

John Wildman of Burton?

Joan and Peter Shaw

During the 17th century, there lived at Burton-on-the-Wolds a gentleman by the name of John Wildman. His grandfather had been a shepherd, but the family had prospered and John lived in comfort and luxury. His was a substantial house with eight chambers and several garrets as well as the usual parlour, hall, kitchen and outbuildings.¹ It was probably built around a courtyard, and may have stood on the site of the old Wildman home - the grange to the east of the village which had once belonged to the Cistercian Abbey of Garendon.²

At first glance, John Wildman was a typical yeoman farmer. Apart from his affluence (and many an expert grazier on the Wolds made a good living by buying and selling at the right time) there was nothing that made him stand out from his neighbours, however, the following passage in the *Victoria County History*³ suggested he merited closer scrutiny.

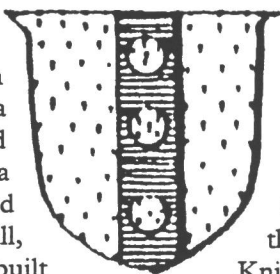
'John Wildman of Burton on the Wolds occurs in the same list. He had inherited the property about 1658 and married a daughter of the recusant Christopher Roper 4th Lord Teynham.'

The list proved to be a list of prominent Leicestershire Roman Catholics drawn up for the House of Lords in 1680.⁴ John Wildman of Burton-on-the-Wolds was included; others were Lord Brudenell, Sir Thomas Beaumont, Anthony Inglefield, Henry Nevill, Thomas Eyre, William Turville, Charles Fortescue, Charles Byerly, Edmond Smith, John Mordant, John Turville, Charles Byerly Jnr.

The property was Neville Holt. There was no apparent connection between Neville Holt and our Wolds farmer, and it seemed likely that the gentleman concerned here was none other than the notorious Leveller leader Major John Wildman, who made a fortune negotiating on behalf of papists and royalists to buy back confiscated estates. One of Major Wildman's closest friends was Henry Neville.

Christopher Roper's daughter was Frances. She was married to John Wildman of Burton on the Wolds. On his pedigree, entered at Leicester for the 1681/82 visitation of the Heralds, John stated that his wife was the daughter of Christopher Roper Lord Teynham by Mary daughter to Sir Francis Englefield; and sister to Christopher Lord Teynham.⁵ Sir Francis Englefield held the manor of nearby Shoby which he had acquired upon his marriage to thirteen year old Winifred Brooksby. John and Frances had six children, at least three of whom were named after their mother's family.

But according to the *The Dictionary of National Biography*⁶, the *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*,⁷ and a



guide to Shrivenham Church,⁸ Frances was also married to Major John Wildman. His biographer, Maurice Ashley, says she was daughter of Sir Francis Englefield,⁹ but this is probably a mistake, Sir Francis appears to have had only three daughters: Mary, Catherine and Helen. It is interesting to note that Francis Englefield's other estate was White Knights in Berkshire, only a few miles from Major Wildman's home 'Beckett'.

There is no mention of Frances on Major Wildman's tombstone in Shrivenham Church; he was buried with his second wife Lucy (according to Volume 37 of the *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, Lucy was the mother of his only son John, but a memorial in Shrivenham Church says she died without issue). Maurice Ashley believed Lucy to be the daughter of Lord Lovelace,¹⁰ but it is a tenuous link and the arms for her at Shrivenham are not those of the Lovelace family.¹¹

There is no doubt about the arms for Major Wildman. They are identical to those entered by John Wildman of Burton-on-the-Wolds for the 1681/82 visitation and illustrated by John Nichols - Or, on a pale azure, three bezants.¹² Clearly John Wildman of Burton and Major John Wildman of Berkshire belonged to the same branch of the Wildman family, but was there one man or two? John Wildman's Leicester pedigree indicates that he may have had male cousins, but though both his father and grandfather left wills, neither identifies another John.

The Wildman family lived on the Wolds for many generations, the name spelt variously Wyman, Wyldman, Wiseman, Wileman and Wildman (Winifred Brooksby was the daughter of Dorothy Wiseman, so John Wildman of Burton and his wife Frances may have been related). The marriage of John's grandparents is recorded in the Prestwold registers¹³ as is the baptism of his father. John's pedigree suggests he was born around 1643. There are no registers for Prestwold covering the period 1639 to 1649 and the pedigree's accuracy must be questioned, it does not include the death of his mother Mary Allen - probably in 1644¹⁴ - and omits all reference to his stepmother Elizabeth Sherwin.¹⁵ One possible explanation is that he was born out of wedlock, and an entry in the Loughborough Parish registers records that John Allyn son of John was baptised in October 1631 at 'Burton in ye parish of Prestwold'; however, there is nothing out of the ordinary about the corresponding entry in the Prestwold register - 'John, son of John Allen late of Loughborough, mercer, baptised October 23 1631'.

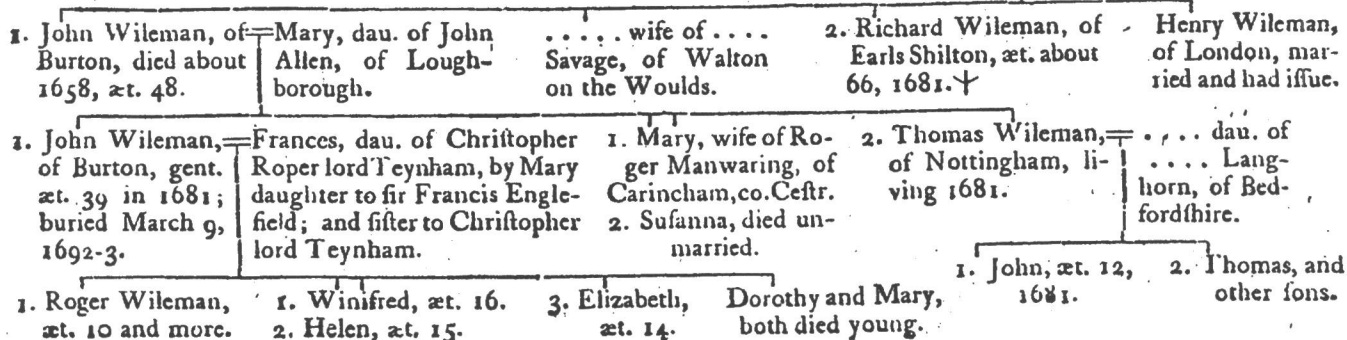
Major Wildman was a republican fanatic who would stop at nothing to achieve his ends. A brilliant lawyer and clever businessman, he was a high profile political activist, a cunning conspirator, a devious double agent.

Pedigree of WILEMAN, or WILDMAN, of BURTON ON THE WOULDs.

(Entered at Leicester 24 March, 1681-2, by JOHN WILEMAN.)

Arms: Or, on a pale Azure, three bezants; Plate LII. fig. 14.

Thomas Wileman, of Burton on the Woulds, died Oct. 6, 1656, æt. circa 80. =



The Wildman pedigree as illustrated in Nichols.

His schemes included restoring the king to the throne, ridding the country of Cromwell and blowing up Whitehall Palace. Some even suspected him of being the man behind the mask when the King was brought to the scaffold. None of his past chroniclers have linked him with Leicestershire, but many of his fellow plotters had strong connections with the County. Henry Neville, George Villiers Duke of Buckingham and Robert Shirley were his special friends, and he was much involved with John Mordaunt who appears on the 1680 list of papists, and Thomas Grey of Groby. He was also closely associated with two men who could possibly have come from Loughborough or the Wolds area: he made his political debut in the company of an army agitator William Allen who may have been related to the mother of John Wildman of Burton; and his loyal and trusted servant, with whom he shared both confidence and imprisonment, was a man called William Parker, a name which appears in the Prestwold registers.

There is an interesting postscript to the Major's association with Leicestershire. John Wildman Jnr and his young wife Elianor Choute had no family. She died at the age of nineteen and he never remarried. He left the Beckett estate to John Shute,¹⁶ said to be a man to whom he was not related but of whom he had formed a high opinion after a very short acquaintance. John Shute was the grandson of Francis Shute of Upton in the County of Leicester.

John Wildman of Burton died in March 1692 and was apparently buried at Prestwold. There is neither grave nor monument. His will was brief. He left legacies to his servants Mary Toone and Thomas Dobney, 'the rest' to his daughter, wife of Sir Edward Golding of Colston Bassett.¹⁷

Major Sir John Wildman of Beckett - ex-Postmaster General, Freeman and Alderman of the City of London, Deputy Lieutenant of Middlesex - died in June 1693. His tombstone says he was in his seventieth year. His monument on the north side of the sanctuary in Shrevenham Church says he was seventy two and includes these words taken from his will:

'Let there be some stone of small price set near to my ashes, that may without foolish flattery signify to posterity that in this age a man lived, who spent the best of his days in prisons without crime; being conscious of no offence towards man, for that he so loved his God that he could serve no man's will; wish the liberty and happiness of his country and all mankind. But I will not this for any other end, than that occasionally some good reflections may be excited in some excellent minds by their reading such an inscription.'

His name is on a list of Affidavits received by the Shrevenham incumbent for 1693, which states that Sir Jo: Wildman was 'interred June ye 21st' - strangely, his is the only entry for the year which does not record place of residence.¹⁸

The life of Major Wildman is a tangled web of mystery and intrigue. It is perhaps not surprising that so little is known of his background; at times he must have needed to lie low and cover his tracks. Burton's John Wildman belonged to a community of proscribed people. His wife's cousins at Aston Flamville were Jesuit priests and her grandparents at Shoby harboured many others. Recusants were baptised in secret and buried at dead of night. No questions were asked, no records kept.

Writing of Roman Catholicism in the Victoria County History, Brigadier T. B. Trappes-Lomax says: 'Underground movements are necessarily difficult to trace. As little as may be is committed to writing - it is, for example, very unusual to find Roman Catholic baptismal registers before 1750 - and every effort is made to dissemble even internal convictions. A host of stratagems grew up from the elaborately contrived hiding-place to minute chalices and small portable altar stones. Lawyers invented methods of concealing the ownership and inheritance of land'.¹⁹ He could almost have had Major John Wildman in mind.

There is little wonder so many pieces of the jigsaw are

missing, and it is possible that the full facts about our own John Wildman and Major Wildman of Beckett will never be known. There may, however, be a family historian or enthusiastic republican among our readers willing to take full responsibility for both gentlemen and fit them in their correct places. We shall be only too happy to help!!

Sources:

1. Leicestershire Record Office PR/1/96/21. Inventory of the property of John Wileman of Burton-on-the-Wolds April 1692.
2. John Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, Vol III Part I p. 364.
3. *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*, Vol II p. 65.
4. House of Lords Record Office. Papist Return of 1680 for Leicestershire.
5. John Nichols, *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, Vol III Part I Page 379.
6. *Dictionary of National Biography*. Vol LXI entry for Sir John Wildman (1621? - 1693).
7. *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, Vol 37 p. 54.
8. *Guide to St Andrew's Shrevenham*. Available from the Church.
9. Maurice Ashley, *John Wildman, Plotter and Postmaster* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1947).
10. *ibid.*
11. *Berkshire Archaeological Journal*, Vol 49 pp. 37 and 38.
12. *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester*, Vol III Part I plate facing Page 359.
13. Leicestershire County Record Office DE455/1. Prestwold Parish Registers.
14. Leicestershire County Record Office DE667/1. Loughborough Parish Registers.
15. Public Record Office PROB11/304. Will of John Wileman died 1658.
16. *Burke's Peerage and Baronetage* - entry for Viscount Barrington.
17. Leicestershire County Record Office. Will of John Wileman 1692/fol 19.
18. Berkshire County Record Office DP/112/1/4. Shrevenham Parish Registers.
19. *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*, Vol II p. 55.

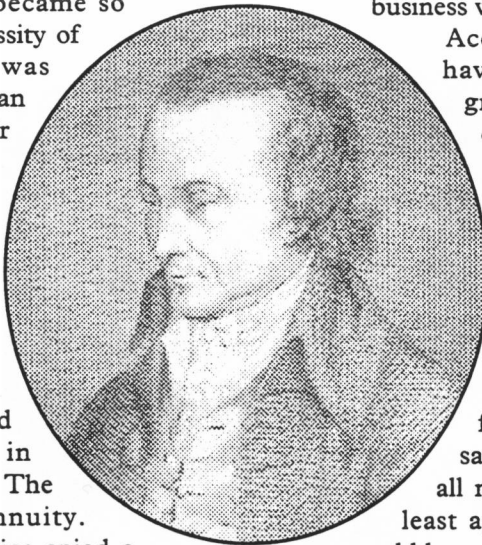
Further Reading

- H N Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution*, Cresset Press, 1961.
Howard Shaw, *The Levellers*, Longmans, Green and Co., 1968.

More Throsby snippets

From Excursion, No XXI To Cosby, Broughton Astley, Leir, Little Ashby, Bitteswell, Claybrook, Wigston Parva, Bennones, and Frolesworth.¹

'Thomas Page had landed property in the lordship of little Claybrook to the amount of near 100l. a year; but, through various misfortunes, he became so embarrassed, as to be under a necessity of selling his patrimony, which was purchased by Mr Byrd, a gentleman ...[known as] the "Old Justice". Mr Byrd covenanted to grant an annuity to Page's wife in case she survived her husband. Soon after this, Page removed to London, leaving his wife in Claybrook. He had not long been absent before intelligence was received of his having died of small-pox; and an affidavit was sent down to Mr Byrd of the body having been buried in woolen in St Pancras church-yard. The widow of course claimed her annuity. Some time after this, the old Justice spied a letter lying at Lutterworth, directed to Widow Page of Claybrooke; and the writing bore such strong resemblance to that of her deceased husband, that his Worship was tempted to indulge his curiosity by opening the letter; which, to his great amazement, bore the signature Thomas Page; and testified, that the person whom he had considered dead and buried was still alive and well; but, when he recollected the



solemnly attested certificate he had received of Page's interment, he could scarcely persuade himself that the man was any longer in the land of the living. The claims of Mrs Page, however, rendered what might have been otherwise a matter for amusement to his Worship, a serious concern; and he determined to investigate the business without delay.

Accordingly he repaired to town; and, having obtained leave to examine the grave in which Page was buried, the coffin was taken up, which, instead of a human body, was found to be stuffed with stones and wool. Some time after Page's return home, the small-pox broke out in Claybrook, and he was in great dread of catching the infection. Having discovered once very strong symptoms of fear and uneasiness, a farmer in the village rallied him by saying, that 'he wondered how Page, of all men in the parish, could entertain the least apprehension of danger, since all the world knew that he had died of the small-pox long ago, and that the only vulnerable part of him, his body, lay very snug in St. Pancras church-yard.'

1. *The Supplementary Volume to the Leicestershire Views: containing a Series of Excursions in the Year 1790, to the Villages and Places of Note in the County*, by John Throsby (London, 1790) p.297