

## LOCAL WILLS C. 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century

By Colin Burrowes



Wills, even in the 17<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, were written mainly as religious documents. Most would commence with the words “In the name of the Lord Amen” or “In the name of God”. Wills were written on vellum, cured animal skin that is extremely durable and therefore provided a permanent hand-written record. Probate of Wills was granted by the Perogative Court of the Archbishop of Canterbury but around 1750 we think the

Archbishop was so inundated this job was delegated to the Bishop of London. Each Will had the Church’s grant of probate attached as an impression, stamped onto a sandwich of paper with sealing wax.

The Treasury, of course, benefited from a tax: in 1790 duty of £15 was paid on the estate of Thomas W Scott of Wickham Hall which was valued at less than £5000. But in the way of all taxes this was increased and by 1809 the Executors of Thomas Capp of Clavering paid £40 on an estate valued at under £2000. Evidence that duty had been paid was also shown by a stamp, which to avoid counterfeiting had a small metal strip inserted into its centre.

These Wills make clear that it was a man’s duty to ensure his womenfolk were provided for. The Will of Daniel Waugh dated 1869 left his property at Hockerill to his grandson aged 7 years, provided that he gave three other granddaughters £20 each when they reached the age of 21. If the grandson failed in this then his inheritance was passed to the girls. The Will of Thomas Cribb gave 40 shillings (£2) each to the Takeley and Little Easton communities’ poor.

Some Wills are quite eccentric. Thomas Tooke, a teacher at Bishops Stortford who died on the 7<sup>th</sup> December 1719, requested that “I will be buried decently, privately without pomp”, hoping to “obtain full remission for all my sins and enjoy everlasting life”. He required thirty gold rings to be bought, at a cost of not more than 30 shillings (£1.50) each, and given to such of his friends as his executor wife thought fit, a request obviously open to abuse. Also, his largest spittoon “but nothing therin contained (!) be given to my dear nephew John”.

William Bernard, a Scrivener (a scribe or clerk), who lived through the plague of 1582/3 and died in 1608, left personal, presumably valuable, items:

“To daughter Grace, my bed or £13-0s-4d [presumably its value], a tableframe or 8d [3p] in mony, a coverlet of whit and black, a pewter platter, a porringer and candlesticks.

To daughter Lucy, 20s, one of my best candlesticks and a book of Latyn sermons.

To son Richard, a shirt and shirtband but he owes me twenty shillings [£1] and I owe him two shillings for shoes and forgive him the worth.

To daughter Jane, my dripping pan and one she already has.

To John Merdrew her son an ink horn, penknife and 3s 4d [17p] to buy a lamb.

To John Merdrew, son in law, my best breeches, best hat and dagger.

To Randall, my son in law, my best dobylet and best cote.

To brother John, my other cote and hat.

One of these local wills can be found displayed in the Rhodes Arts Complex.

### **Researched and written by Colin Burrowes**

Colin is a retired accountant and has been volunteering at the Museum since 2011 and has also been a Trustee since 2015. He has worked on the local history of the area both cataloguing and recording information. Colin also worked with fellow volunteer Renee Gray, who has volunteered at the Museum since 2009, to put together the history of Pubs, Inns and Hotels of Bishops Stortford past and present. This led to a series of blogs which proved popular with local people. Colin and Renee also catalogued and recorded items for Handling Boxes which are available for schools and may assist children with their lessons covering a timeline early history to the present day.