

NOTES

A Dynasty of Sextons and Town-criers at Kendal in the Seventeenth Century

BLAKE TYSON

Sextons rarely feature in historical studies but churchwardens' accounts of Holy Trinity Church, Kendal, contain detail on conditions of employment and activities of members of the Wilkinson family, who will be traced as sextons there for most of the seventeenth century.¹ On 30 June 1679 most of Kendal's 33 churchwardens chose Edward Wilkinson of Kirkland to be sexton. He was to have 'for makeing every grave forth of [outside] the church two pence, or what more they please to give him'.² At that time rural building craftsmen might earn about 8d. a day compared to a shilling a day for townsmen, so the graves were probably shallow. He was to have 12d. for 'every grave makeing, and lyeing the stones [again] in the Church with or without a Coffing'. For every body 'buried in the Church or ... Churchyard in a Coffing', 1s. 6d. more was to be paid to 'Thomas Castley, Receiver for the parish' towards church repairs.³ Edward was to keep 'three Church Cloths for [covering] Corps[es]'. The fee to hire two larger cloths (for adults) was to be 'as formerly and four pence for the last cloth' (for children). He was to 'clean the Church and to take all the Rubbidge away' once a fortnight, or as the vicar wished. He was to 'ring a bell twice a day ... for Morning and Evening Service' and, on Sundays find a 'Sufficient Number to ring the bells three times in the Morning at seven, eight and nine ... and in the Afternoon ... when the vicar or curate shall appoint'. His annual salary was to be 16s. The meeting chose Richard Lancaster to have 16s. a year 'for keeping the Clock and Chimes'. Clearly Edward would need extra pay for any work not in his contract and have flexible employment to make a living. On 18 April 1682 he was paid 8s. for 'keeping Clock Chymes and Ringing of Bells for this last Quarter' as if Lancaster had given up the job.

On 22 February 1681/2 Edward's terms were altered. He was to have 2s. 6d. 'to his own use for every coffin whether in church or churchyard'. In addition to church cleaning he was 'to repair the Font with water at least once a month'. At his own cost he was 'to cover every grave made in the church decently and forthwith' after each burial, and was to have one shilling for every corpse buried in church without a coffin. Burial cloth fees were: 'one new black cloth,⁴ price upon loan 1s. 6d. and overnight 2s. 6d., another piece 1s.' and 4d. for the small cloth. He was to 'account to the Receiver of the church immediately after he... lent them' out and 'to receive them carefully back ... keepe them clean, decently and in good order and to have them forthcoming upon demand of churchwardens at any time'; and wash surplices as often as the vicar wished. An exciting detail was crossed out. It states that the 2s. 6d. charge for the use of a coffin had been paid by custom 'to his grandfather and his father George Wilkinson for 70 years at the least before ... Edward[']s election. In consideration whereof we ... confirme the same ancient due unto the said Edward'. This point will be developed below. Within a year, Edward was buried on 30 January

1682/3. That same day churchwardens received ‘for Cloth 18d. and for grave 3s. 4d. for Edward Wilkinson, *belman*’. Thus, he was covered with the best black cloth and buried in the graveyard without a headstone.⁵ He died intestate. His wife Deborah administered his estate but total assets of just £4 14s. 6d. suggest that he had barely made a living.⁶ The most valuable inventory item was 10s. for a ‘Bell that he went through the towne with’, so he was also Kendal’s town crier.

Deborah took over his job. On 29 June 1683, churchwardens agreed to her being sexton ‘till next Easter, she keeping under her so sufficient a servant as shall please the vicar and whole parish’ to help with heavy work like handling flagstones for burials in church which were to be replaced ‘levelly and in good order, breaking none’. She was to have 2s. 6d. for every coffin in church and ‘give sufficient security ... for her fidelity’. Church cleaning and font filling were as for Edward. An inventory of 1683 shows that Deborah had ‘4 old Clothes for covering Corps, an Imbroidered Pulpit cloth, 2 black hearse clothes and a little imbroidered cloth for covering children’. She must have been satisfactory, since she was sexton until 1694, when John Holme took over. On 24 June 1694 she received her half-year’s salary of 16s. ‘for keeping Clock and Chimes and Ringing bells to service’ but, on 5 January 1694/5, she had 11s. 4d. for her part of that work, while John Holme had 4s. 8d. for his, indicating a changeover at Michaelmas 1694. Apart from providing drink for workmen, a lack of other payments suggests that she did no work beyond her contract.

Despite Kendal’s register gap, the family can be traced. Edward’s appointment was a month after his father George Wilkinson of Kirkland had been buried on 30 May 1679, when 1s. 4d. was paid for a covering cloth to churchwardens, who paid his ‘wife a debt owing by the church to her late husband, due to him at Easter 1678’. George made his will on 5 May 1679 ‘sick in body’.⁷ To his eldest son Edward, he left his house (burgage rent 6s. 8d.) and a house he had bought from William Edmondson (rent 10s. 4d.), a table and form ‘in the vicarage’ and two cupboards ‘in the buttery at home’. If Edward did not pay his sister Elizabeth £10 within a year of entry, she was to have Edmondson’s house. George’s son Thomas was to have a house in the Market Place, bought from William Potter that had been Thomas Wilkinson’s (rent 5s.). Widow Elizabeth was left the ‘house with the Tofall,⁸ opening towards the backside of the house I now live in with two shops and two gardens and all outhouses’ purchased from ‘William Birkett and *next adjoining to the churchyard*’ (rent 13s. 4d.) during her widowhood, and after that to their son Robert. George left his ‘Barn at the Fellside’ (rent 3d.) to his widow and then to his son Thomas.

He also gave Elizabeth during her widowhood, and afterwards to their son Robert, both ‘Docker Croft Lyeing on the Kirkland’ part of the lands of Mr James Bellingham (rent 4s.), and a field in Natland, called Wheas, bought from Mr John Wilkinson ‘and purchased by me to free land of Sir Thomas Strickland’. A close called Haggdale in Natland bought from Edmond Craiston, likewise purchased to free it from Strickland, was left to George Archer, Thomas Warde, George Walker and Thomas Wood on trust that they would sell it ‘to pay the money that lies [owing] on it, and the remainder of the price’ to his executors. Those trustees were to have ‘Three Moss Rooms’ in Brigsteer, part of the land of James Bellingham and Sir Thomas Preston (rent 1s. 4d.)

to sell with the proceeds given to his executors. He owed £10 by bond to the poor of Kirkland (money donated to them by Steven Busher), so George left his house that was Thomas Gibson's and another that was⁹ Mary Wilson's, both in Capper Lane, to the trustees to sell to clear the debt. George gave 'my son Edward ... and his son George 10s. each in full of child's portion'; 5s. each to 'my sister Anne Dickonson' and John Sutton's wife of 'nearer cross bank'; 2s. 6d. each to 'Edward and Thomas, sons of my brother Robert'; and 2s. 6d. each to Robert and George Noble, 'sons of my sister Agnes'. The residue went to the widow, sons Robert and Thomas and daughter Elizabeth as joint executors.

A tuition bond shows that Thomas, Robert and Elizabeth were still minors. Clearly, Edward was married with a baby son George, born near the end of the register gap. His father's inventory of 2 June 1679 shows assets of £98 6s. 0d. reduced by debts: £18 13s. 4d. rent owing to the Marquis of Worcester; £10 12s. to the Kirkland poor; £5 funeral costs; £15 18s. 'upon obligation' to Emmy Brathwait; and £5 8s. by bond to Sir [blank] Strickland. The house contents were poorly recorded, but there were a parlour, a house-part, kitchen, buttery, drink house, lofts over the first two, a 'Floor Loft', 'kitchen loft in the churchyard side', 'Parker Room', a stable, wool loft, hay loft, a Taylor shop, loft over the shop, and a 'Nealson house', surely enough to be an inn. As the house with the lean-to behind was next adjoining to the churchyard, it was probably the *Ring o' Bells* inn. George's main assets were 210 sheep (£30), cattle (£9) and horses £10. With a barn on Fellside and 'plows, harrows, 20 sheep skins and other husbandry gear' in a loft, his work as sexton was not his main occupation and he probably supplied wool to Kendal weavers.

A Kendal midwife¹⁰ noted George Wilkinson as a 'bellman' of Kirkland when she attended births of two children: Thomas on 30 August 1670 (aged 8 when his father died) and Jane 27 May 1673. In 1668 at the burial of an older child, hire of a 'cloth for George Wilkinson's child of Kirkland' cost 4d. The eldest, Edward, would have been born by 1660. As the churchwardens noted that George and his father were sextons for at least 70 years, the latter would be an adult by about 1610. The only likely marriage was of Edward Wilkinson to Dorothy Fox, at Kendal on 17 July 1614. George was the third child baptised on 5 February 1617/18, so was 61 when he died. His father Edward, always noted as 'of Kirkland', had ten children baptised and they are listed in the outline pedigree of Wilkinson sextons below.

The churchwardens' accounts rarely give full dates, but selected entries give an idea of George's range of work.¹¹ He was Kirkland's churchwarden in 1667. In 1659, he was paid 5s. 'for lying the stones in the church this year'; 16s. 'for keeping the Clocke and chyme this year'; and 2s. 6d. 'for keeping the belstrings lockt up in the new deske from Jangling by boyes'. In 1660, he again had 5s. for relaying flagstones lifted for burials and 1s. for 1½ days helping John Straker to glaze 52 [square] feet of new glass costing £1 10s. 4d., and 18 feet of old glass in new lead costing 6s.¹² The tradesman had 4s. for four days and George had 8d. a day. He was aged 42 and had been sexton long before existing accounts began in 1658. In 1676 George and two others had 4s. for two days 'bearing away the great heap of Mould wch lay on the North side of the Church and ... waiste stones wch were not convenient to remain there'. On 4 December 1678 he

shared 6d. with Thomas Clarke for ‘Clensing the Leads [after] the last great snow’ and before Christmas had 6d. ‘for washing and dressing’ surplices. George was often paid ‘for splicing bell ropes’ at 2d. a rope. In 1677 he had 3s. for ‘work done by him in Steeple’, 21s. for a ‘whole years salary and keeping the Clock and Chyme for the church’ and 3s. 8d. for splicing 22 ropes that year, indicating that the ropes were made of inferior materials and lasted only a few months between repairs.

In 1669 William Smith of Troutbeck made new bell-ropes and George shared 1s. 8d. with a Thomas Gilpin ‘for turning’ the handle to twist strands as ropes were made on site. George’s wife provided the drinks for 3s. In 1670, Smith made seven ropes for 14s. ‘Elizabeth Wilkinson and others’ were paid 4s. for the workmen’s drinks, as if she (and he) kept a nearby inn. In 1676, Mrs Forth and George Wilkinson were paid 13s. 6d. for drink while ‘the waller and Joyners wrought at the Church making up the Rayles and removing the vestry door’. In 1661, the churchwardens paid 1s ‘in charges at George Wilkinson’s [for] ... meeting there about church affairs’, a use of his premises noted in other entries. The 1674-5 Hearth Tax shows George as one of only three people who had *four* hearths. None of 94 other folk in Kirkland had so many.¹³ This is compatible with him keeping the *Ring o’ Bells* where he would be ideally placed to satisfy church needs. In 1665, 1s. 6d. was paid in ‘*expences at* George Wilkinsons when the 3 bell was throwne out of the step stone by misfortune and at the helping of it in again’. He had 1s. ‘for taking up the 3 bell and other pains he took about the south gudgion in putting it into the step stone’. In 1665 joiners made a wheel for the 4th bell. George shared 3s. with Thomas Warde for making ‘a new beake’ for it. In 1669 his wife was paid for drink ‘when the 2nd bell was mended and the other oyled’. In 1670 she had 1s. ‘for drink when 3 trees were set in the ch[urch] yard’. George had other ways to earn his living, apart from some farming. In 1658 he received 8d. ‘for a Wood Jeast for a soletree for fastening formes ends into’ and, in 1672, 2s. 4d. ‘for sand of his lying at the water side’. How and where he had obtained these materials is not stated.

George would have been 27 when his father ‘Edward Wilkinson of Kirkland, bellman’ died in 1644/5, so three generations served as town criers. Edward made his will on 10 January,¹⁴ and left ‘my house wherein I now dwell with two cupboards, a Table and a forme in the house’ to his wife Dorothy for life and then to his son George (who later left that furniture to his son Edward). Dorothy was to have ‘my house *above the bridge* where I was borne’ for life, then to son Robert who was to pay his sister Anne £5 within a year of entering. Edward left £4 to a daughter Agnes, wife of Gabriel Noble, ‘to be paid out of my goods’ and £2 to his son John ‘if he be living’, as if he had left home and had not kept in touch. If John was not found that bequest was to be divided between Edwards’s two youngest children, not named. His inventory of 23 January 1644/5 lists assets of £18 16s. 11d. less 25s. debts. He had clothes worth £3 and basic furnishings £7. He had a cow, two pigs and some hay, nowhere near the farming assets amassed by his son George.

As Edward Wilkinson married Dorothy in 1614, the only feasible baptism found for him was at Kendal on 9 July 1593, as a son of William Wilkinson of Highgate. This could explain Edward’s reference to being born in a house ‘*above the bridge*’ probably north of Blind beck the boundary between Kirkland and Kendal. It suggests

that Edward would be aged 21 at marriage and 51 when he died. It appears that he had an older brother William baptised on 26 September 1591 and a younger sister Agnes, baptised on 30 June 1597. Perhaps his father was buried on 29 May 1597, since no later children were found. Unfortunately, the parish registers do not provide sufficiently clear evidence to progress further back with any confidence.

This brief study reveals a range of activities within and beyond the sextons' agreed terms. George Wilkinson was certainly successful. He inherited his father's house, acquired five more, a barn, at least three fields and a peat source. He must have been a practical, hard-working man to cope with his many commitments. His father and son Edward were far less successful. The son died young and his mother Elizabeth, outliving both son and husband, retained control of the inn. On 4 July 1688, churchwardens paid her 18d. 'for drink for the Ringers upon the Account of the Bishops delivery'. That 'same day upon the same account' Edward's widow Deborah was paid 3s. On 18 October 1688 the churchwardens noted 3s. 10d. paid in 'expences this *peremptory* day at Deborah Wilkinson's' when they met to elect churchwardens, collect dues from the townships, settle bills and discuss problems.¹⁵ How long the widows continued as innkeepers is not known, but it has been possible to reveal considerable detail about the work of an ordinary family, mainly because a church could not function properly without the skills and dedication of such people.

190 Oxford Road, OX14 2AE

References

1. The Kendal parish registers and churchwardens' accounts are at CAS(K), WPR/38
2. The comment is ambiguous. Relatives were probably expected to pay Edward the 2d. plus any extra
3. Thomas Castley 'of Market Place, clerk [to the parish]' was buried on 31 May 1685
4. Previously, on 18 October 1681, churchwardens had paid Alderman James Simpson, draper, 24s. 6d. 'for 3 yards of black broad cloth at 8s. 2d. per yard'
5. The charge for having a headstone was usually 6s. 8d., compared to at least 10s. for burial in church
6. CAS(K), microfilm HK 677, Richmond wills, Kendal deanery, proved 9 May 1683
7. CAS(K), microfilm HK 677, Kendal Deanery, proved 4 June 1679. All burgrave rents were per year
8. A tofall was a lean-to extension often for a back kitchen or dairy at the rear of a ridge-roofed building; its roof continued down from the main roof, forming what is often called a 'catslide'
9. All the detail in this paragraph up to this point is missing from the microfilm of this will because it had not been fully unfolded before being flattened for filming
10. Loraine Ashcroft (ed), *The Diary of a Kendal Midwife* (2001), 12, 35
11. Accounts are in four large volumes 1658-87, 1688-1732, 1733-76 and 1777-1849. (see note 1)
12. Thus fitting the new glass cost 7d. per sq. ft., while the old glass was fitted for 4d. per sq. ft., so that the old glass as a commodity was worth 3d. per sq. ft.
13. C. Phillips *et al* (eds), *Westmorland Hearth Tax* (British Record Society and CWAAS, 2008), 271-72
14. Lancashire Record Office (Preston), Richmond wills WRW/K, proved 17 February 1644/5
15. The fine for churchwardens who failed to attend these important meetings was 12d. for each default

