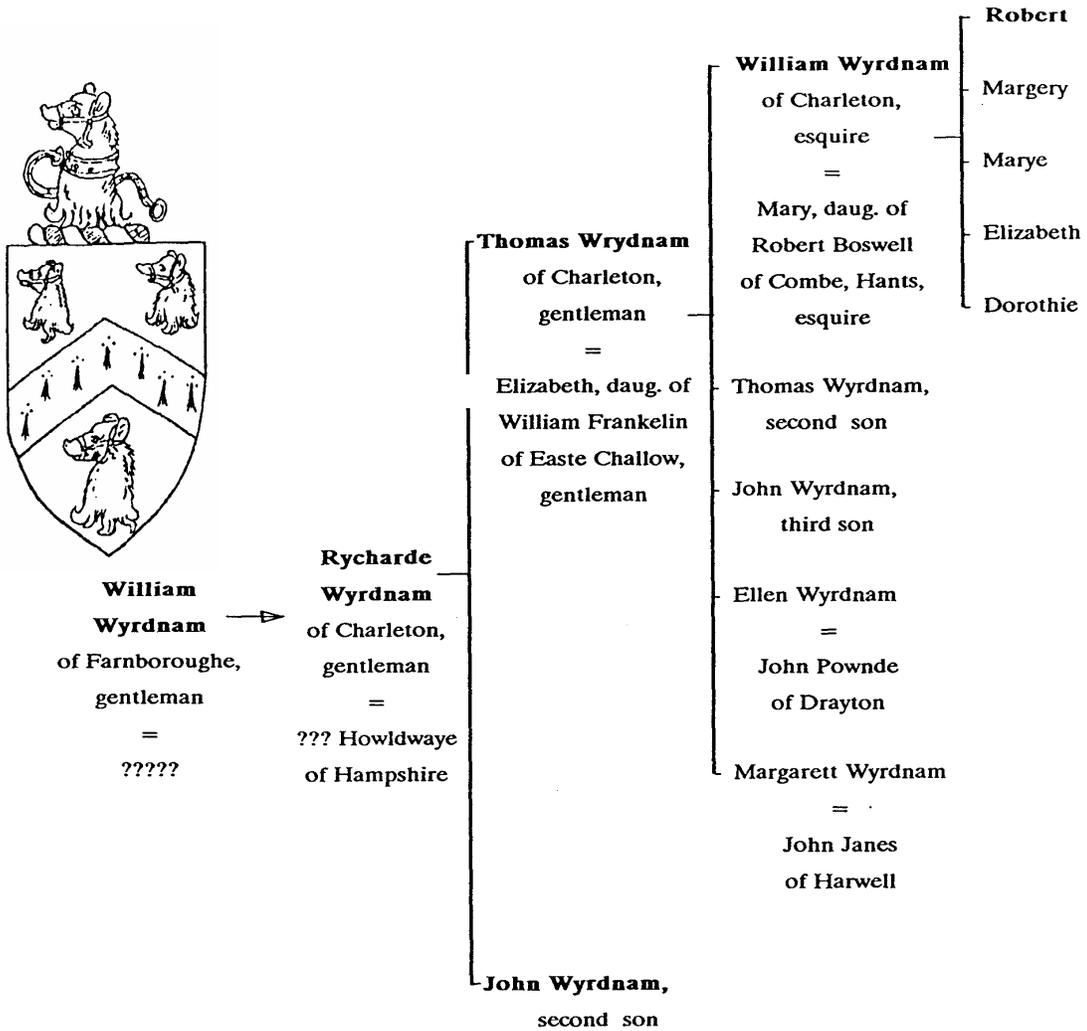


# The Wirdnams – an Upwardly Mobile family of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century - Part One

Lis Garnish



## WYRDNAM of CHARLETON

As represented by William Wirdnam at the Heralds' Visitation of Berkshire in 1566

Since I began research into Tudor and Stuart Wantage I have been interested in the Wirdnam family, particularly in William Wyrndnam. He owned two of the four manors at Charlton and rented Priorshold Manor from the Dean and Canons of Windsor in the second half of the sixteenth century. His mishandling of the Charity Lands led to the passing of an Act of Parliament and the establishing of the Governors of the Town Lands of Wantage. William had appeared before the King of Arms at the 1566 Heralds' Visitation of Berkshire to claim the status of "esquire" and to register his arms (1).

The possession of a "coat of arms" is usually regarded as a mark of nobility. In fact the bearing of arms extended not only to the various ranks of peers, dukes, marquises, earls, viscounts and barons, and the lesser nobility, barons and knights, but also to the "gentry", esquires and gentlemen. By about 1300 some 1,500 families could claim arms and it became necessary to regulate their use to prevent duplication. The heralds, who were trained to identify knights by their shields on the battlefield and at tournaments, were charged with the responsibility. From 1530 onwards the Kings of Arms, the senior heralds, made regular tours of the country to examine claims. They recorded their findings in visitation pedigrees, taking oral and written evidence into account. There were four Visitations of Berkshire, in 1532, 1566, 1623 and 1665-6, and the results make fascinating reading.

Social aspirations are not a modern phenomenon. Down through the ages people have inflated the importance of their forebears in a bid for higher social status. Previous generations had the advantage of being able to invent or embellish, since evidence was not scrutinized as rigorously as today. In the 16th and 17th centuries rising families sought to establish their right to be considered "gentry", sometimes by tracing a tenuous link to an armigerous family, sometimes by judicious adjustment of the facts. So how accurate was the pedigree which William Wirdnam submitted with his claim for a grant of arms?

The William Wyrndnam who claimed arms at the 1566 visitation is the one in the fourth column who married Mary Boswell. The first step is to verify the information from other sources, to find some dates for births or marriages or deaths and to work out William's age and those of his children and then to find some background for the family.

The earliest records of the Wirdnams which I have found so far are for 1511 and 1522 at Farnborough (2) & (3). It seems likely, however, that the family came originally from Compton at the eastern end of the Downs. In Compton there is a Warnham Lane and the name is recorded there as "Werdham" in 1241, "Werdeham" in 1248, when it was used as a surname, and "Werdenham" in 1252-5, in connection with a land transaction (4). The mid-13th century was just when surnames were developing. If Werdenham was an isolated farm it may be that the family had used the name from very early times. In Compton it would have helped to distinguish "John of Werdenham" from "John Carpenter" or "John Smith". The name of a village was only used as a surname when a person moved elsewhere but when a surname derives from very minor place name, of a single farm or a piece of land, it tends to indicate that the family were tenants or owners of that particular holding at some time in the past. Hence, it seems likely that the Wirdnams had adopted the name of a farm or a piece of land as a surname whilst they still lived in Compton and had used it for two hundred years or more before arriving in Farnborough.

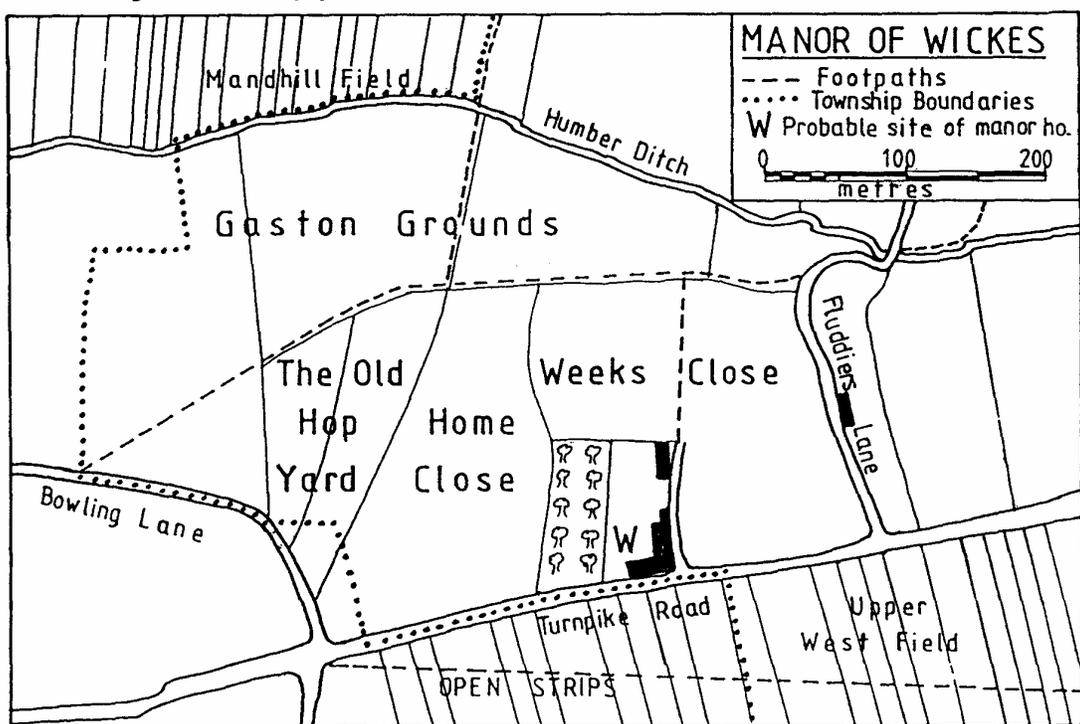
For the first person on William's pedigree, his great-grandfather William, there is as yet no independent information. However, oral pedigrees have a long tradition and there is no reason to doubt that he could name his great grandfather - most of us could do the same. For Richard, we have just one scrap of evidence from the "Returns of the Commissioners

of Inclosures" in 1517 we learn that in 1511 "*Richard Wortham who holds, and for a long time has held, "at farm for a term of years" (i.e. leased) from the Abbot of Abingdon, one Messuage and twenty acres of arable land with appurtenances in Ferneburghe ... which croplands were accustomed to be leased and occupied with the Messuage for the whole aforesaid time, on the sixth day of March in the second year of the reign of our present lord King, he permitted the said Messuage to be deserted and to be without an inhabitant and to stand idle, and still he permits it, whereby that Messuage is going to ruin and devastation and three people there lack their dwelling house*" (2). Richard was probably leasing "*the site & demesne lands of the manor*" as was his younger son, John, thirty years later. To the south of Farnborough church there are the earthworks of deserted houses and Farnborough is termed a "shrunken village". Whether Richard helped to cause that shrinkage, or whether tenants were already leaving the village and he seized the opportunity is not clear but it is likely that he kept the land "in hand" for himself.

By 1522 Thomas and John Wirdenam were living in Farnborough as tenants of the Abbot of Abingdon.(3) They were probably farming, grazing sheep for their wool and tilling a small amount of arable. Thomas was worth £10 per annum and John £6 13s 4d. John was noted as "able", which probably means that he was under the age of thirty and unmarried. Theoretically, all men between the ages of 16 and 60 were "able" and were liable for military service, but in later lists that nearly all those noted for military service were between 18 and 30 and unmarried. Also living in Farnborough was "*Jone Wirdenam, widow*" worth £10 per annum. It seems likely that she was the mother of Thomas and John and the widow of Richard. According to William she had been a Howldwaye and had come from Hampshire. Although the family may have originated from Hampshire, by 1522 there were four male Holdeweys in Farnborough and none in any other parish of western Berkshire so it looks likely that Richard Wyrndnam had in fact married a local girl. The status of the Wirdnams is more questionable. Farnborough was a possession of Abingdon Abbey and most of the residents there would have been tenants of the monks. Whilst "gentlemen" might rent some land an Act of 1429 had specified that they must have freehold land worth 40s per year (5). As tenants of the Abbey it is unlikely that William or Richard would have qualified and in the 1517 "Returns" Richard had had no "title" so it is more likely that they were prosperous yeomen. Nor were Thomas or John termed "Master" or "Squire" or "Gentleman", although the terms are used for others in the 1522 Roll. Thus, it appears that William had "improved" his pedigree a little.

Thomas, the older brother, married Elizabeth Frankelin. The information which William Wyrndnam, gave about his parents stated that she was the daughter of William Frankelin of East Challow, gentleman. Although William may have come from East Challow, and was still holding some freehold land both there and in Letcombe Regis, by 1522 he was living at Charlton and was worth £40 a year in goods (3). He was listed in all three places as plain William Frankeleyne, to which the Letcombe Regis entry added "of Charleton", and there is no suggestion that he was anything more than a prosperous yeoman. Thomas and Elizabeth had five children who survived, William, Thomas, John, Ellyn and Margaret, before Elizabeth died about 1548. During their marriage they probably continued to live at Farnborough, although Elizabeth may have inherited the property at Charlton from her father. Thomas held two copyholds at Farnborough and had bought a house at East Ilsley, and he may have been leasing land at Catmore from the Eyston family for his eldest son William. Wool was very profitable and Thomas probably sold his to the rich clothiers in Newbury and Reading.

In January 1549 Thomas married again to Annis Aldworth of Sutton Courtenay and they had at least one son, James, about 1550 and by November 1553 Thomas and his second wife Annis had moved to Charlton in time for the birth of a daughter, Elizabeth. Three more girl children followed in 1556, 1557 and 1559, Fresewith, Margery and Bridget, though Fresewith only lived about six weeks (6). But in September 1558 Thomas fell ill and he probably died early in 1559, shortly after Bridget's birth. Unfortunately all the burials for Wantage for March 1558 to March 1559 are missing. In his will Thomas makes no mention of his own status but he refers to his older sons as "William Wyrndnam of Catmere", "Thomas Wardnam of Farmeborowe" and "John my sonne", which suggests that he and they were no more than yeoman (7). He mentions his "Farme" of Wickes in Charlton, which had belonged to the chantry at Fyfield and which was to go to his wife Annis for six years after his death. At this time a "farm" usually meant a lease, but he also describes it as "*myn inheritaunce in fee symple*" which means freehold land. The answer seems to be that although he owned the land, 1578 he was using the term "esquire" (18)



which lay to the north of Charlton Road between Garston Lane and Coopers Lane, he still had to pay quit rents and feudal dues to the owner of the "manor", Richard Owen. William Wirdnam finally bought the manor and manorial rights in 1561 (8). Annis does not seem to have re-married after Thomas' death and she died about 1577, when a note was made on her husband's will that she had not administered his estate and administration was passed to her stepson William. Her son, James, paid for her burial in Wantage church (9).

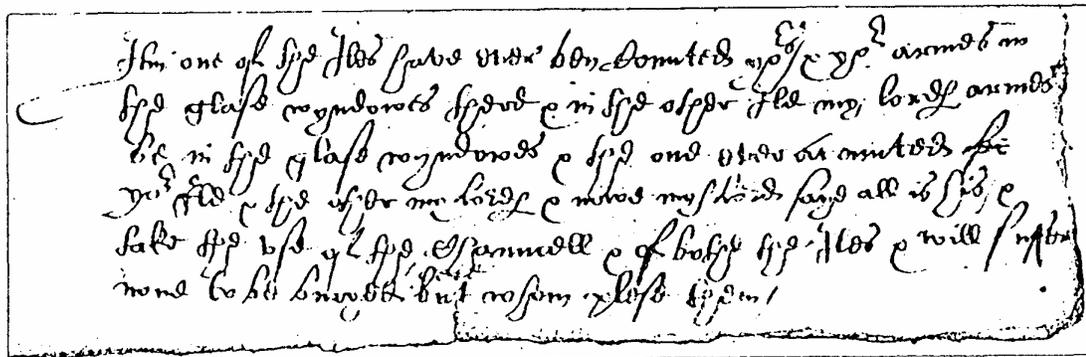
The references for John, the younger brother, are scantier. The Victoria County History entry for Farnborough says that it was held from 1066 by the Abbey of Abingdon, but "*after the Dissolution the manor was granted in 1540 to Edward Fettiplace, from whom John Wardnam, lessee of the site and demesne lands of the manor under the monastery, in the following year purchased a certain portion of the land*" (10) He also acquired chantry lands in West Hanney, sold to him by George Owen and William Martin, soon after their seizure in 1547 (11). In these purchases of monastic and chantry lands the Wirdnams were quite unusual. The bulk of the confiscated lands were purchased by old established gentry families and it suggests that the Wirdnams were enterprising and prescient (12, 13).

John married soon after 1522 and had at least six surviving children, although his wife's name and family are not known. By 1552 his first wife had died and he had married a widow with six children of her own, Alice Anger. She lived in Wantage and he moved there to live with her and their only joint child, Richard, was born there in October 1552 (6). John left his eldest son, another Thomas, to farm at Farnborough.

John died early in 1570. Again we have no burial recorded, but his widow applied for administration in July 1570 so it is likely that he had died in the preceding two or three months (14). He died without making a will, which would have opened a financial gap between his eldest son and the rest of his children. Thomas, as his heir, would have inherited all his freehold land. If there was any copyhold land then it probably passed to Thomas at Farnborough and to Alice at Wantage. That would have left John's "goods and chattels" to be valued and divided between his widow and children. Richard, the youngest child, was 18 and would not have required financial support so the remainder, after Alice's "thirds" or dower had been deducted, would have been divided equally between all seven children. Totals from other Administration Accounts suggest that they may have received no more than £5 or £10 each. Alice lived for another 25 years, dying in 1595 when she must have been about 85. After various bequest to her Anger sons she left £40 to Richard Wirdnam, her youngest son, and some furniture but she made no bequests to her step children (15).

The information so far shows that William had tidied up the truth a little. He had ignored his stepmother and avoided mentioning his aunts and cousins, any of whom might have disputed his information about the status of his family. He had bestowed the term "gentleman" on several people who probably called themselves "yeoman" and had managed to forget a half-brother and several half-sisters.

In the next generation we come to William Wirdnam himself, and his two brothers and two sisters. Both William and his brother John appear in various documents dated between 1565 and 1600, signing the Churchwardens' Accounts, witnessing wills and valuing goods for inventories (9, 16, 17). At first he signed himself as "Wylliam wyrndnam gentleman", but by 1578 he was using the term 'esquire'(18).



*Extract from letter written by William Wirdnam circa 1570  
addressed to his landlords, the Dean and Canons of Windsor*

In addition to owning two of the Manors at Charlton, Baldwins and Wicks, he was leasing the Manor of Priorshold from the Dean and Canons of Windsor, the rectorship, which entitled him to the greater tithes, the Charlton and Denchworth tithes, the Wantage tithes and the advowson (19). As lessee of the Rectory he was able to "present" the incumbent of Wantage Church, so the vicars appointed between 1566 and 1598 must be seen as his protégés (20).

About 1557 William married Mary Boswell of Combe in Hampshire and he stated that her father was Robert Boswell of Combe, esquire. So far I have no evidence for the status of Mary's father but in 1611 another Robert Boswell, either her brother or her nephew, was renting the Rectory and Parsonage of Combe for £6 13s 4d a year (21). In the first and two subsequent leases his name is given as Robert Boswell of Combe, with no title of any kind. William's first two children, Robert and Margery, were probably both born whilst their parents were still living at Catmore. After his father's death William probably sold the remainder of the lease of Catmore and in 1566 he took the lease of Priorshold and lived in the Priorshold manor house, now The Priory (19).



*The Priory, the Manor House of Priorshold until ca. 1660, as it appears today*

The first child for whom we have firm information was Mary, born in 1562, followed by Elizabeth in 1564 and Dorothy in 1565. Shortly after the Heralds' Visitation William and Mary had another son, Edward, born in November 1566 and finally Francis in 1572 (6). We have no date for Mary's death but in a later document William was described as "widower" so she must have predeceased her husband (22). Since William did not remarry she may not have died until they were both fairly elderly, perhaps in the 1590s.

In 1597 the case of the Charity Lands came to the attention of the law (23, 24). William had acquired the post of trustee and had been diverting the profits to his own use and selling some of the land as if it was his private property. The enquiry decided against him and he had to hand over the property and may have had to repay some of the income. The Governors of the Town Lands were established by Act of Parliament to administer the charity in perpetuity. In June 1598 William and his son Robert sub-let the rectory, the advowson and the tithes to William Wilmot for £200, which may mean that they were trying to raise money (25). In early summer 1599 he signed the Churchwardens' Accounts for the last time, and in July 1600 he was mentioned in a letter which implied he was still in Wantage (26). During 1603 the Governors of the Town Lands paid him 20s "for the

*Exemplification*", an attested copy of the very Act of Parliament which established the Governors (27). It seems probable that the Governors paid William to obtain a copy of the Act from London, though such a friendly arrangement sits uneasily with the prosecution of the case against him. There was a plague epidemic in London in 1603, spreading to several other major towns (28) and, since we have no record of William's death in Wantage, it is reasonable to speculate that he may have died in London during the summer of 1603 whilst on business there. By February 1604 Robert, his eldest son, appeared as "*farmer of the rectory and parsonage of Wantage Priorshold*" (29).

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