LONDON

Goldsmiths

Clothworkers

Apothecaries

Smithfield
St Sepulchre's
Newgate
Old Bailey
River Fleet
William Rosewell
Thomas Langley
Christ Church
Goldsmiths Hall
Guildhall
Cheapside
St Paul's Cathedral
Apothecaries Hall
Thames
Blackfriars Stairs
River Thames

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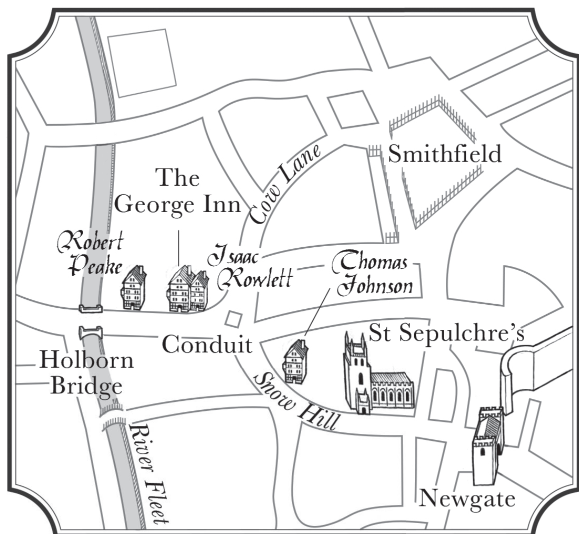

City Wall
Clothworkers Hall
Tower Hill
All Hallows Barking
Tower of London
Marmaduke Rawdon
S t r e e t
Billingsgate
London Bridge
Custom House

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OXFORD

River Thames

Abingdon

Faringdon

Wallingford

Wantage

Pangbourne

Reading

River Kennett

Burghfield

Newbury

Aldermaston

River Loddon

Chineham

BASING HOUSE

Basingstoke

Odiham

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Cheriton

Petersfield

Southampton

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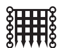
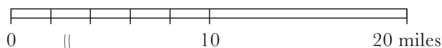
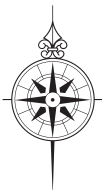
HAMPSHIRE
and the neighbouring counties



LONDON

River Thames





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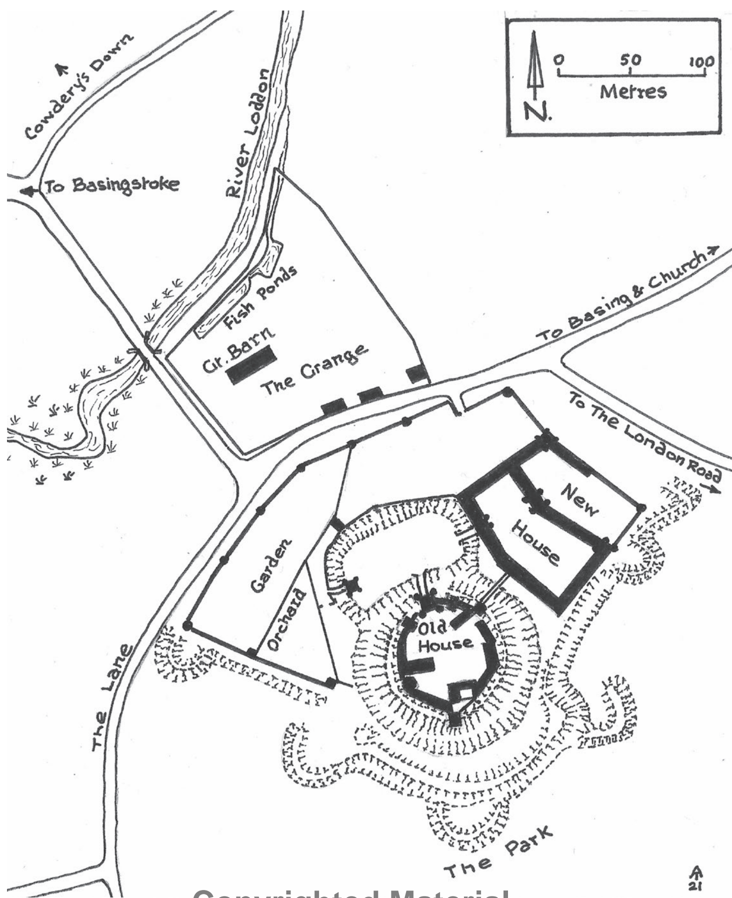
BASING HOUSE



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Author's Note

During an argument at a London apothecary in 1639, Sarah Wheeler called Sampson Sheffield 'fatt gutts' (he had called her a whore, and her husband 'a rogue, a rascal, base fellow, a peasant, an apothecary slave and one that lived by the turds and farts of gentlemen').[1] It would be a shame, I think, to lose the visual thickening of those double 't's. Therefore, when the original spelling of a word adds charm, effect or, indeed, girth, I have retained it. For the most part, however, I have modernised spelling and punctuation.

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Introduction

In 1786, two Americans walked a battlefield. They were in the heartlands of England, not far from Shakespeare country. As they circuited the site of the battle of Worcester, where in 1651 Charles I's son was put to flight, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the future second and third presidents of the United States, had questions for the locals. None seemed capable of or even interested in answering them. Adams couldn't believe it. 'Do Englishmen so soon forget the ground where Liberty was fought for?' he asked. 'Tell your neighbours and your children that this is holy ground, much holier than that on which your churches stand.'[1]

More than two centuries on and there is still some bafflement, and occasional outrage, at the Englishman's unfamiliarity with his nation's brightest, and darkest, hours. This despite the civil wars creating fault lines that are still evident in the way we divide and vote. This despite the seventeenth century being one of the most formative periods in British and Irish history. Everything seemed to expand in this moment, from the population and marketplace to the natural world and the very heavens. With telescopes and microscopes, people could see further and closer than ever before. There were exciting discoveries and terrible new prospects. Merchants grabbed lands and forced enslaved Africans to work them. England's position in the world, in Europe and in its own archipelago was transformed. The public became more literate, litigious and opinionated. There were culture wars and the first newspapers. Preachers and politicians fashioned themselves accordingly. Plague stalked the earth. There was a growing feeling that the end days were coming and that an apocalyptic showdown between the forces of darkness and light was imminent. It was a terrifying, electrifying time.

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People called it the 'Iron Century'. We now know that they were

living through the most intense phase of the Little Ice Age, a period of climatic cooling that saw some of the coldest weather on record. This meant long winters and wet summers, failed crops and food shortage. There was political turbulence across the globe – the Thirty Years War in Europe, rebellion in Russia, sultanicide in the Ottoman empire, civil war in the Mughal empire and violent regime change in China. 'Monstrous things have happened,' wrote the Welshman James Howell, 'it seems the whole world is off the hinges.'[2]

It was hoped, at first, that Britain might escape the convulsions. 'God be thanked,' preached Matthew Griffith at St Paul's Cathedral on 2 October 1642, 'we have lived in peace and plenty. God be thanked, we never yet knew what it is to hear the murdering pieces about our ears.' He implored his listeners to look at the rest of the world in turmoil, 'whilst this our Britain (like the centre) stood unmoved'.[3]

But Britain was not, it turned out, exceptional, and by the end of the month, the preacher was in prison and the battle of Edgehill had reaped the first ghastly harvest of a civil war that would claim a greater proportion of British lives than the First World War.[4] The most notorious casualty was King Charles I, executed at the Banqueting House in Whitehall on 30 January 1649. The monarchy and the House of Lords were abolished and so was the Church of England in structure and liturgy. In came a republic, a Directory for Public Worship, two written constitutions and Oliver Cromwell.

In 1660, the son of the dead king returned from exile as Charles II. He restored the lords and the bishops (if not the status quo ante bellum). An Act of Oblivion offered a general pardon for offences committed during the 'distractions', and people were required to lacquer their pain in a coat of amnesia. Words in 'any way tending to revive the memory of the late differences' were banned.[5]

Yet words – and memories – could not be effaced. They remain in the archives, unvarnished and raw. In the Essex Record Office, the petition of Jeremiah Maye, a disabled parliamentarian soldier, explains that he and his family need rescuing from 'the hungry jaws of want'. In a petition in the Berkshire Record Office, a royalist widow describes seeing her house 'violently torn' and torched 'by the cruel soldiers'. Amongst the papers of the Committee for Advance of Money is an account of the torture of a parliamentarian prisoner who was 'burnt with lighted matches' in Aberystwyth Castle.[6]

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Other documents are less explicit, but equally poignant. A little love poem flits between the pages of an army account book from royalist Oxford – 'What thing / is love is love / . . . It is a pretty thing'. It has been crossed out. In the Hampshire Archives, a royalist protection order is striped with damp, presumably because its frightened recipient hid it under his floorboards (see plates). In the Leeds branch of the West Yorkshire Archives, a tatty notebook catalogues the contents of a garden. Old words tumble out of it: Kentish Codlings, Granado Gilliflower, Melancholy Monkshood. One page is devoted to 'my best tulips'. When war came, the gardener flipped his book over and began new lists. One is headed 'The Postures of the Musket'.[7] Out went seeds, bulbs and stakes. In came powder, shot and scouring stick. A world was turned upside down.

This book is an attempt to recover the shock of that experience and to look upon the face of the war through the story of one particularly dramatic episode. The siege of Basing House in Hampshire belongs to the first civil war, 1642–6, which ended with Charles I in custody. The house was said to be the largest private mansion in England. It rose above the banks of the River Loddon and seemed perpetually enveloped in mist. It was known as 'Loyalty House', after the motto '*Aimez Loyauté*' ('Love Loyalty') of its owner, the Marquess of Winchester, and it had strategic importance because it commanded the main road between London and the west.

It mattered even more symbolically. To its enemies, Basing House was a microcosm of Stuart degeneracy, personified by its Catholic owner, his half-Irish marchioness and their most famous guest, Inigo Jones, the architect who had done so much to exalt the dynasty. It hardly mattered that Jones and many others in the house did not share the Winchesters' faith. In the press and pulpits, Basing House was a bastion of 'popery', 'a limb of Babylon', 'a nest of the vilest vermin in all the kingdom'. It was here, announced a parliamentarian preacher, that 'religion and laws and liberties and the very being of our English nation lie at stake'.[8]

For over two years, Parliament's forces tried to shoot, shell, starve and smoke the royalist soldiers and civilians out of their stronghold. Things happened, we are told, 'which the nature of man doth tremble at', things that anticipated not only Oliver Cromwell's sectarian fury in

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Ireland, but also, in the rudimentary use of chemical warfare, the fumes in Flanders fields. 'You must remember *what* they were,' reported a parliamentarian newsbook, 'they were most of them papists; therefore our muskets and our swords did show but little compassion.'[9] The royalists grew equally ruthless. In their struggle to survive, they turned on their neighbours and they turned on themselves.

If Basing House offers a lesson in the descent of man into savagery, it can also point to his ascent. For this was a place of beauty and wonder too. It saw heroic deeds, miraculous escapes and even a wedding. It was witness to the power of love – from the sacrifice of a daughter for her father to the love of life that provides hope when all else is lost. Basing House acquired an aura. People began to wonder if it would ever fall; if, indeed, God might not want it to fall.

Because the ruins are so evocative, and the archaeology so rich (with the added allure of hidden treasure), and because the mists still come to haze time and space, Basing House is, for me, a numinous place. It captures the push and pull of the past and the transience of human life, 'the poetry of history', as G. M. Trevelyan called it: 'the quasi-miraculous fact that once, on this earth, once, on this familiar spot of ground, walked other men and women, as actual as we are today, thinking their own thoughts, swayed by their own passions, but now all gone, one generation vanishing after another, gone as utterly as we ourselves shall shortly be gone, like ghost at cock-crow'.[10]

A stirred imagination is an impetus that need not adulterate the facts, nor denote partisanship. This story is told mainly from inside the house looking out, but I have also tried to breach the minds of the besiegers and the neighbours who were caught in the crossfire. By dint of the trades and skills of those who came to Basing House, a sort of garrison of all the talents, we can also look out beyond the lines onto other vistas – artistic, scientific, commercial – to see why this was such a dynamic age.

I hope that readers who came for the fighting will stay for the long build-up and the lulls (an authentic siege experience, after all), just as I hope that those who have little interest in military history will better appreciate its value. There is something about war, particularly civil war, and most especially the conditions of a siege, that brings out the best and worst of humanity. By looking at it in detail, it may even be possible to see a world in a grain of sand.

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Above all, and quite simply, I hope that the story that follows might make the civil war seem more vital: that it might enable us to follow the drama on the ground, so to speak, as chaotic and bewildering as the experience often was, and that it might restore life to some of the players. The defenders of Basing House were not a monochrome Cavalier elite. They included an apothecary, a print-seller and a scrivener, a merchant, an engraver and a vintner, an actor and a clergyman and his brave young daughters, who were all thrust upon the stage in one theatre in an especially brutish century.

'All England should come in pilgrimage to this hill once a year,' John Adams declared at Worcester. Other hills provide different views of Liberty. Our story begins on a city hill, fifty miles north-east of Basing House, where the bells of Old Bailey are calling.

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PART ONE

THE SHOP OF WAR

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1

Snow Hill

When will you pay me?
Say the bells at Old Bailey.

The bells at Old Bailey were, in fact, the bells of the church of St Sepulchre, at the top of Snow Hill in the ward of Farringdon Without Newgate. Just as no seventeenth-century Londoner could picture the River Thames without its boats and swans, so none could cross the City and not feel the clangour of its bells. St Sepulchre's, which lay just outside the city wall, had six main bells in the tower, with new clappers and ropes a regular outlay in the parish accounts. They marked the hours and called people to prayer, fixing them to time and place and connecting them – especially at moments of celebration, commemoration or crisis – to the four hundred thousand inhabitants that made up the City and Liberties of London.

Of different tone and timbre was a small handbell, today on display in a glass case in the nave, that was taken across the road to Newgate Prison and tinkled outside the cell of condemned felons on their last night of life. Then, at six o'clock the following morning, the church's tenor bell tolled for the prisoner. It continued as he was carted past the church, down the hill, over Holborn Bridge and along the Oxford road to Tyburn. At ten, 'or at such time as knowledge may be truly had of the prisoner's execution', it rang out for fifteen minutes, then ceased. The intention was to move all hearers to pray for the prisoner's salvation, and for their own. As John Donne, the vicar down the road at St Dunstan-in-the-West, had put it, 'every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main'. This was a noble sentiment, but London was never so united. A single death might diminish mankind, but for the youths

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jeering on the churchyard wall and the punters of the taverns that dotted the route to Tyburn, it was terrific sport.[1]

Near the foot of Snow Hill, an apothecary opened his shop to the more quotidian harmonies of the sweepers and scavengers and the water-carriers and coalmen with their buckets and barrows. His neighbours were leathersellers, a widow, a vintner and the grocer who sold 'Luke olives' and oil from his ground-floor shop. On the afternoon of 16 July 1639, a fight that had broken out in the Holy Lamb tavern was resolved in the vintner's house, where the offender made a bare-headed apology in front of the grocer and six other citizens.[2] A few years later, when the widow drew up her will, she put three pounds aside for select neighbours to have a funeral supper together.[3] Thus, beyond London's Common Council and wardmote, the livery hall and the vestry, a little community was settled and the frayed edges just about contained within the warp and weft of Snow Hill.

'The name is such a good one,' Charles Dickens would write two centuries later. This was before Holborn Viaduct arose from the clay and changed its contours and character; when the hill was still so steep that horses ascending from the Fleet valley 'seriously think of falling down on purpose'.[4] When it rained, the detritus of the street would plunge down to meet the muck of Smithfield Market:

> And in huge confluent join at Snow Hill ridge,
> Fall from the Conduit prone to Holborn Bridge.
> Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,
> Drown'd puppies, stinking sprats, all drench'd in mud,
> Dead cats and turnip-tops come tumbling down the flood.[5]

At the end of August every year, the slaughter stopped and the smooth field of Smithfield was transformed into Bartholomew Fair. Conjurors and jugglers came to town, men on stilts and pigs on spits, wrestlers, ballad-sellers, prostitutes, puppeteers and shoals of pickpockets. In his 1614 play *Bartholomew Fair*, the dramatist Ben Jonson introduced audiences to Zeal-of-the-land Busy, a Puritan fundamentalist 'of a most lunatic conscience', who wants to ban it all. 'Thou art the seat of the Beast, O Smithfield,' he spits. Busy sees sin in all things: long hair ('an ensign of pride'), tobacco ('mist and error'), a hobby-horse ('a very idol') and the 'fleshly' woman. 'He is a fellow of a most arrogant

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and invincible dullness,' sighs Quarlous the gamester, but the real Puritans were not so easy to dismiss, especially by 1631, when Jonson's play was printed and opposition was growing to a king who had decided to rule without Parliament.[6] It was downright dangerous to ridicule them a decade later, when a reworking of *Bartholomew Fair* appeared in an anonymous pamphlet with a Puritan protagonist more menacing than Jonson's canting cartoon.

In this version, the Puritan enters a gallery in Christ Church cloisters, a stone's throw from Snow Hill, where he spies a picture of Jesus with the twelve apostles, the Virgin Mary and the saints. He falls into a frenzy, jabbing at the canvas and railing at the Whore of Babylon.*[7] That he brandishes a child's wooden sword and is soon put in the stocks does not quite render him ludicrous – not in 1641, and not at Christ Church, where, in December, the minister was stripped of his surplice to cheers from the congregation 'as if they had got a greater victory than even Alexander the Great could attain'. One of the defrockers was a blind old woman, transformed in her zeal into a 'young Amazonian'.[8]

It was the same story elsewhere that year. At St Mary's, Chelmsford, in Essex, a group of parishioners had tried to tear 'the rags of Rome' off their vicar. Two weeks earlier, on 5 November, the church's east window, a stained-glass depiction of the life of Christ, had been stoned. Twenty-five miles away in Earls Colne, the 'popish' Book of Common Prayer had been subjected to 'swimming' and burning, as if it were both witch and heretic. At Hillingdon the following summer, surplices were ripped up and recycled as menstrual cloths.[9]

This was no sacrilege, Puritans argued, since there had never been anything sacred in these objects, only the filth of the Antichrist. 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing,' God had commanded. The Catholics and some of the early Protestant reformers had folded this prohibition into God's First Commandment, which admonishes the faithful that there is only one God.

* 'Babylon': the ancient Mesopotamian city, a symbol of glamour, worldly corruption and doom, often personified by the Whore of Babylon riding the seven-headed beast of the Apocalypse. According to the Book of Revelation, Babylon would fall at the Second Coming, in the final cosmic battle, ushering in the kingdom of Christ on earth. To many English Protestants, Babylon was synonymous with the 'popish tyranny' of Rome.

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But later Protestants upgraded it to a stand-alone Second Commandment and made it a central tenet of their faith.[10] For the Puritans, anything that adulterated the pristine Word of God – in image, ritual or clerical fancy dress – was an obstacle on the pathway to heaven. And all those who failed to destroy such obstacles would, like the worshippers of the golden calf, incur God's horrible wrath. At a time of decayed trade, harvest failure, epidemics and wild weather, this was a pregnant threat. 'The Lord hath showed us, of late years, that He is displeased with us by His sending unseasonable weather the last harvest, and then in the seed time, and now this spring season,' the parishioners of St Sepulchre's were warned.[11]

No one wanted to be called a Puritan. It was an insulting term. They did not much like 'the hotter sort of Protestants' either, though it gave a good sense of their ardour.[12] They preferred 'the godly', or 'the Saints' or, indeed, 'the Elect', since most believed in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination – that God had already decided which lucky few would receive the unmerited gift of salvation – and naturally they cleaved to the view that they were the special ones. This might lead to complacency, but most Puritans were twitchy about their status and constantly on the lookout for signs of assurance. 'Keep your day book,' urged Hugh Peter, a popular preacher at St Sepulchre's, 'write down your sins on one side, and on the other side God's little mercies.'[13] Thousands of columns were filled this way. A London woodturner chastised himself for eating a pear without lifting his heart to God. An Essex cleric blamed the death of his baby boy on 'unseasonable playing at chess'. The parliamentary journalist Sir Simonds D'Ewes, who survived a childhood fall in a dung pit, would forever ponder its meaning. While Puritans invited derision, the integrity of their thoughts goes some way to explaining the violence of their deeds and, indeed, their busyness. The Lord, wrote Jean Calvin, 'would by no means have those persons inactive, whom He Himself has placed on the watch'.[14]

Puritans did not think the Reformation in England had gone far enough in cleansing the Church of ignorance and idolatry. They had been frustrated by the moderation of Elizabeth I and appalled by her successor James I's appeasement of the House of Habsburg during the Thirty Years War in Europe. This was a political and religious conflict centred on the Holy Roman Empire but drawing in all the major European states. It had special significance for English Protestants since it

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had stemmed from the acceptance of the crown of Bohemia by James's daughter Elizabeth and her husband, Frederick V, Elector Palatine, after a Protestant revolt against Habsburg rule in 1618. The deposed king-elect, Ferdinand, who was subsequently crowned Holy Roman Emperor, sent troops to retake his throne, re-Catholicise Bohemia and seize Frederick's ancestral lands in the Lower Palatinate. Frederick and Elizabeth were defeated, exiled and ever after mocked as the 'Winter King and Queen'. They appealed to James for help, but he refused them asylum in England and insisted, fruitlessly, on a diplomatic solution.

The Puritans saw the ensuing war in Europe as an apocalyptic showdown between Christ's Protestant soldiers and the Catholic forces of the resurgent Antichrist. They believed that England was the new Israel, God's chosen nation, and that Englishmen should therefore be on the front line alongside their struggling brethren. They linked Protestant setbacks in Europe to the advance of 'popery' at home and they were horrified to see both James and his son, Charles, promote bishops who seemed addicted, as one Puritan put it, to 'ikon slavery'.[15]

Charles, who succeeded his father in the great plague year of 1625, was Protestant, but his French wife Henrietta Maria was devoutly Catholic and there were several high-profile conversions at court. As a young man, Charles had been beguiled by the majesty of Madrid, the seat of the Iberian Habsburgs, and he also believed in the 'beauty of holiness'. This was a phrase that his Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, and his bishops took from Psalm 96 to signify a sublimity of worship in the service and house of God. They believed that true Christian communion was facilitated by decorum in church and the enrichment of its fabric. While many buildings, including St Sepulchre's, had been 'repaired and trimmed' in the previous reign, Charles, Laud and their allies believed that there was still work to be done in cleaning up God's house. Ecclesiastical court records for the Archdeaconry of Essex, for example, mention one ruined church with grave-grubbing hogs in the yard, a man who 'did piss in the church into the hat of one that sat by him' and Susanna Cooke of Baddow Parva, who dried her laundry in the church, for she 'might hang her rags there as well as the surplice'.[16]

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Worse for those bishops who vaunted the Eucharist as the most intense interaction with Christ was the profanation of the communion

table, which they claimed was treated more like a place 'to eat oysters on than the holy table fit for God's sanctuary'.[17] Stories abounded of hats and bags being dumped on communion tables and of naps being taken beneath them. Reverence was restored in many churches in the 1630s, when the tables were returned to their pre-Reformation position at the east end of the church, raised onto a platform and railed off from hoi polloi. To many Protestants (and not just Puritans) this looked very much like the return of the sacrificial altar of the Catholic Mass and the adoration of a 'breaden God'. Back too were performative devotions like bowing at the name of Jesus and kneeling to receive communion, as well as organ music, clerical vestments, candlesticks, crucifixes and religious imagery in the windows. This vision of church and soul aglow with the beauty of holiness had integrity and scriptural rationale to its adherents, but to many others, including the poet John Milton, it was a profane tarting-up of the gospel with 'all the gaudy allurements of a whore'.[18]

Imperative to the ideal of immaculate order was a royal insistence on conformity, an uglier and more jagged process achieved through prerogative court and pillory as the Puritan lawyer William Prynne could attest. Towards the end of 1632, he had released a book against stage plays in which he applauded the Roman assassins of theatre-loving emperors and likened actresses to 'notorious whores'. Henrietta Maria, who was in rehearsals for a masque at the time, was neither named nor exempted. Prynne was tried before the Court of Star Chamber and sentenced to life imprisonment and the loss of his ears. While in the pillory, he was also forced to watch a bonfire of his books – the first time a book was publicly burned by the common hangman in England. Four years later, having smuggled out more offensive tracts, Prynne was again convicted of sedition. His ears, having been cropped before, were now completely sheared off. His nose was also slit and his cheeks were branded with 'S. L.' for 'Seditious Libeller' (or 'Stigma of Laud', as Prynne had it).[19]

Thousands of Puritans fled across the Atlantic to search for God in a New England. One was Hugh Peter, the preacher who had attracted thousands to his whippy sermons at St Sepulchre's and who had been imprisoned for praying that the queen forsake idolatry. (Vile rumour had it that he was also running from a Smithfield butcher whose wife

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