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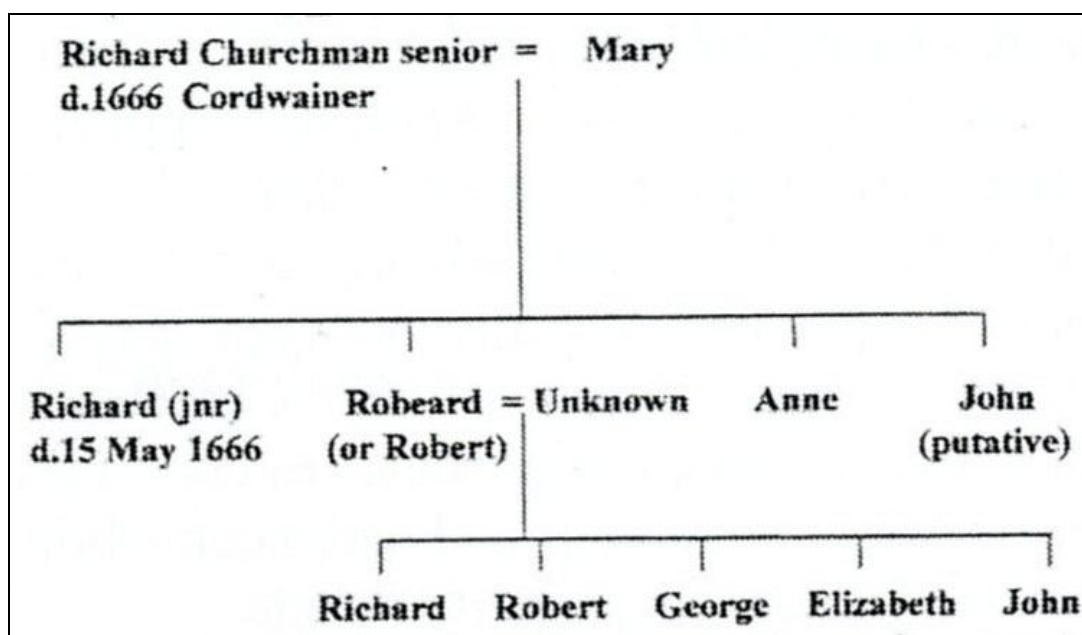
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The Churchmans of 16th and 17th century Walden, Wenden and Littlebury

© Tony Fox and Everett Churchman

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Family tree of the Walden branch of the Churchman family in early December 1666. The third generation, John Churchman is probably the one who emigrated to America. Based on ERO D/ACW 17/158 & 17/225.

People of the middling sort were rare in the 16th and 17th century. In the arable areas of Essex, most people were either farm labourers (i.e. essentially, peasants) or were part of the small, all-powerful gentry. However, there was some prosperity in north-west Essex because of cloth production (from wool), and the value of saffron. The Saffron Walden area is a good place to look for middling-sort people of the 16th and 17th centuries, and this is a story of one such family.

As today, two things were certain in the 17th century: death and taxes. Both create documents. Dr. Emmison's transcriptions of all known Essex Elizabethan wills include several involving the Churchman family in the Walden / Wenden / Littlebury area.¹ Only a small minority of people in Elizabethan Essex actually made a will; the average labourer had insufficient goods to make the costs of probate worthwhile. The survival of several wills from this family, in itself, establishes their above-average status; this is confirmed by the few land transactions that also survive for this family.

The 16th and 17th century Churchmans of NW Essex

In the 16th century, wills were drawn up by those who were seriously ill. The testator would usually dictate his wishes and, if illiterate, mark the will with a cross before witnesses. The actual writer might be a family member, friend or clergyman. In the case of the Churchman wills, no clergy were involved; this was a Nonconformist family. Rarely, someone *in extremis* might utter their dying wishes which were written down by the witnesses later; this unsigned type of will is termed 'nuncupative'.²

The Churchman wills of the 16th and 17th century

Clearly, the Churchmans had risen above the labourer class by the 1560s. The will of William Bonner, 26 January 1558/9, locates his house at Hatfield Broad Oak as that next door to John Churchman. Another neighbour, Robert Shrubbe, had the land across the back of the two properties.³ This is the first time that we hear about a Churchman in his own house, albeit on a small plot, in north-west Essex. Moreover, in 1569, a witness to the will of the Reverend John Jones (or perhaps Jonne), of Great Wenden was one William Churchman.⁴ Witnesses to wills of a clergyman were usually from a cut above the farm labourer.

In 1581, Henry Churchman, a weaver of Great Wenden, made his will while 'sic in bodye but of good and p[er]fect remembrance'. He requested burial in the churchyard of St. Mary the Virgin; the building would have looked much the same as now although the graveyard has been reorganized (see cover picture). Although Henry lived in a 'tenement' (probably rented), he also owned a few freehold houses in his own right. If Agnes, his soon-to-be-widow, would keep the freehold houses in repair, then their rents were hers for life. Their son John would take over this property after Agnes died, provided that he then paid a pound to each of his five sisters (Phyllis, Agnes, Elizabeth, Amye and Marsye). If John failed to pay them, then Henry's brother William was to sell the houses and divide the proceeds equally between the six children. This branch of the Churchman family was ascending the social rungs: they owned multiple buildings and had income both by weaving and from property rentals.

Wills are likely to identify only the reasonably well-off in the 16th century. However, we hear about one poorer member of the family in the will of Christian Westley (what finer Nonconformist name can there be?), dated 7 December 1574. Among her many bequests, she gave sixpence to one Edmund Churcheman, whom she describes as one of 'the poor folk in Hempstead'. We know of no other members of the family at Hempstead, and perhaps Edmund was a 'poor cousin'; another alternative, among Nonconformist folk, was that he had been shunned. In any case, the legacy would have been about half a day-labourer's pay and, while doubtless grateful for a good pub lunch, this could not have changed his fortunes.

Wyllyam Chyrcheman of Great Wenden signed his will on 10 October 1594.⁶ Since he was clearly an adult, and unmentioned in Henry Churcheman's will of 1581, we can infer that there were at least two branches of the Churchman family before 1600. The writer consistently uses the letter 'y' instead of 'i' in personal names (e.g., Wyllyam's son is spelled Rychard).

Wyllyam's house was at the edge of the town, and his will describes it as being 'at the turning end'. This appears to refer to the ends of the strips in an open field, where the eight-oxen plough was turned around. Other lands that Wyllyam held are described as half-an-acre at Hassoke Well, three rods of land in Fox Hole, one rod in Delve Shot, one rod abutting Littlebury Field, and one rod 'lying at overthwartlands leading to Littlebury'. There is no finer description of scattered strips in the communal fields of Great Wenden and Littlebury than in this will.

Wyllyam makes no mention of any living wife. His son, Rychard, inherited the house. Wyllyam left his daughters a total of £9 (much more than left by Henry Churcheman, whose gifts were counted in shillings). However, this money was to be paid from the rental of another freehold house that Wyllyam owned. Thus, Wyllyam, on his deathbed, did not have nine gold sovereigns in ready cash.

In 1598, Robert Churchman of Takely held three acres of arable, one acre of meadow, two acres of pasture, and three cottages. These he sold for £40.⁷ We do not know the family relationship between Robert and the rest of the Churchmans; Takeley is about 10 miles from Great Wenden.

The Churchman wills go beyond the range of Dr. Emmison's transcriptions in the 17th century. On 31 October 1626, Thomas Churchman signed a will with an extremely long, religious preamble, including an unusual commendation of his wife (Joanne) to God. Joanne had borne five sons and two daughters.⁸ They lived at Bordeaux Farm, just to the west of Little Chesterford. In 1600, together with a partner Richard French

(perhaps an attorney or a mortgagee), Thomas had paid £100 to Richard Plommer for this house, its garden, orchard, 40 acres of arable, 17 acres of meadow, and four acres of pasture in Walden and Littlebury; Thomas Churchman was now occupying a small estate, of almost petty-gentry standard. A similarity in terminology suggests that this may have been the same as the house occupied by Wyllyam Churchman in 1594: Thomas Churchman refers to Bordeaux Farm as being 'in North End' (i.e. north of Littlebury), while Wyllyam had used the term 'at the turning end'.

There are two Churchman wills for 1632. On 27 September, Nicholas Churchman of Great Wenden dictated his will. His wife was named Mary. Nicholas uses the Nonconformist term 'Tabernacle' in his religious preamble, and notes that he is writing his will 'considerynge my great age'; evidently, he was not ill. Describing himself as a 'husbandman', Nicholas held 7½ acres of arable land in Littlebury and Great Wenden. The eldest son, another Nicholas Churchman, was left 2½ acres in the open fields of Littlebury, while Ezekiell, a younger son, got a house in Great Wenden with five acres of arable. One daughter, Alyce, was left a freehold tenement and its 'close' (i.e., its garden or yard) in Great Wenden. The other daughter, Mary got three acres of copyhold arable in the two fields called Foxholes and Hassocks; these sound like an enlarged version of the open field holdings owned by Wyllyam Chycheman, some 36 years earlier. Mary (his wife) got most of the household goods. Two animals are mentioned: Ezekiell got a horse and cart, while a colt was for the daughter Mary.

Joan Churchman, unusually a woman, signed the other will of 1632 on 8 October.⁹ Joan lived at the 'Northend in the parish of Walden', thus probably not being Bordeaux Farm at the north end of Littlebury. She is probably Thomas Churchman's widow (see above). Joan left £90 in cash alone, as well as a large number of possessions such as two beds and their bed clothes, a 'presse cupboard' (for cheese-making), two pewter candlesticks and six pewter plates. Her second son Robert, was forgiven a debt of £10, while the third son, Richard, was excused from paying back £4. Richard received a black cow, and was bequeathed that quintessential north-west Essex property, 'one rood of saffron ground of the first sett [i.e., of one year's planting] which I do hold of John Lord of West Leys in the parish of Walden' (i.e., evidently copyhold). Francis Churchman, Joan's fourth son (a tanner at Duckstreet in 1646) was forgiven a £6 debt, and received another rood of saffron field, this time held of John Pomfret of Stortford. Joan's youngest son John was left £6, the bed 'in the apple chamber', and a black bullock. In spite of this wealth, Joan could only mark her will with a cross.

Three principal Churchman family members died in the year that London burned. Edward Churchman of Great Wenden signed his will 9 February 1666.¹⁰ He requested burial in the churchyard of Great Wenden, but this does not necessarily conflict with a Nonconformist belief, because the 17th

century Church of England had the monopoly on cemeteries. Edward was a weaver, and left to his son (another Edward) 'twelve q. saies [rolls of cloth] and also my working tooles belonging to my trade'. A younger son Mathew was left an 'examining table' (used to inspect the lengths of cloth before sealing for quality). Edward had purchased his house freehold from a certain John Hockly some years before. His wife Phylis received a pound and their marriage bed, about the same as he left to his daughter Sarah. Mathew, not Phylis, got the house itself, and two younger children Amy and John also had a pound each.

In 1666, Richard Churchman of Walden had the distress of seeing the death of his own son, of the same name, only to follow him a few months later.¹¹ Richard Churchman junior died on or about 15 May, and his will is nuncupative, suggesting death due to an acute illness, or trauma. Richard Churchman junior had £24 to bequeath, which went to his brother Robeard [Robert], and his nieces and nephews when 21 years of age.

Richard Churchman senior (will dated 7 December 1666) was a cordwainer (shoemaker) in Saffron Walden. His house was left to his surviving son Robert (i.e., the 'Robeard' of Richard junior's will). His widow (unnamed), a child (Anne), and five grandchildren (all Robert's), received £143 in total. The furniture was divided between them, and Richard's collection of four brass pots and kettles, were each individually bequeathed. One intriguing additional character emerges: it appears that Richard senior had another son John, to whom he left £20 'if [he] shall come and demand the same in his owne person'. Perhaps John had gone on great travels, and nothing had been heard from him for a long time.

Anne Churchman of Wenden wrote her will on 30 April 1684, and is probably the daughter of Richard Churchman senior, and sister of Richard Churchman junior.¹² Anne was now herself a widow, with three grandchildren as her only surviving relatives: John, Mary and Elizabeth Andrewes were all under 21 years old. Anne was evidently a competent businesswoman. Some years earlier, she had bought a few pieces of copyhold land and a tenement in Withersfield (about 10 miles south-east of Saffron Walden). Perhaps that was how she had invested the £40 that her father had left her. Another, unnamed daughter had died, but she was on good terms with her son-in-law Ambrose Andrewes, to whom she left her Withersfield property (and an exhortation to look after the grandchildren well). Anne had £150 cash which was equally divided among the grandchildren. Her possessions included a huge amount of linens and textiles, two silver spoons, a gold ring, a collection of brass pots that was larger than her father's, six stools, a 'brass warming pan', a copper, several pewter plates, several pewter dishes, a porringer, a press (for cheese), a cupboard, and some beehives. These valuable objects are shared between the grandchildren and friends outside the family. Anne is also the first Churchman that we come across making a legacy to charity:

twenty shillings were for the poor of Great Wenden. Today, Anne's grave slab is the oldest legible memorial in Wendens Ambo parish church, and Ambrose's memorial is high on the wall above.

The last (and longest) will in the series is that of John Churchman, a baker in Saffron Walden, dated 5 October 1704.¹³ His wife was named Mary. After a century and a half, the family was still using the same few forenames: his children were Robert, Mary, and Anne. John left twenty shillings to 'Mr William Paine, Minister of the blessed Gospel & Pastor of the Church of Christ (in Waldon aforesaid) of wch I am lately a member'. This is not the parish church, which was (and is) dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin. Clearly, Nonconformists had now achieved a certain measure of toleration. John Churchman asks 'to be buried in the Yard belonging to the Meeting in this Towne to wch Mr. Pain apptaineth desiring that my body be decently interred w[i]thout any oration at the Grave as is usuall'.

Here, then is clear proof that the Walden branch of the Churchmans were Quakers, and the length of this will (about twelve times that of Richard Churchman junior) is partly due to the large amount of religious sentiment that it expresses. John had married twice; it is unclear which children were from which marriage. John left his house, near the Saffron Walden Butter Market, to his eldest son Robert, while land elsewhere within Walden parish was left to his widow. His daughters Anne and Mary were to receive £50 each upon his widow's death. Somewhat suspiciously, John makes his son Robert guarantee these payments, and authorizes his daughters to take back the house from Robert if their brother failed to pay them. John had a second freehold house (purchased of one John Wale) which was the business premises, containing 'the tooles and implem[e]nts belonging to my bakeing and maulting office'. However, John Churchman still kept his hand in the old family business, possessing a 'Boulting mill, Boulting cloth, Brine partitions screens, shovells, bushells...tooles and Impl[e]m[e]nts', all of which are used for cloth-making, and were left to his eldest son Robert. Bequeathed luxury goods included a silver cup and spoon belonging to his first wife, both marked 'R. S.', which is probably a clue to her name. The children received about £60 in total, as well as various keepsakes, such as a gold ring, or a silver spoon. The gold ring had an inscription: 'Goode neede and bee a plead' (this phrase suggests that the ring was more than a century old, and probably means something like 'One needs God, and one should be a supplicant to him').

What are the underlying trends in these documents?

Firstly, during this century and a half, there is a pattern of gradually increasing wealth in this family. Secondly, as time passes, and while still associated with the cloth-making trade, the family's professions diversify into arable and livestock farming, shoemaking, saffron growing, baking,

and malting. Lastly, the Nonconformist sentiments become more obvious with time; however, this may be due more to an evolving, more liberal environment than to any increase in the family's Nonconformist persuasions.

How did it all turn out?

Commonly, families achieve prominence for three or four generations, but then disappear either due to the lack of a male heir (hence the surname becomes lost), or dispersal of the family assets, and descend again into the lower classes. What happened to the Churchmans of Walden? The most remarkable scion was John Churchman, born about 1665 near Saffron Walden. His older relative, another John Churchman of Greater Wenden, was a local leader among the Quakers, in whose house meetings were held. John (the elder) was fined for Nonconformity, together with Matthew Day of Newport, and Anthony Pennistone (Pennistone was the Walden Meeting's archivist, and his records are still in the Meeting House at Saffron Walden). Furthermore, on 13 January 1661, John Churchman the elder, with two relatives (Robert Churchman and George Churchman) was arrested at a Meeting at Hadstock, and imprisoned in Colchester Castle for a considerable time. Thus, when John Churchman the younger emigrated in 1682 on the ship *Amity*, it was possibly not only to seek his fortune in the colonies, but also to live in an environment of religious freedom. In any case, the *Amity* arrived in the Delaware estuary on 3 August 1682, and John Churchman the younger quickly became a leading Quaker in Nottingham, Pennsylvania.

The passengers on the *Amity* also included Thomas and Sara Seary (Cerie) and their children Hannah, Richard, Mary, and Miriam. Seary was a farrier, and died in 1683, shortly after his arrival in America. In 1696, John Churchman married Hannah Seary, now 20 years old, at Philadelphia. They had ten children, and joined William Penn in settling the 'Nottingham Lots' near Chester, PA, as well as establishing the 'The Brick Meeting House' in Chester. This meeting house is still in use today, and the 300th anniversary of William Penn granting the Nottingham Lots to the Friends was celebrated there in September 2001, with several of John's and Hannah's descendants in attendance.

Members of the Churchman family migrated elsewhere in North America for various reasons. Many could not swear an oath of allegiance, and Virginia did not require this, while Pennsylvania did. Others were shunned in Pennsylvania for various infractions, including marrying non-Quakers. Moving to North Carolina / Eastern Tennessee, Texas, the Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), Arkansas, Missouri, and Indiana, these Churchmans generally left the Society of Friends for other Protestant churches.

Three of John Churchman's ten children, John, Thomas, and William, also had sons to carry on the family name. John Churchman (born 1705) was a surveyor, and then became a famous Quaker minister whose travels in America and England are chronicled in a published Journal. This minister's son George, born 1730, was also a land surveyor and many maps of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Delaware bear his name. George Churchman's son, John Churchman (born 1753) was a surveyor and scientist. In 1790, his book, *Variation Chart or Magnetic Atlas, and a Stereographic Projection of Spheres, on a Plane of the First Magnetic Meridian, on a new plan*, claimed to solve the problem of longitude by using variations in the earth's magnetic field. His correspondence on this theory with Thomas Jefferson, then Ambassador to France, is in the University of Virginia Library, and he was elected to the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences for this work. However, John Churchman was eventually expelled by the Society of Friends for business irregularities, and he died during the ocean crossing from England to America, in 1805.

The descendants of John Churchman the emigrant have maintained their middle-class status in America. They include scientists, engineers, teachers, businessmen, and doctors. In spite of losing his sight when aged 18 years, William H. Churchman (1818-82) founded the Indiana Institute for the Education of the Blind in Indianapolis, retiring as its superintendent in 1879. Vincent Tapp Churchman (1824-1872) graduated from Virginia Military Institute, and became a prominent Virginian physician. Francis McClintock Churchman (1833-91) was a noted banker; his beautiful home, named 'Hillside', stands today just outside Indianapolis. Vincent T. Churchman (1867-1941) was surgeon and President of the Churchman Eye and Ear Hospital, Charleston, West Virginia. In 1999, a website for the Churchman family was established. Listed are 956 persons with the Churchman surname, and about 7200 descendants of John Churchman, the emigrant from Saffron Walden, are known.¹⁴

Meanwhile, many Churchmans stayed near Walden. In the 1700s, Robert Churchman was a master baker and was an officer of the town corporation. Fortuitous marriages into the Essex gentry were made, and Churchmans appear in the 18th century wills of the Ruggles family of Willingale Spain. In the 19th century, Churchmans in Saffron Walden were also described as mealman or cordwainer (shoe maker); whether this still counts as 'middling sort', however, is debatable, because shoemakers were often as poor as common labourers. However, other branches of the family did well: for example, Sir Samuel Ruggles-Brise paid a substantial dowry for a female member of the family.

[In 2002], one business in Wendens Ambo bears the Churchman name. The local telephone directory lists another twelve Churchmans. In Walden, Wenden and Littlebury, whether they bear the Churchman name or not,

there must be many more, so far unidentified, descendants of this family of 16th century weavers.

Notes

1. The late Dr. F.G. Emmison's volumes of *Essex Wills* are an achievement in Elizabethan history unequalled in any other English county; the volumes were published by the New England Genealogical Society and the Essex Record Office (ERO). The wills referred to are (Emmison volume/number): 1/690, 1/876, 2/713, 3/726, 4/567, 5/116, 5/695, 5/1051, 6/37, 6/878, 7/528, 8/518, 8/606, 10/182, 11/327, and 11/797. No. 7/528 is ERO D/ACW 3/268. No. 10/182 is ERO D/ABW9/158 (but see note 8 below). ERO D/ABW 51/56, D/ACW 10/190, 11/275, and 17/225, D/ABR 8/61, and 11/372, and D/ACR 12/48 are Jacobean, Stuart or Queen Anne. The two fines referred to are Vol. VI, 149, CP25(2)/138/1750 and 165, CP25(2)/139/1756: the former provides the name of Robert Churchman's wife, Rose. This was an era when spelling was entirely phonetic; this family spelled their names Churchman, Churcheman and Chyrcheman, or, rather, those to whom they dictated their wills did.
2. McIntosh M.K., *A Community Transformed* (1991), pp 88-89 & *passim*.
3. Emmison, *Wills* 1: 876.
4. This clergyman was not the vicar of Great Wenden (Newcourt R., *Repatorium Ecclesiasticum Parochiale Londinense (sic)* (1710), 2: 648.
5. Emmison, *Wills* 10/182.
6. Emmison, *Wills* 7:528 and ERO D/ACW 3/268.
7. Emmison, *Feet of Fines*, 6: 149 Michaelmas 1598, no.3.
8. This will may be ERO D/ABW 9/158, with a catalogue dating error.
9. ERO D/ABW 51/56 for Nicholas Churchman. ERO D/ACW 11/275 for Joan Churchman.
10. ERO D/ABR 8/61.
11. Richard Churchman, junior: ERO D/ACW 17.158 and ERO D/ACW 17/225, for his father.
12. ERO D/ABR 11/372.
13. ERO D/ACR 12/48.
14. Churchman is not a common name and Quakers keep good records.