WILLS AND THEIR Scribes

A communication from the Matlock Population Studies Group.

It may be of interest to compare an analysis which the Matlock Population Studies Group is making of Matlock wills with that which Margaret Spufford made of Cambridgeshire wills in the last issue of L.P.S.

Of 115 wills for the parish of Matlock, dated between 1664 and 1742, which were found in the Lichfield Probate Records, 71 could be ascribed with reasonable certainty to specific scribes. The most interesting series, spanning the whole period, is by John Woolley senior (5 wills between 1664 and 1669), his son Adam (16 wills, 1675-1711) and his grandson John (11 wills, 1720-1742). A second series is by Henry Flint senior (6 wills, 1672-1685) and his son Henry (5 wills, 1716-1740). Stephen Badsley wrote 10 wills (1672-1714). Six other scribes wrote two or three wills each. The remaining 44 wills could not be ascribed with any certainty. Some 30 elements used in the formulae of the 115 wills were plotted to see how they were distributed both in decades and as between scribes.

The first fact to emerge is that most of the elements occurred throughout the whole period of eighty years with identical or almost identical words, and were used by a considerable number of scribes. This could, of course, be due to a given scribe copying the form used by another, but the fact that most of the formulae quoted by Margaret Spufford for Cambridgeshire occur in almost identical form in Matlock wills makes one wonder whether there did not exist a printed source from which scribes could select appropriate phrases.

Most of the remaining points emerge if we consider the long Woolley series. There is a definite "house style". All three of them "call to mind the uncertain state of this transitory life and that all life must yield unto death." Other scribes share this, or a similar formulae, but far less frequently. All three use the formula "I bequeath (or commend) my soul to Almighty God", a formula common to all but a very few of the wills, but thereafter ring the changes on a variety of phrases such as "and to Jesus Christ my Redeemer", "hoping for the remission of my sins", "through the merits, blood-shed and death of Jesus Christ" but in a way which leaves one in doubt as to whether these phrases are used at the request of the testator or whether the scribe is exhibiting his skill in varied phraseology.
Occasionally, though, there comes a phrase which must almost certainly have been demanded by the testator. Neither John senior nor Adam commonly introduce the idea of salvation or of eternal life, so that when one will only by each of these scribes does so, it does seem significant. John junior, on the other hand, has a phrase relating to salvation in six of his eleven wills, and in the same six wills he uses the phrase "being penitent and sorry for all my sins", an idea not used by his father and grandfather or by the Flints or by Stephen Badsley and which is used by only six of the unidentified scribes. Adam who, like his father, rarely uses the more elaborate forms, does produce an elaborate one for Margery Johns, a substantial shopkeeper, who bequeaths her "soule to Allmighty god my Macker and to Jesus Christ my redeemer and to ye holy ghost my sanctifier and my bodye to the earth from whence it came to be buried in such devout and Christian Manor as to my Executors shall be thought meeete and conveniant; their to rest until my sowle and bodye meeete againe and be joyned together at ye joyfulfull resurrection and being made Pakers of ye neverending joyes of immortalaty which god in mercy through ye meritts of Jesus Christ alone hath promised and prepared for all those that truely and unfeignedly repent and beleive in him." And, thirteen years later, he produces an almost identical form for William Pidcocke.

It is noticeable that, at a time when the phrases "through the blood-shed, death and passion of Jesus Christ" and "to be made partakers of life everlasting" were in common use, they were never used by Stephen Badsley.

There are two points which do seem to us to be of positive significance. There are seven wills only, drawn up by six scribes, out of the total of 115 which use the form "trusting that I am one of the number of Gods elect and chosen people" or some very similar form of words. This must surely reflect the religious views of the testators and suggests that they may have belonged to one of the 'particular' groups opposed to the growing Arminian doctrine that salvation was available to all men and not only to the predestined few. Such a group may have existed within the Anglican Church or as a separate denomination. The fact that all seven specifically desired that their bodies be buried in the churchyard at Matlock may suggest a group within the Anglican Church. All these wills date before 1690. And there are six wills, drawn by four scribes and all after 1700, in which, apart from "In the name of God, Amen" and "of good and perfect memory, thanks be to God", there is absolutely no religious formula, not even "I bequeath
my soul ....". This, too, must be deliberate. It has not yet been possible to trace the religious affiliation of any of these thirteen testators, but the enquiry is proceeding.

Further work is being done on wills, including a group between 1550 and 1660. Our present impression (and it can be no more) is of scribes who had some common source available, who had a choice of phrases, some of which a given scribe invariably used, others which he varied either for his own satisfaction or according to his knowledge of what would please his testator, but that there were occasional testators whose religious views led them to demand a phraseology to express them. For the most part, we doubt whether the religious views of the scribe himself determined the form of the will.