

John Wood and Mrs Chivers' Garden

David Crellin and Penny Gay

The discovery of the John Wood/Jenny Withers marriage in London in January 1725/26 introduced a new perspective to the debate about the possible meaning of John Wood's adopted coat of arms. Instead of being a fanciful design dreamed up by John Wood himself, it appears that it could have been more genealogically authentic than previously had been supposed.

Yet despite the obvious relevance of this marriage to the researchers, it was initially difficult to believe that the John Wood who married Jenny Withers could have been the man who later settled in Bath and became an eminent architect. The reason for this uncertainty is that, despite the promising evidence of the similar signatures,¹ the idea that John Wood the architect had married in London in early 1726 and that his wife was named Jenny Withers contradicted a well established belief that he had married someone in Bath, probably after May 1727, who was the daughter of a Mrs Chivers.

Top of the reading list for anyone with an academic interest in John Wood, are Walter Ison's *Georgian Buildings of Bath from 1700 to 1830* and also *John Wood: Architect of Obsession* by Tim Mowl and Brian Earnshaw. These authors mainly examined and discussed Wood's talents, experiences and achievements as a surveyor, town planner, architect and builder, rather than personal events in his life. Mowl also detailed the trials and tribulations of Wood's turbulent career and provided a clear insight into the way his obsessive beliefs influenced, inspired and shaped his ambitious and hard-won schemes.

Ison appears to be the first to have included an otherwise unrecorded biographical detail relating to the identity of Wood's wife. This small nugget of information, included in an appendix to the 1980 revised edition of his book, is the suggestion that a Mrs Chivers, who in the late 1720s seemed determined to keep possession of her garden near the Cross Bath, was John Wood's mother-in-law.²

Ison seemed convinced that John Wood must have married a Jane Chivers very soon after arriving in Bath in May 1727. A son, John, was baptised at Bath Abbey in February 1728, scarcely 9 months later, and the baptism appears in the Abbey register. Yet no record has been found of a marriage anywhere, at the relevant time, between John Wood and Jane Chivers. Nor is there evidence of the birth at an appropriate date of a Jane Chivers likely to have been directly related to the Chivers family of Bath who had long held the lease of a house and garden on the site of the Duke of Chandos's proposed new building development.

It is clearly necessary, therefore, to return to original sources to determine the basis of Ison's belief:

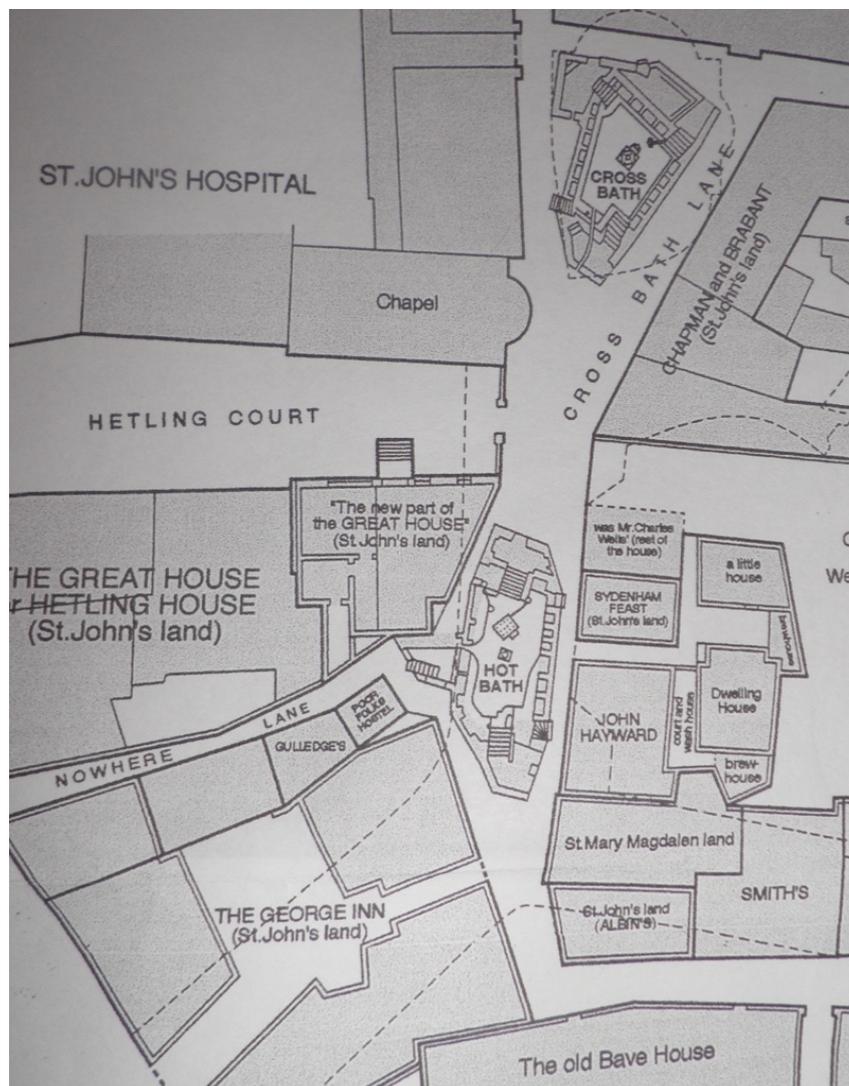
*Jane Wood's identity seems to be established by the evidence of a letter dated October 9th, 1729, wherein the Duke of Chandos instructed the architect-builder Edward Shepherd to bargain with Wood's mother-in-law, Mrs Chivers, for her garden adjacent to St John's Hospital. Incidentally, Chandos failed to obtain the coveted site and in 1740 Wood himself built a large house on it.*³

Close scrutiny of a digitised image of the original letter cited above,⁴ kindly sent from the Huntington Library in California, fails to prove how it seemed to establish Jane Wood's identity. The all-important letter certainly contained a message sent from the Duke of Chandos to a Mr Shepherd and mentioned John Wood and Mrs Chivers' garden – but it mainly expressed the Duke's annoyance that Wood had not yet followed his instructions to make the necessary arrangements to have that particular piece of land surveyed, and also his concern about ownership of a wall between Mrs Chivers' garden and the adjoining land now belonging to him. There was no direct reference to Mrs Chivers being John Wood's mother-in-law. Nor was any such reference found in any of the other eight letters sent to Mr Edward Shepherd by the Duke of Chandos.⁵

Writing about the same topic in *John Wood: Architect of Obsession*, Mowl drew attention to a further significant detail that seemed to substantiate Ison's suggestion concerning the Chivers/Wood family link – the fact that, on arriving in Bath in 1727, John Wood had lived in lodgings 'almost next door to Mrs Chivers.'⁶

The site of this lodging house was described by John Wood himself, who wrote in his *Essay* that while surveying the area around the Baths, prior to beginning work on the Chandos development, he had noticed that water was finding its way under the house, which was 'situated at the South-East Corner of the [Hot] Bath; and at that time it was Rented of Mr Milo Smith, by one Mr Silcock.'⁷

Although the map below illustrates the area in the 1770s – more than forty years after John Wood had lodged there – the piece of land on which Mr Milo Smith's house would have been situated is still clearly marked. Archive documents prove that during the relevant time in the late 1720s, Mr Milo Smith held the lease of a property on St Mary Magdalen land, which can be located very near the south-east corner of the Hot Bath.⁸



Section of a Map showing the Bimbery Area of Bath in the 1770s⁹
By kind permission of Mike Chapman, Cartographer,
and The Survey of Old Bath

Being so close to the Hot Bath, this building would clearly have been very susceptible to water finding its way beneath it.

In *John Wood: Architect of Obsession*, Mowl also put forward his own interpretation of the whole chapter of events centred around ownership of Mrs Chivers' garden. He suggested that the only reason that John Wood survived for so long, despite his many architectural blunders, over-spending and his habit of upsetting people, might '*possibly be explained by the use he made of Mrs Chivers, his mother-in-law*' and concluded that the way negotiations were conducted in an attempt to secure Mrs Chivers' garden proved that '*Chandos saw Wood as the key to a deal and equally clearly Wood was reserving that deal for himself.*'¹⁰ Mowl's theory seems to concur with Walter Ison's earlier hint that there might have been a deliberate motive behind John Wood's apparent delaying tactics.

Another meticulous Bath researcher, Jean Manco, tracing the history of St John's Hospital in *The Spirit of Care* (1998), also seemed convinced that John Wood had married Jane Chivers:

*John Wood's work for Chandos did bring him one joy. While he laboured on the site, he lodged at the Crown beside the Hot Bath. He was ideally placed to woo Jane, the daughter of Walter Chivers, who lived in the Middle House. It must have been a whirlwind courtship, for their son John was christened on 25 February 1727/28.*¹¹

A further point of interest here is that John Wood's lodging house is identified by Manco as the *Crown*.¹² This fact is substantiated by three separate pieces of evidence found during research of the Bimbery area carried out by the Survey of Old Bath:

- In his Will – Probate November 1668 – Samuel Bave bequeathed to one of his sons 'two messuages' – one of which was described as the *Crown*, on St Mary Magdalen land.¹³
- The site of one of these messuages, occupied by Dr Bave's widow in 1669, is confirmed as being immediately south of the area named on the Bimbery Map as 'JOHN HAYWARD' – i.e. on St Mary Magdalen land.¹⁴
- The site of the property leased by Mr Milo Smith (in which John Wood lodged) was to the north of the area marked on the Bimbery Map as St John's land (ALBIN'S) - i.e. on the same St Mary Magdalen land.¹⁵

Two further details in Manco's account of the events surrounding the wrangling over Mrs Chivers' garden are especially pertinent. She confirmed that in fact no building was carried out on the site of the garden itself until after November 1753,¹⁶ which casts considerable doubt on Ison's theory that in 1740 John Wood had built a large house on it. She also wrote that, in a letter to the Duke of Chandos in November 1729, Wood had suggested the idea of approaching his *mother-in-law* with an offer of £200.¹⁷ However, since no source reference was cited to establish the original wording of Wood's letter, it appears that Manco's identification of Mrs Chivers as John Wood's mother-in-law may well have been her own elaboration, based on the theory widely accepted at the time. Had any letter written by John Wood himself actually contained the ultimate proof that Mrs Chivers was his mother-in-law, then surely it would have been evidence worthy of an exact reference. In his reply to John Wood's letter, the Duke wrote that he was '*well pleased with the hope you give me of your being able to agree with Mrs Chivers for her garden.*'¹⁸ So there was certainly no confirmation there to suggest that Mrs Chivers and John Wood were related.

Yet the real puzzle still remained unresolved. Did John Wood marry Jenny Withers in London in 1725/26 – or was he swept off his feet by Mrs Chivers' daughter Jane (of whose existence there is no trace) as soon as he arrived in Bath? Why might Ison have felt so sure of the validity of this relationship that he simply mentioned it as though it were already a foregone conclusion? Possibly, of course, there could simply have been some confusion over the similar-sounding surnames 'Withers' and 'Chivers'.

Unlikely as it may seem, a case heard at the Court of Chancery in 1744 and briefly summarised in the National Archives' Discovery catalogue,¹⁹ just might suggest another possible explanation.

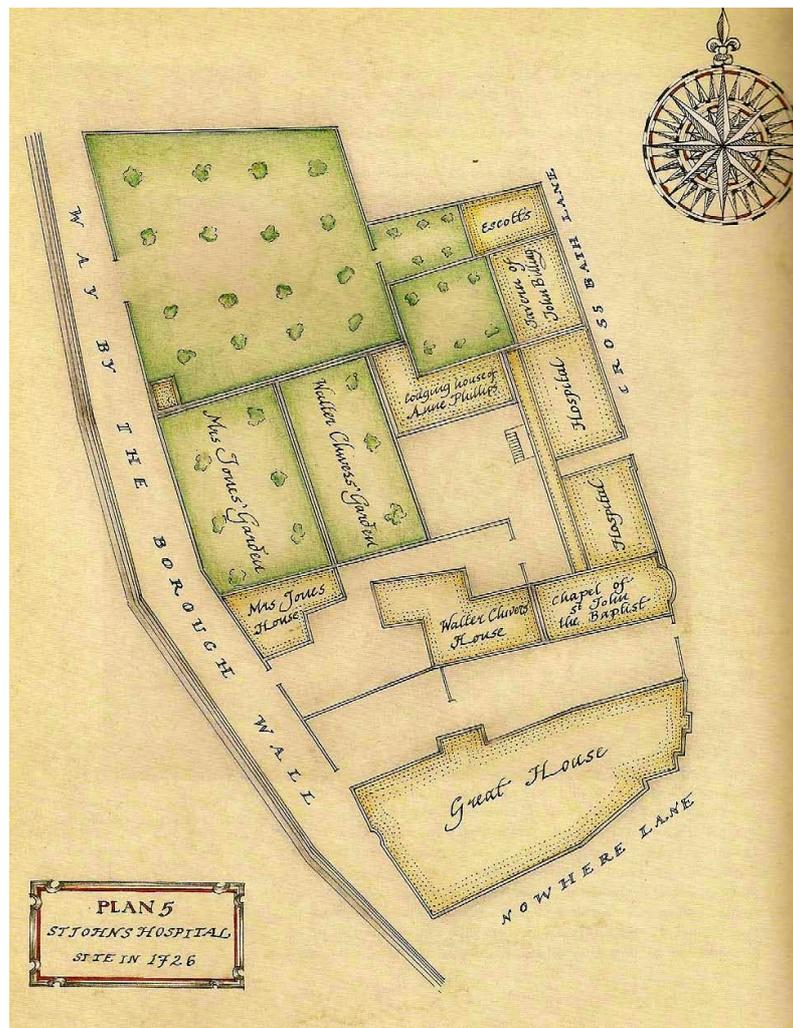
The details of the Chancery record entitled Sheppard v Dyer would be superfluous here, but for the fact that the names and identities of some of those involved in this family dispute have proved to be relevant. The different spellings of the surname Sheppard are those recorded in the original documents.

Plaintiffs: Mary Sheppard (widow of Edward Sheppard, deceased and formerly Mary Chivers, spinster, daughter of Walter Chivers, deceased), Samuel Davies, peruke maker of Bath, Somerset and Mary Davies his wife and Ann Sheppard, aged 18 years (by the said Mary Sheppard, widow, her mother)

Defendants: Edmund Dyer, John Dyer, Edward Sheppard and John Chivers

The fact that Mary, a daughter of Walter Chivers, had married someone named Edward Sheppard, could possibly have been the reason that a Mrs Chivers came to be identified as John Wood's mother-in-law, but to justify that idea, it was essential to find evidence that Mary Sheppard's deceased father, Walter Chivers, might in some way have been involved in the contentious issue of Mrs Chivers' garden.

The Spirit of Care includes a series of very attractive coloured drawings depicting plans of the St John's Hospital site throughout its history. Of particular relevance to the present research is Plan 5, which is reproduced below.²⁰

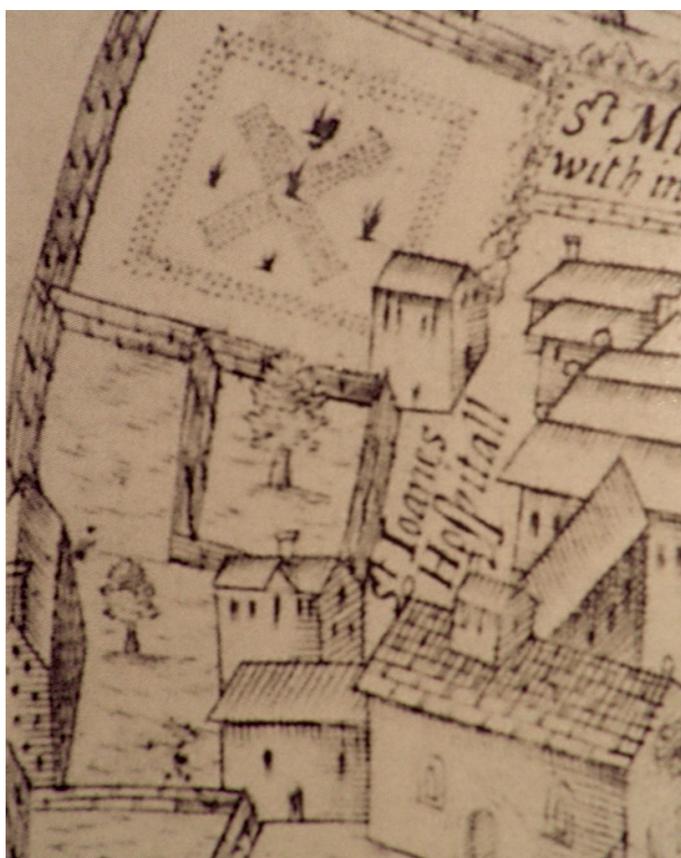


St John's Hospital Site in 1726
Cartography by Catherine Horton
Courtesy of St John's Hospital Archives, Bath

Each plot of land or property on the St John's Hospital site in 1726 has been clearly identified, including two locations marked Walter Chivers' house and Walter Chivers' garden. The garden occupied a central position, next to Mrs Phillips' lodging house, so it is plain to see how important it would have been to the Duke's proposed building development.

The position of this house and garden is confirmed in a Deed dated the 25th March 1717, in which John Chapman, Master of St John's Hospital, leased to Walter Chivers of Bath, gentleman, for the natural lives of John Chivers, Walter's son, aged about 32, who had been baptised in Burrington, and also Anthony Biggs of Bath, aged about 30, and John Ford, aged about 18, son of Richard Ford,

... all that messuage and tenement with appurtenances, in the City of Bath which extendeth from the West side of the Chappel called St John's Chappel to which the said tenement adjoyneth unto the highway leading by the Walls of the City commonly called the Borough Wall AND all that garden belonging to the said tenement lying on the North side thereof AND the Courts or Backsides now in the possession or occupation of the said Walter Chivers. ²¹



A 17th Century illustration of the house leased to Walter Chivers in 1717 ²²

Mrs Chivers' enclosed garden can be seen immediately to the north of it
Courtesy of Heritage Services, Bath & North East Somerset Council

The fact that Walter Chivers' son John must have been baptised in Burrington in about 1685 led to further discoveries about this family. An image from the original register of Weston All Saints' Church, Bath confirms that on the 2nd of August 1676, a Walter Chiver [*sic*] of Chancery Lane, London married Mary Lemman of Burrington, Somerset. ²³ There was no trace of a marriage record for Edward Shepherd and Mary Chivers – but the Burrington parish register did include several baptisms and burials from 1701 onwards of children of an Edward and Mary Shepherd. ²⁴ None of them was named Jane.

From available records it was therefore possible to estimate that Walter Chivers had probably been born in about 1655. In which case, by 1727, he would have been over seventy years old. He died in 1731.²⁵ If there had been any proof that a Jane Chivers, supposed to have married John Wood in 1727, ever existed, then she would surely have been born in the early 1700s and might therefore have been a granddaughter, not a daughter, of Walter Chivers. However, Mrs Chivers, who was so unwilling to give up her garden near the Cross Bath, could well have been the wife of Walter Chivers and therefore the mother-in-law of the Edward Sheppard, deceased, named in the 1744 Chancery record.

There is much to speculate about in the saga of the Chivers family, but it does seem to be an intriguing coincidence that Mary, daughter of Walter Chivers, married a man named Edward Shepherd – exactly the same *name* as the architect whom the Duke of Chandos had previously employed as surveyor in the building of his house, Cannons, in 1723. Furthermore, as a result of John Wood's apparent reluctance to cooperate with the Duke in any schemes to acquire Mrs Chivers' garden, this same surveyor/architect, Edward Shepherd, received several demanding letters from the Duke in 1729/30, clearly prevailing upon him to help with negotiations to gain possession of this coveted plot of land.

The discovery that Walter Chivers was the father-in-law of an Edward Shepherd could therefore well have caused confusion, even though it soon became clear that there were definitely two different men named Edward Shepherd. The Chancery document, dated 1744, provides proof that Mary Shepherd was by then a widow and the Burrington parish register confirms that a Mr Edward Shepherd was buried there in 1731; Edward Shepherd, the architect, is known to have lived until 1747, so could not have been the husband of Mary Chivers.

Nevertheless, in the years between 1727 and 1730, when the Duke was desperately anxious to secure Mrs Chivers' garden, there would have been an Edward Shepherd who was the son-in-law of Walter Chivers, and another Edward Shepherd who was the surveyor/architect called in to speed up negotiations over this vital piece of land and, in addition, believed to be delaying any such negotiations, there was another architect named John Wood. No doubt details of the story of Mrs Chivers and her garden were much discussed at the time - and would then have been handed down from one generation to another. Is it possible that, at some point in the delicate thread of communication, Edward Shepherd, son-in-law of Walter Chivers, was wrongly identified as Edward Shepherd, architect, who himself became confused with John Wood, also an architect; that the original facts were increasingly misconstrued, until, in the final distorted version of the story, Mrs Chivers was widely reported to have been John Wood's mother-in-law?

So far, except perhaps for the more obvious possibility that the surname 'Withers' was at some point mistaken for 'Chivers', there seems to be no other explanation to account for Walter Ison's conclusion that the letter cited by him from the Duke of Chandos to Edward Sheppard somehow established the fact that John Wood married someone named Jane Chivers. It may sound paradoxical, but possibly the most significant evidence to emerge from this piece of research is the noticeable lack of proof to support this theory. There was simply no trace of any young woman named Jane whose mother was likely to have been the Mrs Chivers who seemed determined to keep possession of her garden near the Cross Bath.

Similarly, there is no record of a marriage taking place anywhere in England between a John Wood and Jane Chivers and no reference to a Jane Chivers or Wood to be found in any Chivers family documents. Furthermore, no reliable source references have been cited so far by any researcher to establish, beyond all doubt, that there was a family connection between John Wood and Mrs Chivers.

In the light of the John Wood/Jenny Withers marriage in London in 1725/26 and the impaled Withers' arms on John Wood's heraldic seal, the present conclusion has to be that, barring new evidence, the belief that John Wood married a Jane Chivers cannot be tenable.

References and additional notes:

- 1 historyofbath.org: David Crellin and Penny Gay: John Wood's Coat of Arms; July 2018
- 2 Walter Ison: *The Georgian Building of Bath from 1700 - 1830*; first published by Faber & Faber Ltd. (1948); Kingsmead Press, Bath, Revised Edition (1980): Appendix VI: Some Further Biographical Details of the Woods
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Chandos Letterbooks: Letter to Edward Shepherd: 9 Oct. 1729*: Huntington Library, California: *Stowe Manuscripts: ST57: Vol. 33, f. 275/6*
- 5 *Ibid: Letters to Mr. Shepherd, Surveyor*; Huntington Library, California: *Stowe Manuscripts: ST57: Vol. 34, p. 334 (9 May 1730); Vol. 35, f. 64, 88, 91, 105, 122, 142, 156 (June-July 1730)*
- 6 Tim Mowl and Brian Earnshaw: *John Wood: Architect of Obsession*; Millstream Books, Bath 1988, p.35;
- 7 *John Wood: Essay Towards a Description of Bath: 1765 Edition*, p. 265
- 8 Milo Smith: *Leases of land and property near the Hot Bath*: Bath Record Office: BC/6/2/3/1273 - 30 MAR 1716; BC/6/2/3/1287 - 31 DEC 1716; BC/6/2/3/1453 - 6 JUL 1724
[William I. Smith, known as Milo Smith, Alderman and one time Mayor of Bath, died in October 1735, aged 53. He was buried in the Church of St Thomas A Becket, Lyncombe and Widcombe](#)
- 9 Section of the map: *The Bimberly Area of Bath in the 1770s*; produced by The Survey of Old Bath for the Spa Project Team 1999; researched by Mike Chapman and Elizabeth Holland; cartography by Mike Chapman. Published for the Survey of Old Bath in 2001 in the booklet 'Bimberly and the South-Western Baths of Bath'
- 10 See reference ⁶
- 11 Jean Manco: *The Spirit of Care* (1998); published by St John's Hospital, Bath (1998); p. 106
[Several source references are given to support the information quoted from p. 106, but although these substantiate the location and identity of John Wood's lodging house and its proximity to the house leased to Walter Chivers, and also confirm the baptism date of John Wood's son, they do not cite any source to prove that John Wood married a daughter of Walter Chivers named Jane.](#)
- 12 Jean Manco: 'The History of Bimbury', Plot 15; in 'Enquiry into Somerset Charities 1734-5', 1, 80; (Bath Records Office)
[The former Crown, on St Mary Magdalen's land, was pulled down in 1804](#)
- 13 *The Beacon*; February 1899: *Famous Houses of Bath and District, No 13*; Dr Samuel Bave's House, Lower Borough Walls, Bath
[In this article, Meehan confirms that Dr Bave also held a property known as the Crown, which was situated on St Mary Magdalen land](#)
- 14 BC/6/2/3/417: Lease dated 10 August 1669: property north of St Mary Magdalen land granted to John Fisher
[Mrs Hester Bave, widow, held a property 'to the South' – i.e. on St Mary Magdalen land](#)
- 15 Previous catalogue number: StJH4/7/127: Lease dated 25th March 1717: property on St John's Land granted to Francis Carne
[Mr Milo Smith held lease of a property 'to the north ...' – i.e. on St Mary Magdalen land](#)
- 16 *The Spirit of Care*; p. 106
[In November 1753, following the death of Walter Chivers' son, John, the lease of the site of Mrs Chivers' garden was granted to Mary Shepherd, Walter's daughter and the widow of Edward Shepherd. \[StJH/7/114\]. Soon afterwards, a new lease was drawn up, granting this plot of land to William Sainsbury. Manco cites BMCA StJH/7/113-4: Lease of 3 Chapel Court, 14 October 1760, which includes a plan showing Mr Sainsbury's house adjoining.](#)
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *The Duke of Chandos to John Wood: 23 November 1729*; *Chandos Letterbooks*: Huntington Library, California: *Stowe Manuscripts: ST57, Vol. 33, f. 340*

Manco's source reference for the Duke's letter to John Wood is 'Bath: A Social History 1680 - 1850' by R.S. Neale: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd. 1981; p. 139. Although Neale transcribes the entire letter sent by the Duke of Chandos to John Wood (pp.137 - 139), he makes no reference to the letter previously sent by John Wood to the Duke on the 19th November 1729.

¹⁹ *National Archives: Reference: C11/2098/11; 1744 Chancery Case - Sheppeard v Dyer*

²⁰ *Spirit of Care; p. 102: Illustration 9, Plan 5: St John's Hospital Site in 1726: cartography by Catherine Horton*

²¹ *St John's Hospital Deed: John Chapman, clerk and Master of St John's Hospital, to Walter Chivers of Bath, gentleman: 25 March 1717: Ref. St John's Hospital Archives; StJH/CP/4/1/1*

²² *Detail from Savile's 17th Century Map of Bath; first exhibited in Bath in 1992;*

²³ *ancestry.co.uk: Somerset, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, 1531-1812; Parish register of Weston All Saints, Bath - original images*

The surname written in the register could well be interpreted as CHIVER, but has been transcribed as CHINER on ancestry.co.uk and as OLIVER on familysearch.org. The additional detail that the bride was of the parish of Burrington suggests that the Walter 'Chiver' and Mary Leman who married in 1676 were very likely the parents of Mary Shepherd (nee Chivers), whose children were baptised in Burrington from 1701 onwards, and of John Chivers, baptised in Burrington in about 1685.

²⁴ *Ibid. Parish register of Burrington, Somerset*

²⁵ *Ibid. Register of the Abbey Church, Bath*

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Bath Record Office for images of The Chandos Letterbooks

Drew Westerman, archivist at Bath Record Office, for details of the 1669 lease to John Fisher relating to property north of St Mary Magdalen land

The Huntington Library, California for images of letters from the Duke of Chandos to Edward Shepherd, written in 1729/30

The Survey of Old Bath for permission to publish part of Mike Chapman's map of The Bimberly Area of Bath in the 1770s

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