarchal figure; he was known as "the Lamp of Ashby", for "enlightening" the people. Ashby was seen as a centre of Puritanism and the church was full.

He died of scurvy in 1632, and was buried in the chancel here at St Helen's. One of his sons, Samuel, put up a monument, which was moved to the Lady Chapel when the church was rebuilt in the late 19th century – and Arthur was forgotten.



Why was Arthur Hildersham so important?

Arthur was, through his mother Anne Pole, directly descended from George, Duke of Clarence, brother of Edward IV and Richard III. He was also a distant cousin of Elizabeth I, so a descendant of both the Plantagenet and Tudor lines.

In 1563, when Arthur was born, England was a land divided in terms of religion and unsure what the future might hold. The country, under several Tudor monarchs, had see-sawed between being Protestant and Catholic. People were probably very unsure about the future. Under Elizabeth I it was Protestant, but many people were still closet Catholics. Arthur was one of the leading lights in the Protestant movement in England, helping to embed the changes which were happening throughout Europe, and following in the footsteps of eminent men such as John Wycliffe and Martin Luther. What is surprising is that he was forgotten!

*Anne Heaton
September 2021*

