

A curious will

On 10 December 1491 John Leeston, a substantial property owner of Tickhill, drew up his will. It was proved in the Prerogative Court at York on 11 June 1495. He requested that he should be buried in the choir of St Mary's Church, a location reserved for the most eminent inhabitants of the parish. Much of his will is as could be expected from a wealthy man of that period, but there is one curious feature.

His first concern was for his soul which he bequeathed to almighty God, the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints. The church was the first benefactor of his wealth: 12d to the high altar for tithes forgotten, his best beast for his mortuary [to cover the cost of his burial], 4d to each chaplain for his exequies, 1d to each surplice clerk on the day of his burial and on the seventh day, 8d for the light of St Katherine and 6d to each light within the church. His first named relation was his son Robert Leeston a Chaplain who was left 'a whole bed with all its necessaries and which he now has and on which he lies'. Further down the will the same, now called 'Sir', Robert is left John's place in Northgate, a close at the 'Wroo' and another one at Bagley to the service of Our Lady for evermore, an acre of land in the Southfield and an acre of meadow in the Malpas. As a celibate cleric without heirs, on Robert's death John specified which of his other two sons should receive all this land.

Alexander and Gregory, John's other sons were left a range of property. Alexander was to receive the long newest sty and two other sties standing in the corn and 2 rakes in a stable. Alexander was also to have 'my chief place with a mece [possibly adjoining land and outbuildings] in which William Cundall dwells', a house in which John Rayncott dwells in Northgate with 2 lands lying thereto, 1 messe [see mece] in Sunderland in which Robert King dwells with a rode [rod of?] land lying on Sunderland croft, and another house in Sunderland set between the mece of William Sandford of the west part and Matthew Ingam of the east part. Also listed for Alexander was a blue girdle. Alexander's son, also called Alexander, was bequeathed 6s. 8d.

Gregory received 2 rakes in the farm stable and the following property: a place in Northgate that was late the place of Sir Nicholas Dawtre priest, with the appurtenance, with a place in the same gate called 'layz podell' [possibly meaning cow's puddle/watering-hole] with a close annexed to it, a place in Castlegate, sometime the place of William Archer with the appurtenances, a cottage house in the same gate. If Gregory died the property was to go to his lawfully begotten heirs. Smaller items left to Gregory were a harnesses dagger with sangwin [blood-red] girdle and the purse hanging from it. The two brothers, acting as John's executors, were finally to receive the residue of goods not bequeathed to dispose of 'for the health of my soul'. As Gregory died before probate was granted either his heirs or, if he did not have any, Alexander would have been the beneficiary of the property allocated to Gregory.

The first woman to be mentioned in the will was Margaret Jakson who was bequeathed 1 mattress, 1 bolster, 2 pillows, 2 coverlets, 1 pair of blankets with a covering of a bed, 2 pairs of sheets, 1 'met' cloth, 2 towels, a 'garnesh' vessel with 1 laver [a bowl used for washing], 1 'salsaler' [possibly a salt cellar], 3 candlesticks, 2 brass pots, 2 'panny's', 1 gown with 1 kirtle with belt, and a red girdle. A second woman, also called Margaret, was to receive 3s. 4d. and her brother John Sexton the younger 6s. 8d.

Near the end of the will is mentioned 'my wyff Margaret' and this is the curious feature. Her only bequest is a checked girdle. It is clear that John's wife Margaret is not the same person as Margaret Jakson or Margaret Sexton. Was John's wife Margaret left destitute or were his sons expected to look after her? Had the relationship between husband and wife broken down in some way or was his wife incapacitated? Was Margaret Jakson a relation? Was Thomas grateful to her for some reason?

Were wives treated with more apparent consideration in other wills? A comparison may be made with the will of Thomas Denbigh of Tickhill which was drawn up on 18 October 1559 and proved on 9 May 1564. Thomas did not mention his soul nor did he leave money to the church (he simply asked to be buried in the churchyard), but he did leave 12d. for the 'poor men's box'. His elder son Robert received £20 in money and a pennyworth and one old gold angel (the value of this coin ranged from 6/8 to 10/-) 'in full payment of his filial portion'. The younger son James received £20 and one old angel while daughter Elizabeth received £20, one great pound, one featherbed and 2 silver spoons. Robert was also to receive the profits of all Thomas's lands in Tickhill, while James received land in Moreton in Lincolnshire and the lease of one meise [see mece] in Gainsborough held from the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln.

Thomas's wife, Helen, had her own feoffment of land in Tickhill and she was expected to look after the affairs of her younger son and only daughter until they came of age unless she remarried in which case Thomas's brother and uncle were to look after the affairs of these two children. The elder son Robert's affairs were to be overseen by Thomas's mother and brother until he came of age. The residue of all Thomas's goods was left to Helen who was named an executrix while Thomas's brother and uncle were named as 'supervisors'. Helen's treatment was thus very different from Margaret Leeston's.

John Leeston's will is published in Biatwright, L., & Hammond, P., (Falvey, H., ed.), *English wills proved in the Prerogative Court of York 1477-1499*, Richard III Society, 2015, pp. 165-167.

Thomas Denbigh's will is published in Clay, J. W. (ed.), *North country wills 1558-1604*, Surtees Society, Vol. 2, 1912, p. 17.

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