



The Wedons

by Lis Garnish

William Wedon was born in 1544, whilst Henry VIII was still on the throne. He was the eldest child of Richard and Annis Wedon, and he was followed by two sisters and five brothers, but only one sister and one brother survived childhood. By the time he was 14 he had seen two kings and a queen die, and he must have wondered if this latest Queen Elizabeth would last very long.

Fourteen was an important age for it was then that most boys became apprentices. William was apprenticed to a joiner - an up-and-coming craft, which was replacing the crude work of the local carpenters. I think he probably served his apprenticeship in a larger town, such as Newbury or Oxford, where there was a demand for high quality furniture. At any rate when the Muster Roll of all able-bodied men was drawn up in 1564 he was not in the Wantage area, (at 20 he would have been old enough to register for military service).

His apprenticeship probably ended the following year, when he was 21, and he would have spent the next few years as a journey-man, working for a master-craftsman, and saving enough to set up his own workshop. By the time he was 25 he had returned to Wantage with a wife. Their marriage does not appear in the Wantage register so she may have been a girl he met whilst working away. He and Jone set up house with his widowed father.

The 1570s must have seemed to William to have been a good time to be alive. Elizabeth was secure on the throne, trade was expanding and profits went into buying his fashionable new joined furniture. He was respected enough in the community to become a churchwarden and felt rich enough to donate 2/6d towards the new church bell, the equivalent of £50.00 in today's money. He and his wife had three daughters, Jone, Annis and Mary, and were still young enough to hope for a son to carry on the business.

Then in 1583 disaster struck. Throughout the winter of 1582-83 pneumonic plague had been stalking through Wantage. With the spring weather this became bubonic plague. In April William attended the vestry meeting - a worried man. His 12-year-old daughter, Annis, had died of plague four days earlier, and he watched his wife, father and youngest daughter anxiously. Jone, now 14, was probably safely away - perhaps in service with a local farmer's wife to learn the arts of housewifery - but the others were vulnerable.

He listened to the reports of his own good work in mending the seats and panelling in the church, and signed his name to the accounts firmly enough, but he must have been worried. And his fears were justified - 10 days later eight-year-old Mary died, followed 19 days later by his father. He and his wife must have hoped that that was all, but two days short of three weeks his wife died as well. William was left alone, with a teenage daughter, and no-one to run his house.

By September he had pulled himself together and found a new wife, another Joanne, and now perhaps that longed-for son would be born. Two daughters came, Elizabeth and

Margery, but still they hoped. In 1589 they joined in the celebrations on January 15th, the anniversary of the Queen's coronation, chosen to celebrate the defeat of the Armada the previous summer. The bells were rung, including the new one William had helped pay for, prayers were said and much spiced wine-cup was drunk. Maybe the wine helped - or the prayers - but the following September a son was born at last, and, of course, christened William. A further daughter came, little Anne, but only lived to the age of three; but at least they still had three daughters and one son.

Throughout the 1590s William worked hard, even in the famine years of 1596, 1597 and 1598. He took his place as an elder of the community, acting as an overseer when a friend's will was performed, appraising the value of the household goods of others who died, witnessing the writing of several wills where his ability to read and write was probably a useful check on the accuracy of the clerk. When his friend and fellow-craftsman, Richard Doe, died, William's three children received legacies and he himself received a small token for his work in helping to wind up the estate.

Then in 1607 Queen Elizabeth died. William had lived under three other monarchs, but it must still have been a shock, and having to accept a Scottish King must have caused some muttering. Two years later, in 1605, his only son, William, died "aged 16 years", as the parish register pathetically records - the only instance we have in the whole of the first register of a specific age being given.

Nine years later William and his wife died within two months of one another. We can read in their inventories of the rooms in their house, the hall, the shop, the kitchen, the buttery, the millhouse, the chambers upstairs, and how they were furnished. We can see how both parents made generous provision for their daughters, one already widowed, one married and one betrothed, and how they remembered their grandchildren, but both made special bequests to their nephew William, son of William's brother, Richard. And perhaps they wondered regretfully why the God who had granted brother Richard five sons, all living, could not spare one son for them.

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Vale and Downland Museum Trust, 19 Church Street, Wantage, Oxfordshire, OX12 8BL
Telephone: 01235 771447 e-mail: museum@wantage.com