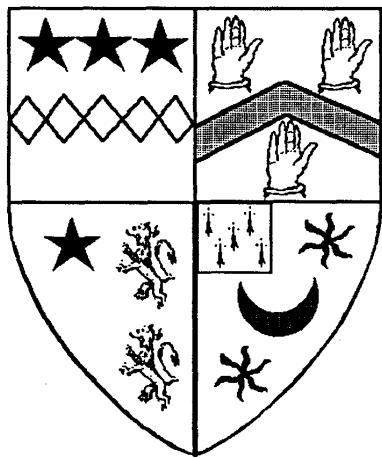


## The Wirdnams - Part Two

by Lis Garnish

In Part One we traced the early history of the Wirdnam family and their arrival in Wantage. We saw how Thomas and his brother John had prospered through the purchase of ex-monastic and chantry lands and how Thomas' son, William, rose in the world and became a member of the gentry, marrying Mary Boswell from Combe in northern Hampshire. However, William's business methods were far from straightforward and he found himself the subject of an enquiry and had to hand over the running of the Charity Lands in Wantage to a group of Governors.



*The Boswell arms*

William's brother, Thomas, had moved from Farnborough to Sutton Courtenay and had married a widow, Margaret White, who already had two sons and two daughters. Marriage with a widow was a prudent move; not only might she have property and money left to her by her first husband but her fertility had been proved so the chances of begetting an heir were good. Thomas and Margaret had three sons, James, John and Richard, who were still under ten when Thomas died in 1570 (1). His will gives confirmation of his siblings' names. After mentioning "*my brother william wyrdnam of Charlton*" he goes on to speak of "*my brother Ihon wyrdnam*" and "*my brother Ihon Genens of harwell*". The name "John Genens" is the first clue we have that another part of William's pedigree was wrong. In the 16th century "brother" could also mean brother in law and "John Genens" is the "John Janes" of

the pedigree, married to William's sister Margaret. In his will Thomas only calls himself "husbandman", despite holding three separate copyholds, two at Farnborough and one at Sutton, and having goods and chattels to the value of £134 17s 9d.

In 1598 John, the third brother, appeared before an ecclesiastical court to attest to the validity of a will which he had witnessed three years earlier (2). He gave his name as John Wirdnam of Wantage, gentleman, and stated that he was about 54 years of age and had lived in Wantage for 30 years. This means that he is the only child of Thomas' first marriage for whom we can allocate a fairly accurate date of birth – 1543-4. He was probably the youngest child at the time of his mother's death, his brothers and sisters having been born between approximately 1525 and 1540. He would have been about 24 when he first lived in Wantage, which suggests that after his early years in Farnborough he may have been at University or the Inns of Court to train for a profession. By 1573 he was certainly living in Wantage, where he witnessed the will of Elizabeth Brookes as "*John Wyrdnam gentleman*" (3) and he continued to style himself "gentleman" for the next thirty three years, signing the Churchwardens' Accounts, paying his taxes, writing some wills and witnessing others (2, 3, 4, 5). It is possible that during this time he was teaching in the Latin School because in 1598 the Governors paid "To

*Master John Wirdnam Scolemaster for one yeares wages - £10"* (6). However, there was a new schoolmaster by the next year so it may be that he was only installed by William when the furore blew up about the charity lands. With John as schoolmaster they could demonstrate that at least one of the provisions of the charity was being met.



*The Latin School in Wantage, where John Wirdnam may have taught*

About 1574 he had married Martha Yate, one of the Catholic family from Lyford, and they had five children, two of the sons going on to university before John died in 1606 (6a). I can find neither a will nor an application for administration which seems odd, but so many crucial facts about this family are still elusive. His second son, Richard, paid for both his father and his brother to be buried in the parish church where they still lie together (4). Again, we do not know when Martha died but in 1610 "*Martha Wirdnam, widow*" surrendered Rack Close which was a part of Priors Mead next to the Letcombe Brook (7). At death copyhold land was "*surrendered to the use of the lord*" and was normally re-granted to the heir on payment of an entry fine, so it is possible that the 1610 entry marks Martha's death.

William's eldest sister, Ellen, is shown on the pedigree as the wife of John Pound of Drayton and Ellen Pound's will of 1602 confirms the identification (3). She left 6s 8d to "*my Brother William Wirdnam of Charlton*" and 6s 8d to "*my Sister Jennens of Harwell*" and made her son, William Pound, her executor. She and her husband John had two surviving sons and three daughters and both her husband and her eldest son Robert called themselves 'yeoman' in their wills. Margaret, William's younger sister, married John Jennens of Harwell, yeoman. They had eleven children, six sons and five daughters, who are shown neatly lined up on their brass in Harwell church, although it seems possible that only four sons and four daughters lived to adulthood. Two of their sons moved to Charlton to farm and the land at Harwell was left to their youngest son, Anthony. Margaret Jennens will, made in 1609, is less helpful because by then her brothers and sister had all died. However, she did leave 20s to "*Master william Pownde of shrevenum, my god sonne*", son of Ellen (9).



*John and Margaret Jennens and family, from the brass in Harwell Church*

I have not traced wills for any of Thomas' remaining children. James died in 1588 and was buried in Wantage Church, but Elizabeth, Margaret and Bridget disappear without trace. Perhaps, like their sister Fresewith, they died as children. William himself did not make a will but in 1656 his great-grand-daughter, Dorothy Fox, applied for administration of his estate as his sole remaining kin (10).

Less information is available for the children of John the elder. His eldest son, Thomas Wirdnam, yeoman, died at Farnborough in 1587 (11). His will names four children, Francis, Gillian, Margaret and Alice, and two more daughters can be deduced from the information. His wife is not included in his bequests so she had probably died before him. He mentions two of his sisters, Ellen Grove and Katherine Knapp, and a brother, James Wyrdnam. Thomas was fairly prosperous; 274 sheep were bequeathed in his will as well as six horses, £80 in money and the lease of the parsonage of Stanford. His inventory came to £392 10s 6d. Unfortunately for his executors once they had distributed his bequests and paid the various expenses for the administration they ended up £34 4s 6d out of pocket which must have deterred them from agreeing to act as executors for anyone else!

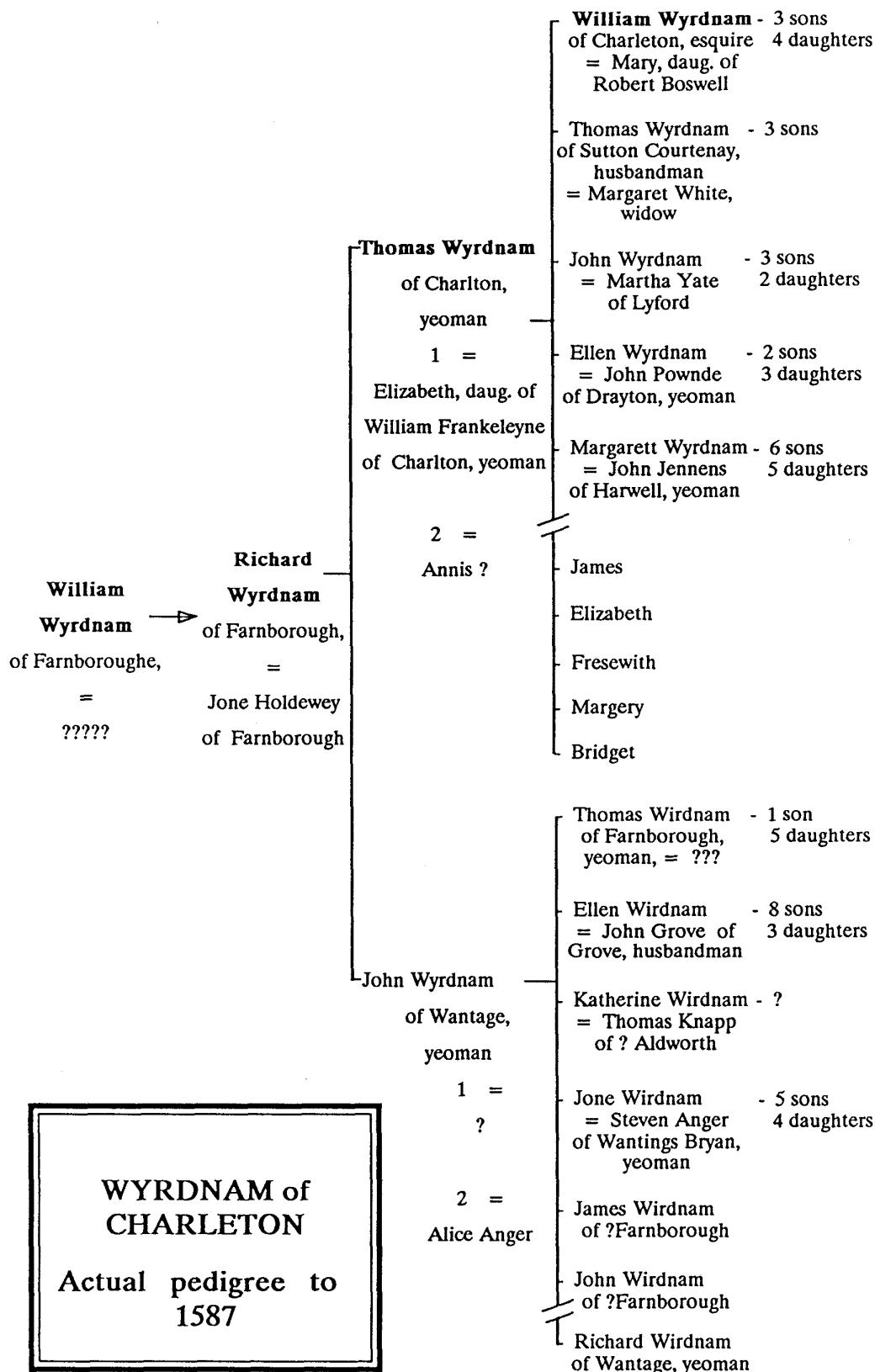
John's eldest daughter, Ellen, was married about 1542 to John Grove of Grove, husbandman. She outlived her husband but her will is not helpful as she had very little property of her own to bequeath (12). Her husband had bequeathed most of their goods to their children, with the use of them to remain to Ellen for her lifetime only. Her few personal belongings were bequeathed to her children with no mention of any surviving siblings. Katherine, the second daughter, was married to Thomas Knapp, who probably came from Aldworth, and I have not

traced any wills for them as yet. John's youngest daughter, Jone, had married Steven Anger, yeoman of Wantage. She died in 1578 and, as a wife, could not make a will, but it is interesting to see the extent to which her family names had been used for her children - Alice, William, Elizabeth, Mary, John, Robert and Annis.

James Wirdnam, the second son, slips out of sight after 1595, unless he is "*my kinsman James at Garford*" mentioned in the will of his half brother Richard (13). John Wirnam of Farnborough, Thomas' third son, died somewhere between 1607 and 1611 and his will mentions only his niece and nephew and their children (14). He does not seem to have been married as he made no mention of a wife or children. Richard Wirdnam, yeoman of Wantage, was the last of his generation to die (unless James or Katherine were still living) and he left most of his goods to his maternal half brothers and sisters (13). Like James and John he does not seem to have married.

The Wirdnam family tree which can now be constructed is rather different from William's idealized version. In the absence of any other information we must accept William's account of the name of his great grandfather, but it seems highly unlikely that he was anything more than a yeoman so his status, and that of his son Richard, has been omitted. William's maternal grandfather was probably also a yeoman, as was his father Thomas. There were no entries for Wirdnam or Frankelin in the Heralds' Visitation of 1532 which makes it unlikely that either family considered themselves gentry at that date. With the exception of William and his brother John all their siblings and their cousins called themselves "yeoman" or "husbandman" or were married to yeomen and husbandmen. So why did William and John feel that they could claim to be gentry?

There were four situations which might entitle a man to call himself 'gentleman' and to use arms. Firstly, by custom; that is, if he could prove that his forebears had been gentlemen and had used arms, or that he was descended from a knightly house. Secondly, he could be an officer in the army or the navy. Thirdly, he could be a member of a profession, such as a barrister. By extension from this last condition the term "Master" and the status of a gentleman could be claimed by a graduate of a University (15). Fourthly, from the mid 16th century, those who fulfilled a minimum property requirement of land worth £100 a year or goods worth £360 could apply to bear arms (16). It is clear that the Wirdnams could not fulfil the first condition as their family could, at the best, only be counted as yeomen. There is no evidence that either William or John ever served in the army or navy so the second condition is unlikely. The third and fourth requirements seem to be the most likely ones for the basis of their claim. William owned two small manors and rented a larger one so it may be that he felt entitled to use the term 'gentleman', although only his freehold land should have been considered. As mentioned before, from the 1570s onwards he termed himself 'esquire', and this courtesy title was extended to JPs, so perhaps William became a Justice of the Peace. John may possibly have attended University, as his son did, since he was teaching at the Latin School in 1597-8, but even this may be less than the whole story. It was common for young men to attend one of the Universities or the Inns of Courts, for one or two years, as a preparation for administering their lands and fulfilling their public duties. However, many did not take a degree and were therefore not entitled to the name 'Master', but they used the term just the same. Finally, since William gave false information to suggest that his forbears had been gentleman, it seems possible that his own social pretensions were the main basis for a claim, helped maybe by a suitable payment to the King of Arms.



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