

THE WILLOUGHBY'S OF WEST KNOYLE

Gone but not forgotten

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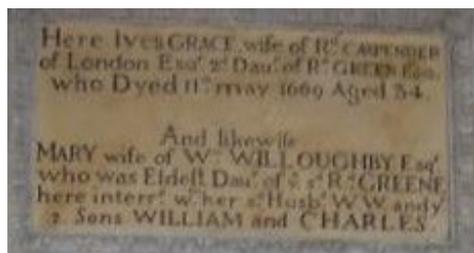
My father was a university lecturer in botany, but also for sixty years a keen amateur genealogist who did extensive research into the family antecedents, including their origin from West Knoyle. When he died in 2007, I inherited a mound of files, index cards, old photograph albums, family bibles and numerous boxes of assorted and unclassified junk. One of my own retirement projects has been to get things organised on computer and to extend the family story with as much hard evidence as possible, bearing in mind my background in clinical medicine and medical research. This is a snippet about the Knoyle Willoughby's and a little bit about what happened afterwards.

The Willoughby family settled in West Knoyle during the first half of the 16th century, the first recorded member being Christopher, the illegitimate son of Sir William Willoughby of Turners Piddle in Dorset, himself descended from the younger son of Sir Robert Willoughby, fourth Lord Willoughby D'Eresby (1349-1396).

Christopher - as judged by the probate records after his death in 1571 - was distinctly well off, owning the manors of Baverstock and West Knoyle, and leasing Broad Chalke Farm (later the home of John Aubrey the author and diarist) from the Earl of Pembroke. Christopher built West Knoyle House behind St. Mary the Virgin church; the family lived there for six generations until the death of the last Knoyle Willoughby in 1762. During this span of more than two hundred years, there were several personages of some note.

Christopher's grandson, Henry Willoughby (1575-1596) was an Oxford undergraduate and the probable author of a rather turgid and moralistic poem 'Willobie his Avisa', which is mainly of interest because of the suggestion of a friendship with William Shakespeare.

Fifty years or so later, another Christopher Willoughby was implicated in the royalist Penruddock Uprising against Oliver Cromwell but escaped conviction because of his 'advanced years' (he was 61). This Christopher's son, William, was the main family protagonist in the rebellion and is supposed to have covered his plotting against the Parliamentary regime by holding foxhunting meets for his co-conspirators.



William was seen in the rebel camp near Salisbury but claimed only to be there to persuade his brother-in-law, Richard Greene, not to join the revolt. Fortunately, most of the other evidence brought against him was circumstantial and amounted to his riding around on a big horse and carrying a sword. He escaped conviction as 'there appeared no probable cause of prosecution'. When William died in 1677, a detailed inventory of his assets was made for probate reasons and indicates that, while still well heeled, the family was not by this time as prosperous as when they first came to the village.

William's grandson, Richard (1703-1762) was the last of the family resident at Knoyle, and inherited the estate in 1730 from his elder brother, another William. Richard either didn't want the land or need the money, and promptly sold the West Knoyle property in about 1732 to Henry Hoare, the banker from London, who pulled the house down a few years later.

Richard stayed on in the village as Hoare's agent. He seems to have been a cultured man with a social conscience - he subscribed to a number of publications on history, botany and agriculture, had friends in common with George Frederick Handel and was frequently in correspondence with Hoare or his London agent about the importance of maintaining the roads on the estate - but at the same time was fond of country sports and desirous of forming a 'stout pack of harriers'.



He also had connections in 'society' as he was appointed seneschal of His Royal Majesty's Manor of Mere in 1731 and First Waiter of the Robes in Ordinary to George II in 1740.

Richard may have been somewhat financially imprudent and certainly was unable to have children with his wife Sophia, but managed to produce three 'natural' sons with a lady called Jane Strong from Mere, with whom he appears to have had a relationship going on for at least eight years.

Left: Memorial plaque in St. Mary's church

When Richard died in 1762 he was buried in the northwest corner of the churchyard in West Knoyle rather than within the building as expected for the local squire and patron of the church. There has been speculation in the family that Sophia - who outlived him by only a year - organised this as a form of revenge either because of his financial prodigality or because of his marital indiscretions.

However, this is almost certainly unfair to her, as a copy of Richard's will deposited in the National Archives includes the passage:

"I desire to be buried in the most private manner in the churchyard at West Knoyle aforesaid near the yew hedge at the end of my dwelling house in a grave six feet deep - and that a plain stone may be laid thereon - and I limit the whole expense of my funeral to five pounds ..."

The will, written in 1758 when the first of his illegitimate sons had been born, also implies that his wife was well aware of the extended family, as this child was left £200 in shares in the Wincanton Turnpike Company and specifically "commended to the care and protection" of Sophia, Richard's executrix. An academic thesis on estate incomes in the 18th century mentions West Knoyle and Richard's monetary problems, and suggests that his financial difficulties may largely have been due to the strains of supporting his mother and five sisters during a time of national economic stringency.

Although Richard had no legitimate issue - not, apparently, a particular problem in the 18th century - at least two of his offspring did well. The eldest, also Richard, disappears from the historical record but is supposed to have emigrated to and died in Barbados.

William, the second son, moved to London and was initially apprenticed to a stationer, becoming a Liveryman of the Stationers' Company in 1785. However, before this he moved as a clerk to Hoare's Bank - possibly given a post because of the connection with his father - and eventually rose to Chief Confidential Clerk (the bank manager), remaining in harness until his death in 1830.

Unlike his father, William was financially astute and left his family very well provided for. In the absence of an estate to run, his descendants followed a modified but traditional middle-class course, with the elder son or two becoming lawyers in each generation and the other male offspring either going into the church or the army. Willoughby's participated in the Zulu wars, actions in India, the Boer war, both World Wars, and the Korean War. One of this line, in the Indian Civil Service, became Assistant Commissioner of Kheri, Oudh and was assassinated in 1920.

Richard's third son, Charles, remained in Frome, where he became a grocer and wine-merchant. The family prospered and his sons, Richard and Charles, built up a substantial property empire and also ran a small bank for a while. These businesses were liquidated in 1825, after which Charles moved to London and his descendants became sea captains and, later, marine engineers; one branch of this family ended up in Australia.

Richard stayed in Frome, where he married - at different times - two sisters, Anne and Elizabeth Cockey. His son, George Edmund Willoughby, emigrated to the USA, became a famous captain on the Great Lakes steamers in the mid-nineteenth century and gave rise to the Willoughby descendants still resident in America today.



West Knoyle - a deeply rural parish in a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.