



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

Documents of Tudor Wantage

by Lis Garnish

Several years ago a study group under Nancy Stebbing, then the Curator of the Vale and Downland Museum, transcribed some of the Wills and Inventories of people who lived in Wantage and Grove about four hundred years ago. As part of the background to this work we looked also at some of the other documents from the period, a number of which belong to the Dean and Canons of Windsor, who were, and still are, the titular Lords of the Manor of Priorshold in Wantage. One of these documents casts an interesting light on relations between the lessors of Priorshold Manor and the Lord of Wantage Manor, the Earl of Bath, who had inherited the chief manor from the Fitzwarrens through the female line. At that time the Manor of Priorshold was leased to the Wirdnam family, who were therefore the "farmers" of the Manor, receiving the fines and rents from Priorshold and expecting to receive the respect due to the Lord of Priorshold Manor. The document reads as follows:

- 1 Wronge offred by the Erle of Bathe to the
Dene & Cannons of wyndsore att wantinge in
the Countie of Berkes Concerninge their manor there
Inprimis he Claymethe all your wast there & you have had
- 5 alwayes wast there & buttes stockes & pound standinge
apon the same, tyme out of mynd of mynde of man
& Diggethe vppon your west. And your tennentes have
presentid in your Court that tyme out of mynd of man
you have had Comon in the fieldes which they deny
- 10 to your Disinhieritaunce
Item he Claymethe your almes howse to be holden
of hym & he never had nothing out of hitt but you
have had vijd ayere paid out of hitt alwayes
Item he Causeth other rent of free tennentes to be with
- 15 holden Robert Clement viiijd ayere for iijor Buttes in the
ham
Item my Lord sittethe in the parsons sete in the side of the
Chauncell & Claymeth hitt to be his owne, And I
beinge your farmer there, & stand to all the Charges in
- 20 the Chauncell as well of the pavement as of all
other Charges, and wold have buried my sister
there in the said Chauncell but my Lord & Mr
Barnabe stode there & wold not suffer her to be
buried there which is xijs iijjd out of my waye for
- 25 I should have so muche for euerye buriall there towards
the reparacaions of the Chauncell which have Cost me aboue
tenne poundes alrebye
Item Mr barnabe sittethe in the patrons seate which I take
to be myne vnder you & kepeth hitt forceable from me
- 30 Item one of the Iles have ever ben Counted yours & your armes in
the glass wyndowes there & in the other Ile my lordes armes
be in the glas wyndowes & the one ever accounted
your Ile & the other my Lordes & nowe my Lord saye all is his &
take the vse of the Chauncell & of bothe the Iles & will suffer
- 35 none to be buried there but whom please them

1. Line 1 - 'Erle of Bathe' - This would be the third Earl of Bath, William. (d.1623), grandson and heir to the second Earl, John (d.1561). The implication of this letter is that he spent at least some time in Wantage but this was probably before 1585 when his father-in-law, the Earl of Bedford, died. He succeeded his father-in-law as Lord Lieutenant of Devon and Exeter and from then on he "lived in a great new house at Tawstock" where he is buried under a splendid monument with a life-size effigy of himself and his wife (W.G. Hoskins. Devon).
2. Line 4 - 'all your wast there' - On the Priorshold Map of 1754 an area at the entrance to the Ham is shown as 'Waste'. It is immediately to the south of Ickleton Road which, at that time, was called Gallows Lane.
3. Line 5 - 'butts stockes & pound stondinge apou the same' - Although butts, for archery practice, stocks or gallows may have stood by Gallows Lane, by the time of the Priorshold Map the pound is shown as being in Tanner Street (Priory Road). The site of the pound may have been moved to a more central position at a later time or Priorshold may have had more than one area of waste since the writer refers to 'all your wast' which might imply several areas.
4. Line 10 - 'your almes howse' - In Reflected in Wantage - Part II Kathleen Philip mentions that "the Town Governors paid a quitrent of 7½d to the Dean and Canons of Windsor for a "house and back-side in Newbury Street" which had been used "time out of mind....to the maintaining of the poor of Wantage"" and suggests that this is the earliest reference to the alms house.. The date which she gives (1595) seems unlikely, as the Town Governors were not incorporated until 1597, but it seems probable that the same premises are intended here. The earliest unambiguous reference to the almshouse which I have found is February 1541, when Stephen Fordeham, a yeoman, bequeathed "to every person and persounes of the Almys howse in Newbery strete ... ijd a pece".
5. Line 16 - 'my Lorde sittethe in the parsons seat' - This and line 22 would certainly suggest that the Earl of Bath was personally present in Wantage and not merely acting through an agent.
6. Line 21 - 'Mr Barnabe stode there' - Master William Barnaby was Steward of Wantage Manor and had married the widowed mother of the Earl of Bath. He was buried on 3rd October 1583, which would seem to provide a terminal date for this document as there is no suggestion here that he has died. See also line 28, which says that Mr Barnaby sits in the Patron's seat, not just that he used to.
7. Line 22 - 'xiiis iiijd out of my waye' - At this time burials within the church cost 6s 8d and burials within the chancel cost 13s 4d. The writer seems more aggrieved at the loss of income than about the, presumably, unseemly struggle which took place at his sister's funeral.
8. There is no name given in the document but as the writer refers to himself as 'your farmer there' and feels that the rights of the Patron should be his, he is likely to have been either William Wirdnam or his son Robert. The Wirdnams rented Priorshold Manor from 1566; my own view is that the writer is probably William Wirdnam although I cannot identify the sister whose burial caused such problems. William Wirdnam had two full sisters and four half sisters. His two full sisters married out of the Parish, one to Drayton and one to Harwell, and neither died until after 1600. One of his half sisters died as an infant in 1556, before the lease was taken from the Dean & Canons of Windsor. There are no records of marriages or burials for his remaining three half sisters but the Parish Registers for the late 1570s and early 1580s are far from satisfactory. No marriages are recorded from November 1577 to April 1579, a block of fifteen marriages between October 1585 and November 1586 are included in the Bishops' Transcripts but are not in the Parish Register, no baptisms are recorded from July 1577 to January 1578 and the deaths from August 1580 to October 1581 are

missing completely. It may be that one or more of William's sisters died in this period. Alternatively, a Jone Wirdnam had married Stephen Anger, who was leasing Wanting Bryans Manor, on 7th June 1559. They had at least eight children, the eldest son being baptised William, and Jone died in September 1578. She was buried in the church, but not in the chancel, so it is possible that she was another, otherwise unrecorded, full sister. In addition the name 'sister' was used rather loosely at this time and could include a sister-in-law. William's brother Thomas died about 1570 leaving a widow, Margaret, and it might be she who was the subject of the dispute as she lived in Sutton Courtenay and would not have qualified as a parishioner of Wantage.

9. Finally, the document throws an interesting light on the later episode which resulted in an Act of Parliament setting up a body to administer various local charities. In 1597 there was a scandal involving William Wirdnam, who was accused of mishandling money and land intended for charity. As a result an Act of Parliament was passed setting up the 'Governors of the Town Lands of Wantage', a body who still meet today to administer the affairs of some of the almshouses in Wantage. The preamble to the Act accused William of misappropriating funds and name him as "*...a man of evell name and fame, indicted for a Comon Barector and a man of a notorious, sedicious and troublesome disposicon*". The present document would suggest that ill-feeling existed between the Earl of Bath and William Wirdnam, which could have grown into a long-standing feud. Perhaps William won this particular dispute, since the Dean and Canons would have been jealous of their privileges as Lords of the Manor of Priorshold. They were certainly quick to jump in on a subsequent occasion when they felt that the Dean and Chapter of Sarum, were encroaching on their rights. Furthermore, when the renewal of the lease was drawn up (c.1665) there was no suggestion that their privileges had been diminished in any way. If William did win the argument then it would have provided grounds for the Earl of Bath to bear a grudge against him and it may have been the Earl who was the moving force behind the complaints. He certainly had the political weight to start such an action; he had at least two pocket boroughs in Devon, where he used his influence to change one election that did not suit him. It would also explain how Robert Wirdnam was able to be chosen as one of the original Town Governors in spite of the scandal surrounding his father. If it was a personal grudge which the Earl held against William he may have had no reason to object to Robert serving. Furthermore, if the 'mismanagement' of the Charity Lands was a 'frame-up' by the Earl and his agents, local people may have been aware of this and have been willing to accept Robert as a Town Governor, knowing that there was another point of view to the matter.

(Published with acknowledgements to the Hon. Archivist to the Dean and Canons of Windsor.)

This article was reproduced from "The Blowing Stone" Autumn 1983 (revised October 2000).

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