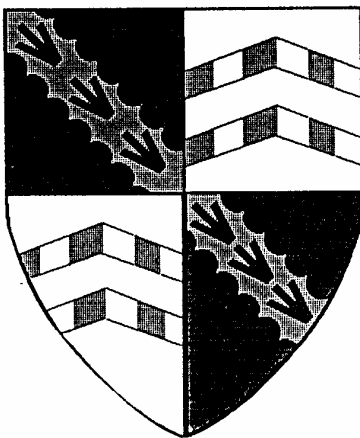


The Wirdnams – Conclusion

by Lis Garnish

In the first three parts we have traced the rise of the Wirdnam family from prosperous yeomen to local landowners and gentry. Four generations of their family had lived in Wantage and they had prospered from increased prices for crops at a time of rising inflation. They had made prudent marriages and probably thought that they had a secure place in the local community. In the absence of a local peer they probably saw themselves as the leading members of Wantage society and may even have aspired to marrying their children into the titled classes. However, George Wirdnam's early death in 1629 and the religious beliefs of his female relatives seem to have led to the collapse of their position. At the time of the third Heralds' Visitation in 1623 George Wirdnam may have seen himself poised to attain a knighthood, an honour which was later awarded to his cousin George Wilmot. He would want his family tree to demonstrate his good social connections. Even so, the errors in the pedigree which George gave to the Heralds were probably due to ignorance rather than deceit, unlike those of his grandfather William. It seems surprising that he did not report the details of the marriages of three of his aunts, but since at least two of them were dead, and the third may also have died, he may have felt that the information was unnecessary. However, since his cousin, William Withens, submitted a claim to arms at the same Visitation, and his Brookes cousins could also have made a claim if they wished, the omission is interesting. Both families were still associated with trade so an element of snobbery may have influenced George's selection of information. The omission of two of his uncles is more surprising since they and their children would be entitled to use the Wirdnam arms.



The Tipping arms

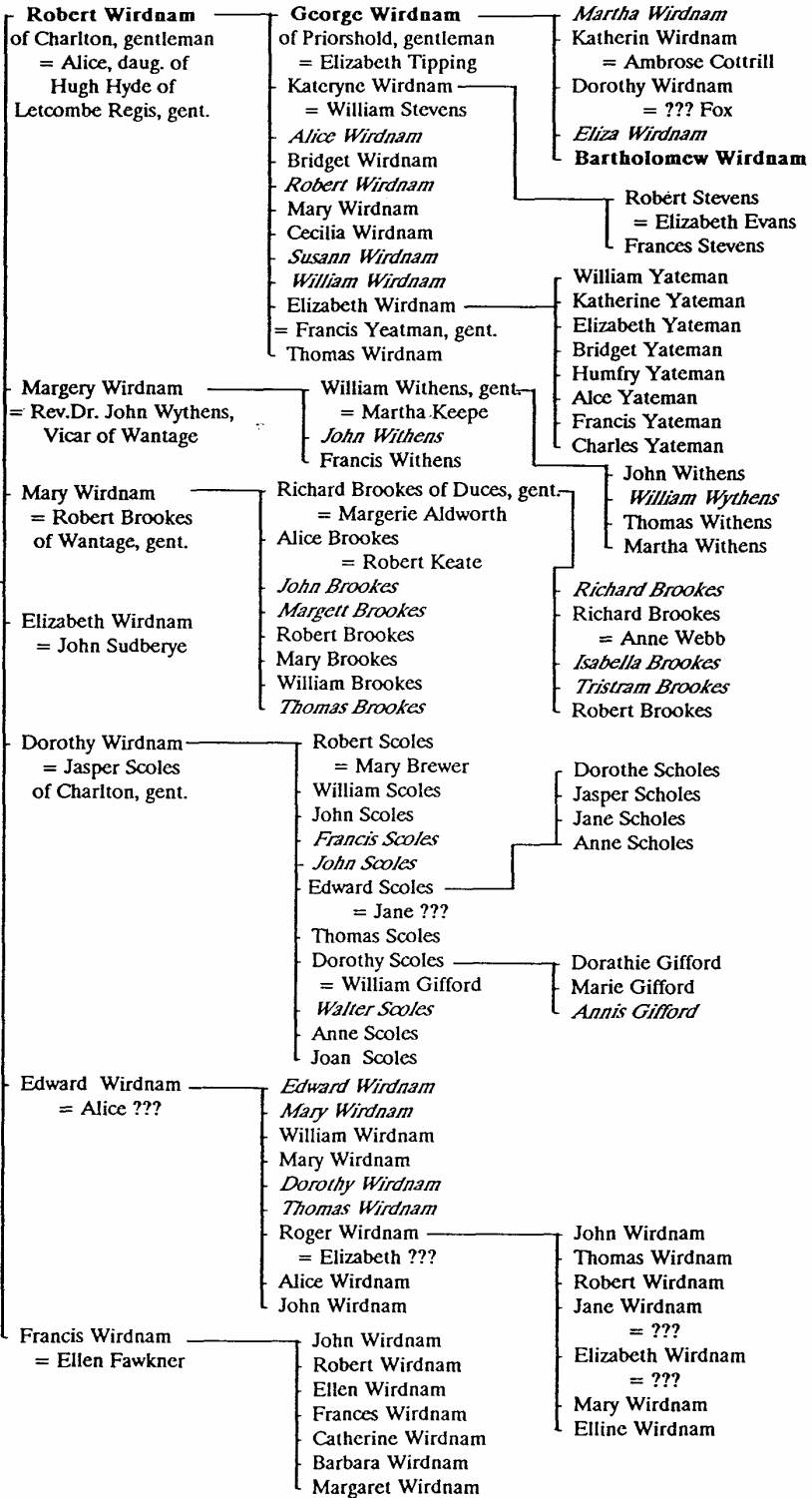
George and Elizabeth seem to have settled at The Ham, leaving the widowed Alicea at The Priory. At the time of the 1623 Visitation they had three daughters, Martha, Katherine and Dorothy. A fourth daughter, Eliza, was born just before Christmas but died early in the New Year. Their eldest daughter, Martha, also died about this time but they were comforted by the birth of a son, Bartholomew, in 1626. 1629 does not seem to have been a plague year in Wantage, and in fact the burials for July, August and September were unusually low, but about 16th September George Wirdnam died suddenly, and was followed about a fortnight later by his uncle, Jasper Scholes. George does not seem to have had time to make a will, and his early death would probably have disrupted any long

term plans for financial provision for his children.

**WIRDNAM of
PRIORSHOLD
in WANTAGE**

**Actual pedigree
to 1650**

William Wirdnam
of Charlton, gent.
=
Mary Boswell, daug. of
Robert Boswell, gent.



*Names in italics
represent those who
probably or certainly
died in childhood*

For the next few years his widow Elizabeth seems to have run the estate, perhaps with the help of her brother-in-law, Francis Yeatman, but in November 1634 she married Laurence Castle, gentleman. He took a sublease of Priorshold and they settled at The Ham (1 & 2). Laurence Castle's inventory, following his death in 1676, gives us our only glimpse of this earlier house at The Ham and reveals a substantial farm house which probably lay nearer to the road (3). It had a cross passage leading from the front of the house into the back yard. To one side of this lay the scullery and the buttery, with a small room between them

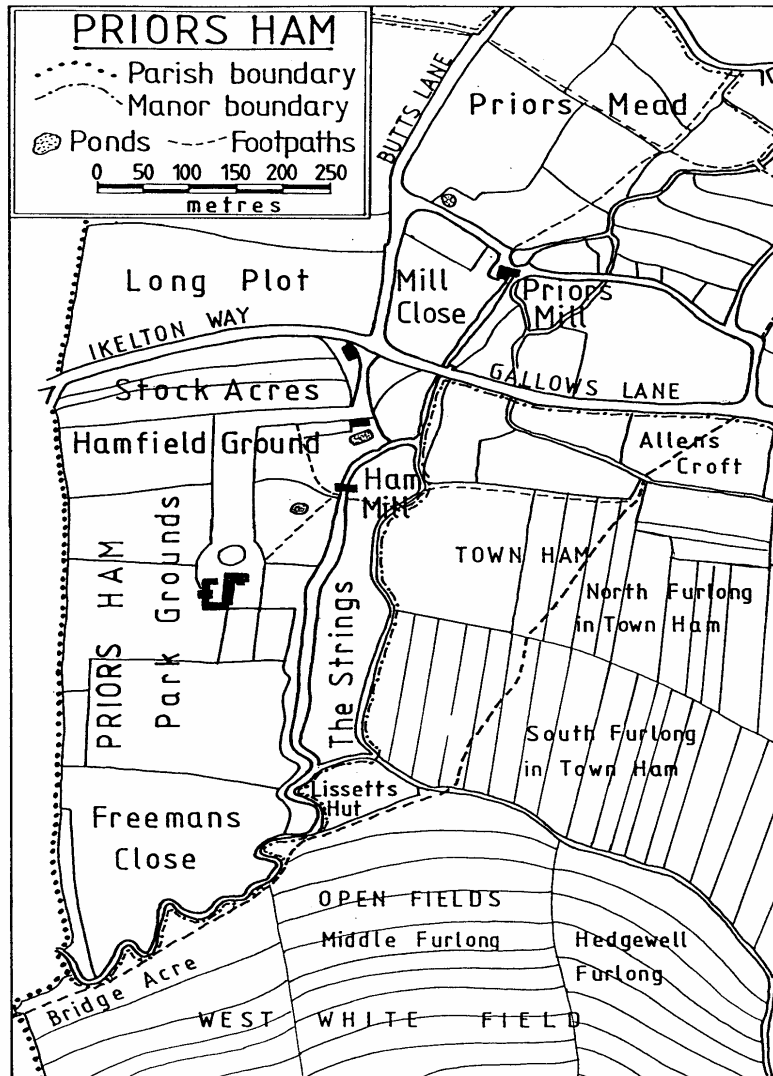
from which the stairs led up to the five bedchambers. The master bedroom probably lay over the hall, possibly created by inserting a floor into the main room which would once have been open to the roof. One bedroom was called "*the old chamber*" and the one next to it was "*the men's chamber*", so that the menservants working in the house and on the farm had somewhere to sleep, and it seems likely that these lay over the scullery and the buttery. At the other end of the house were two bedrooms built over the parlour, one with a bed hung with yellow curtains and one with the luxury of mats on the floor. Outside in the yard were the dairy and the brewhouse where cheese, butter and beer were prepared for the household. Only the best chamber, the parlour and the hall seem to have had hearths and the cooking must have been done in the hall.

Elizabeth and her mother-in-law Alice must have invested all their hopes in Bartholomew Wirdnam, the last male Wirdnam to inherit the lease of the Manor of Priorshold. Alice may also have sought comfort in religion because she is recorded in the 1641 Lay Subsidy Roll as a "recusant", that is a Roman Catholic, as well as her daughter, Elizabeth Yeatman, and her granddaughter, Frances Stevens (4). This also raises the possibility that the Wirdnams had remained Roman Catholics since the Reformation. In 1559 William's father Thomas had made quite elaborate provision for five masses to be said for his soul on the day of his burial, on the anniversary of his burial one month later and on the annual anniversary for as long as William was alive. William had rented Catmore from the Eyston family, who have remained Roman Catholics to this day, and in times of persecution the Eystons would retreat to Catmore to avoid difficulties. Did they choose William, as a fellow co-religionist, as a safe person to entrust with the administration of their estates there? William's brother John married one of the Yates, the Roman Catholic family from Lyford and his son Robert had married a Hyde, also well known Catholics. Does this explain the lack of wills for John and William and his son Robert, who may have preferred not to make a public statement of their religious beliefs and spiritual provisions? Unless other evidence comes to light these speculations will have to remain unanswered.

There is no evidence regarding Bartholomew Wirdnam's education but he may have attended the Latin School in the churchyard opposite his grandmother's house. He probably saw the prisoners from "the Devizes" being locked in the church for the night a few days after the battle of Roundway in July 1643, and in the September of the same year he may have been presented to King Charles when the King spent the night with Bartholomew's cousin once removed, Sir George Wilmot, at the old manor house of Wickes (5). During the second half of 1643 and the early part of 1644 the armies of the King and of Parliament passed through Wantage several times, and brought the war close to peoples' lives. They also brought disease, dysentery, typhus and plague, and Bartholomew Wirdnam died just after his 18th birthday in May 1644 when there was much sickness in the town. The death of his grandmother is not recorded but there is a gap in the Burial Register for August and September 1645 when plague hit Wantage and it is possible that she died at this time.

The Civil War caused much confusion, especially in business matters, and it has left a gap in nearly all the records, which makes it very difficult to determine what happened to Bartholomew's inheritance. However, it looks likely that Laurence and Elizabeth Castle continued to lease at least part of Priorshold Manor (6). In 1649 Parliament passed "*An Act for Abolishing Deans, Deans and Chapters, Canons, Prebends and Other Offices and Titles of, or Belonging to, Any Cathedral Church or Collegiate Church or Chapel within England and Wales*". This was really the last step in Henry VIII's Reformation. Henry had seized the monastic lands and his son had seized the chantry lands, but the cathedrals had managed to hang on to much of their property. Parliament determined to finish the business and to sell off the remaining church lands for the benefit of their creditors;

running a civil war was an expensive affair. Priorsfold Manor was sold in 1650 and it is likely that all the leases were renegotiated (7). The remaining Wirdnams were left with what little personal property they owned in the town and the lease of the Priorsfold property which lay in Charlton, so Laurence and Elizabeth Castle, who were living at The Ham, Katherine, now the wife of Ambrose Cottrill and Dorothy, now the wife of Mr Fox, received rents for various properties and some income from Charlton. A Mary Gearing, also a recusant, was living at The Priory.



Area of the Ham, taken from the Priorsfold Map of 1754. One of the buildings near the road may mark the site of the original house. The field boundaries would suggest that the Priors Ham was originally strips like the Town Ham.

The Tippings must have administered the remaining income for the benefit of George's surviving family and in 1656 Dorothy applied to the Prerogative Court of Canterbury to wind up her great-grandfather's estate (8). She gave her name as Dorothy Fox and claimed to be William's sole surviving relation, although this was not true as there were descendants from several other of William's children, and her sister Katherine was also still alive. However, during the year or two after the seizure of Priorsfold Manor Dorothy's husband, Mr Fox, was the sole person named in grants of copyholds of two or three of the Priorsfold tenants at Charlton so perhaps the sisters had come to a financial

arrangement (9). By 1666 the Wirdnams' lease had lapsed and the Dean and Canons of Windsor had re-leased their recovered Manor of Priorshold to Petley Garnam of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London (10). This was almost the end of the Wirdnams' connection with Wantage; 100 years had spanned the association. The final references which can be found are the death of Elizabeth Castle in March 1684 and the burial of Dorothy Fox in May 1695, probably the last Wirdnam, to be buried in Wantage Church (11).

However, in one way the Wirdnam blood did not die out in the town. Through the marriages of cousins, sisters, daughters and granddaughters William's descendants continued to influence the life of Wantage -Jennens, Grove, Anger, Brookes, Scholes, Bathurst, Yateman, Cottrill, Gregory, Withens - the names recur in the Churchwardens' Accounts, as Governors of the Town Lands and as local landowners. William may have failed to establish a "gentry" family in the permanent life of the town but his business acumen and social aspirations continued to appear in his progeny for the next hundred years and more. Elizabeth's Tipping relatives (24).

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