
Elizabeth Tilley

Letter I:

Educational Companion

Elizabeth Tilley - Letter I

A Note from Jeanie

Welcome, dear reader.

These pages have been prepared to guide you more deeply into the world behind each letter—its history, its landscape, and the quiet details of daily life that shaped the hands who once held the quill. My hope is that these notes will enrich your reading, spark thoughtful conversations, and help you see the past not as distant, but as a living thread woven gently into your own story.

May you find insight, wonder, and perhaps a bit of curiosity in these glimpses of lives long ago. Thank you for learning with me, and for keeping the art of letter-reading—and letter-writing—alive across the distance.

With warm regards,

Jeanie Lick

Creator, Researcher, and Writer of Letters Through Time – Across the Distance

A Real Elizabeth Snapshot

Elizabeth Tilley was a real child of Henlow, Bedfordshire, in the early seventeenth century. Parish records note her baptism at St. Mary's Church in Henlow on 30 August 1607, making her about ten years old in the winter of 1618—the same age she is in these letters. In 1620, she sailed aboard the Mayflower with her parents, John and Joan (Hurst) Tilley, and she was among the children who survived the colony's first harsh winter.

In this winter letter, we meet her in the quiet, frosty rhythm of home—small labors and small kindnesses that steady the heart for harder seasons.

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Target audience:

Grades 4-8 (homeschool, co-ops, classrooms, family learning, interested adults who want to go deeper).

Use it flexibly: in order, as a full unit study, or as pick-and-choose pages.

Parent/Teacher Tips:

- For the richest experience, begin by reading the letter aloud together - a gentle English accent is optional, but children love it!
 - This series brings 1618 daily life to life through the eyes of a young girl, showing how family routines, community cooperation, and personal choices shaped each day, much as our own routines do today.
 - Feel free to adapt any of the discussions or activities so they fit your family, co-op, or classroom perfectly.
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Learning Objectives:

By completing this lesson, learners will be able to:

1. Understand daily life in early-17th-century rural England → Taught in: Historical Background, Geography & Place, Then & Now, Map & Coloring Pages.
2. Explore cultural values through household routines, work, and community → Taught in: Behind the Pages Commentary, Primary Source Excerpts, Discussion Questions.
3. Recognize how choices and values shaped emotional resilience in Elizabeth's world → Taught in: Behind the Pages Commentary, Reflection Prompt, Creative Extensions.
4. Compare historical fiction with documented history → Taught in: Fact vs. Fiction Breakdown, Primary Source Excerpts, Educator's Citation List.
5. Practice close reading, inference, and emotional interpretation → Taught in: Comprehension Questions, Suggested Answers, "Find the Historical Details" Scavenger Hunt, Character Insight Box.
6. Engage creatively and empathetically with the past → Taught in: Step into the Scene Writing Prompt, Draw-It-Yourself Corner, Frost & Hearth art, Family Connections Mini-Chart.

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Behind the Pages – Author’s Notes and Commentary:

This letter brings early-seventeenth-century village life into focus by showing how a winter day feels through Elizabeth’s own eyes. Instead of giving historical facts directly, it lets readers experience the world as she would have known it; through sound, texture, and small domestic moments that reveal character as much as setting. Frost on the roof, the smell of peat smoke, the rhythm of chores, and the cheer of a single robin all work together to show how beauty and hardship often lived side by side. The mill’s distant creak and the hum of a tune inside the cottage suggest how community and home shaped her earliest sense of belonging. As Elizabeth pauses in quiet moments—mending by the doorway or imagining distant places she has only heard described, we see her curiosity widening beyond the familiar edges of her days. The commentary highlights how these gentle shifts of attention foreshadow the larger journey ahead, allowing the letter to serve not only as a glimpse into daily life but also as an early portrait of a thoughtful girl beginning to sense that her world may soon change.

Historical Background:

In January 1618, Henlow was a small agricultural parish in Bedfordshire, England. Families lived in timber-framed, thatched cottages, heated by peat or brushwood fires. Life followed the rhythm of:

- Seasons (long, hard winters; harvests; sowing)
- The parish church of St. Mary’s (with its bell)
- Local trades such as weaving, spinning, and farming
- Neighborly barter (bread, wool, help, and hospitality)

The Tilley family—John, Joan (Hurst), and their daughter Elizabeth (about 10–11 years old at this time)—belonged to this rural community. Some of Joan’s kin (the Cooper/Samson connections) were already associated with English communities in Leiden, Holland, so letters and news sometimes crossed the sea, even while Elizabeth still lived among Henlow’s fields and frosted mornings.

This letter imagines a single winter day just before Elizabeth’s life begins to bend toward the broader world and, eventually, the Mayflower voyage.

**This series imagines life in 1618 England, where cultural practices and daily routines shaped community life and decisions, much like today.*

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Daily Life & Labor Context (Henlow, Winter 1618)

In Elizabeth's world, 'daily life' was not separate from survival. Winter brought short days and frozen ground, and households relied heavily on what they could make and mend with their own hands.

A typical winter household rhythm included:

- Fuel & heat: tending a peat or brushwood fire; saving kindling; keeping embers alive overnight.
- Light: using rush-lights or candles sparingly, since light cost labor and materials.
- Textile work: spinning, twisting thread, weaving, mending—because cloth was valuable and repairs mattered.
- Water & washing: hauling well water even in frost; rinsing and scrubbing by hand; drying near the hearth.
- Food & storage: stretching preserved foods; baking when there was fuel to spare; sharing and bartering with neighbors
- Community dependence: exchanging goods (bread, wool, help) and watching out for widows, children, and the sick.

Why this matters for the letter:

Elizabeth's sensory details—smoke on sleeves, frozen rope, mending stitches—aren't "extra description." They show how a child's character and values are formed by what she must do every day.

Kitchen & Domestic Life – “Winter Hearth Ways”

Elizabeth mentions peat smoke, mending by the door, and evenings gathered by the hearth. In many homes, the hearth was the warmest place—and also the center of cooking, light, and comfort.

Try a simple, low-prep “hearth” activity (classroom or home):

- Make a mug of warm apple cider (or warm apple juice).
(Optional: add an apple slice. Spices are a modern add-on, so skip them if you want it simpler.)
- Sit quietly for 2 minutes with the lights low (safe + supervised).
- Ask: What sounds do you notice? What smells feel like “home”?
- Write 3 sensory lines in Elizabeth's style:
“The air smelled of...,” “The light looked like...,” “The room felt...”

Elizabeth is observant, steady, and quietly imaginative—she notices small mercies and finds meaning in ordinary days.

In this winter letter, we see her learning patience and gratitude, noticing how warmth and kindness matter most when the world feels cold.

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Then & Now:

Create a simple chart for students to fill in with the items in the boxes below. Which changes are conveniences? Which show that some things (like needing warmth, bread, and friendship) never change?

1618 - Elizabeth's World

1. Water hauled from the village well
2. Heat from peat or wood fire
3. Weaving for family clothing
4. Letters carried weeks or months
5. Village church bell marks time

Today - Our World

1. Water from kitchen sink / faucet
2. Furnace, electric heat, space heaters
3. Store-bought clothes; crafts as hobby
4. Texts, email, instant messaging
5. Phones, alarms, school bells

“Find the Historical Details” Scavenger Hunt:

Students reread the letter and check off each item when they find it:

- A reference to a real river
 - A mention of a real church bell
 - A type of fuel used for heat
 - A kind of work done in the cottage
 - A neighborly exchange
 - A hint about family in another country
 - A sound that is compared to a melody
 - A description of something that happens at dawn
- Optional: Students copy the sentence where they find each detail.

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Geography & Place Context:

Label & Locate Map Activity

Use the Outline Map (pg 7), and label the following:

- Henlow (Bedfordshire, England)
- River Ivel (draw its path on the map)
- Leiden (Holland / The Netherlands)
- North Sea
- English Channel
- London (optional)
- Southampton (future departure point)
- Plymouth, England (optional, for later letters)

Extension prompts:

- Draw a small church icon at Henlow for St. Mary's.
 - Shade the Ivel River and mark where a mill might stand.
 - Use arrows to sketch a possible route: Henlow → London → Leiden (for some kin), and later Henlow → Southampton → Plymouth/New World (for Elizabeth).
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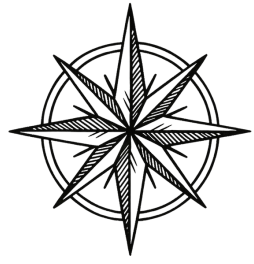
“

The frosts lay heavy upon the fields, and folk rose early to their work, for the days were short and labour could not wait.

– *Period-style paraphrase
(inspired by early English rural diaries and winter husbandry accounts)*

”

BOTTOM OF MAP



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Timeline & “Chronology Builder” Strips:

Quick Timeline (Teacher Reference)

- Before 1618: Some of Elizabeth’s extended Cooper/Samson kin move to Leiden.
- 1618: Elizabeth still in Henlow; parents alive; ordinary rural life.
- 1619-1620: Growing discussion of relocation; letters from Holland influence family decisions.
- 1620 (Summer-Autumn): Elizabeth travels to join the Mayflower voyage.
- 1620 (December): Arrival in New England (later letters).

Print these as cut-apart strips for students to arrange in correct order:

Elizabeth helps fetch water from the well on a frosty morning.

Elizabeth hears the mill on the River Ivel grumbling in the cold air.

Her mother mentions kin who have gone to Holland.

The family shares bread and wool with their neighbor, Widow Hawkins.

They gather by the hearth to read from the Psalter.

Elizabeth falls asleep watching frost patterns and wakes to St. Mary’s bell.



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Step Into the Scene – Sensory Writing Prompt:

“If you stood beside Elizabeth on that frost-bright January morning...”

Have students write a short paragraph answering:

- What could you see?
- What could you hear?
- What did the air feel like?
- What job might you be helping with?

Encourage them to borrow details from the letter and add one detail of their own.

Hedgerow Nature Observation Mini-Activity:

Inspired by Elizabeth’s winter errands, *have students draw or describe three animals or plants she might see along a snowy hedgerow path* (e.g., a robin hopping boldly, a hedgehog curled in hibernation, or frost-covered hedges with red berries).

Encourage research or imagination: What makes these suited to an English winter? Label your drawing with fun facts (e.g., “Robins stay active in cold weather for food!”). For extra fun, color it in or share why Elizabeth might notice them.

Draw Elizabeth’s Hearth or Frosted Window:

Option 1: *Draw the hearth scene—loom, peat fire, parents, rushlight.*

Option 2: *Draw the frost trees on the window with St. Mary’s bell tower faint in the background, including hidden treasures in the ice.*

“Every season has its task.”
– *Early English proverb*

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Reading Between the Lines – Why Elizabeth Says It This Way

Elizabeth rarely states big emotions plainly. Instead, she lets her world speak: frost, smoke, river-mist, a bell at dawn, a loaf shared by a neighbor. That is how many early letters (and many quiet lives) reveal feeling—through what is noticed, not what is announced.

Look for these “between-the-lines” clues:

When Elizabeth describes the weather, she is also describing mood.

Frost and hush = stillness, smallness, waiting.

When Elizabeth describes chores, she reveals values.

Mending and tending show steadiness, patience, care.

When Elizabeth mentions kin in Holland, she hints at change.

The world is widening; decisions may be coming later.

When Elizabeth ends with gratitude, she shows resilience.

Hard days can still hold warmth, kindness, and wonder.

Mini-Activity (Inference):

Choose one line from the letter and answer:

What is Elizabeth describing?

What does she mean beneath it?

Example: “Kindness travels between cottages...” → *She believes small kindnesses hold a community together.*

Elizabeth is observant, steady, and quietly imaginative; she notices small mercies and finds meaning in ordinary ways. *In this winter letter, we see her learning patience and gratitude, noticing how warmth and kindness matter most when the world feels cold.*

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Primary Source Connection — What This Letter Connects To

This letter is historical fiction, but it rests on real patterns historians can document:

- Village life & household labor: *early modern English families depended on textile work, fuel gathering, and mutual aid to make it through winter.*
- Faith and home reading: *many households read Scripture or devotional texts by firelight, and psalms shaped everyday language and comfort.*
- Family networks across the sea: *English communities connected to Leiden often relied on letters,*

Think like a historian:

Jot notes on a separate page or in a notebook (sample answers below).

Which details in Elizabeth's letter feel like daily life?

- "Father unbarred the door... the rush-light... flickering."
- "Mother... sat at her loom while I twisted the thread..."
- "Yesterday I fetched water from the well... the rope bit at my palms..."
- "Mother sent me out... gather any fallen twigs for kindling."
- "Widow Hawkins brought us a loaf... Mother gave her a skein of wool."
- "I... mend the small tears in Father's workshirt."

Which details feel like inner life?

- "All Henlow stands hushed... as if the world itself waits..." (her sense of stillness, expectation)
- "I wondered... what secrets [the distant hills] hold." (curiosity, longing)
- "I wonder if life in Holland... is stitched together differently..." (quiet questioning about change)
- "I felt a stillness in my heart... as though a gentle hand covered the roof..." (comfort, safety, awe)
- "I think it is a good thing to feel small beneath so great a sky..." (humility, perspective)

- The well-water line shows what survival required in winter (no plumbing, cold rope, daily labor).
- The loom / thread lines show a real household economy (textiles weren't "crafts," they were livelihood).
- The bread-for-wool exchange shows how neighbors relied on one another (community as a safety net).
- The letters from Holland show family networks already stretching across borders before the Mayflower.

How do ordinary tasks become "history" when we look closely?

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Comprehension & Discussion Questions:

1. What winter sights, sounds, and smells does Elizabeth describe in Henlow?
 2. How does her family's weaving trade shape their daily routine?
 3. What does Elizabeth's relationship with Widow Hawkins tell you about the village community?
 4. How do cultural values appear in ordinary tasks like weaving and reading by the fire?
 5. Why is the mill on the River Ivel important in her description?
 6. What do we learn from her remark about kin in Holland?
 7. How does Elizabeth respond emotionally to the harsh winter work?
 8. What does she mean when she says it is "a good thing to feel small beneath so great a sky"?
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Suggested Answers:

1. Frost on thatch, cold air, smoke, the grumbling mill, wind, bell.
2. They rise early, weave and twist thread by hearth light; weaving is central to their survival.
3. They share bread and wool; the community supports one another.
4. Through tunes, readings, and seeing labor as steady reward.
5. It shows the mill was important to the village and how weather and daily work were connected.
6. That some of her extended family has already crossed the sea, with stories that excite her, foreshadowing future journeys.
7. She feels the strain but responds with humor, steadiness, and growing gratitude.
8. She recognizes the world's vastness and her own smallness, leading to humility and thankfulness.

"Their daily labors were many, but they bore them with patience and cheerful spirits."

— *William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation*

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Teacher Note: This breakdown helps students understand which elements come from historical evidence and which are added to enrich narrative voice.

Historical Fact

1. Henlow is a real weaving village in Bedfordshire.
2. The Tilleys and their kin had connections to Leiden communities.
3. St. Mary's Church and its bell existed.
4. Peat, rushlights, and wells were part of daily life.

VS

Creative Interpretation

1. The specific winter day, conversation, and chores are imagined.
2. Elizabeth's thoughts about letters from Holland and her "wide world" feeling are inferred.
3. The dream of frost trees and bells is a creative scene.
4. The joke about sprites and scrubbing pots is invented but plausible.

Quick Quiz – Self Check (with answers)

Teacher Note: Use for quick assessment or discussion starters.

Quick Quiz:

1. What river flows near Henlow?
2. What fuel gives the cottage its "sweet and bitter" smoke?
3. What trade does Elizabeth's father practice?
4. Where have some of her mother's kin already gone?
5. What does Elizabeth say it is good to feel beneath the great sky?

Answers:

1. The River Ivel
2. Peat
3. Weaving/cloth-working
4. Holland (Leiden)
5. Small – which leads to gratitude

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Reflection Prompt:

Elizabeth says winter teaches her to be thankful for small kindnesses and warmth.

Ask students to write or draw:

Describe a time when something cold, hard, or difficult in your life helped you notice or appreciate kindness, family, or everyday wonders more deeply.

Glossary (with Pronunciation & Meaning):

- Peat (peet) - Compressed plant material burned as fuel; smells earthy and smoky.
 - Rush-light (rush-lyte) - A simple candle made by dipping dried rushes in tallow (animal fat).
 - Thatch (thach) - Straw or reeds used on roofs.
 - Rime (ryme) - A thin coating of frost that forms crystals on surfaces.
 - Ivel (EYE-vuhl) - The river flowing through Bedfordshire near Henlow.
 - Psalter (SAWL-ter) - A book of poems or songs used for readings (historical note: usually Psalms).
 - Separatists (SEP-uh-ruh-tists) - English groups who formed independent church communities to live according to their beliefs.
 - Skein (skayn) - A long, coiled length of yarn or thread.
 - Bellows (BEL-ohz) - A tool used to blow air into a fire to make it burn hotter.
 - Anno Domini (AN-oh DOH-min-ee) - Latin for “in the year of our Lord,” used for dates; “xij” is old Roman numeral for 12th.
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Build a Word Bank (Mini-Chart):

Students choose 4–6 words from the glossary and:

- Copy the word
- Write a kid-friendly definition
- Draw a tiny sketch

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Historical Spelling Activity:

English spelling in the early 1600s was not yet standardized, and many words appeared in forms that may look unusual today. Some spellings in Elizabeth's letter reflect British usage or historical conventions rather than modern American spelling. *Reread the letter and locate words that are spelled differently from the spelling you would use today. Copy them into a two-column chart.*

Suggested Answers:

These older or British spellings appear in the letter and differ from modern American English.

1. neighbours VS neighbors (Used intentionally in the letter to reflect British usage.)
2. labour VS labor (Also a British -our form; common throughout the 17th century.)
3. rime VS rimed (Not a spelling change but an archaic vocabulary term meaning "covered with frost". Still correct but rarely used today.)
4. Anno Domini VS AD (A formal Latin dating convention; not a spelling difference but historically significant.)

Teacher Note:

The only true British-vs-American spelling differences in Letter I are neighbours and labour. Other words (such as unbarred, thatch, rush-light) are historically accurate but still correctly spelled; they simply feel old-fashioned because their usage has changed. Invite students to notice phrasing as well ("unbarred the door," "grumble clear to our door") to explore how language evolves over time.

Optional Discussion Prompts:

- Why do you think English spelling has changed between 1618 and today?
(Hint: dictionaries, printing, regional dialects, American independence, etc.)
- What can historical spellings teach us about how language evolves?
- Do you prefer historical letters to keep original spellings, or to be modernized?

Try rewriting one sentence from the letter in a modern style.

How does the feeling or voice change?

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Family Connections Mini-Chart:

Have students create a simple family/kin web:

- Elizabeth in Henlow
- Parents: John & Joan (Hurst) Tilley
- Kin in Holland: Cooper and Samson relatives (already in Leiden)

Prompt: Why might it be hard to have some family in another country? How might letters help—or not completely help?

(This sets the stage for Humility Cooper and Henry Samson in later letters.)

Web References & Digital Resources:

These curated online resources provide reliable, accessible visuals and background information that support classroom learning. All are free to access.

1. Plimoth Patuxet Museums – 17th-Century English Village:

<https://plimoth.org/>

Why it's helpful:

High-quality photos, virtual tours, and educator tools showing hearths, weaving, spinning, clothing, and domestic routines similar to Elizabeth's early life. Excellent for visual learners.

2. Bedfordshire Archives – Henlow Parish & Local History:

<https://bedsarchives.bedford.gov.uk/>

Why it's helpful:

The primary archive for Henlow and its surrounding parishes. Useful for showing students how real historical records (manor rolls, parish books, maps, occupations) inform historical fiction.

3. Historic England – Tudor & Early-Stuart Homes:

<https://historicengland.org.uk/>

Why it's helpful:

Provides images and explanations of timber-framed cottages, rural architecture, and village landscapes closely matching Elizabeth's world. Great for linking the letter to real English buildings and geography.

4. British Library – Learning Portal (Manuscripts & Daily Life):

<https://www.bl.uk/learning/>

Why it's helpful:

Digitized primary sources—woodcuts, household inventories, tools, textiles, and rural scenes. Helps older students understand the objects mentioned in the letter (rushlights, looms, peat fires, etc.).

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Additional Reading (with Why):

For Children & Families

- The Pilgrims of Plimoth by Marcia Sewall

→ Gentle, historically grounded artwork and text that help children visualize the world Elizabeth will later enter.

- If You Lived in Colonial Times by Ann McGovern

→ Though set later, it introduces children to everyday chores and practices similar to Elizabeth's.

- Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! by Laura Amy Schlitz

→ Monologues from children in a medieval village; chores, relationships, and social structure feel very familiar to Elizabeth's life.

For Older Students & Adults

- Mayflower Lives (or similar) → for biographical context of real people.

- Jeremy Bangs, Strangers and Pilgrims → deep dive into Leiden and kin connections.

- William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation → foundational primary source for the broader story.
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Citation & Source List

Bradford, William. *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Modern Library, 1981.

Bangs, Jeremy D. *Strangers and Pilgrims, Travellers and Sojourners*. Leiden, 2009.

Bedfordshire Archives. *Henlow Parish Records, 1600-1650*.

Author & Artist Reflection

This first letter begins not with ships or sails, but with the quiet rhythm of an ordinary morning—a cold windowpane, the steady pull of a loom, and a small hearth where a young girl learned her world by touch and sound. Before Elizabeth Tilley became a “Mayflower passenger,” she was simply a girl with chilly fingers, smoky sleeves, and a mind beginning to stretch beyond the edges of her village life. The words, artwork, and activities in this companion are meant to help you enter that early world—not as spectators from afar, but as welcome guests taking a seat by her family's fire.

Series Disclaimer: This letter is a work of historical fiction inspired by documented events, people, and places. All customs, locations, and background details are carefully researched, but the thoughts, conversations, and some scenes are imaginative reconstructions created to help readers connect more deeply with the past.