A NOTARY OF CANTERBURY: NEW LIGHT ON WILLIAM WATMER, A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MAYOR

GEOFFREY WHATMORE

Of the long line of mayors who have served the city of Canterbury, few come over to us with such clarity and none display such compassion – especially towards children – as William Watmer, who was twice mayor in early Stuart times. Watmer was not a Canterbury man; he was born a farmer's son in Shropshire, but was involved for forty years as a notary in the affairs of his adopted city, rising to prominence with malice towards none, and marrying into the best families. His career is a remarkable example of social mobility based on ability and a little push, with perhaps some pull at its beginning. Even after his death, ripples of his activities spreading outward from his home in the Westgate tower were to be carried outward to the American colonies through the descendants of his nephews and wards who sought a new life there.

More can be uncovered about Watmer than many of his contemporaries, for his papers, compiled when he was alderman and chamberlain to the Corporation, are miraculously preserved. Indeed, they comprise much of the Consistory Court records and City Chamberlain's accounts of the period, a vast collection relatively neglected by researchers and carefully tended now in the Dean and Chapter Library of the cathedral. The sheer bulk of the documentation which has survived is astonishing, though a number of intriguing obscurities remain. Watmer's lifetime of entries in the city and ecclesiastical records provide in themselves a window on the government of the city and church unique in its detail and continuity.

Though he spent fifty years of his life in Canterbury, Watmer was born in the small village of Stottesdon in Shropshire, where one of the earliest entries in the parish register shows his baptism on 12th August, 1569. We can be sure of his place of birth for Watmer habitually confirmed it in the Latin preamble to his dispositions in the Consistory Court papers, such as that of 1598:

> William Watmer of the city of Canterbury notary public, where he has lived for seven years, coming from Stotesdon in the county of Salop, aged 27 years or thereabouts, freely brought forward, sworn and examined, says as follows.[1]

And to make doubly sure he was remembered, not perhaps without a touch of pride, Watmer declared his origins again when, somewhat irregularly, he applied for a grant of the arms borne by his distant kinsman, Francis Watmough, of the senior, Lancashire, branch of the family. In this pedigree,[2] Watmer proclaimed his descent from William Watmere and Margaret, daughter of Thomas Sparkes of 'Scotesdon, co. Salop', and, ultimately, from John Watmough of Eccleston in Lancashire. Watmer was probably well aware that in setting down that pedigree he was fixing for posterity the family line of descent and, incidentally, the transition of the spelling of his name from Watmough to Watmer in the move southward.

It was about 1590 that young William Watmer packed his saddle-bags and rode out from the Shropshire farm to seek his own new world. An obvious question is why, for his legal training, Watmer should choose Canterbury and not Worcester or Shrewsbury or some other town nearer his birthplace. Though there are other possibilities, much the strongest reason is to be found in family ties, especially with the Wynnes, a Canterbury family also originating in Shropshire. A reference in the dictated will of Robert Wynne, a woollen merchant who became mayor, implies that Watmer's sister Frances was his wife. And what more likely than that the presence of his sister in the city would have influenced his decision to spend his life there? In the years ahead, Watmer was to have a fateful relationship with the children of Robert and Frances Wynne, of which we shall hear more later.

Watmer first appears in the Canterbury records on 4th July, 1597, when he was elected a freeman by redemption, that is to say, he gained the honour by paying a fee rather than by right of birth, as indigenous citizens were able to do. Nevertheless, he was taken up by the city's government very quickly, appointed chamberlain within five years, and started to keep the city accounts, a task that was to demand his attention through sultry summers and chill winters, in health and in sickness, for the next forty years.

Already he was a rising man, continuously busy with his practice as a notary, his name appearing as guarantor, bond-holder or witness on many official documents, always immersed in the administration of

[1] Consistory Court Papers, X.II.3 f.366

[2] W. Berry, *County Genealogies: Kent, 1830*, and the *Visitation of Kent, 1619*, (Harleian Society, xlii).

the city. For a 'foreigner' his progress was remarkable, an indication of the openness of the Canterbury community once the formality of its freedom had been granted, and also of his ability and, perhaps, of his likeability. The accolade came in 1608 when he was elected mayor, the reward for eleven years' service to the Corporation and his colleagues. Within months of receiving the city's freedom he married, as was proper for a promising young man in his late twenties. It was scarcely accidental, and no bad thing for his future either, that for his wife he chose Maryan, the widow of Leonard Bonnar or Bonarde, a former sheriff, who had two children by her dead husband. Even if Watmer was guided as much by his head as his heart, it was probably a happy marriage, though she was the elder and they had, apparently, no children of their own.

However it was, to live in those times meant that the bright days were heightened by the ever-present background of death, which could strike without warning at any age. Watmer and Maryan felt it, too, the sharp edge of existence lived against a vivid and dangerous background. Like their neighbours in the teeming streets, caring little for sanitation and misunderstanding the spread of disease, they were familiar with bereavement and death, though the pain was no less. Maryan's two children had died; the household servant, Elizabeth Byng, was buried soon after their marriage; from Stottesdon in 1599 came news of the death of William's father, when Watmer received a legacy of ten pounds 'and his mother's reward besides.' This relatively small bequest probably reflected the preferment he had received years before when he left home and may have contributed towards the cost of his legal training.

In the year of Watmer's mayoralty death struck yet again and Maryan died in the mid-winter 'at a quarter before nyne of the clock in the morning.' She was buried in the vault of St. Peter's with her first husband. Life had to be lived fully, for a man never knew how many days God might grant him, and within three months Watmer married again. Taking time off from his civic duties, he journeyed to Ashford where on 30th March, 1609, he married Joan, the daughter of Thomas Hatch of Tenterden. There is even a record of the lease they arranged on their home at 45*s*. to Thomas Cocks who, fortunately for us, kept a diary and recorded the transaction.[3]

Late summer in a Stuart city was a time of anxiety, for plague could sweep though the crowded alleys like the vengeance of God, which some thought it was. Water drawn direct from the Stour, itself used as a sewer, brought typhus; smallpox could bring an unpleasant death

[3] *Cook's Diary, 1607–1610*, 1901.

at any time; and in winter when bubonic plague was quiescent, influenza, fostered by damp beds and wet walls, lay in wait for those too poor to go well shod or to dry out by large fires. The outbreak of 1609, probably bubonic plague, was particularly severe; assemblies were discouraged and companies of strolling players were paid to go elsewhere. Folk kept close to their houses.

Among the casualties were Alderman Robert Wynne and his wife, Watmer's sister. Wynne dictated a noncupative will naming Watmer as his executor. Meanwhile the five Wynne children were alone in the stricken house, quarantined in accordance with the regulations, and in great peril. It was Watmer, recently re-married and just relieved of his mayoral responsibilities, who translated sympathy into action and so involved himself in a web of work and charity for the orphans which was to last for years.

This part of the story has been uncovered by Dorothy Gardiner in a previous volume of this series,[4] unveiling Watmer's rescue mission with rich detail culled from the city record books kept by Watmer himself. There is no room to repeat all of it here. Suffice it to say that Watmer arranged for the children to be removed from the plague house and placed in a refuge outside the town. Their clothes were burnt and Watmer organised a group of shopkeepers to supply new outfits, although they must have known that their bills would be a long time in settlement. Watmer sent bedding from his own home for the children and made money available. Goodwife Maple was allowed 30*s*. for looking after the children for six weeks, no great sum when we consider the terror inspired by plague victims among those who had any contact with them.

During the quarantine period Watmer was planning the children's future. Joan, his wife of a few months, does not appear in the chronicle but she must have participated in many anxious discussions and agreed that Ann should be brought to join the Watmer household. Elizabeth was sent to Rochester to live, but things did not work out. Gratitude does not always provide the best mortar for relationships and Elizabeth seems to have been hard to please. She was brought back to stay in the Watmer household with her sister. Peter and John were lodged with Roland Dixon, a tailor. Thomas at seventeen, the eldest, returned to the Wynne house to keep an eye on it – perhaps not as lonely or sad as we might think, for the community spirit, stirred into action by Watmer, would have ensured that he was

[4] D. Gardiner, 'A Mayor of Canterbury: William Watmer, the Children's Friend', *Arch. Cant.*, lxi (1948), 98–105.

safe, and his brothers and sisters were only a few streets away. Watmer spent an enormous amount of time and much of his own money on the affairs of his foster children. The Wynne estate was in debt. There were letters to be written, deals to be made with creditors, journeys to London to be undertaken. There was the valuation of the Wynne property to be arranged. At the end of it all Watmer was out of pocket by £209 – but without him things would have gone hard with the Wynne children.

Meanwhile, the Watmers had their own lives to lead. Material success and the status of gentleman were confirmed by the grant of arms. About this time he and Joan moved their home to one of the towers in the city wall in Westgate parish, a property called the Rosiers, with a garden, and from the upper floors a view across the steep roofs and smoking chimneys of the city which encompassed their existence.[5] With his practice at street level, accessible to clients, and a constantly renewed supply of servants and apprentices to carry fuel to the fireplaces in the thick walls, Watmer carved out for himself an enviable niche in Canterbury life. With increasing affluence, he felt the need to escape at times from the city's bustle, and he built a house at Sturry – known ever since as Watmer's Hall (now a private hotel)[6] – and he acquired further property at Westbere. At Sturry, in rural quiet two miles outside the city, the nine-roomed mansion was equipped with the possessions of a cultivated man. The Shropshire farmer's son pored over maps including, significantly for the times, a 'great map of the world.'

According to the surviving bishop's transcripts of St. Margaret's parish registers, which start in 1615, it was fourteen years after Watmer's second marriage before the first children began to arrive, though they did not live long in the draughts of the Tower. A son was still-born in 1623; another, William, baptised in 1624, did not reach his second birthday. Joan herself died a few days after the birth of William, of puerperal fever very likely, which was such a scourge of women when antiseptics were unknown. In the nature of things, there must have been other children. Watmer's first wife may have been past child-bearing, but it cannot be accepted that there were no children of the second marriage until Watmer was fifty-four, and then two in quick succession.

Nevertheless, there is no trace of earlier children and apart from

[5] Mary Watmer applied for an extension of the lease of the Rosiers after the death of her husband. The document is in the Dean and Chapter Library.

[6] D.H.B. Chesshyre, 'Whatmer Hall', in (Ed.) K.H. McIntosh, *Sturry*, 1973.

his foster family Watmer was alone once more. A year or so later, in 1626 at Thannington, he married for the third time, on this occasion to Mary, the daughter of Giles Master, and took her back to the house in Westgate. Mary Master was in her twenties, Watmer was fifty-seven; in their marriage they were a perfect example of the 'marriage fugue': young man marries widow, when she dies he chooses a young bride; when he dies, she inherits and marries a younger husband. Giles Master was a lawyer, a wealthy member of a prolific family, burdened with six daughters. Master saw to it that all were duly married and it was carved on his memorial that 'he lived to see issue of his loins, children and grandchildren, forty-six.'

Through these relatives and a series of newly-acquired brothers-in-law, especially the Randolphs (one of his wife's sisters had married Herbert Randolph), Watmer climbed to the topmost rung of Canterbury society. Mary was twenty-seven, and he must have been delighted when she presented him with a son, whom they named Giles, after Mary's father. Giles' sister Mary was born in 1630, followed two years later by Dorothy, though Dorothy was to die. Living as he did with death a familiar shadow, Watmer felt the presence of God in all things and a sense of His personal intervention. In his grief he noted in the margin of his will: 'God hath taken away Dorothy.'

The year 1629 brought a return to earlier responsibilities, and Watmer was elected mayor for a second term. This was a time of increasing quarrels over Canterbury's Walloon and Flemish immigrants (a quarter of the population was foreign), and serious friction was beginning to develop between the city and the Privy Council, so Watmer was kept busy – as always.

The last decade of his life with Mary in the Westgate Tower was as tranquil as Watmer's civic and legal duties ever allowed him to be. At home with his two children around him – the first, perhaps, to reach maturity – Watmer could look towards the towers and spires of fourteen churches as Christ Church Cathedral cast its great shadow towards the west wall; and at night marvel at a thousand points of light as each citizen lit the lamp required by law outside his door. As the passion for flower gardens developed, Mary spent much time in their plot by the Stour, planting roses, lavender and box in orderly rows, though building work devoted to strengthening the town walls caused her much trouble. In high summer, the children were safer in the country house at Sturry.

One day in 1640 Watmer died, quite ready, 'knowing to meet such excellent company in the other world.' He was buried in the Corporation church of St. Margaret, so long associated with him, and a memorial stone was placed over his remains in the middle aisle.

Hasted saw it,[7] but the church was badly damaged in the air raid of 1942 and now wooden structures cover the memorial stones.

Giles was twelve or thirteen when his father died, but his interests were closely watched over by his grandather Giles Master until Master's death in 1644 and then by a variety of uncles on his mother's side, especially the Randolphs. They guided his entry into the Middle Temple in London in 1646, and he returned to his native city to practise as a public notary. Indeed, with his family background he could hardly have adopted any other profession.

His marriage was, of course, of the greatest importance, it being necessary to protect his inherited wealth and further strengthen family ties via a suitable liaison. This his uncle, Herbert Randolph, arranged for him. Randolph had married Elizabeth, one of the Master girls, a year before William Watmer had married another. Herbert's brother Edmund married Deborah, another sister, and the families remained closely associated. Herbert and Elizabeth, in their turn, had three daughters, Giles's cousins, and in 1652, newly qualified as a lawyer, Giles married one of them, Mary Randolph, completing a marital web of enormous strength and mutual support.

The Randolphs of Biddenden were a high-ranking family who played many parts in the history of Kent and whose explosive drive took them to more distant places. Edward, the son of Edmund Randolph and Deborah Master, had a stormy career in the development of Massachusetts, dying in Virginia. Edward's brother Bernard led an equally colourful life in the Levant and wrote a book, famous in its day, on the Greek islands. The Randolphs were to become one of America's proudest families.

Giles and Mary had only one child, Giles, born in 1654. After his son's baptism the records have little to say of the life of Giles the elder, though in his capacity as a notary his name appears from time to time on legal documents as a bondsman. Like his father, he became a procurator, and he seems to have been living in his father's house at his death in 1675, for the rooms and some of the items on both men's inventories tally to a degree.[8] Somewhat out of character for a notary, he left no will, but the administration accounts compiled by his sister (Mary Ellwin, formerly Mary Terry) seem to indicate a taste for extravagant living. He was a very different man from his father and perhaps some of the rich habits of the Randolphs had brushed off on him. At his death he was in debt to a large number of

[7] E. Hasted, *The History and Topography of Kent*, 2nd ed., xi, 231.

[8] The inventories of William Watmer and his son Giles are in the Kent Record Office.

people, including £107 to Mr Le Hoogue (a Walloon?), £70 to Thomas Ginder, and £218 to his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Randolph. His shoemaker was owed £6 and his tailor the same sum; even his servant Mary Dronts was due the large amount of £17 in unpaid wages. In spite of his debts, his sister gave him a sumptuous funeral costing £100, a huge sum compared to two to five pounds usual at the time.

At this point we must return some years to consider the subsequent careers of the Wynne boys, Giles' cousins, a little older than himself. Thomas was apprenticed to the grocery trade and John, after attending King's School, appears to have become a musician. Peter, apparently the academic one, followed his foster father and became a notary public. It was his son Robert who, according to his American will, went to Virginia where he became a seminal figure in the development of the colony, becoming speaker of the House of Burgesses there for twelve years until his death in 1675.[9] Thus, the Canterbury Wynnes, almost eliminated by plague and saved by Watmer's exertions, founded in America a family which lives on there today.

We hear no more of Giles, the only son of Giles and Mary Watmer. Such was the casualty rate for new young lives that, in spite of three marriages, William Watmer's male progeny probably ceased after the second generation. We cannot forebear to speculate, however, that young Giles, William Watmer's grandson, who vanishes away in the records, growing up in the claustrophobic environment of a procurator at the ecclesiastical court, may have been stimulated by the prospect of adventure in the American colonies to cross the sea and join the Randolphs and the Wynnes there. If he did emigrate, Giles was the first of his family to reach the American shores.

William Watmer's memorial is more enduring than most of us leave behind. Though his tomb in St. Margaret's church is covered over, his marvellous accounts – too voluminous to be fully catalogued as yet – remain a few hundred yards from the place where he laboured over their preparation. He may have found them burdensome at times but, though he did not see it that way, he was writing his autobiography day by day as his life went by.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the research for this paper, I have been greatly assisted by Mr. Duncan Harrington.

[9] J. Kukla, *Speakers and Clerks of the Virginia House of Burgesses*, 1981.