

WOODBURY LOCAL HISTORY

SOCIETY

Newsletter No. 5

December 2005

Oswald Wilkins and Antigua
Nonconformism in the parish of Woodbury
Society Publications
House History
Programme of Meetings for 2006/7

page 1-2
page 2
page 2
page 2
page 2

Oswald Wilkins and Antigua

In 1776 John Wilkins married Rachel, daughter of Thomas Jarvis, the Governor of Antigua. Four sons were born to them, Thomas, Oswald in 1780 in Antigua, Jackman in 1785, and Samuel Martin in 1789 at Brixham in Devon. The fate of Thomas and Jackman is unknown but the records show that Oswald joined the 55th Regt of Foot (Westmoreland) as an ensign in April 1796 and was promoted to Lieutenant in September of that year — by 1803 he had left the army for some unrecorded reason. His brother Samuel joined the 86th Regt of Foot as an ensign in January 1806 and served until 1821, much of the time on ¹/₂ pay. John and Rachel Wilkins settled in Woodbury in the early 1800's and a series of letters have survived from the family in Woodbury to Rachel's brother George Jarvis, an army officer in Kent, showing the poor state the Wilkins family had been reduced to. In 1818 Rachel, wrote that 'my Husband poor Wilkins is exerting himself to go, altho' at the Age of 70 years, and asks him if he will join him on so lucrative an Expedition [to N S Wales]'. Two months later she writes 'I hope my good friends will be kind enough to think on me this Christmas for I do feel the cold so much and have but little fireing [sic]. The poor Old Man is in bed half the day the weather being too severe for him. He has been ill some time. How thankful should I be if among the circle of your friends my dear and affectionate Oswald could get a situation. He is almost broken hearted for want of something to do. Will you make my best regard to Mrs Jarvis and request if at any time she has any cast off] apparel that her goodness will think of me'. The next letter from Rachel to George Jarvis is in 1827 when she writes: 'Tis now a month since I received a severe unfortunate fall so as to require surgical assistance. I am now unable to assist myself and feel much pain in my arm. I can neither dress nor undress myself ... my poor Heart labours under much fear for Oswald. I sincerely wish my dear Brother your interest with the Duke of Wellington could obtain him half pay

or that he had some employment to make my mind easy before it pleased God to take me'. In 1829 Oswald married Mary Soper in Exeter she was a lacemaker, whose father was a labourer from Woodbury and mother a lacemaker. Three months after the marriage their first daughter was born, followed by a son and three more daughters. John Wilkins died in 1823 and Rachel in 1841 and her brother George, now the owner of Doddington Hall in Lincolnshire, was apparently sending money, after Rachel's death, to Oswald and his family who were in some poverty. Oswald was working as a labourer and his wife and daughters as lacemakers. In 1851 he writes to his uncle thanking him 'for your Benevolent kindness to me and family for many years past.... My dear Uncle, you are the only Friend I have and on your Benevolence I depend with hope and love to support my poor Family (wife and five children). I sincerely hope nothing has happened to you or family and with an aching heart, and distressed mind I remain etc.' That year George Jarvis died and was succeeded by his son George. A letter was sent to him at Doddington Hall by another relative staying at Topsham stating, 'my Uncle Oswald is now arrived at the advanced [age] of 71 with no personal means of providing for a wife and 5 children, one of whom is a handsome youth of 16, wholly uneducated & unprovided for. The handsome annuity, which My Uncle allowed him, was consequently an essential loan to him. A few lines informing us whether it has been perpetuated to him by will or could be continued to him thro' your generosity would unspeakably oblige.' At the same time Oswald wrote to his cousin in Doddington Hall, '...I am 70 years old last March with five children & a sickly wife under the humble cottage I live in, and how to find them bread I know not, untill [sic] the time expires respecting the Annuity my dear Uncle has been pleased to leave me. I am very infirm from care & trouble for many long years past since I left the army.' By December

cousin George had sent a remittance to Oswald who thanked him and saying that he was 'much distressed in mind & circumstances'. In June 1854 Oswald died and his widow, aged 50, died the following year, probably worn out with work and poverty. George continued his benevolence to Oswald's daughters. There are two letters written in 1856 and 1857 from Mary Ann Wilkins thanking George for his allowance (which was managed for the sisters by the Rev Fulford) and enclosing for George's wife and daughters lace collars and a veil, which they had made. Once the sisters had all married the allowance to them was stopped. Samuel, Oswald's brother, also settled in Woodbury, after leaving the army, living on his half-pension, until his death in 1854. From the wealth and privileged society in which she was brought up as the daughter of the Governor of Antigua, to the poverty of a damp cottage in Woodbury and a son working as a labourer, Rachel Wilkins showed much stoicism in her letters.

Nonconformism in the parish of The parish has had non-conformists in its midst since the time of the Civil War. The merchant families throughout Devon embraced the various sects once they had been given freedom to worship. Presbyterians built the chapel at Gulliford in the 1680's, which survived until 1908, though Woodbury families had mostly deserted it by the middle of the 19th century. Quakers were recorded from the 1680's and a licence was granted for a meeting in a house in the parish - a century later there were Quakers living at Exton. The old Quaker burial ground is on the borders of Woodbury and Colaton Raleigh at Greendale. From the late 18th to mid-19th centuries licences were granted by the Bishop to hold non-conformist meetings in various houses throughout the parish. The Salvation Army made several visits to Woodbury in the 1880's but did not appear to make any converts — possible the working man's support of its alehouses did not conduce to a successful outcome. Plymouth Brethren met in Broadway at the old Drill Hall. In the middle of the 19th century bible readers held sessions in part of Escotts Cottage (much larger premises at that time). The Baptist church held services in Christ Church, which had been built originally for Evangelical Protestants. Robert Brent who was prominent in the erection of this building was originally a Baptist, though he called himself a 'true Protestant'. Since the Reformation there has been no Roman Catholic place of worship, though there was a 'Papist' living in the parish in 1676.

House History in Woodbury in 2006 A project has been suggested for members of the Society to trace the origins of the house in which they live and the land upon which it stands. This could be an introduction to recording in detail every property in the parish, whether old or new, and a way of understanding the development of the villages over the centuries. There are many records available of which Carol McFadzean will give members a full list, as well as tips on how to start researching lands and houses. For modern houses it is possible to trace the land on which they were built, the farms to which it belonged and its uses. The results of a project such as this could be published by the Society, and perhaps be a useful example of local history to the school and the rest of the community.

Society Publications

Sally Elliott has written, using published sources, a very useful and interesting condensed history of agriculture and land use from the time of Domesday. This will be kept in the Archives on CD-ROM. It will also be printed and collated with other articles on related subjects. There have been several articles written about various subjects concerning the history of Woodbury, which too could be combined and printed as aspects of Woodbury's history. The success of Carol McFadzean's lace book, published and funded by herself, is an example of what the History Society could achieve.

Programme of Meetings for 2005

- 26 Jan AGM followed by a Social Evening with refreshments
- 2 Mar 'Vanishing Street Furniture (urban and rural)' — an illustrated talk by Roger Brien (librarian at the Devon & Exeter Institution)
- 13/14 May Exhibition on crafts and occupations
- 7 Jul Visit to Cadhays House (home of the