

About Conesford Wills and Inventories – 15th to 17th centuries

These wills and inventories were transcribed by members of the King Street Research Group which grew out of a local history class at Wensum Lodge tutored by Chris Barringer. As well as publishing a number of excellent booklets about various aspects of King Street life, members of the Group, between approximately 1980 and 2000, also transcribed a great number of wills and inventories from the Norfolk Record Office which were relevant to the ward of Conesford. Most of them give the NRO reference at the top of the page. The Group continued, tutored by Mary Fewster, until approx. 2016.

The transcriptions were mostly in typescript, long before computers were in general use. These have now been scanned and digitised and to make them widely available put on to the Local History section of the Dragon Hall Heritage Volunteers website (dragonhallnorwich.org.uk).

Conesford was one of the four Great Wards of Norwich, sub – divided into Upper Conesford, Lower Conesford and Ber Street. They in turn were sub- divided into the separate parishes, about 15 in all. (The numbers varied over time as some were abolished or combined with other parishes). In the various wills the testator usually identified him or herself as resident in a particular parish and usually left bequests to that parish church, but sometimes also to other churches, notably to the church of the Austin Friary which adjoined the current Dragon Hall site, or to the church of the Holy Trinity, i.e. the Cathedral.

Where both the will and inventory of a person is available they have been combined in one document. In a few cases, where other information about the testator is available, usually from the various publications of the King Street Research Group, that information has been added to the document.

Wills and inventories can tell us a great deal about ‘ordinary people’ whose lives are not otherwise documented. One of the things that we can notice is the impact of the English Reformation and the Act of Supremacy in 1534 when Henry VIII declared himself Supreme Head of the Church. Almost immediately it seems people felt the power of the new regime and felt obliged to indicate that they were no longer Catholics by changing the preamble to their wills. Before 1534 it usually reads, *Fyrste I comend my sowle unto allmighty god, our lady saint marye, saynt peter advowe and*

to all the holye compenye in heven (John Allen 1534) but very soon after 1534 the references to Mary and the saints disappear and we find just, *First I bequeth my soule to almightie god* (Henry Atmere 1559). By 1579, presumably after the Protestant regime has become more firmly established, we find a more 'evangelical' belief in salvation, such as, *My soul to Almighty God the Father and unto my Saviour and onely redeemer Jesus Christ, through whole death and merritts I believe faithfully that I am redeemed and saved and shall live with him for ever* (Edmund Pawling).

In addition to bequests to their own church many of the testators make bequests to the four orders of Friars which suggests that they were looked on very favourably because of their work among the people; some also gave bequests to several of the other Conesford churches which suggests that they had a loyalty to the ward as a whole. Another Catholic feature of some wills is where they provide for a priest to say masses for their soul (e.g. Isobel Cobbe).

A few wills contain very specific bequests of clothing and household goods which reveal what they valued; an example is Isobel Cobbe who bequeaths, *to Beatric my Dowtt(er) xls a blew girdell a pair of beds of Jett ij brasse potts a laten with an Eware ij Candilstyks a featherbed v(i)t(h) a traunsome a payer of shetys & a Covlight a Chayer ij platters ij Dishes & a sawcer with a sprewse chest.*

We can also learn quite a lot about a person's wealth, family and friends from the wills. John Stingate (1589) was a keelman and quite prosperous as he left two houses in St Peter Southgate, a garden in St Etheldreda, and property in Bergh Apton, plus £200 to his two grandchildren. In this case we also have his very detailed inventory and from it we know a lot about his house which has several parlours and chambers. We can also see some evidence of his work: *'a keile with all her furniture' and '2 thousand hering spites'*. Another keelman leaves his keel to his widow to carry on the business.

But in most cases it is from the Inventories that we can glean a great deal of information about a person's wealth, work and life style. A good example is John Lulman, keelman, in 1638, who is quite wealthy, leaving some £90 worth of possessions – of which £20 worth is in coals. So it seems that being a keelman is quite profitable. We also learn that he has a few books and a Bible, four pictures, and many chairs, cushions, stools, cupboards etc.

This and other inventories go into great detail about household and kitchen items, such as *'One pot of grease'; one chopping board'* and *'one old broken chiste'* (Anne Pawlinge 1610).

Eight of the eleven inventories are for people in St Peeter Southgate parish where there was a tightknit community of keelmen, wherryemen and fishermen. Oliver Phillips (1631) leaves: *'One boat one paire of oares and other tackling thereunto belonging xxiiij s; Half a wherry with half her tackling iijL xs [40 shillings]; One old wherry with her tackling'*. John Mondford (1602), fisherman, leaves *'Item 2 whashen (waterlogged?) boats, Item 1 skiff £2 Os Od, Item 6 trunks *[slung over stern of boats to keep fish fresh], Item 1 groundnet leads and corks and rods £2 Os Od, Item 1 section of a groundnet £3 IOs Od: the whole value of his inventory is less than £10.*

Finally, from their wills we can also learn a little about people's relationships and friendships in this small area of Norwich, but set apart from the city centre, as quite often bequests are made to people whose wills or inventories we also have or they are nominated as executors, e.g. Edmund Pawling, keelman (1579), nominates John Stingate – mentioned above - as *'Supervisor'* of his will and leaves him 40 shillings *'for his pains'*.

RJM 2.26