

## 'THE CRUCIBLE' - BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Puritans were a religious group who wanted to purify the Church of England by making religion a much more simple and devout affair. They didn't believe in singing, dancing, theatre or drinking and devoted their lives to hard work and prayer, wearing simple black clothing and having their hair cut short. It was absolutely forbidden to work on Sundays and no personal adornment was allowed.

Before 1625 and the reign of Charles 1 they were persecuted and many fled to the Netherlands (particularly from Lincolnshire). In 1620 a group of 35 sailed from Plymouth in the Mayflower in search of a new life in the British colonies in the New World (America). These were called the Pilgrim Fathers. They took with them sheep, goats, dogs, seeds etc. intending to set up their own Puritan colony. They chose a strip of land on America's east coast (calling the landing spot Plymouth) and began to clear land and grow crops. It was gruelling work and many died but their sense of community held them together.

This sense of community was accepted easily. A strong, authoritarian minister as the 'ruler' of each community and a devout belief in prayer, coupled with the hard work involved to make the land viable, kept the people busy and under control. Holidays were non-existent and time spent not working had to be spent in prayer. There was no time for discussion or rebellion as all the time was needed for survival - on this earth and in the next.

By 1692, when life was easier, a few people were beginning to resent the complete control of the church and as a result, ministers often set up networks of 'spies' to report on people not in church or not behaving according to the principles of Puritanism. So neighbours watched each other closely, not knowing who was likely to report them to the magistrates nor whom they could trust.

Status was acquired by the amount of land owned and many disputes arose over land boundaries as men strove to better themselves by carving out bigger areas of farmland. As life became easier, strict authoritarian control was no longer quite so necessary, yet those 'in charge' (ministers, judges and the like) did not want to loosen their hold on the people.

This balance between authority and freedom has always been (and still is) a delicate one. In the late 17th century that balance seemed to be swaying dangerously in favour of the more liberal Puritans and therefore the time was ripe for the events of 'The Crucible' as the church strove to maintain its authority.

Paradoxically, in England under the reign of Charles 1 and then Oliver Cromwell and his son, Puritanism was wholly accepted. Cromwell himself was a Puritan and the traditional Church of England believers were being repressed and subdued here. Pubs and theatres were closed down and dancing and singing were forbidden. Not until Charles 11 claimed the throne in 1660 did life return to normal - which explains the popularity of Charles 11 and his nickname, The Merry Monarch.