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Chapter 1

Introduction: ‘this munificent person’ – Dr Thomas Plume and his legacies

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Dr Thomas Plume (1630–1704), the younger son of Thomas Plume senior, a wealthy merchant and prominent member of the Maldon Corporation, was born in the small borough and port of Maldon, on the Blackwater estuary in Essex. Plume was educated at Chelmsford School and Christ’s College, Cambridge, and probably determined upon a church career at an early date with his father’s support. He began his education at a time of acute religious dissension following on from the Reformation initiated by Henry VIII. The religious changes developed further under Edward VI, turning England from a Catholic into a Protestant country. Despite Mary’s attempts to reverse the changes, by the reign of Elizabeth I the Church of England was established as the national church with the monarch as Supreme Governor. From the late 1550s until the 1630s there was a working consensus around Calvinist theology and practices, especially in parish life. Jean Calvin (1509–64) taught the doctrine of predestination in which some are destined for eternal life (they were known as the ‘elect’), others to eternal damnation.¹

Although Elizabeth’s successor, James I, also supported Calvinism, his son Charles I instead held to the rival Arminian theology and practice taught very forcibly by William Laud (1573–1645), and thus subsequently labelled Laudianism. Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) had taught that ‘predestination is based on foreseen faith, that the human will is not completely bound by sin, that grace may be resisted and that even the elect may fall from grace.’² Charles made Laud bishop of London and, later, archbishop of Canterbury and, in addition to theological alterations, Laud enforced extensive changes in church practice affecting church furnishings, clerical dress and the liturgy. These changes were widely distrusted and feared by many congregations, who could not differentiate between them and the ‘popery’ that they had been taught

to abhor for many years. Lay resistance to Laud's 'innovations' spread, being seen for example in Chelmsford from the 1630s, and escalated into full-blown violent iconoclasm following the promulgation of the Root and Branch Petition of December 1640 by the Long Parliament.³ It is widely held that these religious differences contributed in large part to the Civil Wars of the 1640s between the king and parliament. By the time these wars ended there had been enormous loss of life, families had been torn apart and Laud and Charles I had both been executed by parliament (in 1645 and 1649 respectively). The Long Parliament, in its attempt to impose on the nation a Presbyterian church governed by elders, abolished the episcopacy and its associated posts and replaced the Book of Common Prayer with the Directory for Public Worship.

Following the collapse of the Cromwellian regime in 1658, Charles II returned at the request of parliament in 1660. Initially, the king and others hoped to create an inclusive church but instead 'the restored Anglican Church was narrow in its boundaries, and conservative, perhaps even Laudian, in its nature'.⁴ More than 1,900 dissenting Protestant ministers and their many followers were forced out of the church by the prescriptive demands of the Act of Uniformity in 1662, leading to the founding of a number of nonconforming churches.⁵ Although the Church of England retained its formal position as the state church, it 'was no longer a national church' because not everyone conformed or belonged to it.⁶

Tracing Thomas Plume's career through these troubled times is by no means a straightforward task, as the surviving documentary evidence for parts of his life is sparse. While his personal religious belief was influenced by his family background and his hometown, which were distinctly Puritan or Presbyterian in outlook, the violence and turmoil of the Civil War period appear to have encouraged in Plume an innate royalism and support for the established church. Notably, Thomas Plume owned portraits of both Charles I and William Laud, which are now preserved in his library at Maldon.⁷ He therefore found himself at odds with the prevailing political and religious sentiment by the late 1640s. His moves immediately after graduation from Cambridge are unclear, but he is found living near the village of Cheam in Surrey by 1651. There he became an informal student under the tutelage of the vicar, John Hacket, who, after the Restoration, went on to become bishop of Coventry and Lichfield. Through the contacts of his mentor Plume successfully obtained episcopal ordination at an unknown date, but he did not receive clerical advancement until the winds of change were in the air in 1658, in the final days of the Cromwellian regime, when he was inducted as vicar of Greenwich. He soon gained a solid reputation as a churchman and preacher, conformed in 1662 and used Laudian practices, and by 1679 had risen to become the archdeacon of Rochester and a prebendary of Rochester Cathedral. His progression from the Presbyterian

outlook of his family and childhood to the Laudianism he demonstrated after 1662 is a key aspect of his life.

Because he remained unmarried and had no close relatives, Plume planned upon his death to bequeath most of his considerable fortune to good causes, leaving about one-fifth only of his cash and stock, as well as a house, shop and land in Maldon, to family members, friends and servants. His will was long and complex, comprising 19 pages in its original form and with 76 bequests.⁸ It disposed of cash and stock worth about £7,270 (equivalent to about £1,101,000 today), plus a considerable amount of real estate in Essex and Kent.⁹ A comparison with his archidiaconal peers and more senior bishops and archbishops during this period demonstrates that the scale of Plume's philanthropic giving was exceptional, even allowing that he was a single man with no immediate family requiring support.¹⁰ Several trusts were set up by his will, the largest of which are still in existence today, their work extending across several counties in south-east England. Most of the bequests were associated with Maldon, Cambridge or Kent, the scenes of his childhood, education and life's work respectively.

Numerous benefactions were made to his home town, many of which were incorporated into his Maldon Trust, the modern successor to which is the charity known as Thomas Plume's Library.¹¹ Indeed, the gift to Maldon of his library, comprising around 7,400 publications, as well as his manuscripts,¹² to be housed in the redundant church of St Peter (which he adapted and rebuilt in his lifetime for that purpose), was one of his chief bequests. Other legacies for Maldon included support for the town's grammar school (later Maldon Grammar School and now the Plume School) and a workhouse for the poor of Maldon, Mundon and neighbouring parishes. In Kent, where Plume had spent his professional life, many of his benefactions were combined into the Stone Castle Charity (named after his country estate near Dartford), the most important of which is the fund for poor clergy in the Diocese of Rochester, which still operates as Dr Plumes Trust.¹³ Finally, Plume's financial legacies have probably had their widest impact – indeed, international renown – in his endowment creating the Plumian Professorship of Astronomy at Cambridge University. Yet, notably, Plume was very different from the majority of benefactors in that he consistently sought anonymity, whereas it was customary for benefactors to require that their name be perpetuated.¹⁴ His tombstone does not bear his name, reading instead: 'Beneath here lies the Archdeacon of Rochester ...'¹⁵ Similarly, his almshouses at Deptford in Kent were to be called the 'Archdeacons Poor Almes-Houses'. He forbade his unnamed portrait to be brought into his library and it remains to this day in the Moot Hall at Maldon (Figure 1.1).¹⁶

The extraordinary extent of Plume's philanthropy was recognised by contemporaries. Leading churchmen, townsmen, academics and other