

## Anthony Watson

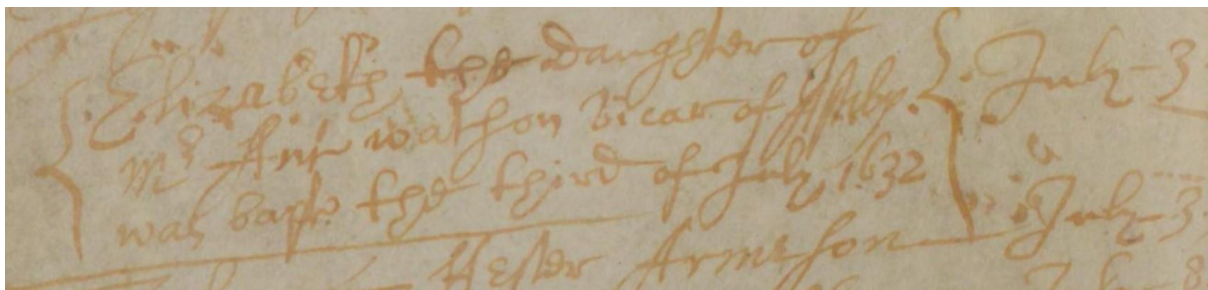
### Vicar 1622-1646

A wooden board beside the Tower records the names and dates of St Helen's vicars. In respect of Anthony Watson, it is incorrect. It records that Arthur Hildersham was vicar from 1593-1632. In fact, Hildersham's career at St Helen's was chequered due to his Puritan stance and for many years he was 'Lecturer' at the church, temporarily removed from the role or even, on occasion, in prison. Anthony Watson was appointed vicar after the departure of Thomas Pestell in 1622. Pestell's name doesn't appear on the board at all, but that's a story for another day.

There is little information about Anthony Watson. Lesley Rowe, in her book on Hildersham, describes Watson as 'something of an enigma.' He recognised Hildersham's seniority in the town and deferred to him. For instance, a letter from leading townspeople to the Mayor and Corporation of Leicester in 1625, stating that Ashby was not – as widely rumoured – rife with plague, a circumstance which was severely damaging trade in the town, was signed first by Hildersham and second by Watson.

Watson entered Pembroke College, Cambridge at Easter 1607 and graduated with a BA degree in 1610 and an MA in 1614. He was ordained deacon at the Bishop's palace in London on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1614, aged 22, which indicates that he was born around 1592. However, he was not ordained priest until September 1620.

The clergy database records that he was Curate of Harfield (now Harefield) in Middlesex for a while, then priest in Peterborough and '*perhaps Vicar of Ashby de la Zouch, Leics 1632.*' He was *certainly* vicar of Ashby from 1622, appointed by Ferdinando, 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Huntingdon, though he may have been in Ashby before that date. Clerks in Holy Orders were often employed as teachers, but there is no reference to him in the early records of Ashby Grammar School.



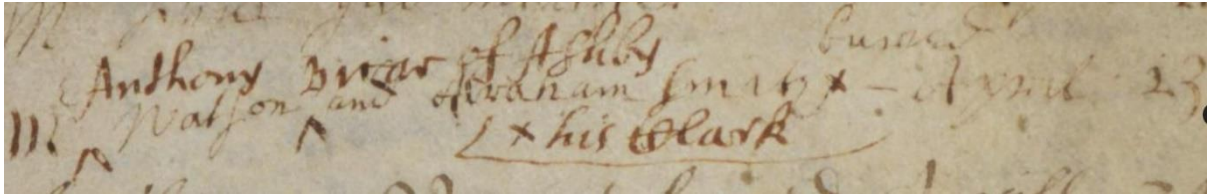
Anthony Watson must have been married, because there is an entry in the baptism register at St Helen's – "*Elizabeth daughter of Mr Ant Watson Vicar of Ashby was baptised the third of July 1632.*"

There is another possible entry for the birth of a daughter to Mr Watson and his wife in March 1627, but it is very difficult to read. The birth of a son, Anthony, to Mr Anthony Watson is recorded in the registers of Harefield, Middlesex, in March 1619, during the time of Watson's curacy there. This may be his son.

Lesley Rowe writes that Watson was considered sympathetic to the puritan cause and was presented to the authorities in 1629 for administering Communion to a parishioner who was standing instead of kneeling. 'In 1636 he protested his conformity to a commission of enquiry. He certainly engaged in some unseemly legal wrangling with his predecessor, Pestell, and had appeared in court over allegations of sexual impropriety with servant girls.' Watson was accused of seduction by servant Mary Bailey in 1630. He denied misconduct but other servant girls made the same complaint. In the summer of 1631, Watson sued the Baileys for defamation, as gossip spread.

Hildersham was apparently supportive of Watson and they worked closely together. Watson was one of the witnesses to Hildersham's will and inventory.

Anthony Watson died in April 1644 and was buried at St Helen's Church on 23<sup>rd</sup> April. The burial register notes the burials of "Mr Anthony Watson vicar of Ashby and Abraham Smith his Clerk" on that day. Some of these details have been added by a different hand, with the original entry reading "Mr Watson and Abraham Smith."



There was a major outbreak of plague in Ashby in 1645, during the Civil War siege of the castle. Could it be that Mr Watson and Mr Smith fell victim to plague in 1644? It's likely that we will never know.

**Julie Starkey**  
**June 2022**

#### **Sources**

*Entries from the Parish Registers of St Helen's Church have been accessed on Find My Past.*

*Clergy of the Church of England Database*

*Cambridge University Alumni 1261-1900 (Ancestry)*

*Quotations are from: Lesley A Rowe: The Life and Times of Arthur Hildersham, Prince among Puritans. Reformation Heritage Books. 20 March 2013*