

William Willington c. 1480-1555

Remarkably little is known of William Willington.¹ He was probably born around 1480, elder son of John of Todenham, Gloucestershire, whose will suggests he was a grazier.² Aged around 20 he inherited 100 shillings, 12 silver spoons, a silver jug and the best bed with its hangings from his grandfather, another William. He was also entrusted with the administration and sale of two tenements, one in Banbury, the other in Stratford, for the support of a chaplain at Todenham.³

Willington's interest in the manor of Barcheston is first recorded in 1504 when he acquired some land from one of the five freeholders, William Torch.⁴ Next year he signed a lease with William and Henry Durant, owners of the manor for whom Willington's future grand-father in law, Sir Robert Throckmorton, had acted as trustee since around 1476.⁵ Three years later Willington bought the manor, a matter possibly connected with his marriage.⁶

He married twice, on each occasion to a lady of the same name, Anne Middlemore. His first wife was the daughter of Margery née Throckmorton and Richard Middlemore of Edgbaston. The exact date is unknown, but the marriage probably took place sometime in 1506 because in that year William entered into a bond of 1000 marks to Dame Margery, his mother in law, to secure lands in Stratford, Banbury and elsewhere immediately; they were to be held by feoffees in trust for himself, his wife and their children.⁷ Any future purchase of land worth £9.13s 4d would also be held by trustees on Anne's behalf. This suggests the possibility that this agreement formed part of the marriage settlements, perhaps Anne's jointure lands.⁸

By the time William's father died in 1512 the couple already had three daughters, Margaret, Dorothy and Alice. Each received a silver spoon and two sheep; Dorothy did not survive into maturity.⁹ At least five others followed – again, all girls. Anne herself died around 1537 of 'a sickness in the brest' as Roger Morris of Shipston reported to the inquiries of 1560.¹⁰ Morris added that Michael Dormer, mercer and Alderman of London, had written proposing a suitable second wife to which Willington replied 'he would have no other heirs' – and turned the proposal down. He did not re-marry until 1545 when in November a Faculty Licence was issued to permit him to marry, without banns and in whatever church he chose, the

¹ A perceptive biography was first offered by Rees Price, 'William Willington of Barcheston: a 16th century Warwickshire Woolstapler', *Evesham Journal*, 12 Jan-9 February 1924.

² Worcester Record Office (WRO), wills, 1512/41. Dugdale's information that members of parliament were chosen from the family seems to be one of his rare, unsubstantiated remarks, W. Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*, 1730, p. 601b.

³ TNA PROB 11/12/321, 8 May 1501.

⁴ Warwickshire County Record Office (WaCRO) CR 580/ 9/4.

⁵ WaCRO CR 580/ 9/2; in lease CR 580/9/16.

⁶ WaCRO CR 580/9/15; a draft agreement survives at CR 580/12; CR 580/9/16.

⁷ WaCRO CR 580/9/17.

⁸ WaCRO, CR 580/9/17, (12.9.1506).

⁹ WRO, wills, 1512/41. William got 400 sheep, the leases at Upton and Upton Abell and the Todenham pastures.

¹⁰ WaCRO, CR 580/17/5. A. B. Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London*, 1913, ii, 27.

second Anne Middlemore, widow of Thomas Middlemore of Studley, the brother of Willington's first wife.¹¹

The best known story attached to Willington, which has circulated since 1656, is the accusation that he converted arable land in Barcheston to pasture and, by allowing the houses to fall into 'ruen and decaie', made twenty-four people homeless. Willington's answers to the king's officers during the hearings in the Chancery and Exchequer courts, not previously known, suggest that much of the case against him was false and that the manor had been impoverished and run down long before his purchase in 1507. It may even have been partly enclosed by a previous lord.¹² Nor is it certain that Willington then enclosed the whole estate.

An undated document notes figures for his wool production - 100 sacks - from his Warwickshire lands.¹³ Sir William Spencer was his only competitor in the county, with 60 sacks in a list which includes graziers in both 'parts' of the county of Warwick and also records Berkshire; both men clearly owned much larger flocks than the others mentioned.

Nevertheless, glimpses of Willington's life are few. The earliest reference to him as a merchant of the Staple was noted in the general pardon of 1509.¹⁴ A London counting house, a wool house and two fishers' cottages in Calais supported his trading ventures; on his death they passed to the family with whom Willington's family had had a long association, George, brother of William Bradwey, probably related to the Chipping Campden grazier John with whom Willington's father had done business. Other than passing references to London associates, his mercantile activities remain obscure. Amongst his trustees he counted, on more than one occasion, William Dauntsey, a London mercer, Alderman and known moneylender – though possibly not to Willington.¹⁵ Other contacts were also Londoners; John Fulwood described as parcener (partner), whose lands Willington had acquired, and a haberdasher, William Garrage.¹⁶ An undated document recounts the help Willington had offered to one Thomas Willington, perhaps a nephew, for whom he paid an apprenticeship fee of £100 for a term of ten years to Richard Coldar, a London mercer.¹⁷ Master and apprentice clearly did not get on; the apprentice was accused of theft of some materials and chose to escape house imprisonment by jumping from a window twenty feet above ground rather than bear a flogging. Willington intervened, by petitioning the Lord Chancellor. He claimed that Coldar had cheated him in several business

¹¹ D.S.Chambers, *Faculty Office registers 1534-1549*, OUP, 1966, p. 265, 8 Nov 1545. She chose burial in Tredington.

¹² H. L. Turner, 'Reputational Damage: William Willington and the supposed enclosure of Barcheston, Warwickshire', *Midland History*, 37(2), 2012, 222-39; C. Dyer, 'Villages in crisis: social dislocation and desertion, 1370-1520', in C.Dyer and R. Jones eds., *Deserted Villages Revisited*, (Hatfield, 2010), pp. 26-45.

¹³ *Letters & Papers Henry VIII, Addenda*, vol 1, pt I, no.917, p.320 c.1533; SP 1/238. fo (original) 264-65; printed no. p.230.

¹⁴ *L&P Henry VIII*, vol.1, 1509-13, no 438 (3m.3).

¹⁵ References in TNA catalogue; Beavan, *Aldermen*, ii, 28. Willington had done business in May 1528 with Ambrose Dauntsey, TNA C 241/280/24 and would later be William Dauntsey's executor, PROB 11/42B. William Dauntsey died in April 1543; PROB 11/29/374 as Dautesey, for whom see also <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/95064?docPos=2>

¹⁶ WaCRO, CR 580/13 and TNA Prob 11/42B/641.

¹⁷ TNA C 1/688/3.

deals, but in such a way that it was hard to prove; he requested a subpoena, and that Coldar should take his nephew back to complete his indentures. Oddly Willington does not seem to have requested repayment of the £100.

His known activities in Warwickshire are few although he served almost continuously on commissions of the peace from 1529.¹⁸ In the same year he, with his wife, joined the Guild of the Holy Cross based in Stratford upon Avon.¹⁹ Sometime between 1533 and 1538 he sold 600 sheep to Robert George of Brayles whose partner, anticipating profits, was then told by Willington that he could take none because of the terms of the sale to George.²⁰ In his capacity as JP he rode to Oxhill on New Year's eve 1535/36 with his son in law Thomas Holte to investigate reports of parishioners that the priest of Oxhill had not made clear king Henry VIII's position as supreme governor and had none of the reformed prayer books ordered by a proclamation some months previously. His contravention of Privy Council orders concerning the correct celebration of church services and the daily saying of the collect for the King and Queen was reported back to Thomas Cromwell, with whom he seems also to have had other dealings.²¹ He either was, or was expected to be, amongst the esquires in Calais presumably in the escort for the arrival of the king's fourth wife, Anne of Cleves, in January 1540.²²

The most illuminating records are his tax assessments. He was appointed as a collector of the subsidy of 1524 when he worked alongside the older gentry families but not, apparently, subsequently. He was assessed on lands worth 104s and taxed £3.6s.8d.²³ His assets rose steadily over the years; in the subsidy of 1543 he was taxed on lands worth £240 and later on goods of £500.²⁴ In 1544 his name was noted in a Muster Book intended to show 'what soldiers may be furnished by gentlemen'; the extent of his obligation was not recorded.²⁵

Amassing of lands

Even allowing for the different bases of evaluation, his surviving tax assessments tell a story of increasing wealth much of which was invested in land. In November 1536, perhaps with regard to changing personal circumstances Willington recorded the dispositions which are the earliest record of those finally outlined in his will – arrangements he changed several times. On this occasion he created a trust with William Dauntsey, Alderman of London, Sir Robert Middlemore and the unknown

¹⁸ *L&P Henry VIII*, vol 4, p iii, -g. 5243(28); *ibid* vol 5, 1531-32, p. 706 and *passim*.

¹⁹ M. Macdonald ed., *The Register of the Guild of the Holy Cross Stratford upon Avon*, Dugdale Society 42, (2007), p.217.

²⁰ TNA C 1/1746/46.

²¹ *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. P.I Hughes and J. F. Larkin, Yale 1964, 3 vols, I, no. 158, pp.229-32; *L & Henry VIII*, vol. 10 (1536), ed. James Gardiner, p.4, no. 14 and vol.14(2), no.782, p.325..

²² *L&P Henry VIII*, vol 14(2), no.1539; vol. 15, no.14, p.6.

²³ TNA E 179/192/131.

²⁴ TNA E 179/192/153 (1543) Willington, gent, in landes ccxl li paying £13.0.0; E 179/192/163 July 1545 Willington in lands £240 paying £12.0.0; E 179/192/172, m.3 February 1546 Willington in goods £400 paying £23 13s 4d; E 179/192/178, m.2 1547 Willington Esq. in goods £400 paying £26.13.4; E 179/192/179 1546, roll of 8 m, on m. 1 of Kineton 100; Willington Esq in goods £400 paying £3.6.8d.; E 179/193/183 – 1549 April 28 m.3; Willington Esq in goods £500 paying £25.0.0; E 179/193/186, m.1 April 9 1550 Willington Esq in goods £500 paying £25; E 179/193/190 Jan 30-March 20 1551: Fo 9 Willington Esq £500 paying £25.

²⁵ *L&P Henry VIII*, vol. 19(1), no. 27 (p.155).

William Baron.²⁶ Its purpose was to give his first wife a life interest in the manor of Barcheston, before going on to describe an impressive list of lands. They include Todenham, Newnton, Harbourn, Halesowen, Norfeld, Tanworth, Northurst, Stodley, Whitchurch, Wellesbourne, Newbold Pacey, Halford, Tysoe, Willington in Barcheston,²⁷ Burmington, Brailes, Boughton, Chipping Norton, Bodicote, Adderbury, Tredington and Tidmington. Some already formed the dowries of his daughters. At this point the manor of Barcheston was granted to William Sheldon, husband of Willington's eldest surviving daughter, Mary. Other sons in law named, actual or prospective, were Basil Fielding, Thomas Holte, Francis Mountford, William Catesby and Edward Greville, in connection with other lands, part of the dowries of their wives.

It also stipulated that after Willington's decease Anne was to pay an annual salary of 8 marks to a chantry priest to say masses for Willington and all the deceased, '*iuxta ritos, modos et ordines ecclesie anglicane*' (according to the rites, ways and ordinances of the church of England). It was, however, Anne who first occupied the tomb with which Willington adorned an extended south aisle in Barcheston church, possibly intended as a chantry chapel.²⁸



Willington's tomb effigy at Barcheston. © Hilary L Turner

His will, composed in March 1555, reveals still further land acquisitions.²⁹ Some were acquired from the recently dissolved guilds and chantries, a contrast to his earlier possessions few of which had come from the dissolved monasteries; others represent expansion further afield from his core possessions in south Warwickshire. Should one perhaps see in this the hand of

William Sheldon, Willington's son in law and commissioner for the suppression of chantries in those counties?³⁰ Yet other than the frequently changing arrangements creating trusteeships for his ever increasing possessions and occasional appearances as the overseer of local wills, Willington's activities remain in obscurity. He preferred

²⁶ WaCRO, CR 580/ 13, 20 Nov 1536.

²⁷ This land, one of the few dated acquisitions, was acquired from Richard Ingram of Wolford, who was clearly indebted to Willington, TNA C 1/1093/23-25. WaCRO, CR 580/9/32,33,34.

²⁸ J. Bayliss, 'Richard and Gabriel Royle of Burton on Trent, Tombmakers', *Church History*, vol. 6 (1991), pp. 21-41, p. 37.

²⁹ TNA Prob 11/42b/641. Lands at Aston, Duddeston, Nechels and Saltley had belonged to the guild of Deritend, others at Aston to the chantry there; Smethick, Alvechurch, King's Norton were close to existing possessions; Welford, Gloucestershire, Witton and Melton Mowbray represent expansion into Leicestershire. See http://yourarchives.nationalarchives.gov.uk/index.php?title=William_willington

³⁰ *L&P Henry VIII*, vol 21 (2), 1546, g.302 (30).

to pay a fine of £30 rather than come forward to accept the knighthood offered on the occasion of the Queen Mary's marriage.³¹

Will

Willington's provisions were generous. Cash bequests were arranged for the poor of the surrounding villages (£27.8s 4d), for the repair of Shipston and Halford bridges and Ditchford Lane (£30 6s 8d), to Barcheston church (£10), 1 mark each to 100 maidens on their marriage and £274 to his servants and relatives, a total of £428 8s 4d. It rehearsed the provisions for the dowries of the only daughter unmarried or not betrothed in 1536 (Elizabeth who married Edward Boughton) and for the children of the two who had been widowed and re-married (Holte and Catesby) but added nothing further. Willington probably felt he had done as much as was necessary for his daughters, for each of whom he had secured an advantageous marriage, choosing men of higher social status than his own.³² The date of one is fixed by reference to the jointure, that of Margaret with Edward Greville around July 1531.³³ More details are known of another, that of Katherine to William Catesby of Ashby Legers; they suggest that the arrangements were a matter of considerable expense and long-term planning. Katherine's marriage settlement, finalized in November 1543, reveals that her betrothal had taken place eight years previously, in 1536, for a sum of 630 marks (£420). The prospective bridegroom was then under 14 and at Christmas 1541 in a family gathering he declared he 'did refuse and disagree to take her'. Nevertheless it was decided that they should marry but that if William died before the marriage could take place Katherine should marry Thomas, the younger son. The jointure lands were specified and it was settled that Katherine should be clothed according to the rank of her husband at her father's expense. The expenses of the dinner were to be shared equally.³⁴

The bargaining attendant on this settlement shows how hard won was Willington's social standing, despite his wealth. It perhaps explains Willington's almost minatory sentence that if his sons in law 'do not use order and keep his wife my daughter like as a gentleman ought to be used ordered and kept' the bequests would be void. Arrangements for any separation that might occur favoured the daughters. The style to which they were accustomed is seen in the bequest of a bed with all its furnishings and plate 'to be properly weighed' to each daughter and more clearly still in his own widow's will. The second Mistress Willington bequeathed five cassocks, one of furred cloth, another of damask, a third of worsted 'garded' with velvet and a fourth of cloth lined with cotton; there was also one satin and one damask kirtle, a mourning cloth gown and a pair of sables.³⁵

³¹ E.P. Shirley, 'Compositions to avoid Knighthood 1 & 2 Mary', *Herald and Genealogist*, V, 1870, 18-24.

³² Margery = (1) Thomas Holte of Aston, (2) Sir Ambrose Cave; Godith = Basil Feilding of Newnham; Elizabeth = Edward Boughton of Lawford; Mary = William Sheldon; Margaret = Sir Edward Greville of Milcote; Anne = Francis Mountford of Kingshurst; Katherine = (1) Richard Kempe (2) William Catesby of Chastleton (3) Sir Anthony Throckmorton, Dugdale, *Antiquities*, 1730, p. 601b.

³³ VCH Worcs IV, ed J H Willis Bund 1924, pp. 9-10, 12.

³⁴ Oxfordshire History Centre, E/24/1/1D/3. William died soon after the marriage.

³⁵ TNA PROB 11/42B/640, 1559.

Despite Willington's thorough attempt to anticipate and regulate every possible contingency he could do nothing about the dislike his second wife seems to have inspired. No doubt suppressed during Willington's life, it broke out immediately after his death. It may well have seemed to William Sheldon, and perhaps also to the other sons in law, that Willington had favoured the kin of his second family rather than his first. The will's provisions had given a life interest in Barcheston to Anne and possession after her death to her cousin, William Barnes. Granted previously to William Sheldon, and clearly a matter of some importance to him, there was a dispute over who should inherit; it started immediately on Willington's demise and continued for a further nine years before being resolved.³⁶ During the court case Willington was said to possess more than £3000 in money and was owed a further £2000 in debts.³⁷ He was also said to have been nearly blind and to have been cozened into signing a codicil which he could not properly see. But the provisions of a man as wealthy as Willington and with as many sons in law, one of whom had been deprived of the manor previously assigned him, was a target for a challenge.

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Updated November 2013, 2016

³⁶ For an account see <http://www.tapestriescalledsheldon.info/pdfs/NEWPP33BIOGWmS.pdf>

³⁷ TNA C 3/122/71, complaint of Robert Middlemore