

Extracts from some Somerset Wills.

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SOME of the facts to be found in the ancient wills made by people domiciled within the county of Somerset are often singularly interesting. A will being generally acknowledged to be of all legal documents the least formal, we are often enabled through the means of one or more of these records to read in a plain and homely style of phraseology of the wants and enjoyments of those who, ten or eleven generations since, were alive and busily employed within the limits of the county. We can thus argue, from the effect to the cause, and from a mass of details of the same nature, gathered from several wills, compare the present condition of society with that of the past, and draw a just inference. Many of the earliest wills relating to this county have from time to time been copied into books, the originals being either lost or destroyed. Most of these books of collated wills, as they are styled, are in an excellent state of preservation.

In the collection of manuscripts belonging to our Society, is a book of collated wills, bearing date 1539, 1540, and 1541. From a memorandum on the inside of the cover, we are informed that the fragments which remain were rescued from a butcher's shop, where they were being used for the purpose of wrapping up chops and steaks. It may be here stated that it was formerly the practice for the Bishop of the Diocese on each visitation to prove in his own Court all the wills which were then provable within the archdeaconry. It therefore not unfrequently happens that duplicates of wills which had been proved in the Bishop's Consistorial Court at Wells, are to be found in the District Registry at Taunton. For the most

part the earliest wills in the local courts commence about the time of the first suppression of religious houses. The form first made use of was very concise, having been evidently prepared by the clergyman of the testator's parish. It commenced generally as follows:—"In the name of God, amen. In the yeare of o^r lorde God A thousande fyve hundrythe thirtie and eighte And the Eleventh day of the moneth of Aprill I A.B. of the parryshe of syke in bodie and whole of Remembrance make my testamente yn this maner, ffyrst I bequethe my sowle unto Almighty Gode our Ladie Seynt Marie and to all the Seyntes yn Heaven And my bodie to be buried in the Churchyearde." Others will their bodies "to be buried in the holie Sepulture;" while Edward Watts (25th of February, 1541) is "to be buryd in the Churche yerth off my p'ish Church of Shepton Mallett." Almost every will about this period contains a donation to the parish church or to the high altar, and likewise to the Cathedral, or, as it is sometimes termed, the "mother church," and the "churche of Seinte Androes at Welles." These bequests generally range from four pence to half a mark (six and eight pence). The "pore mens boxe" of the parish church was also frequently remembered.

In consequence of the scarcity of money, it was found more convenient to give either goods or cattle in lieu of money. Thus in 1538, after bequeathing her "sowle vnto almighty god, to our lady and all hallos," and directing that her body should be buried in the churchyard, one gives her "wedding ring vnto o^r [our] lady and to the Church her best gown." Another gave to "the hy awter ffor tythes and offeringes ffor gotten iij^d, and to the churche a shepe and to o^r [our] lady brotheres a fflockbedd." Again, in the same year, another "to o^r [our] lady brothers vj buttons of silu' [silver] and a ringe." Another, in 1540, gave "to ye repāycon of the church one aker of wheat." There are also various gifts, "to the hye Auter of my pyssh Church xij^d; Item, to iij Autors more yn

the same church xij^d; to the hye cross 1 bowshell of beans; to the hye cross lyght ij^d; to the rode lyght and the torchys xij^d; to the sepulcre lyght iij^s iiij^d; I geve to iij men to ring my knill xij^d; to ringe my knill by the space of one monethe a iij^s iiij^d.”

Through the means of bequests made in some of these wills we are often enabled either to corroborate the date of some local event, or to record some interesting fact; as by the will of John Siddenham of Dulverton, Esq., dated 29th June, 1558, who gives “to the maintence of the free skole in Welles newlie sett up a iij^s iiij^d.”

The Christian names mentioned in some of these wills are either rarely used at the present time, or have become entirely obsolete. Such for instance, as Ancilla, Argent, Emet, Ebbotte or Ebet, Emyn or Emlyn, Isote, Jacquet, Joan, Margery, Petronell, Prudence, Radigond, Sibily for Sibyl, Ursula, Wilmot, and Welthian: and such male baptismals as Jasper, Jerome, Baldwin, and Justian; while the names of Christian, Philip, and Julian appear to have been used indiscriminately for either sex. It is rather singular that I have been unable to find in any will relating to this county the name of “Alfred,” unless perhaps it appear in the corrupted form of Alford, or as once in 1557 as Althred.

The character of some of the bequests is interesting: such, for instance, as the gift, either of a hive or a swarm of bees: “I geve and bequeath vnto Margaret my daughter one Aple wringe and the powninge trowe and one swarme of bees.” On two or three occasions I have met with names given to domestic animals; as, “to my sonne a Yowke of Oxen named hart and starre, and a yearling; to Agnes my daughter an oxe named hawke;” etc. “Item, to John my sonne I bequethe ij oxen, violet and nann.” “Item, I geve to Elyno^r and Luce my daughters my blacke cowe called Colly.” “Item, one black cowe w^{ch} was given by the old moth^r [mother] mablye vnto my iij sonnes Henry, John, and Amerie,

equally to be devided betwixte them." Gifts of sheep and black cattle from a testator to his dependents were very frequent about this time. "Item, to eu'y [every] of my seruants now beyng in s'uys a Chilver Hogge;" *i.e.*, a ewe of the age of one year. "Item, to eu'ie one of my household s'r uants that shall be reteyned wth me in s'r uice at the time of my death one yewe." "Item, to Emet' my daughter in lawe all my treing vessell wth all my cofers, whitches, and plough geare," etc.; to the same Emete "my reeke of stakes," etc.

Horses, I think, must have been valuable, not only on account of their being specially mentioned in these wills, but likewise from the fact that not unfrequently there was a joint and several interest given in the same animal. An ambling mare appears to have been considered a desirable gift. "Item, to my brether my baye Amblynge mare and my beste pan' [pannier] and after his decease the mare and the panier to remayne to John his son." Cows are, as a matter of course, often referred to. Sheep are more frequently mentioned than any other domestic animal, and pigs the least: as "To my wife foure platters of pewter fowre potengers and fowre saw^{es} of pewter." "A chaffer of Latin [Latten], two pigges, all the pultrey, one yeres drye corne, two vates, two tubbes, two standers," etc.

Articles of clothing and domestic utensils were evidently valuable, from the precision with which they are referred to in each particular will. "Item, to my sone John my Blackgowne facyd w^t Blacktāne, a dowblet of Blacksatyn, a jacket of Say, a rydyng cape of Sattyng." "I bequethe to my s'r uante my black kirtell, one of my furred gowne, and a doublet of Russett satten, and one of my clothe coates, two paire hoses and my beste cappe." "A paire of White Russett Stockinges and a paire of shoes." "A paire of White Russett Breeches," etc; "my blacke hose and stockings; my workinge Daies Dublett, a paire of breeches of Browne Blue, and a sleveles jerkin."

The description, Yeoman, which is stated to have been a contraction of "Young Man" (see *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, vol. xxii. p. 198), is not often met with. In 1539, James Springe of Pitminster is called "Yomá;" and John Pime of Kilton is thus described in his will, dated the 4th of February, 1565. It was from this class—the forty-shilling freeholder—that the young men, the archers, were recruited. "You good yeomen, whose limbs are made in England, show us here the mettle of your pasture." (Henry V to his soldiers at the siege of Harfleur). The muster roll of the rape of Hastings, of the time of Edward III, formerly in the *Cartulary* at Battle Abbey, shows that all the freehold tenants, to the value of forty shillings by the year, held by service as bowmen. Offensive or defensive arms are seldom mentioned. John Tomson of Taunton (10th January, 1582) is described as "Bower" [Bowyer]. Thomas Doding, "a M'ster Maryn", of the prshe of Canyngton," in 1538 gave "vnto the s^rvaunte of the yerle of bathe a crosse bow," etc. One gives his "bigger dagger; my buckler;" another gives, "his sonne the folding borde in the hawle and my crosse bow. Item, my pistoll." In 1565 one gave to his brother his "violett coate, a Jerken clothe, a skine of Bucks lether, a bow, and xvjs" "Item, to John my brother xvjs in parte of the corne that is in the mowe, a blue cote, a jerken clothe, a bowe, a Quayver and Arrowes, and one hatte."

As the agriculturist bequeathed his special goods, so did the weaver; as when one gives his sons "two brode lomes and a osate lome," and wills "that the harnys off the saide lomes to be divided indifferently between the both." "Item, to my sone one rack close, conteynyng by estimatione a three quarter grownd, wth the rackes thereon now standinge, w^{ch} said rack close is sett lyng and beinge in Pole [Paul] Street, wth in the borowe of Taunton." "Item, I geve to my sonne George my sea chest now standinge in the hawle, and all my wearinge appell, both Wollen and Lynnen." "Item, I geve vnto the

said George ij Ossett lomes and one brode lome, and also the bed y^t he commonly vseth to lie in performed.”

One or two wills from Bridgwater and the neighbourhood give nautical information. “I geve towards the new making of a Couseway from potnell to Comidge x^{ls}. Whereas I have the third p^{te} of a shippe called the lion of Bridgwater, I geve my p^{te} of the said shippe to John Trowke as she now is.” It was the custom to introduce, previously to the conclusion of a will, a list of the credits and debts of the testator. In 1574, “I owe vnto Robert Blake of Bridgwater liij^s iiij^d, whereof he must allow me for a capstinge [capstan] in the Brave xiiij^s iiij^d, so resteth due to him xl^s.” A bootmaker records, in 1587, “that the Searcher of Bridgwater oweth me xx^s.” Occasionally a curious clause is to be met with; for example, “Item, to Robert Baker, for keeping his father-in-lawe from mariadge, vj^{li} xiiij^s iiij^d [£6 13s. 4d.]

After the restoration, the introduction to a will grew very verbose; as the date, too, brings all nearer to our own time, the few facts here recorded will, perhaps, as referring to early times, be better left distinct.
