The Scribes of Villagers' Wills in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and their Influence

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The Background

Wills have been used by historians interested in life at the village level perhaps less than any other single class of document. This is strange, considering the vogue of the probate inventory, which, ideally, should accompany the will. It is also strange considering the rich mine of general information on social affairs, the way the kinship network worked, inheritance customs, retirement, provision for widows, and so on, which can be worked from wills. This information goes far beyond the narrower and more immediate purposes for which genealogists frequently use wills. The normal will may be expected, in this period, to surrender any copyhold held by the testator into the hands of the lord, and to express a wish as to its disposal. Any freehold will be carefully bequeathed. If land is not left to younger sons, cash sums will be, probably with directions as to how they should be raised. Doweries in cash will be left to daughters, and a minimum age will be laid down at which they should be handed over. If there is a defective child, provision may be made for its upkeep. If a widow survives, extraordinarily detailed instructions will be made, giving her a certain amount of housetoom, and a certain amount of land and stock. Often directions will be given to the inheritor of the main holding to keep this land up, plough it and sow it for her. The moveable goods, down to the last blanket, sheet, copper pot and brass pan, and in the case of a widow, the last neckchief, will be divided up.

There is just one way in which historians have used wills more commonly and that is to establish, if possible, the religious convictions
of the ordinary villager, be he yeoman, husbandman, craftsman, or labourer, who once in his life, and once only, at the beginning of his will, made a statement which bore on his religious beliefs. The first bequest in a will was of the soul. This may appear strange to modern eyes, but the reasoning behind it is made plain in the will of a maltster of Orwell in Cambridge, Thomas Brocke, in 1597, the body of whose will began 'First as thing most precyous,(1) I Commend my soule to God the father my Creator'. So a testator with Catholic beliefs may well leave his soul to 'Almighty God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the whole company of Heaven', or some equivalent phrase, and a testator of puritan or Calvinistic beliefs may well leave his soul to 'Almighty God and his only Son our Lord Jesus Christ, by whose precious death and passion I hope only to be saved' or some other similar phrase. Any will which mentions the Virgin, the saints, or the angels may be suspected of Catholic tendencies. Any which stresses salvation through Christ's death and passion alone, or the company of the elect, may be thought of as Protestant. In between, lie a vast number of indeterminate neutral wills, which simply leave the soul to 'Almighty God, my Creator', or in which the stress on salvation through Christ appears so minimal, that they cannot be classified. The spectrum of these clauses is very wide; but because of their existence, historians seeking to penetrate the iron curtain which hides the religious opinion of the really humble laity, below the social level of parish priest or minister, in the upheavals of Reformation or Counter Reformation, sometimes analyse them in an attempt to establish what was going on at the parochial level. (2)

Unfortunately there is one major technical difficulty, which has not been given attention in doing this. For most purposes, the content of the will itself is all that matters: the identity of the scribe who wrote it is irrelevant. For this particular purpose, the identity of the scribe might be all-important. A very high proportion of villagers wills were made in the testator's last illness, on his death bed,(3) It is almost common form to get, at the beginning of a will, a statement that the testator is 'sick in body but thanks be to God of good sound understanding and memory' and extremely rare to get the opposite statement, which headed the will of William Griggs, a yeoman, of Orwell in 1649, that he made his will

'beinge in good healthe of body (but) considering the frailty of this life, although there is nothinge more certaine than death, yett there is nothinge more uncertaine than the tyme of the coming thereof ... now intending the disposition of landes ... in this tyme of my good health and memory for

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the better quieting and satisfying my mynd and conscience 
whenever it shall please God to visit me with sickness'.

A man lying on his death bed must have been much in the hands of 
the scribe writing his will. He must have been asked specific 
questions about his temporal bequests, but unless he had strong 
religious convictions, the clause bequeathing the soul may well have 
reflected the opinion of the scribe or the formulary book the latter 
was using, rather than those of the testator.

I have therefore considered the whole question of the identity of the 
scribes who wrote villagers' wills in relation to the historical points 
to which the identity of the scribe may have been crucial. When 
old Leonard Woolward of Balsham died in 1578, he wished to leave 
an acre or so of his free land away from his son and daughter-in-law, 
to each of his three daughters. His son's death followed soon on 
his own, and his daughter-in-law's indignation induced her to bring 
a case to the ecclesiastical court. (4) The details set forth in the 
depositions made there bring home, with extraordinary clarity, the 
conditions under which wills could be made in the sixteenth century. 
Leonard Woolward had retired: he was living in the 'low chamber' 
off the hall in the house of his son and daughter-in-law. He feared 
that his desire to provide land for his daughters would bring him 
discomfort, if not maltreatment in his last illness, and that 'he 
should not be well-tended and have that he woulde have, and yt enye 
of his friends or aquintances .. should write his sayd will, his sayd 
sonne yonge Leonard ... woulde knowe of yt, and so laye on him 
that he shoulde not or coulde not make his wyll accordinge to his 
own mynde'. He therefore asked the young barber surgeon, Henry 
Spender, who came from Little Wilbraham several miles away and 
not from Balsham at all, who was trying to bring him some relief 
from pain in his last illness, to write his will for him 'as prwvelye 
as mighte be'. The barber surgeon was ill-prepared for such a 
task, and, as he said, 'went to the house of John Allen of Balsham 
and desyred (him) to bestowe him a penne, ynce and paper'. 
After writing the will alone in the room 'leaning uppon the sayd 
testators bedd' and reading it aloud to him after he had attempted 
and failed to read it to himself, Henry Spencer took the will back to 
John Allen's house, and read it aloud to him and to his wife, and 
declared it to be Leonard Woolward's true will. The will itself 
is duly witnessed by Henry Spencer and John Allen.

It is immediately evident from this that the circle of people who 
could be asked to draw up a will was wide. Quite obviously
Leonard Woolward had a number of 'friends and acquaintances' whom he could have asked to write his will and he thought first of them, not instinctively of the minister, curate, or parish clerk. The implication is that as early as the 1570's, there were in a village several members of the community who could write a document at need, even in a village like Balsham, where there were only isolated references to schoolmasters at work.\(^{(5)}\) Since he desired secrecy, his choice fell on the doctor, who came from another village altogether. There is a modern case, which shows how traditional methods of making a will persisted, although in this case, the testator's instinctive first choice was for a gentleman. Leonard Woolf\(^{(6)}\) writes of a time in about 1918 when the farm carter of Rodmell in Sussex 'came to me and asked me to make his will for him. He had several sons and one daughter and he wanted me to write out on a sheet of paper a statement, which he would sign in the presence of his children and of me, saying that he left everything to his daughter. I told him that this would not be a legal will and that he ought to go to a solicitor and sign a proper legal will. He refused to do this and said that if I would do what he asked, his sons would carry it out after his death. So I did what he asked. I wrote out the statement and took it round to his cottage one Sunday morning. He, his sons, and his daughter were all there in their best clothes. I read aloud the document and he signed it and they all thanked me and we shook hands. When he died, everything went to the daughter without difficulty.'

It is obvious therefore that in the search to identify scribes, not only the incumbent or his curate, who may seem the obvious choice, but the local gentry and acquaintances of the testator, must be considered.

The scribes

There is an obvious, major difficulty in identifying the hand of the scribe who wrote a particular will, for the local historian, who is not a highly trained paleographer. Any hand of the late 16th and 17 centuries, once educated beyond a certain point to write a reasonably formalised hand, has so many features in common with any other, that the non-specialist may well pause. There is one redeeming feature. A local historian working on a particular community, and on all the surviving wills for that community, is limiting himself so strictly by date and by place that only a small number of scribes are likely to be at work at any one time.
The smaller the community, for a pilot study, in some ways the better. Orwell is a small village on the clay uplands of Cambridgeshire. When it was mapped in the 1670's, there were only 55 houses there, so the Hearth Tax was not far out in taxing 52 of them. Between 1543 and 1700, 99 wills of which the originals survive, were proved in the Consistory Court although until the 1580's, the 'originals' were mostly office copies, and therefore useless for these purposes.

It is possible to make at least a reasonable guess at the identity of the scribes who were responsible for a surprisingly large number of these wills. Sometimes the scribe was the only witness of one or more wills who could actually sign his name; sometimes his hand was the only one even approximately of the same type in a run of wills, and he was also a witness to all of them. In order to tell whether or not the clause bequeathing a soul to Almighty God was dictated by the testator's opinions, or by the scribe's, at least two wills in the same hand are necessary, and obviously, a much longer run is desirable.

The Orwell wills include half a dozen each written by an identifiable scribe, who only appears to have written one will. They are therefore useless for comparative purposes. Often the scribe's name is unfamiliar to the historian of the parish, and he may therefore have been an outsider, and possibly a notary or ecclesiastical official. There were four pairs of wills by the same scribe, one series of three, by George Holder, a villager who held at least an acre of freehold in the defective survey of Orwell made in 1607, and two very interesting series of four. One of these was by John Martin, about whom nothing is known, and the other by Neville Butler. He had been educated at the Perse School and Christ's College, and was the grandson of a yeoman. He ended up by buying the lands of the dissolved Priory of Barnwell, becoming a gentleman, and disappearing from the Orwell scene. There were also, most usefully for comparative purposes, two longer series, overlapping in date. One of six wills was written by Nicholas Johnson between 1614 and 1626. He was one of Neville Butler's father's first cousins, was frequently a churchwarden, and was tenant of fourteen acres of copyhold land. William Barnard, M.A., Rector of Orwell from 1609 to 1644, who held a licence to teach there, wrote twelve surviving wills during his incumbency, between 1615 and 1642.

Nicholas Johnson, who was described as the 'well beloved in Christ' of Catherine Rutt of Orwell when she made him the supervisor of
her will in 1614, probably had his own religious convictions. Not only Catherine Rutt's testimony, but his career as a churchwarden bears this out. In all six of the wills he wrote, the clause concerning the soul is so nearly identical, that if there were any doubt that the scribe's hand had been identified correctly, it would be disposed of. Every one read 'I commend my soul into the hands of almighty God that gave it me ... when it shall please God to take me out of this present world'. Whatever the opinions of the testator, they did not influence Nicholas Johnson, who started off each will in his accustomed fashion, which unfortunately did not reveal much of his doctrinal position.

Each of the four men who wrote a pair of wills apiece in the seventeenth century, as well as George Holder, who wrote three at the beginning of the century, also used his own common form. Laurence Johnson, one of the numerous literate Johnson clan, wrote in his horrible hand and entirely neutral phrase at the end of the 1640's 'I bequeath my soul to Almighty God'. George Holder wrote with slightly more protestant emphasis in each of his three wills 'I commend my soul to God the Father my Creator, and his son, Jesus Christ my Redeemer'. John Wicks took up a slightly stronger position again in 1640, and wrote 'I bequeath my soul to God my Maker expecting (or believing) to be saved by and through the merits of Christ Jesus my Saviour and Redeemer'. Matthew East, at about the same date, wrote more strongly still. Both his wills contain the phrase 'I commend my soul into the hands of Almighty God who gave it to me assuredly trusting through the death and passion of his son Jesus Christ to be saved'. Ambrose Benning, who appears as 'Mr. Benning' in a rental of the 1670's, and was probably a freeholder and a gentleman, again adopted his own formula. Again, if there was any doubt of the correct identification of a hand which only occurs twice, six years apart, it would be resolved by the identical wording. 'I commend my soule into the hands of god my maker, redeemer and preserver, in an assured hope of a joyful resurrection through the meritts of Jesus Christ my saviour'.

It appeared quite clearly then that each of these half dozen men adopted his own formula, and that the religious conviction of the scribe, not the testator, is apparent in the will.

This provisional conclusion can be taken further, by looking at the series of twelve wills written by the Rector, William Barnard, between 1615 and 1642. William Barnard's phraseology was not much more striking than that of his churchwarden, Nicholas Johnson.
Eight of his twelve wills bequeath the soul of the testator to 'the hands of God Almighty my Creator, (Saviour) and Redeemer ... whenever it shall please the Lord to take me to his mercy'. They were all written before 1636. In 1637, he added a new phrase which appeared in three of the remaining wills and strengthened his formula by the expectation of a 'joyful resurrection to life eternall'. But in the will of Richard Flatt, made in 1636, a strongly individual piece of phraseology was inserted within William Barnard's formula. Richard Flatt commended his soul

'vento the hands of God Almighty, my maker, my Saviour and Redeemer, trusting to be saved by the only sufficient merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour ... when it shall please the Lord in mercy to take me out of this world, being fully assured that this my mortal body shall one day put on immortality, and being raised again by the virtue of Christ's resurrection, I shall live forever with him'.

Here is a piece of Pauline theological thinking, which is so far outside the scribe's usual formula that it seems for the first time that a testator feels sufficiently strongly for his opinions to come through clearly into his will. In any long series of wills for any one village, there are a large number of individual formulae which occur, and some deviants, which fit into no pattern. It looks, from the example of Richard Flatt, as if these deviants can be taken to reflect the genuine convictions of the testator; the rest reflect the opinions of the scribe, who may, of course, have been a villager also.

This suggestion is strengthened by examination of the four wills John Martin appears to have written. Two of the testators Mary Barton and Elizabeth Adams, were members of families who were strongly nonconformist. Their wills were witnessed by Simon Grey who was also a nonconformist as well as by John Martin. The other two wills were written for men who do not appear on the dissenting church lists, or as absentees from church in the episcopal records. Simon Grey witnessed one of the latter as well as those of the dissenters; but it had a purely neutral clause commending the soul of the testator into the hands of Almighty God, its maker, despite being drawn up and witnessed by dissenters. The last of the four was also neutral. The wills of Mary Barton and Elizabeth Adams were highly individual, however. Mary Barton bequeathed her soul into the hands of Almighty God her maker, 'hoping through the meritorious death and passion of Jesus Christ my only saviour
and redeemer to receive free pardon and forgiveness of all my sins'. She also spoke of the temporal estate that 'God in his infinite mercy has lent me in this world'. So did Elizabeth Adams, though she felt that her temporal estate had pleased 'God far above my deserts to bestow upon me'. The clause in which Elizabeth Adams bequeathed her soul had the same sense as Mary Barton's, but it was not phrased in the scribe's identical wording. She ended her will with an injunction to her son and principal heir that related worldly prosperity to prudence, which I have not seen duplicated anywhere else. As Solomon said to his son 'My son fear thou the Lord and the king, and beware that you live not above your living especially in the beginning for that will bring you to wanton necessity, both in the midst and the ending'.

This scribe then, wrote dissenters' wills, which expressed the testators' strong sense of justification by faith, but did not dictate the form when a more neutral phrase was required. Neville Butler likewise, wrote two wills which were neutral and simply bequeathed the soul to God that gave it (11) but also two in identical wording when more appeared to be called for. Richard Johnson and Robert Bird both left their souls

'With a right good will .. to god that gave it whensoever it shall please him to take it out of this transitory life hoping by his infinite mercy and the only merryt of my saviour Jesus Christ that it shall again put on this my corruptible body of flesh and that they (sic) shallbe made partakers of everlasting life'. (12)

One further interesting point emerges from the Orwell wills. The vicar, when he was present as a witness, and not as a scribe, was not necessarily deferred to over the form of the clause bequeathing the soul. Roger Davis, clerk, wrote his own will in 1580 (13) and appears to have been a protestant, for he bequeathed his soul to 'Jesus Christ in faith in whom I hope undoubtedly to be saved'. He witnessed a will couched in similar terms for John Adam, yeoman, in 1569, but the two others he witnessed for John Johnson, husbandman, in 1568, and Edmund Barnard, another husbandman, in 1595, both had neutral clauses bequeathing the soul. John Money, the vicar in 1595, witnessed Katherine Ingly's will in that year, and she also simply bequeathed her soul to Almighty God. Nicholas Butler, who had the same faith in the resurrection of his temporal body that was later expressed by his grandson Neville, as a scribe, both witnessed Katherine Ingly's will along with the vicar, and had his own will

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witnessed by the vicar; but his faith in the resurrection of his earthly body seems to have been entirely his own, and was not dictated by John Money.

Willingham, on the edge of the fens, was three times the size of Orwell. It differed from Orwell, which had no school permanently established before the eighteenth century, in having a school founded by public subscription in 1593. This seems to have been based on the work of the first known schoolmaster, Laurence Milford (14) and had a continuous life thereafter. The same features found amongst the Orwell wills are also found amongst the much more numerous surviving wills from Willingham. There are nearly two hundred and fifty wills written between the 1570's and 1700 by an identifiable scribe, although fifteen of these are the only ones by that particular scribe, and are therefore useless for comparative purposes. Amongst the scribes, there are a considerable number of series by the same men. Laurence Milford himself wrote fifty wills between 1570 and 1602, beginning before he was first licenced as a schoolmaster to 'teach young children' in 1580, and continuing after William Norton, the curate, was licenced to teach grammar in 1596. After experimenting with various formulae hoping to 'obtain everlasting joys and felicitie' for the soul in the 1570's and 80's, he went through a neutral phase before settling down in 1590 to the constant usage of one of his early experimental formulae, 'I bequeath my soul into the hands of God the father, and to Jesus Christ my saviour, by whose merits I hope to enjoy his everlasting rest'. William Norton only wrote four wills, and bequeathed the soul in an unusual Trinitarian form to 'God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost'. This was obviously entirely his own.

Laurence Milford was succeeded as the principle Willingham scribe, not by Norton's successor as schoolmaster, John Nixon, who taught and was curate in Willingham from 1608, but by John Hammond, a local gentleman who was lessee of the sub-manor of Bourne in Willingham. He, with a relation of his, Edward, wrote over thirty wills between 1609 and 1639. He also acted as a scribe when a petition against the charges of fen drainage was drawn up. (15) His phraseology was again almost identical throughout the wills that he wrote, and he had been very heavily influenced by Milford. He strengthened the protestant element and added 'by whose only merits and mercies' to Milford's formula. Otherwise he duplicated it. There were only three wills in the Hammond series which varied from the standard opening in any way, and none of them, with the possible exception of his own, was of importance. John Gill, a labourer, who died in 1623 hoped to enjoy everlasting rest 'after this transitory life ended'. Philip Fromant,
a husbandman, trusted to obtain 'remission of all my sins'. When John Hammond himself wrote his will in 1637, it became evident that a genuine faith lay behind his standard protestant formula, for he left his soul to

'Almighty God my creator, and to Jesus Christ my redeemer, by whose only mercies and merits (Sealed unto me by their blessed Spirit) I trust to obtain forgiveness of all my sins and to enjoy their everlasting rest'.

The laity of Willingham, are known from other sources to have been particularly zealous protestants. They probably had secret conventicle meetings in Mary's time, and were anti-episcopal in the late 1630's. From these beginnings, a strong and lasting congregational church developed under the Commonwealth. Quakerism was present there too. (16) Laurence Milford, either in his work as teacher or as scribe, unfortunately seems to have made such an impact on the people of Willingham, that their individual convictions, which were undoubtedly strong in very many cases, are masked, in their wills, by his phraseology.

The early wills of the 17th century do provide ample evidence that old Leonard Woolward of Balsham was right to feel he could depend on 'friends and acquaintances' to write his will, if not to keep it secret, for enough villagers acted as scribes in Willingham to prove the point. Four men from the Greaves family, who were half-yardlanders with twenty acres or so at the turn of the century, and therefore in this fenland village were substantial yeoman, wrote twenty-two wills between 1609 and 1647. Fifteen of them were by Thomas Greaves. With the exception of one neutral one by Robert Greaves which simply bequeathed the soul to 'the hands of Almighty God', they all made use of the Milford formula, or the variant on it employed by Hammond. Henry Halliwell, who was a representative of another family which had held arable of between nine and twenty two acres in 1603, wrote five wills between 1614 and 1619. They were all neutral, and unrevealing, except for a single one which adopted Milford's terminology. John Pitts, who was described in his own will as a 'woolwinder' wrote three wills between 1617 and 1626, all using the Milford phraseology. His own will, made in 1631, was couched in stronger terms. His soul was left to the 'hands of Almighty God my Creator hoping for remission of my sins by the death and passion of Jesus Christ my redeemer'. Unfortunately John Pitts own will was an isolated one, written by Thomas Ambler, so it is impossible to tell

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whether John Pitts made a fuller and more revealing assertion of his faith on his own death bed, or whether Thomas Ambler was asserting his own beliefs. Henry Bissell who wrote two wills in 1630 and 1631, was another villager who was descended from the tenant of nine and a half acres in 1603. He also used the Milford terminology. So did another six villagers in the first part of the seventeenth century, who only wrote one will apiece, but all used the Milford formula or the Hammond variant of it. There was a further series of six wills by Edward Allen, written between 1625 and 1630, and one series of fourteen by Robert Stocker between 1631 and 1639, using exactly the same wording. Neither family appears in the land survey of 1603, but both wrote distinctly village hands. The school obviously produced a large number of fully literate villagers.

The strength of protestant feeling in Willingham, combined with Laurence Milford's influence, makes the wills of the villagers so consistently Protestant, that as in any orthodox group it is impossible to tell how far individual feeling is involved, even when minor variants in the phraseology do occur, since the sense is so uniform. Occasionally individual testators do stand out, just as Robert Flatt did in Orwell. Robert Shilborn wrote the will of Thomas Lambert, who was a husbandman, in 1625, and that of Thomas Bowles, who was a fisherman in 1632. There was no doubt at all of the strength of the convictions of Thomas Lambert. Shilborn wrote for him

'I bequeath my soul to God that gave it trusting in the only merits of Jesus Christ my saviour and redeemer for the forgiveness of my sins, and that death shall be an entrance for me into a better life'.

The will ended with the desire that

'The Lord out of his never decaying or failing mercy be a husband to my wife and a father to all my children'.

Thomas Bowles' will began with an orthodox phrase, but contained the tell-tale bequest 'To my eldest son William Bowles ... my bible wishing him to use it to God's glory.

Although the influence of Laurence Milford at last declined, the Willingham scribes continued each to write their own standard formula. There was one important change. From the 1650's, the testators customary bequest of his body to the churchyard for burial, which
followed that of the soul, was replaced by a phrase leaving the burial of the body to the discretion of the executor or to 'Christian' burial. This may well reflect the growth of the nonconformist element in Willingham. But congregationalist or quaker wills cannot be picked out as such from the phraseology. They can sometimes be identified by virtue of local knowledge. Two Henry Orion wrote thirteen wills between 1634 and 1648, and 1659 to 1667. They were probably father and son, and of humble stock. There had been no Orions in Willingham in 1603, but the family held twelve acres of arable there in the 1720's. Both men wrote a roughly standardized form of will, bequeathing the soul to 'God that gave it men, and to Jesus Christ my redeemer by whose mercies and merits I hope to have forgiveness of all my sins and to have a Joyful Resurrection at the Last Day.' The emphasis on the resurrection was typical of them; the formula was their own, but some of the testators obviously had religious convictions, which were hidden behind the devout but customary formula of the scribes. John Carter, a chandler, whose will was made in 1648, left both his son and his daughter bibles. Mary Marshall, the widow whose will Henry Orion wrote in 1669 left Francis Duckins a bequest of £2. She did not appear to be related to him, and he was a leading congregationalist in whose house the conventicle met in 1669.\footnote{This is not proof that the Orions were writing for congregationalists, particularly since the very last will in the series, in 1667, expressed the, by now, unusual desire to be buried in the churchyard: but there is a suspicion. It is partially confirmed because the Henry Orion alive in the 1720's had his house licenced as an independent meeting place.\footnote{8}}

The same suspicion applies to Edward Negus even more strongly. He wrote forty three wills in an educated hand between 1661 and 1693, mostly with a brief clause bequeathing the soul into the hand of God and the body to the ground in Christian burial. Until 1670 he usually wrote, when he came to the disposal of the testator's goods 'touching such worldly estate as God in his Mercy far above my estates has been pleased to bestow upon me'; after 1670 he dropped this additional clause also. But there was no doubt that he was writing the wills of convinced Protestants. In 1669, the will of Edward Hammond, 'yeoman' who was one of the sons of John Hammond who had acted as a scribe earlier in the century, contained the clause 'I give unto Edward Negus my book of martyrs'. Deborah Frohock, a congregationalist widow, left her son Samuel three books, incidentally bibles in 1672. Neither of the inventories of the testators concerned mentioned the four of the twelve men who were known to be
congregationalists in Willingham in 1675 (19) had their wills written by Negus; A Suspiciously large number of the witnesses appeared charged with absence from church in an ecclesiastical court of 1673. But despite this, individual conviction did not come through Edward Negus' accustomed phraseology, except in the case of two men, William Bowles, a yeoman in 1673, and John Allen a maltster, in 1686, both of whom trusted in a joyful resurrection at the last day. Neither was known from other sources to belong to a particular sect. Negus himself held the lease of a shop in 1665, and does not appear to have been involved in agriculture at all.

Robert Osborne wrote eleven wills between 1665 and 1693 in a village hand, and wrote a much more vivid clause, but one which was still in a common form peculiar to himself, bequeathing the soul 'Unto the hands of God that gave it to me trusting through the merits of Jesus Christ my redeemer, to have a joyful resurrection at the Last Day'. One of the eleven wills was written for one of the Willingham Quakers, and a second was witnessed by another Quaker.

The clauses in wills bequeathing the soul of the testator to God are therefore mainly couched in whatever phrase the particular scribe was accustomed to use and taken alone tell little, or nothing, of the testator's opinions. But just as the strength of Robert Flatt of Orwell's convictions in 1636 broke through his rector's common formula, so also did a handful of the Willingham wills reflect, in the strength of their language, what must have been the strength of the dying man's faith. John Osborne, who only wrote one will in 1668, must have been closely related to Robert, because their hands were so alike. Even though the will cannot be compared with any others written by John, it is impossible to believe that anything but the feelings of Thomas Staploe, the testator, lie behind the last and only statement of faith which he ever made.

'I ... calling to remembrance the uncertain state of this Transitory life that all flesh must yield unto death when it shall please God to call ... first being penitent and sorry from the bottom of my heart for sins past most humbly desiring forgiveness for the same, I give and commit my soul unto Almighty God my Saviour and Redeemer in whom and by the merits of Jesus Christ, I trust assuredly to be saved, and to have full remission and forgiveness of all my sins and that my soul with my body at the General Day of resurrection shall rise again with joy and receive that which Christ hath prepared for his elect and chosen'.

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Conclusion

It seems from this analysis, as if, for any village there will often be two or three scribes writing wills at any one time, and a large number over a period of a hundred years. They will range from the Lord or lessee of the manor, to the vicar, curate, church clerk or churchwarden, to the schoolmaster, a shopkeeper, or any one of the literate yeoman or even husbandmen in a village who could be called in to perform this last neighbourly office for a dying man. If the village lay near a county town, it was possible for a public notary to be called in, although this I have less evidence for. (20) Most of these scribes evolved their own slightly different formulae for bequeathing the soul, which can be traced through most or all of the wills they were responsible for. If the scribe was an identifiable villager, as he often was, of course, one is still getting irreplaceable information on the doctrinal convictions of the peasantry, since the scribe came himself of humble stock, like the Greaves, or Thomas Pitts, or Edward Negus of Willingham, or Nicholas Johnson or George Holder of Willingham. Even when the rector, like William Barnard of Orwell, or the schoolmaster, like Laurence Milford of Willingham, is the scribe, one is still getting information on whatever doctrine is generally accepted at the village level. It is a great mistake to assume the docility of the normal parishioner. If the Rector of Cottenham, which was a radically nonconformist village in the seventeenth century felt unable to let his children out to play after one of them had been attacked and scarred for life with a fork in the school yard by a 'sone to an adversary', (21) it is scarcely likely that such an adversary would call on the Rector to make his will, while the choice of potential scribes was, as I have shown, wide. It is therefore safe to assume that however near death the testator was, he still exercised a choice over his scribe, as Leonard Woolward did. He probably did not influence the form of the preamble the scribe normally used, unless he had abnormally strong convictions, but he is highly unlikely to have chosen a man who did not hold the same general opinions as himself.

Wills can, therefore, be used as Professor Dickens used them, to show a swing away from the cult of the Virgin and the Saints in the 1540's continued into the 1550's, but he was entirely right when he wrote 'The results should not be presented in any spirit of statistical pedantry'. The evidence is not statistical. It is wrong for the historian to assume that if he takes a cross-section of four hundred and forty wills proved over a particular period, he is getting four hundred and forty different testators' religious opinions reflected.
NOTES

1. This phrase is not common form. I have come across it nowhere else. The original wills of the Consistory Court of Ely, which I have used for this study, are bundled under years, by date of probate, in The Cambridge University Archives. They have no reference numbers. Wherever italics appear in this paper, they are mine.

2. The clause leaving the soul to Almighty God is never as elaborate and lengthy, in a villager's will, as those of the puritan clergy (See, for instance, the wills printed by R.A. Marchant, The Puritans and the Church Courts in the Diocese of York, 1560-1642 (1960), pp. 212-15). They none the less contain significant differences. Professor Dickens has used these differences effectively in Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire wills to illustrate the progress of the Reformation amongst the Laity. A.G.Dickens, Lollards and Protestants in the Diocese of York, 1509-1538 (1959) particularly pp. 171-2 and 215-17.

3. A comparison of the date the will was written, and the usually close, date of probate, shows this.

4. Cambridge University Library, Ely Diocesan Records, D/2/11, ff. 259-61. I am very grateful to Mrs. Owen, Ely Diocesan Archivist, who drew this revealing case to my attention.


7. Public Record Office E.179/244/23.

8. When the 'original' wills of the Consistory Court of Ely are indeed the originals, and not office copies kept by the court, while the true originals, signed or marked by the testator, were returned to the testators' executors. At some point in the latter 16th century, this custom changed, and the original document was retained, for registration, and presumably an office copy given to the executors.
9. G. Lyon Turner, Original Records of Early Nonconformity under Persecution and Indulgence (1911), I p. 36.


12. This example is a confusing one, because the phraseology Neville Butler uses, and his emphasis on the resurrection of the body echoes almost exactly that of his grandfather Nicholas, in 1601 (P.C.C. 74, Woodhall) and his great uncle Henry in 1594 (P.C.C. 32, Dixy) although his own father, Thomas, wrote a neutral clause bequeathing his soul in 1622 (P.C.C. 18, Saville) and his own will 'all written with my own hand' only expressed his belief in justification by faith, not in the resurrection of the body (P.C.C. 1675, f.42). We may here be getting an example of the scribe's own religious beliefs, rather than the testator's, but it is interesting that he only applies it when it is called for, and does not automatically write a phrase expressing his own opinions.

13. It ends 'per me Rogerum Davys'.

14. Margaret Spufford, art. cit, pp. 139-140 and pp. 131-3.

15. B.M. Add. Ms 33466 f.190. I am indebted to Mr. Dennis Jeeps, of Willingham, for lending me his photostat of this.


18. This information also comes from Mr. Dennis Jeeps, who likewise kindly provided me with additional information on Negus.

19. See my forthcoming paper in Studies in Church History, 8, 197, on 'The Social Status of Some Seventeenth Century Rural Dissenters'.

20. Samuel Newton, a public notary, wrote and signed, as such, the will of Edward Daintry the elder, a husbandman of Milton, in 1665: likewise John Brayshaw, a public notary wrote the will of John Foot a husbandman of Milton in 1628.

21. Taken from an abstract by W. N. Palmer of a letter from the daughter of the Rector of Cottenham, who was ejected under the Commonwealth, in the Walker MS., Bodleian Library, C.S. fo.17.
WIDER RECONSTITUTION

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The idea of family reconstitution based on the parish register came out of consideration of the material available for a parish history of Aldenham in Hertfordshire; the place chosen for no better reason – and no worse – than that we had moved there in 1957. It was undertaken without the excellent guidance and methodology set out by Dr. Wrigley in his chapter on the subject in An Introduction to English Historical Demography, but the need for similar conventions was clear, and their use alone made the undertaking possible. It must be confessed that the burden of working alone on such a project bore heavily on both mental and physical energy, as the work was undertaken 'blind', without any clear idea of what might come out of it. However, in some respects, interest was maintained and heightened by excursions into other documentary sources which, by the way in which they could be associated with the parish register material, began to present a structure which, whilst in many ways yet incomplete, presents fascinating evidence to explore.

What follows is an endeavour to 'prove' the conventions and the methodology as being sound bases, taking into account the many other sources of information which can be tapped for confirmation of some of the better documented subjects. The 'proof' of the methods in these cases may support the methods in less well documented cases and widen considerably the number of subjects for consideration in a particular field of study.

The sources available were: The parish registers from 1560 to 1812, which had been transcribed and printed at the beginning of the century and included copies of the