

Christopher Willoughby (b. ?, d. 1680)

The Willoughby Charity for the Poor Women of Aylburton

Christopher Willoughby of Bishopstone (Wilts.) was an interesting character. He had a long connection with the village of Aylburton for well over 400 years! By a deed of 1680 he gave a rent charge of £16 to be paid ‘for ever’ on the 1st day of June each year to the churchwardens of Aylburton and distributed as follows:

- (a) £4 was to be given equally to two aged poor women born in Aylburton ,
- (b) £4 10s. distributed among four other poor people equally, and
- (c) the remainder used as payment for a sermon, to the vicar or curate for keeping a record of the charity distribution, and to the clerk and churchwardens.

He furthermore insisted in his will that the aged poor women in receipt of charity should wear on their sleeves the letters ‘E.W.A’ during their life. This could stand for Edith Willoughby Andrews (or Aylburton perhaps) but this is uncertain. The condition was:

‘provided that each person so elected to receive the 4L should during her life wear on the sleeve of her upper garment these letters to wit E.W.A. of a distinct colour from the said upper garment and in the case of refusal, that another should be chosen in her place’

The charity was distributed as directed from 1681 and continues to this day.

Christopher Willoughby married twice:

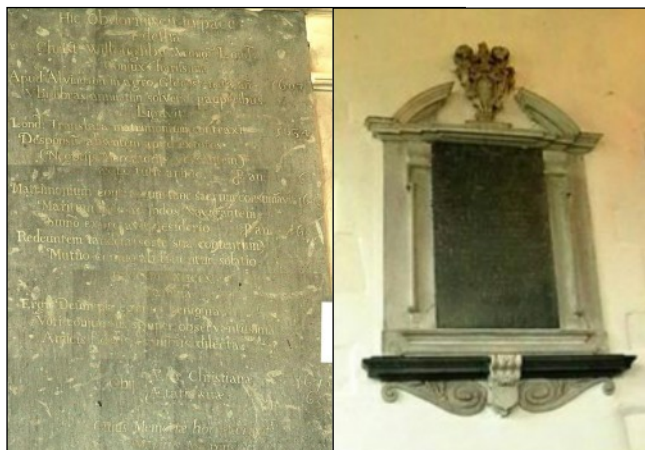
His first wife, Edith Willoughby (maiden name Andrews) was born in 1607 and a marble in St Mary’s, Bishopstone gives her birthplace at or near Alvington, Gloucestershire. As now, Alvington and Aylburton were closely connected parishes. He married her in 1634 and she died in 1670 at the age of 63.

In Bishopstone church, on a marble near the altar is written:

‘Having finished her course, here resteth the body of Edith, wife of Christopher Willoughby of London, Merchant late Sheriffe of this Countie, who deceased this life the 13th of August 1670’.

On another monument on the wall of the church within a family crest is an inscription in Latin which translates as:

‘Here lies Edith wife of Christopher Willoughby Merchant London, born near Alvington in Gloucestershire in 1607 where alms are given annually to the poor...’



It appears from the rest of the inscription that immediately after the contract of matrimony, Mr. Willoughby went abroad on mercantile business and was absent for six

An Aylburton Benefactor for over 400 Years

years. On his return the marriage was completed. He then went away again for six years and three months and upon his second return domestic life was resumed and continued without interruption.

His second wife was Mary Willoughby (maiden name Willoughby) who he married on 4th July 1671. She died on 12th September 1687 and is referred to as ‘widow of Saint James, Westminster, Middlesex’. In his will he named his second wife as a beneficiary but he made his preferences perfectly clear, specifying that an inscription be made on a marble stone to be laid on his grave:

‘Here lyeth the body of Christopher Willoughby happy in his first Wife whome he now lies by; but unhappy in his last wife’



Bishopstone D. & M. Ball

Christopher purchased the lease of the Manor of Bishopstone in North Wiltshire in the early 1660s and lived in a large ten roomed mansion on the Bishopstone estate. The family probably alternated between this residence and a London address. Indeed with the devastating London plague of 1665 and the Great Fire of London in 1666 they almost certainly would have ‘gone to the country’ as so many wealthy did.



Willoughby was a wealthy London merchant. He was very active in the East Indies trade throughout the 1650s, and appears to have been an active private trader following the suspension of the monopoly of the English East India Company. As a part-owner of the vessel the *Jonathan* he was involved in private trade with Bantam (Java) in the late 1650s. He continued to invest in ships in in the 1660s, reporting in another letter of March 1662/63 that he had become a part-owner of the *African*.

His cousin George Willoughby's address was in Throgmorton Street, in the City of London. A Mr Willoughby is also recorded at Mark Lane, London. This may have been our Christopher Willoughby. Both he and Edith are recorded as living in London as a family. (1) He was appointed as High Sheriff of Wiltshire in 1666 (2) and when Christopher Willoughby died he left the estate of Bishopstone, Wiltshire to his cousin George Willoughby, a fellow merchant in the same East India venture.

Reverend Benjamin Godwin (10th October 1785–20th February 1871)



Benjamin Godwin is in the centre. This photo was taken by his son John Venimore Godwin, an early photographer.

Reverend Benjamin Godwin was a Baptist clergyman, abolitionist and activist. He was a pastor at Dartmouth, Great Missenden, Bradford, and Oxford as well as a teacher of classics. He became involved in debates on the ethics of slavery and a schism in the Baptist missionary community.

His family was poor and at fifteen he ran away from his home in Bath with a friend and boarded a ship bound for the Mediterranean. During the journey Godwin reported that he gained a close relationship with his God. Godwin jumped ship in Palermo and he was able to find work as a cabin boy bound for London. However in Menorca, on Godwin's 16th birthday, the whole crew of his ship was press-ganged to crew HMS *Le Génereux*. Godwin was a Royal Navy sailor during the Napoleonic Wars until peace was declared. Upon return to Bath Godwin renewed his religious interests, attending his family's Baptist Church. He initially tried his hand at building with his brother-in-law.

Through the church Benjamin Godwin met Elizabeth (*Betsy*) Hall and fell in love but she refused to marry him until he could support her. Betsy Hall was unimpressed by Godwin's sermons, until he had delivered three successful sermons in Bath. Others were also impressed and Godwin was offered a part-time position as an evangelist at Aylburton. Betsy was satisfied and they were married on 14th August 1806. Godwin was inspired by his wife he regarded as *the name of a powerful spell*. They were given the use of a cottage in Aylburton. I have been unable to identify the cottage but it can be assumed it was one of our present Grade II cottages in the High Street. Here they set up a home and they established church meetings.

Evangelist sermons, could have been given at the medieval cross in Aylburton which would have been in the middle of the High Street at the time, the Chapel being still on Chapel Hill. However the sermons were poorly received and, for reasons unknown, the couple antagonised the local residents of Aylburton.

A FORGOTTEN RESIDENT OF AYLBURTON 1806

Despite Reverend Godwin's efforts to bring the Gospel to the villagers local hospitality was less in evidence than today and the couple were reduced to eating potatoes and drinking water.

Their evangelical mission was subject to active opposition and the following extract from Godwin's account of his time in Aylburton gives a flavour of the hostile reception endured by the couple.

'I sustained an almost incessant form of persecution. I was pelted with stones and rotten eggs, sparrows were put in though the windows, one night an owl was brought to flight with a cat and on another occasion a tall fellow presented himself with one half of his face blackened and the other part white, having a wig with the hind part before. The meeting place was broken into and the benches destroyed more than once, the pulpit split into pieces and books torn to fragments. A rowdy discordant band played outside a meeting, and once the walls, floor and ceiling of the meeting place were covered in disgusting filth.'

Hearing that he had been mischievously drafted into the militia, presumably by local people anxious to rid themselves of this unwelcome evangelist, Godwin left Aylburton in 1807.



According to The National Portrait Gallery, Godwin is shown in this painting under the speaker's raised hand during the 1840 Anti-Slavery Convention.

Footnote:

In the early 19th century the remoteness and inaccessibility of the Forest, the hard life and the Forest laws undoubtedly made it a rough place and savage laws and penalties made savage people. In the 50 years to 1836, 120 people were hanged in Gloucester, the majority *not* for murder. Until Tudor times the Forest was still a dark and impenetrable place.

Sources

Christopher Willoughby

(1) Boyd's *Inhabitants of London & Family Units 1200-1946*

(2) *London Gazette* No.102, 5th Nov 1666, p.2

Other sources include:

Aubrey's Collection for Wilts (d. Sir T Phillipps), *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol.21, Pt. 2, *The Little London Directory*, 1677, *Brook House*, No. 555, D & M Ball, 2003