

TESTATORS, LITERACY, EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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In her 1971 article in **LPS**¹ Margaret Spufford pointed out the value of wills as a source of information about many subjects, including education, literacy and religious belief. The historian who uses wills needs to know to what extent testators are a cross-section of society. Thus before examining the evidence which wills provide it is desirable to consider the question of who made wills and why they did so.

This article is based on a study of 282 wills made between 1550 and 1640 by inhabitants of South Elmham, a group of nine parishes in North Suffolk. Table 1 shows the social status of these 282 men and women.

Table 1 Status of South Elmham testators.

Social status	Number	Percentage of all testators
Gentry	12	4.3
Clergy	9	3.2
Yeomen	77	27.3
Husbandmen	18	6.4
Widows	50	17.6
Singlemen/women	9 (6 men, 3 women)	3.2
Wives	1	0.3
Craftsmen/tradesmen	21	7.1
Labourers/servants	4 (3 labourers)	1.4
Unknown	81	28.7

It is disappointing that nearly one third of the wills do not give the status or occupation of the testator, but it is clear from their wills that forty-nine men in this group were farming on a considerable scale. If they are added to the yeomen and husbandmen in table 1, 51 per cent of all testators were engaged in farming. Furthermore, most of the gentlemen, clergymen and craftsmen and some of the widows were also involved in farming. Thus the great majority of South Elmham testators were wholly or partially dependent on land, and most of their wealth was in the form of land and livestock. Testators are obviously not a true cross-section of society as the poorer classes are very under-represented.

It is a truism that it is those with possessions to bequeath who make wills, but this leaves unanswered the question: why did not all those who owned land or moveables make wills? Margaret Spufford believes will-making to be atypical in the sixteenth century at least, and suggests 'that men who made wills did so primarily because they had dependent children to provide for.'² Children are mentioned in 205 of the South Elmham wills made between 1550 and 1640, but in many cases these are adult children, and in only sixty cases is it evident that the testator is leaving some under-age children. In another fifteen wills land is left to two or more adult sons. Thus 26 per cent of South Elmham testators could be said to have made wills either because they had under-age children, or because they had more than one adult son for whom to provide. This is a very different picture from that found in Willingham, where 75 per cent of those who made wills in the last quarter of the sixteenth century fell into the categories just described.³ Furthermore, another 13 per cent of South Elmham testators were apparently childless men, and this excludes known bachelors. It seems that the absence of an obvious natural heir or heirs was another pressing reason for making a will. Table 2 shows that not much more than a quarter of the wills which mention children are those of men with under-age children.

Table 2 Family status of South Elmham testators

Type	Number	Percentage ¹
a. All children under age	43	15 (21)
b. Some children under age	17	6 (8)
* a. and b. together	60	21 (29)
c. Two or more adult sons inheriting land	15	5
a., b. and c. together	75	26
d. Childless male testators	37	13

¹The figures in brackets show the percentage of wills in which children are mentioned, while the other figures are a percentage of all wills.

The striking difference between Willingham and South Elmham testators requires further investigation. The existence of a survey, dated 1575, of Willingham makes it possible to relate land-holding to will-making in that village. In the absence of a survey for the main manor in South Elmham, it is impossible to draw any very satisfactory conclusions about the relative economic standing of testators, but a survey of one of the smaller manors, dating from the 1580's, does exist and the wills of nearly half of the tenants have survived. All fifteen are known from their wills or other sources to have been men of substance, whereas at Willingham two-thirds of the wills dating from between 1575 and 1600 were made by men who held two acres or less of arable land. The findings at Willingham contradict the usual view that only the more prosperous members of rural society made wills, but the South Elmham evidence points in the other direction and supports the generally held view. Perhaps the most important conclusion to draw from this is that it is unsafe to make generalizations based on one parish. The main reason for the difference between Willingham and South Elmham testators must be that the two places lie in different farming regions. In the Cambridgeshire fen village very small holdings were economically viable because of the opportunities provided by the fens. Although there is no firm evidence about the size

of holdings in wood-pasture Suffolk, all the evidence suggests that South Elmham men tended to hold more land than those in Willingham. In death as in life the type of farming practised deeply influences society.

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Laslett has pointed out that the ability to sign is not a very good guide to reading and writing ability.⁴ Reading was normally taught before writing and some children may well have left school having only learnt to read. All Ralph Josselin's children learnt to read young but did not learn to write until they went away to school around the age of ten.⁵ Reading, at least the reading of print, is an easier skill to acquire than is writing, and is therefore likely to have been more widespread. However there is no way in which the extent of the ability to read can be demonstrated. No attempt has been made in this study to try to recognise individual hands, which is an extremely difficult exercise.

Wills are amongst the best sources for the study of literacy, but probate inventories, letters, parish registers and consistory court depositions are amongst the other sources used to study literacy in South Elmham. Excluding gentlemen and clergy, the signatures of 288 men and women living in or closely connected with South Elmham between 1550 and 1640 have been found in the above sources. Only six signatures are those of women, who had far fewer opportunities than men for signing documents. The great majority of men who signed were yeomen, but there were a few husbandmen and a handful of tradesmen as well. A knowledge of reading and writing must have been useful to many tradesmen and craftsmen. The signatures range in dexterity from very fluent ones of obviously educated men, not all of them being those of clergy or gentlemen, to the laboured ones of those unused to much writing. Death-bed signatures are a poor indication of literacy, and it is not uncommon for known literate individuals to be capable of making only a shaky cross on their wills. Both Cressy⁶ and Spufford⁷ have commented on the tendency of literacy to decline with age, perhaps from lack of use as well as from physical weakness.

Table 3 shows the status of known literate testators. Seventeen per cent of all South Elmham wills, and 30 per cent of those wills which make clear whether the testator signed, bear the signature of the testator. These percentages agree with those for seventeenth-century Orwell and Willingham wills, as does the fact that about one-third of South Elmham yeomen wills are signed.⁸

The general impression is that South Elmham inhabitants were at least as literate as their contemporaries in other rural areas, and may well have been more so. It is unfortunate that the Protestation returns for the whole of Suffolk have not survived, as they would have given a rather more general view of literacy than do wills. Wills have a bias towards the better-off, whereas all males over eighteen had to sign the Protestation in 1641-2.

Table 3 Status of known literate testators 1550-1640

Status	Number	Percentage ¹	
Gentry	8	67	17
Clergy	3	33	6
Yeomen ²	25 (29)	32 (38)	52 (60)
Husbandmen	2	11	4
Widows	2	4	4
Singlemen	2	33	4
Craftsmen/tradesmen	1	5	2
Unknown	5	6	10

¹The first column is the percentage of all testators in each class; the second column is the percentage of all literate testators.

²The wills of four of the literate men of unknown status make it clear that they were yeomen, so the true figures for this class are those in brackets.

It is worth studying illiteracy as well literacy. The same sources which produced the signatures of 288 literates also provided the marks of 178 men and 54 women. Almost invariably the women were either signing their own wills or witnessing those of others. Just as the standard of fluency of signatures varies widely, so does that of marks made by illiterates. Leaving aside wavering death-bed crosses, marks range from quite sophisticated initial letters and symbols to shaky crosses or squiggles, evidently made by those unused to handling anything as precise as a pen. The marks made by some men look like an attempt to imitate writing, which to an illiterate must appear as a series of squiggles. The more sophisticated marks used indicate that their writers were used to fine manipulation or had trained themselves to produce a neat and individual mark. These people were surely less illiterate than those who could make nothing better than a crude cross.

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Research into literacy among South Elmham residents has made it possible to identify twenty-nine men who wrote wills. Not surprisingly the largest group among them is formed by twelve clergymen, but it is interesting that two husbandmen also wrote wills. Seven of the will writers were probably yeomen and it seems likely that another was a lawyer. Some of the known writers of wills appear so often as witnesses that it seems safe to assume that they wrote all the wills they witnessed, except in cases where two will writers witnessed the same will. John Morland, rector of South Elmham St. Margaret from 1572 to 1599, witnessed fourteen wills, and Roger Masterson, the lawyer, a total of twenty-two. It seems likely that whenever a clergyman witnessed a will he was the writer of it. This was a continuation of the pre-Reformation tradition of the parson as almost the only literate man in the parish. Clergymen were found as witnesses or executors of 34 per cent of the wills used. Richardson's study of Manchester wills showed that 14 per cent of them came into this category, and he pointed out that writing and witnessing wills 'was quite clearly a normal part of the clergyman's role in society.'⁹ However, by the early years of Queen Elizabeth's reign testators were not only dependent on the clergy as scribes; Margaret Spufford notes a parallel situation in Cambridgeshire.¹⁰

None of the South Elmham villages appears to have had a regular school, but Cressy has several references to schoolmasters in the area.¹¹ Most of these transient schoolmasters were in nearby parishes but two worked in South Elmham. Schoolmasters were more often found in local towns such as Beccles and Halesworth and from 1565 there was a grammar school at Bungay. The establishment of this school must have had a material effect on the standard of literacy of at least the better-off South Elmham families. Unfortunately the early records of the school were destroyed in a disastrous fire in Bungay in 1688 so there is no means of discovering how many South Elmham boys were educated there.

In **Contrasting Communities** Margaret Spufford has very persuasively argued the case for reading being a far more widespread skill than writing, and has shown the importance of reading in village life in the seventeenth century. One of the reasons she gives is the incentive to read figures at least for those who lent out and borrowed money by bond. Bonds are mentioned sufficiently frequently in South Elmham wills and probate inventories for this to have been a motive here as well.

The kind of evidence found in Cambridgeshire for the development of dissenting sects is not available for South Elmham before 1640 but the stress laid by Protestants in general, and by Puritans in particular, on reading the bible must have been another strong incentive to learn to read. Some of the evidence given in a case in the Norwich Consistory Court in 1590 suggests that the ability to read was fairly common.¹² Several of the witnesses stated that their vicar found fault with his parishioners for looking at their prayer books while he preached and one deposed that he had heard him reprove his parishioners for, lookinge in their bookes, sayinge that he wolde have them shutt them upp and not looke on them.'

Certainly bibles are the books most frequently mentioned in wills and probate inventories. Apart from one will, the only other books named are prayer books, a 'Book of Statutes and chronicle,' and Foxe's **Book of Martyrs**, which was the most popular book after the bible in the early modern period. Books are mentioned in only ten wills and five of these use some such phrase as 'all my bookes' rather than naming the individual works. Seven of these ten testators were definitely literate, and their status reflects that of the totality of South Elmham will makers.

Table 4 Status of testators who mention books.

Widows	Yeomen	Clergy	Gentlemen	Unknown
2	4	2	1	1

The exceptional will¹³ is that of John Fiske of South Elmham St. James; it was made in 1632. He made specific bequests of twelve named books to his wife, two daughters and younger son, and left the rest of his books to his elder son. Apart from three bibles, the named books are all works either by continental reformers or English Puritan authors. Certainly, in this family the women as well as the men could read. The Fiskes of St.

James were clearly a prominent Puritan family in their neighbourhood. The father and grandfather of the maker of this will fled abroad for religion in the reign of Mary,¹⁴ and all his children emigrated to New England in 1637.¹⁵

Probate inventories are rather more informative about books than are wills. Eighteen, or 39 per cent, of the forty-six South Elmham inventories include books, and, even omitting the five clergy inventories, 32 per cent of the remainder list books.

Table 5 Books in inventories.

A. Distribution of books by status.					
	Clergy	Yeomen	Widows	Tradesmen	Unknown
	5	6	2	1	4

B. Distribution of books by value of inventory.				
	Under £50	£51-100	£101-200	Over £200
	2	5	4	7

Although it appears that an unusually high proportion of probate inventories from South Elmham includes books, it must not be forgotten that a study based mainly on consistory court inventories is almost certainly biased towards the richer and better educated section of the community. Nevertheless, the proportion of book owners is strikingly high. In Myddle in Shropshire only two inventories which recorded books were found;¹⁶ and few books are mentioned in Cambridgeshire, where there are no surviving inventories before 1660.¹⁷ A more useful comparison can be made with the consistory court inventories for the Isle of Flegg in Norfolk, where the percentage of inventories listing books in the last two decades of the sixteenth century is only just over half that found in South Elmham at the same date.¹⁸ One of the few surviving Suffolk subscription lists to the Solemn League and Covenant of 1644 is that for Brundish, a parish not far from South Elmham. Here 64 per cent of those who subscribed were able to write their names and Cressy points out that this is a literacy rate nearly as good as that for London; he suggests that this part of Suffolk may have had a very high proportion of literate men.¹⁹ Unfortunately the evidence is too scanty to be able to prove this suggestion for the early seventeenth century. At the end of the century the Oath of Association returns for South Elmham show that 60 per cent of those who took the oath in these parishes were capable of signing their names.²⁰

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Wills provide some evidence of the attitude to education in the early modern period. In some cases the term 'education' is used in the sense of bringing up children, but in other cases it clearly carries its modern meaning. Fifteen wills, just over 5 per cent of the total, make specific statements about the education and upbringing of children. Nine of these testators were yeomen, but one was a labourer.

Five testators made specific requests about the education of sons, or in one case of a grandson. The educational proposals ranged from that for a gentleman's son who was to be sent first to Cambridge and then to the Inns of Court, spending his time 'in places of best learning and most profitable exercises,'²¹ to that for the youngest son of a yeoman of moderate wealth who was to be brought up 'with larning to write reade and caste accompts perfectly durying his nonage.'²² It is interesting that this boy, who was the youngest of four sons, was the only one of his brothers to be left cash instead of land and to receive some education. Clearly this yeoman family felt that only a landless younger son needed an education in order to make his way in the world.

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Apart from the nuncupative wills they all begin with an expression of the testator's religious beliefs but, as has been pointed out,²³ it is difficult to know whether the views expressed are those of the testator or of the person who actually wrote the will. This problem is only resolved in the few cases of men who drew up their own wills in their own hand. An analysis of the preambles to the wills written by Roger Masterson and John Morland, the most prolific of the known will writers, throws some light on this problem.

Masterson's period of activity as a will writer in South Elmham covers the two decades between 1550 and 1569; therefore he spans the period which saw three about-turns in religion. Most of his earlier wills follow the usual pre-Reformation formula: 'I commend and bequeath my soule to allmighty god my maker Redeemer and saviour, to our Lady the Virgin saint Mary and to all the holy company of heaven,' but three seem to be a hybrid between the forms usually found before and after 1558. All three date from 1555 and have identical preambles which read as follows: 'I commend and bequeath my sowle to all mightie god my maker redemor and savior trustinge by the merittes of Christes passion to be on of the chosen members and to atteyne therebie liffe everlastinge, To our ladie saint Marye and to all the holie companie of heaven.'²⁴ Do these three wills illustrate the confusion in men's minds about doctrine in the mid-Tudor period, or is the last phrase tacked on as a safeguard against the Marian persecution by men who were Protestants at heart? James Brame, who made his will²⁵ in 1556, was bolder and omitted all reference to the Virgin Mary and the saints. Masterson's last will with a Roman Catholic preamble was written in February 1560; from that time on he used a new Protestant formula, which has practically no variations. Whether Masterson took his preambles from a formulary book, or whether they were his own composition, it is clear that they are his words and not the testators' that we are reading.

Roger Masterson bears out the view that writers of wills imposed their opinions on testators, but John Morland, who was a clergyman not a lawyer, seems to have allowed far more variation. Except in one case, the variations are not very great and the basic meaning remains the same. The will of Robert Meane, a weaver, provides a typical example: 'I bequeth my sowle to almighty god and to Jhesus Christ my onlie

saviour and Redemer by whose death and passion I hope and beleve verely to have full foregevnnes of my synnes.²⁶

The following table analyses the apparent religious views of testators. Margaret Spufford has rightly pointed out that this type of evidence is not statistical and can only be used to indicate general trends.²⁷

Table 6 Religious views expressed in wills.

Anglican	Puritan	Roman Catholic	Non-committal	None
160	20	33	12	57

With one exception, all the wills which can be classified as Roman Catholic in tone were drawn up not later than the early months of 1560. Most of the wills in the last two columns are either nuncupative or have a very brief preamble. Any preamble which mentions the elect has been taken to be Puritan. The overtly Puritan wills are few in number, but nearly all the Anglican ones display the almost Calvinistic beliefs typical of the great majority of those who belonged to the Church of England in this period. Doubtless the tendency of the age to social conformity accounts for the preponderance of wills which express religious views generally held to be acceptable to church and state. The fact that parish clergy witnessed ninety-six wills and probably wrote most of these, would also explain the large number of conformist preambles. Margaret Spufford's point that testators must have chosen scribes whose religious views coincided with their own suggests that in South Elmham Protestant views were sincerely held by a majority of the population.²⁸

It is interesting that two-thirds of the wills with non-committal preambles were written between 1551 and September 1558; four each in the reigns of Edward VI and Mary. The brevity of their preambles may be due to a deliberate effort to avoid committing religious beliefs to paper in a period of violent change; a kind of passive resistance to conformity with beliefs imposed from above.

The earliest South Elmham will to have a Puritan preamble dates from December 1552 but the majority of wills expressing Puritan views were written in the seventeenth century, doubtless reflecting the increase in the numbers of active Puritans in East Anglia after 1600. The preambles of wills written by the testators themselves must be assumed to express the beliefs of the writer, but they show no noticeable variation from the great mass of wills written by scribes.

A study of the religious preambles of Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire wills showed that the traditional commendation of the soul to the Virgin and the Saints was beginning to decline in the late 1530's and that about the same time preambles written in Protestant terms began to appear.²⁹ By the 1550s South Elmham wills were displaying a similar trend, and had probably started to do so a decade or so earlier.

Generalisations about will-making, literacy and changes in religious belief can only be based on religious studies. Local social and economic conditions must have influenced standards of literacy and underlay the reasons for making wills. Attitudes to religious belief are also likely to

have varied regionally. In these fields, as in so many others, local studies show up the great variations within the broad national trends. South Elmham between 1550 and 1640 was a richer community than most others which have been studied over the same period. This must have influenced the standard of literacy and the evidence of probate records shows a high level of book ownership. On the whole it is probably correct to say that religious preambles tell us little about the testators' personal views but on the other hand it is unlikely that the phrases used by scribes would have differed radically from the beliefs of those whose wills they wrote.

Notes

1. Margaret Spufford, 'The Scribes of Villagers' Wills in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and their influence,' **LPS** 7, (Autumn 1971), pp. 28-43.
2. Margaret Spufford, 'Peasant inheritance customs and land distribution in Cambridgeshire from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century,' in **Family and Inheritance: Rural Society in Western Europe 1200-1800**, edited by Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk and E. P. Thompson, 1976, p. 176.
3. *Ibid.* pp. 171-2.
4. Peter Laslett, **The World We Have Lost**, 1965, p. 208.
5. Alan Macfarlane, **The Family Life of Ralph Josselin**, 1970, p. 91.
6. D. A. Cressy, 'Education and Literacy in London and East Anglia 1580-1700, unpublished Cambridge Ph.D thesis, 1972, p.311.
7. Margaret Spufford, **Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries**, 1974, pp. 197-8.
8. Spufford, **Contrasting Communities**, pp. 197, 201.
9. R. C. Richardson, 'Wills and Will-makers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: some Lancashire evidence,' **LPS** 9, 1972, p. 38.
10. Spufford, **Contrasting Communities**, p. 322.
11. Cressy, appendix.
12. NRO DEP/24.
13. NRO (NCC) Tuck 146.
14. BL Add Mss 15520.
15. N.C.P. Tyack, 'Migration from East Anglia to New England before 1600,' unpublished London Ph.D. thesis. 1951, appendix 1, Vol. 2, p.xv.
16. David G. Hey, **An English Rural Community: Myddle under the Tudors and Stuarts**, 1974, p. 126.
17. Spufford, **Contrasting Communities**, pp. 210-212.
18. I am indebted to Mrs. Barbara Cornford for allowing me to quote from her unpublished work on Flegg inventories.
19. Cressy, p. 289.
20. I am indebted to Dr. Cressy for drawing my attention to these rolls.
21. NRO (NCC) Moyse alias Spicer 319.
22. SRO IC/AA1/21/17.
23. Spufford, **Contrasting Communities**, p. 321 et seq.
24. NRO (NCC) Walpool 207, Will of Robert Terolde the elder.
25. SRO IC/AA1/16/180.
26. SRO IC/AA1/30/126.
27. Spufford, 'The Scribes of Villagers' Wills,' p. 41.
28. Spufford, 'The Scribes of Villagers' Wills,' p. 41.
29. A. G. Dickens, **The English Reformation**, paperback edition. 1967, pp. 266-7.