

A PILGRIM PATH:
John Bunyan's journey

A NEW BIOGRAPHY BY FAITH COOK

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CHAPTER 1

A TROUBLED YOUTH

Only four years had passed since Thomas Bunyan had first married Anne, a girl from his home village of Elstow in Bedfordshire, and now she had died. Perhaps he felt unable to cope alone because just two months later he remarried. Thomas already knew Margaret Bentley for she too was from Elstow, then a straggling village of only sixty-one cottages lying just a mile and a half from Bedford. Both were born in 1603, and with their homes all clustering around the village green, must have played together as children, sharing any education available to village children at the time. Now twenty-four, they married and set up home together in old Harrowden, an area on the outer fringes of Elstow.

Their thatched wattle-and-daub cottage had only one living room with a rickety staircase leading up to several bedrooms. Immediately adjacent to his cottage Thomas had built a forge where he could hammer out the metals needed for his living—mending pots and pans—for he was a brazier by trade, more popularly known as a tinker.

And it was in this cottage that Thomas and Margaret's first child was born in November 1628. Today the site of the child's birth is marked by a memorial stone in the far corner of a field of wheat near a reedy stream known as Elstow Brook. Driving slowly along the A421 near Bedford, an observant passenger may pick

out the stone in the distance and even ask the driver to stop and take a photograph. But why the interest in the birth of the son of a poor tinker and his wife in a rural Bedfordshire village almost four hundred years ago? Little could Thomas and Margaret know that this son of theirs—John Bunyan—would find a place in the annals of secular and religious history long after many princes, rulers, politicians and church leaders had been long forgotten. A baptismal record states briefly: *John, the sonne of Thomas Bonnionn Jun., the 30th of Novemb.*

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

The placid Bedfordshire countryside may have looked calm enough that November in 1628, when John was born, but far off in London a serious situation was developing. England was in turmoil, religiously, socially and economically with the king, Charles I, on a collision course with his Parliament. English men and women had long memories. Some had grandparents who could remember the reign of Mary Tudor, known as Bloody Queen Mary, an ardent Roman Catholic who sent some of the noblest citizens of the land to a fiery and fearful death at the stake for their Protestant faith. Many could remember a more recent event that had occurred only twenty-three years ago. In November 1605 Guy Fawkes and his cronies had attempted to blow up the king and his House of Commons, in order to provoke anarchy in the hope of subsequently setting another Catholic monarch on the throne. Small wonder then that the people were uneasy and not a little anxious because Charles I, aided and abetted by William Laud, soon to be Archbishop, was displaying strong Roman Catholic sympathies.

With an intense belief in the divine right of kings Charles simply dismissed his parliaments when they refused to give him money for wars and projects which they felt to be against the country's best interests. Then at last in 1628, the very year of John's birth,