

James White and “The Grange”

I have previously written about the family pedigree of James White’s wife Hannah Cole (they were married on 20 May 1756). The Cole link brought respectability and family ties to the Hillyard, Wood, Rawlins and Barnard families. James White’s origins were opaque - he seemed to have been a young mercer from Chard but little else was known about him. How did he make such a good marriage?

The James White story is now much clearer and is quite a remarkable tale, worthy of Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations. It turns out that he was born in humble circumstances at Long Sutton on 13 August 1725, the only son of John White and his wife Mary (nee Bishop). He had one older sister, Love White, born seven years earlier also at Long Sutton. John’s parents seem to have worked in service with some of the families of the area.

At the age of about 12 years, young James found himself in service in the home of William Plush at Ash. Here he seemed to do odd jobs and run errands. William Plush was a wealthy land owner with land held around Martock, Ash, East Pennard and elsewhere. No record of his birth/baptism has been found - he never married and lived alone although he had three married sisters in Somerset. In April 1740, William Plush died and was buried at Martock on 28 April 1740.

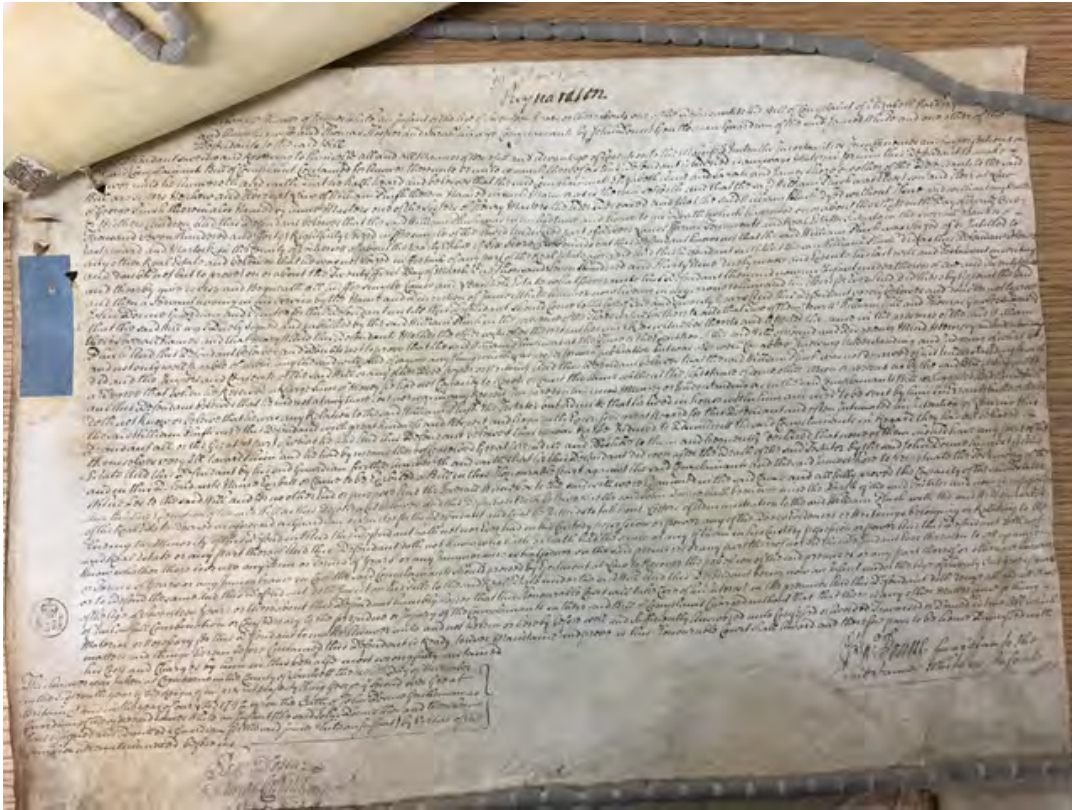
William Plush had prepared his will in March 1739 – one of the witnesses was Mary White, James’s mother, who made her mark on the will. Perhaps she also worked in the house. When the will was unsealed, the Plush family received an unpleasant shock. William Plush had a long list of beneficiaries including his sisters who received 100 or 200 pounds each. However, the will continued that after these distributions:

“...all my fee simple lands and leasehold estates whatsoever to James White a minor now living in my service to him and his heirs forever.”

This was a substantial sum at the time valued at over 8,000 pounds or 400 pounds per year in rents. Plush went on to appoint James White as his executor and a canny Crewkerne lawyer, John Donne, as his guardian. Donne arranged for James White to be apprenticed to a Chard mercer while the fuss died down.

The fuss did not die down and the three Plush sisters proposed legal action and the case looked like being tied up in the Chancery courts for a long time. There does not seem to have been much love lost between William Plush and his sisters. The year before, Gabriel Richards, the husband of Ann Plush, threatened to murder William according to an indictment filed by John Donne. He was convicted of “menacing one Plush” and sentenced to a month in prison, suspended for 12 months good behaviour.

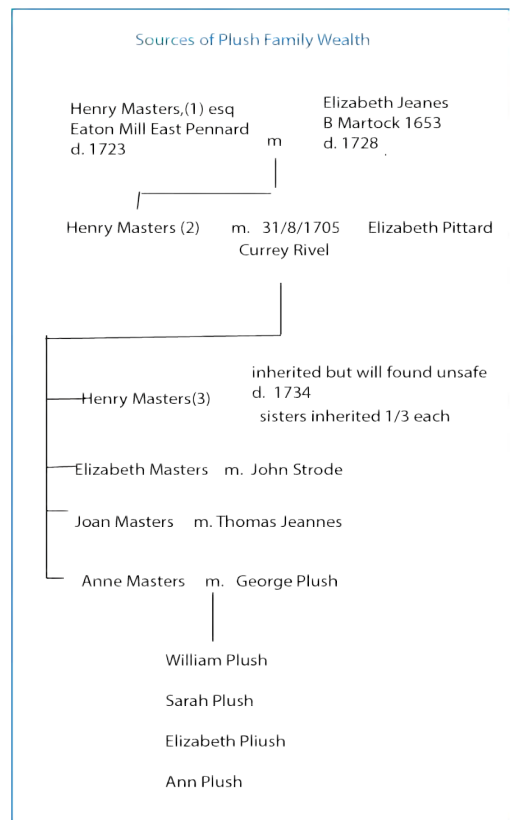
It may be that, knowing the strength of James’ case, John Donne acted to bring the case on and in 1842 the various claims were brought before the courts. These claims are now held by the National Archives in Kew.



Statement to the Chancery Court by John Donne as Guardian to James White

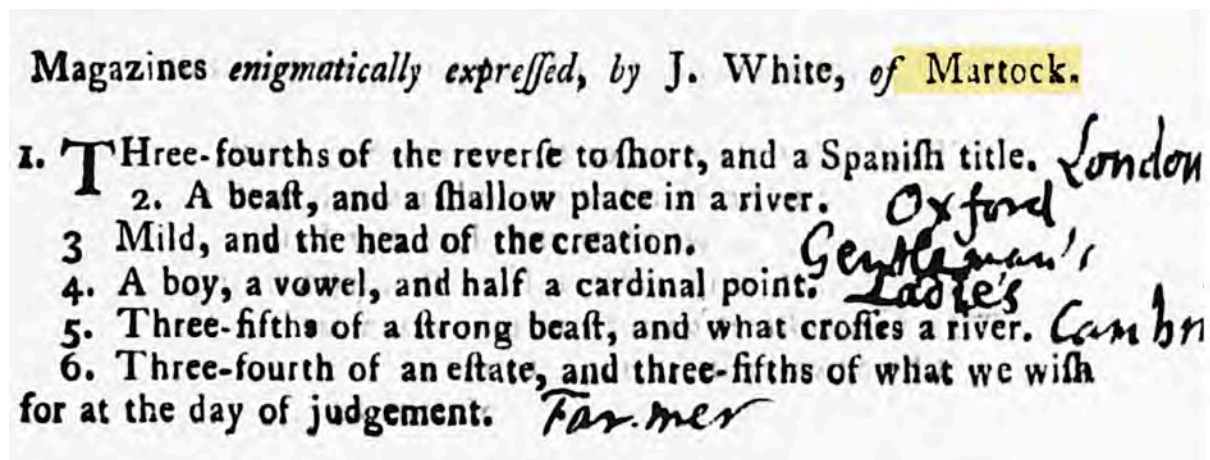
The claimants were unable to prove that William Plush was of unsound mind and the court decided that a minor of James White's age could not have acted in a fraudulent way. The family tried to emphasise that the lands had been held by their family ancestors, rather than gained by any skill of William Plush (see box), and they also claimed that White/Donne had been collecting rents over the intervening period. These strategies failed and the case was won by White. Other records at Kew show receipts from the beneficiaries dated in 1752 so the case did take some time to finalise.

Perhaps I am over-rating John Donne's legal cunning, but during the dispute process he had negotiated a loan for William Plush using some of the disputed properties to secure the mortgage. The loan was made by the wonderfully named Lady Bridget Bastard, a sister of Earl Poulet at Hinton St George – the wealthy family were clients of Donne. Having gentry on your side in a court case would not hurt your cause and so it proved.



By 1750 or thereabouts, James White had reached his majority, gained a trade qualification and won his court case. He returned to Martock wealthy and confident. He was also literate and for the rest of his life would correspond with regional newspapers either posing

or answering riddles and enigmas. He was enjoying himself! At about this time he secured the house now known as “The Grange” in Water St Martock and proceeded to enlarge and improve it.



From Weekly Miscellany 13 May 1776 (published after White's death)

As noted above, James White married well, in 1756, to Hannah Cole, daughter of wealthy and influential clothier William Cole. An historian of the Cole side, Cosmo Rawlins, noted that none of the Cole family were witnesses to this wedding. Perhaps the bruises from the controversy over the will were still raw in Martock society.

The family settled down in the re-built “Grange” and had seven children between 1758 and 1771. Unhappily, all died young except for two girls Elizabeth and Mary. James himself died at age 50 in 1775. His family tomb is located just near a holly tree south west of the church. The Grange passed to the two surviving daughters. Mary, who married William Adams, a clothier of Hurst lived in one of the Adams houses now called Hurst Barton nearby. Elizabeth, the elder daughter stayed in the house with James’ widow Hannah and married the Rev Henry Rawlins, sometime curate of All Saints Martock and vicar of Montacute. Hannah died in 1804 and in about 1814, Elizabeth moved out to live with her grandson, also a cleric, in Staplegrove near Taunton.



Grave of James White

William and Mary (White) Adams’ third son James White Adams, named after his grandfather, took over the house. James was a solicitor who had taken his articles in Taunton and London and returned to practice in Martock. James White Adams married Mary Anne Elizabeth Patten in 1824, the daughter of a prominent London solicitor and landowner in Coat.

James White and Mary Adams filled the house with ten children born between 1825 and 1841, nine of whom reached adulthood. These children would be the first generation to look outwards from Martock. Four went to Tasmania, one to South Africa, one to London

and two died early. They also moved out to the professions-lawyers, doctors, clerics and civil servants. The move was undoubtedly hastened by the bankruptcy of James White Adams in late 1859. He decamped to Scotland to declare bankruptcy (called Sequestration in Scotland). This would avoid debtor's prison in England as the professions were not yet covered by English bankruptcy law. Owing 5,000 pounds and only having 250 pounds, the house was gone from the White/Adams family. Ironically, the descent into bankruptcy was probably triggered by his own sister Mary Anne Poole (nee Adams) who had sued him in relation to another family property issue.

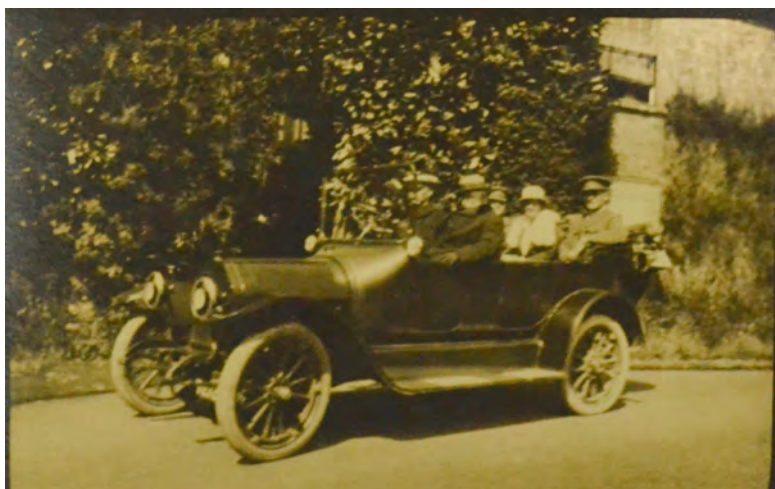


Henry White Adams 1857

The Adams children did leave their mark before leaving - Robert Patten Adams and Henry White Adams both scratched their names in upstairs windows. Henry White Adams' signature remains. Another son, Joseph Dixon Adams, carved his initials in a ham stone wall - that mark also survives.

It is not clear what happened to the ownership of the house over the next few years. It was eventually re-sold back to the Adams family by a Mr Leach, another family of Martock solicitors. This time the property was bought by James White

Adams' son Joseph Dixon Adams who was a prominent local physician and held several government medical appointments such as coroner and health commissioner for the region. He, his wife Annabella and four children lived in The Grange until one of his sons Evelyn George Beadon Adams qualified as a doctor and returned to practice in Martock. At that point, his family took over the Grange and Joseph Dixon Adams bought "The Lawn" opposite. This did not last long as Evelyn and his family left Martock for Newbury, Berkshire and in early 1919 Joseph Dixon Adams died and both properties were sold.



Joseph Dixon Adams at The Lawn with daughter Lillian and Lieutenant G R L Adams Australian Army in January 1919

On a final note, the Grange played host to numerous members of the Adams family for short and long stays. In World War 1, a new generation of Australian Adams descendants of Joseph Dixon's brothers came through as soldiers on the way to the front.

The All Saints Churchyard contains the graves of numerous residents of the Grange, all lying within about

100 metres of what was once their home. Most of the graves surround that of the first occupant James White:

James White, Hannah White and children Sarah, Hannah (2 daughters), James, Nathaniel White.

Rev Henry Rawlins Elizabeth Rawlins

James White Adams, Mary Anne Elizabeth Adams and children Ellen Coverdale Adams, Isabella Louise Louch (nee Adams)

Joseph Dixon Adams, Annabella Eliza Adams, and children Ernest Beadon Dixon Adams, Katherine A'Court Adams, Annabella Lillian Adams

Children of Robert Patten Adams – Adelaide Laura Adams, Captain Frank Bertram Adams.

References:

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Sir Mervyn Meldycott, Monumental Inscriptions Martock, Curry Rivel, 2004

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Free Reg Parish Registers <https://www.freereg.org.uk>