



FRIENDS OF ST NICHOLAS CHURCHYARD

The abuse and the beauty

THE SHOCKING STORY OF THE MASON GIRLS

Dorothy Mason and Anne Mason: beauty, marriage, power and scandal in
Restoration England

Two sisters, one privileged beginning, two very different lives. The daughters of Sir Richard Mason, Lord of the Manor of Sutton and a senior officer in Charles II's royal household, grew up within the fashionable world of the Restoration court. Their portraits present beauty, wealth and confidence, but their stories reveal how little control even privileged women could have over marriage, reputation and inheritance.

The Mason family and Sutton



Sir Richard Mason

Sir Richard Mason served Charles II as a royal household administrator, becoming Clerk Comptroller of the Board of Green Cloth. His wife, Anna Margareta Long, came from an influential Royalist family. In 1669, the Manor of Sutton passed first to her great-uncle, Sir Robert Long, and then, only a month later, to Richard Mason. Sutton became closely connected with a family moving at the highest levels of Restoration society.

The sisters were born into a culture that celebrated fashionable women through portraiture, court display and advantageous marriage. In modern language, they can reasonably be described as something like the “It girls” of Restoration Sutton: glamorous, fashionable, wealthy and exceptionally well connected. They embodied their cultural moment, although Anne, far more than Dorothy, later became a subject of public scandal.

Dorothy Mason, Lady Brownlow (1664-1699/1700)



Dorothy was the elder Mason daughter. Leading artists, including Sir Godfrey Kneller, Willem Wissing, and Michael Dahl, painted her repeatedly. The portraits show her in the elegant, theatrical style expected of a fashionable young woman of rank. A contemporary remembered her as “really deserving everybody’s love”.

In 1688 she married Sir William Brownlow, later 4th Baronet. Their marriage joined the Masons to the wealthy Brownlow family. Dorothy and William lived chiefly in London, while also staying near Sutton with Lady Mason. They had five children, including John Brownlow, later Viscount Tyrconnel.

Dorothy died while still only in her mid-thirties. Her husband arranged an immense funeral procession from London to Sutton and commissioned the sculptor William Stanton to create a magnificent marble monument in St Nicholas Church. The design survives in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The monument, once one of the most prominent features of the church, is now concealed by the organ.

DOROTHY

Beauty • marriage • motherhood • affection • monument

HER LEGACY

A life that conformed closely to the expectations placed on a wealthy woman of her age, preserved in portraits and in stone.

Anne Mason, Countess of Macclesfield (c.1665/66-1753)



Anne's life followed a dramatically different course. On 18 June 1683, while still in her teens, she married Charles Gerard, Viscount Brandon, later 2nd Earl of Macclesfield. The marriage quickly became deeply unhappy. By 1685 the couple were separated. In a surviving letter, Gerard denied Anne's accusation that he had "used [her] ill" and beaten her. The allegation cannot now be independently proved, but the document shows that accusations of mistreatment formed part of their bitter marital breakdown.

When Sir Richard Mason died in March 1685, Dorothy and Anne became co-heirs. Anne was therefore not only an estranged wife but also a wealthy heiress. Marriage, inheritance and control of property became inseparable from the conflict surrounding her.

Years after the separation, Anne formed a relationship with Richard Savage, 4th Earl Rivers. Two children were born in great secrecy, and both appear to have died in infancy. Her husband eventually sought a parliamentary divorce. In 1698 their marriage was dissolved by Act of Parliament, an exceptional and highly public proceeding that exposed intimate details of Anne's private life. The legislation also had to address her property rights, including interests connected with the Manor of Sutton.

Anne later married Colonel Henry Brett and returned to fashionable society. She lived until 1753. Long after the divorce, the poet Richard Savage claimed that he was her surviving illegitimate son and portrayed her as a cruel mother who had abandoned him. Later research has seriously undermined that story: the two children she bore to Earl Rivers are understood to have died young. Nevertheless, Savage's claim, repeated by Samuel Johnson, shaped Anne's reputation for generations.

Two sisters, two versions of womanhood

	Dorothy	Anne
Public story	Admired wife and mother; remembered with affection; commemorated by an elaborate monument.	Teenage marriage, separation, alleged mistreatment, illicit relationship and a sensational parliamentary divorce.
Historical legacy	Her life survives mainly through portraits, children and the Brownlow monument.	Her reputation was repeatedly shaped by other people, including her husband, Parliament, Richard Savage and Samuel Johnson.

A short timeline

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| 1669 Richard Mason acquires the Manor of Sutton. | 1683 Anne marries Charles Gerard while still in her teens. |
| 1685 Sir Richard dies; Dorothy and Anne become co-heirs. | 1688 Dorothy marries Sir William Brownlow. |
| 1698 Anne's marriage is dissolved by Act of Parliament. | 1699/1700 Dorothy dies and is buried at St Nicholas, Sutton. |
| c.1700 Anne marries Colonel Henry Brett. | 1753 Anne dies after a long life extending well into the Georgian age. |

Why the Mason girls matter to Sutton



William Stanton's design of the monument to Dorothy Brownlowe.

Their story connects Sutton directly with the Restoration court and with major national themes: the power of marriage and inheritance, the limited legal independence of women, the culture of beauty and portraiture, domestic conflict, the development of parliamentary divorce, and the making and remaking of reputation. Dorothy left Sutton a remarkable monument. Anne left a story that still asks us to separate the woman herself from the scandal created around her.

"Being admired is not the same as having power."