

THE ROBERTS FAMILY OF WILLESDEN

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No family is more important in the history of Willesden than the Roberts family who lived for three centuries, on and off, at Neasden. Yet the traditional account of the family's history over this period contains an unusually large number of errors, some of them in standard works of reference like Burke's *Extinct Baronetcies*, the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Victoria County History of Middlesex*. The main purpose of this essay is to correct and amplify the received tradition.

THOMAS ROBERTS, HIS WIVES AND CHILDREN

The name Roberts occurs from time to time in 14th century deeds but more especially when John Roberts bought an estate at Neasden from John Attewoode in 1403¹. Another John Roberts, probably his grandson, was recorder of Middlesex and held lands 'within the manor of Nesdon'; when he died in 1476 his son Thomas was six years old². It was without doubt this Thomas who, according to a lost portion of an inscription on a monumental brass in St Mary's Willesden, was the husband of Margaret Roberts, daughter of Robert Fyncham³.

When Thomas died in 1543 he was buried at St Clement Danes, having had a residence in that parish near his law business. Administration of his estate was granted to his eldest son Michael in the short-lived court of the Bishop of Westminster⁴. At Neasden Thomas built or enlarged a house called Catt-at-

woodes, probably at the time he started the first of his two families. After Margaret's death in 1505 he evidently took as his second wife Ann Adam, daughter of Humphrey Adam of London, by whom he had three daughters: Dorothy in August 1508, Ann in 1509 and Alice in 1511.

Dorothy Roberts seems to have been betrothed at an early age to a lawyer of good standing who died shortly before his nuptials, probably on a visit to Neasden, as he was interred at St Mary's church. The stone which records this sad event is inset into the south wall at eye level. It is now badly eroded but the Latin inscription clearly indicates that the disappointed fiancée was Thomas's eldest daughter Dorothy, not Anne as reported in the Gentleman's Magazine in 1822⁵. Dorothy later married Alan Horde of Ewell, a bencher of the Middle Temple, and is described on a monumental brass in Ewell church as the daughter of Thomas Roberts of Willesden.

Some time after 1511 Thomas's wife Ann must have died because by a later wife Catherine Sadler, daughter of Roger Sadler of London, he had a second family of three sons: Michael in 1519, Edmund in 1520 and John in 1531. All these six children of Thomas Roberts are listed with precise dates of birth on spare pages of a 15th century book of devotions called *Speculum Vitae Christi*. Details were printed in The Genealogist in 1885, but there is no suggestion in this or any other document that Thomas had any children by his first wife Margaret⁶.

Although the Margaret Roberts brass in Willesden church nowadays looks simple enough, what has been said for some centuries about it presents a considerable difficulty. In 1861 the Rev Herbert Haines in his *Manual of Monumental Brasses* wrote that figures of 3 sons and 3 daughters were associated with this brass and he was not the first to say so: the antiquarian Richard Rawlinson had said the same thing more than a century earlier⁷. More recently the statement has been repeated by Mill Stephenson (1926) and the Historical Monuments Commission Report for Middlesex, 1937⁸. Unfortunately, this notion is in direct conflict with the contemporary evidence, cited above, which shows that it was Thomas who, by his two later wives, had 3 sons and 3 daughters, not Margaret. Rubbings of the two small pieces of brass, one for the boys, the other for the girls, are in the collections both of the Victoria & Albert Museum and of the Society of Antiquaries and are assembled in each case below the rubbing of the main Margaret Roberts brass⁹. It was doubtless because the two small brasses had at some time been placed below Margaret's brass in St Mary's that antiquarians like Rawlinson concluded that the children must be hers. It would not be surprising, however, if in the two centuries which elapsed between the original fixing of the brass and Rawlinson's visit the two separate pieces of brass had somehow got into a misleading position; they are not mentioned in Lansdowne MS 874¹⁰. They seem to have disappeared altogether some time before 1871 because the local antiquarian F. A. Wood, who was secretary of the Willesden church committee at this time, makes no mention of them in his voluminous notes about the church¹¹; they could well have been lost during the 1852 restoration of the church, in which an important feature was to have been

the raising of the church floor to alleviate the chronic problem of damp.

Thomas Roberts was a man of substance. In 1525 when some 30 gentlemen were appointed to conduct 'privy searches' into church property in London, Thomas was one of the two appointed for 'Kilborne and Wilsdon', his colleague being Nicholas Jenyns of London¹². He was also regularly on the Commission of the Peace for Middlesex. So he would be likely to be commemorated on a brass, like his son Edmund in 1585, and his children could possibly have been depicted on separate small brasses accompanying the main brass. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that such a main brass for Thomas ever existed either at Willesden or at St Clement Danes.

EDMUND ROBERTS AND HIS WIVES

Thomas's eldest son Michael (1519–44) was very much a Willesden man, leaving among his many bequests a legacy for the poor of the parish and £20 for the upkeep of a highway at Neasden. His younger brother Edmund, born on St Edmund's day 1520, was married on Candlemas Day 1549 to Frances Welles, daughter of Richard Welles of Ware, who had been a clerk in Henry VIII's chancery.

The wedding took place at Royston, Herts, where Robert (later Sir Robert) Chester held Royston manor as a grantee of Henry VIII to whom he was a gentleman-usher of the royal chamber. Edmund and Frances could well have been living at Royston when their first child Francis was christened there in February 1551, with Chester as one of his godfathers (the other was Sir Robert Tyrwhitt, lord lieutenant of Huntingdonshire and formerly Master of the Horse to his relation Queen

Catherine Parr). But in the following year their next child was christened Catherine in St Mary's Willesden in honour of her grandmother Catherine Welles and her godmother Lady Catherine Chester¹³, which suggests that by this time Edmund may have succeeded Ursula, Michael's widow who at some date remarried, as the occupier of the house at Neasden.

This connexion of Edmund Roberts with the Chesters evidently misled the heralds concerned with the Visitation of Leicestershire into the error of supposing that Robert Chester's sister was Edmund's first wife—an error repeated by John Nichols in his book on Leicestershire in 1811, by Burke in 1838 and by a young genealogist Francis Grigson in *The Genealogist* in 1881¹⁴. The idea is conclusively refuted both by the figures and by the inscription on Edmund's brass in St Mary's Willesden. On Edmund's right stands his first wife Frances with her six children and the Welles coat of arms, while on his left is Faith Pattenson with her three children and the Pattenson arms; and in the long inscription Frances is explicitly referred to as Edmund's 'first' wife.

Edmund Roberts's first wife Frances can confidently be asserted to be the woman depicted on the brass in St Mary's Willesden hitherto listed in modern reference books as a 'Lady Unknown' brass. Frances died in 1560 having borne Edmund two sons and four daughters, although only one of the boys and three of the girls were alive at the time of her death. When Edmund was about to marry Faith Pattenson as his second wife in 1563 he may have wished to ensure that Frances would always be remembered by having a brass engraved for her and her six children. After Edmund's own death a

quarter of a century later, his widow Faith had a large brass engraved showing his two wives and their two families¹⁵, which probably ousted the smaller brass for Frances and her children so that it became lost until dug up in the churchyard in about 1923. The statistical probability that two ladies of good family both connected with Willesden church could both have had families of exactly two boys and exactly four girls at exactly the same time in history is too small to justify any other conclusion than that the Unknown Lady is indeed Frances Welles, the first wife of Edmund Roberts¹⁶.

THE 17th CENTURY: KNIGHTS AND BARONETS

The most serious mistakes about the Roberts family in the received tradition are undoubtedly those which relate to the 17th century, starting with the date of birth of the first Sir William Roberts. He was born not in 1605 (*pace* Burke, DNB, etc) but in April 1604; and the entries both in the family records and in the baptismal register of St Stephen's Coleman-street for May 1604 agree that he and Barne his brother were twins¹⁷. Barne died at Eton College in 1618¹⁸; but William flourished, entered Gray's Inn in 1622, married Eleanor Atye in 1624 and was knighted a few months later by James I at Greenwich. During the Commonwealth period Sir William was one of Oliver Cromwell's most trusted administrators, a member of the Council of State from 1653 and, as 'Lord Roberts', a member of Cromwell's Upper House from 1657. He was a commissioner for the sale of Crown lands and of forfeited estates.

There is a wrong old tradition, going back to the 18th century, that in 1661 Sir William Roberts was reconciled to Charles II and made a baronet. This tra-

erigimus
 Officium & creatum dilectum nostrum Willielmum Roberts de Willesdon in comitatu nostro
 Comite nro Middlesex Armigerum

(. . . *erigimus, praeficimus et creamus dilectum nostrum Willielmum Roberts de Willesdon in comitatu nostro middlesex Armigerum . . .*)

(. . . *we raise up, appoint and create our beloved William Roberts of Willesdon in our county of Middlesex Esquire . . .*)

Fig. 1 Excerpt from the Baronetcy Award to Roberts of Willesden, 8th November 1661.

dition has been carried on by most later writers, notably by Burke, by DNB, by the novelist Cecil Roberts and by the VCH¹⁹. But there is in fact no truth in this story, as even a cursory glance at the evidence will suffice to show.

The grant of the baronetcy in November 1661 was in fact not to Sir William Roberts, knight (b. 1604), but to his eldest surviving son William Roberts, esquire. This is conclusively proved by the

description of the recipient in the award document as 'William Roberts . . . armiger'; if Sir William had been the recipient he would have been called 'miles'²⁰. Equally conclusive is Sir William's description of himself in his will (1662) as 'knight' and his son as 'baronet'²¹. Again, Dame Eleanor in her petition to the Lord Chancellor in November 1662 similarly refers to her late husband as 'knight' and to her eldest son

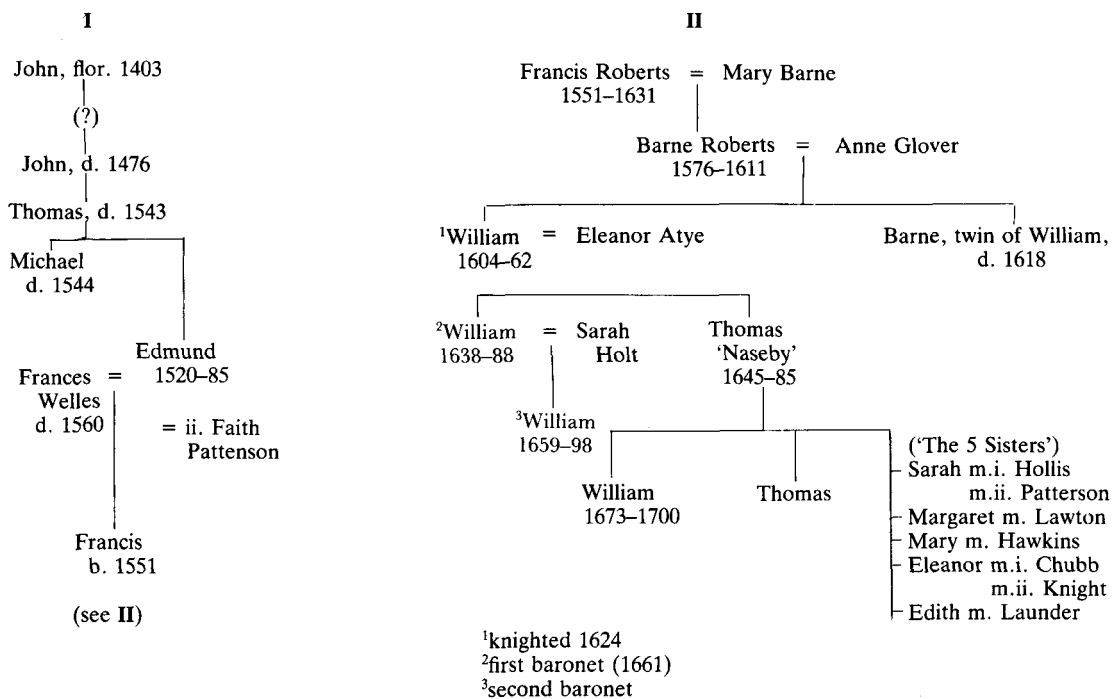


Fig. 2 The ROBERTS Family Succession at Neasden.

as 'baronet'²². It is not surprising that G. E. Cokayne in 1903 got the story right, but it is greatly to the credit of Lysons that he perceived the truth²³. It is sad to record that Mark Noble mentioned the truth about the first baronet, possibly without believing it, in a footnote in his book *'Memoirs of the Family of Cromwell'* in 1787; but he cannot complain if most later writers have ignored the note since he himself disdained it in his later *'Lives of the English Regicides'* (1798), where he telescopes the first Sir William Roberts and his son into one person²⁴.

Near the end of the century, leaving aside the usual mistakes about old-style dates (for instance, the first baronet died in March 1688 not March 1687), we have the oft-repeated statement that the baronetcy of Roberts of Willesden 'expired in 1700' on the death of the 'fourth' baronet²⁵. In fact, there were only two baronets: Sir William (d. 1688) and his son Sir William (d. 1698), on whose death the baronetcy expired. The William Roberts who succeeded to the Willesden estates in 1698 was not the son of the second baronet (who was childless) but his cousin, the son of the first baronet's younger brother Thomas 'Naseby' Roberts—so called because he was born a fortnight after Fairfax's victory in June 1645. This last William Roberts was neither knight nor baronet but simply 'esquire' and he never claimed to be anything else²⁶.

THE 18th CENTURY: THE FIVE SISTERS AND THE HUTCHENSONS

In 1700 William Roberts sold off a considerable part of his Willesden lands and the rest passed in time to his five sisters in equal shares. Sarah married firstly a Hollis and then someone called Patterson (or Pattinson) and lived for a time abroad. Mary married in 1703

William Hawkins, vicar of Willesden. Eleanor married Thomas Knight, the curate. Margaret married Richard Lawton. Edith married Thomas Launder. There was no sister Elizabeth as has sometimes been alleged.

The reverend William Hawkins was a good latinist. Besides being vicar of Willesden, 1699–1736, he was the incumbent also of Kingsbury and of St Peter-ad-vincula in the Tower of London, held the prebend of Neasden in St Paul's cathedral and was tenant of Westminster Abbey's land at Neasden²⁷. In 1732 he put up a sundial which still exists on the tower of St Mary's Willesden with the half-line of Latin verse 'Dum spectas fugio' (While you stand looking, I move on), which he either culled from some classical poet or wrote himself. Almost certainly he was the author of the elegant piece of Latin prose on the memorial stone for his wife and their daughter Mary which lies at the threshold of the sanctuary in the church. The inscription, which deserves to be better known, runs:

*Hic Inter Avitos Cineres conditae sunt
Exuviae MARIAE Uxoris dilectissimae
GULIELMI HAWKYNs de WILESDON
Quae Filia fuit THOMAE ROBERTS
Nuper de NEASDON Armigeri
Soror et Cohaeres
GULIELMI ROBERTS et THO:
ffratrū
Vixit Annos XLVII et obiit IV Octob.
Anno Christi Domini MDCCXXVI
Et Juxta matris optimae reliquias jacet
MARIA
Filia eorum primogenita
Virgo formae et Indolis Eximiae
Praematura morte Sublata
Decessit XXIII Mensis Junii
Anno } a xti Nativitate MDCCXXII
 } a sua XVIII*

(Here, among the ashes of her ancestors, are stored the remains of Mary, most beloved wife of William Hawkins of Willesden, who was the daughter of Thomas Roberts, late of Neasdon, esquire, the sister and co-heiress of her brothers William and Thomas. She lived for 47 years and died 4 October AD 1726.

And next to the remains of her estimable mother lies Mary their firstborn, a maiden of outstanding beauty and character. Carried off by an untimely death, she died on the 23rd of June in the 1722nd year from Christ's nativity and the 18th from her own.)

When William Roberts died in 1700 at the age of twenty-seven, his widow Elizabeth, daughter of Lord Howard of Effingham (a descendant of the Elizabethan admiral and himself Governor of Virginia), married a local man William Hutchenson, always described by genealogists as head clerk in the Pells Office. But he later held a more important public office as one of the two deputy chamberlains on the Receipts side of the Exchequer²⁸. William Hutchenson died in 1724, his widow the Lady Elizabeth at Kensington in 1728.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. British Library, Stowe MS. 862.
2. Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS. C.299.
3. British Library, Lansdowne MS. 874; Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS. B.389b.
4. GLRO, DL/C/355, f. 22.
5. *Gentleman's Magazine* 92 (1822) II 577; the name is correctly given in R.C.H.M., *Middlesex* (1937) 134.
6. *The Genealogist*, new series, 2 (1885) 46-7; the present whereabouts of the book *Speculum Vitae Christi*, which was a century ago in the library of Allestree Hall, Derby, are not known.
7. see note 3.
8. Mill Stephenson *A List of Monumental Brasses in the British Isles* (1926) 317; R.C.H.M., *Middlesex* (1937) 133.
9. V & A, brass rubbing 10598 QQ 16.
10. see note 3.
11. Grange Museum library, Neasden, Wood folio notebooks V.
12. PRO, SP 1/33, f. 166.
13. Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS. C.894.
14. *Visitation of the County of Leicester* (1619) in Harleian Society Publications 2 (1870) 203; John G. Nichols *History & Antiquities of the County of Leicester* (London, 1811) IV 452; John Burke *Extinct & Dormant Baronetcies of England* (1838) s.v. Roberts; Francis Grigson in *The Genealogist*, first series, 5 (1881) 300. A Leicestershire branch of the Roberts family of Willesden was established by Thomas Roberts (b. 1566), eldest son of Edmund Roberts by his second wife Faith.
15. A well-written Latin couplet on the brass says:
Ista suo benefida fides monumenta marito
ponit ut officii pignora certa suo
but the last word 'suo' is a mistake for 'sui', probably because 'suo' occurs in the previous line.
16. K. J. Valentine in *Willesden Local History Society Magazine* 1 (1983) 6-7; see also V. J. B. Torre 'An Unrecorded Lady at Willesden, Middlesex' in *Trans. Monumental Brass Society* VII 284-6 (1939).
17. Barne, the elder of the twins, was named after his father Barne Roberts, William after his maternal grandfather Sir William Glover, alderman of London.
18. Bodleian Library, Rawlinson MS. C.894; Eton College Register.
19. Burke, *op. cit.*; DNB s.v. Roberts, William; VCH, *Middlesex* VII (1982) 272; Cecil Roberts's autobiographical *The Growing Boy* (London 1967) 194, 206-8. Cecil Roberts (1892-1976) claimed to be descended from an ancient branch of the Roberts family in Leicestershire collateral with the Willesden branch.
20. PRO, C.66/2974/2.
21. PRO, PCC Nov. 1662.
22. PRO, C.8/320/171.
23. G.E.C. *Complete Baronetage* III (1903) 233; D. Lysons *Environs of London* III (1795) 623n.
24. Mark Noble *Memoirs of the Family of Cromwell (al. Memoirs of the Protectoral House of Cromwell)* (Birmingham 1787) I 426, and *Lives of the English Regicides* (London, 1798) II 148. In fact Roberts was not one of the regicides, having refused like many others to take any part in the trial of Charles I.
25. Burke, *op. cit.*; DNB, *ibid.*; Cecil Roberts, *op. cit.* 208.
26. PRO, PCC Dec. 1700.
27. In *Trans. London Middlesex Archaeol. Soc.*, old series, IV part II (1872) 198-9 F. A. Wood wrongly gave the year of Hawkins's death (twice) as 1730 instead of 1736. Since he also telescoped William Hawkins's vicariate with that of his predecessor Francis Hawkins (1670-99) he miscalculated the length of William's incumbency as 59 years instead of 37. In the same article (p. 195) there has evidently been a confusion of Henry VI and Henry II with the result that a group of Willesden court cases which belong to AD 1422 are wrongly dated to 1154; and the date when Francis Roberts founded his charity for the parish of Willesden (p. 200) should have been 1624, not 1629.
28. PRO, T 60/8.