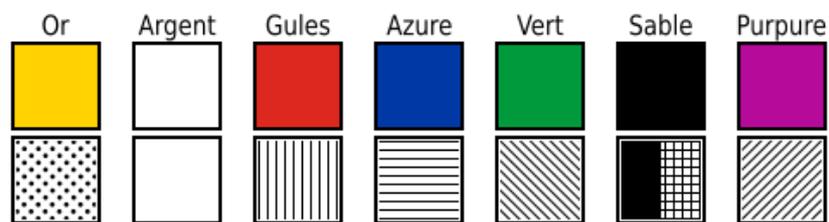


# John Wood's Coat of Arms

David Crellin and Penny Gay

Could it be that certain significant aspects of the heraldic shield adopted by John Wood the Elder, architect of Bath, have been overlooked or misinterpreted? No record of John Wood's coat of arms or pedigree exists at the College of Arms and it has therefore been generally supposed that it was created by Wood himself, since the tree and the 'wild man' holding a branch of acorns were entirely appropriate to his surname and also reflected the Druidic beliefs known to have inspired many of his architectural plans and designs for the city of Bath. Unofficial - or 'self-awarded' - it may have been, but perhaps only in the sense that John Wood himself never established any rightful claim to it with the Heralds. However, this may not necessarily signify that it should be dismissed simply as some whimsical invention dreamed up by John Wood and therefore completely devoid of any genealogical authenticity.

Until recently, the only example of the heraldic design displayed on John Wood's coat of arms was believed to be on a book plate, originally illustrated in the highly acclaimed book '*John Wood: Architect of Obsession*' by Tim Mowl and Brian Earnshaw.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, however, a silver drawing set, inscribed with the words *John Wood Architect* and engraved with the same quartered arms, was acquired by the Bath Preservation Trust at an auction. Unfortunately, at first glance, neither the monochrome illustration on the book plate nor the engraving on the silver case of the instrument set seemed to offer any obvious clues to the tinctures of John Wood's shield. Nevertheless it is in fact possible to identify some of the main colours from the shading used on the book plate, which follows the recognised heraldic code for depicting colours in black and white. This is also the standard coding used to indicate colours in printing or when engraving arms on silver.



Therefore, the blazon, complete with tinctures (colours), appears to be:



Quarterly: 1st and 4th quarters: Or on a mount vert an oak tree fructed,

2nd and 3rd quarters: Ar a chevron gules between three crescents sable

Crest: A demi wild man all wreathed about the middle, in the dexter hand an oak slip, in the sinister a club resting over the shoulder all ppr.

Motto: DIRUIT AEDIFICAT  
'... tears down, builds up ...'

Clearly, Tim Mowl also discovered the heraldic origins of the coat of arms displayed on the book plate, since he captioned the illustration with the information that *'the devices relate to the Woodes of Harestone and the Withers of Manydown'*.<sup>2</sup> However, with the information then available to him, he understandably concluded that the image represented *'the unofficial coat of arms which Wood designed for himself to use as a bookplate'*.<sup>3</sup> Yet, is it possible that, even if self-awarded, John Wood's design, which displayed the long established coats of arms of the Wood/Atwood family of Harston in Devon, quartered with the Withers family of Manydown in Hampshire, might have had some genealogical significance?

In traditional heraldic terms, the quartered shield would have signified that John Wood's father could claim descent from the Wood family of Harston, Devon, and that his mother had inherited a right to the arms of the Withers family of Manydown in Hampshire (who were by that time also found in Somerset and London). The crest and tinctures would have been established when the arms were originally granted and these were equally significant, since other families might bear the same design, but with a different crest and in different colours.

Focusing first on the paternal side of the family, a look at the Visitation of Devon of 1620, page 314, confirms, as Tim Mowl rightly pointed out, that the coat of arms of the Wood or Atwood family of Harston, Devon, first granted by the Heralds in 1533, was very similar to that illustrated on the 1st and 4th quarters of John Wood's book plate. The most noticeable difference is a reversal of the or/argent tinctures of the field: the arms of the Wood/Atwood family of Devon displayed an oak tree on a field of silver, whereas those of John Wood are depicted as an oak tree on a field of gold. A possible explanation for this might be that a field of gold instead of argent was chosen in order to create a sharply defined background contrast with the arms in the 2nd and 3rd quarters, which exactly matched the official blazon of the Withers family of Manydown, Hampshire and, like that of the Wood/Atwood family of Harston, Devon, had a field argent.

The crest of the wild man (or "Wodehouse") on John Wood's shield appears to be almost an exact replica of that used by the Woods of Harston, but admittedly might also be interpreted as a visual pun on the motto adopted by John Wood - meaning *"... tears down, builds up ..."* - which was unique and entirely apt for a man who was an architect and builder. Whilst these similarities do not necessarily prove that John Wood was a descendant of the Harston Woods - and certainly no evidence has been found so far to prove any family link at all - it does suggest that he was well aware of the traditional and 'official' coat of arms of one family in particular with the surname Wood or Atwood. It should be mentioned here that amongst the Wood/Atwood families in Bath throughout the 17th century there are frequent examples of these two surnames being synonymous and interchangeable

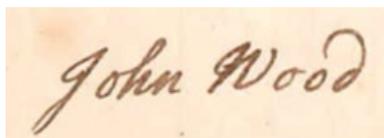
Intriguing explanations have been suggested for the design in the 2nd and 3rd quarters (argent, a chevron gules between three crescents sable), which in heraldic quartering traditionally represented the maternal side of the family. Tim Mowl cited John Wood's interest in Onca, Goddess of the Night, and interpreted the Withers' arms as Onca's crescent moons *'set about a chevron or surveyor's set square'*.<sup>4</sup> However, surely John Wood, respected for his accuracy as a surveyor, would have been aware that a chevron rarely forms an exact right angle.

Several other theories have also been put forward: it might have been an oblique reference to the Latin motto, DIRUIT AEDIFICAT - part of a quotation from Horace - *'diruit aedificat mutat quadrata rotundis'* - which, literally translated, means *'...tears down, builds up, changes square things to round'*; for those who believed that John Wood the Elder had strong links with freemasonry, the motto also seemed to hint at the emblem of the freemasons which represented their belief that the Compasses and Square were 'the embodiment of the rectangular and the round'; some imagined a more obvious visual pun - the chevron and crescents representing Queen Square and the Royal Crescent; and finally, the fact that the design of a chevron between three crescents, with the same tinctures, was indeed identical to the arms granted to the Withers family of Manydown, was seen as a nod of acknowledgement to the poet George Wither (of Manydown), whose Druidic designs Wood used in the architectural ornamentation of the houses around the Circus. Certainly, since no

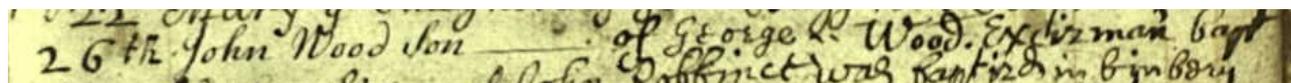
evidence has yet been found, heraldic or otherwise, of any John Wood or Atwood born at a relevant date whose mother might have belonged to an armigerous family named Withers, there was every reason to invent all kinds of ingenious theories about the meaning behind the chevron gules between three crescents sable.

At this stage of the research it certainly seemed that the quartered shield on the book plate could well have been a fanciful design dreamed up by John Wood himself. But if he had free rein to design a shield uniquely applicable to him, why would he have appropriated the arms previously granted to other well-established families (to which he may have had no rightful claim) simply because they seemed relevant to the surname Wood and were visually fit for purpose? This appears to reveal an uncharacteristic lack of imagination for a man otherwise so full of creative inspiration. However, a new discovery was about to shine a completely different light on the mystery of John Wood's coat of arms - and the significance of the arms of the Withers family.

There was already ample evidence to prove that the wife of John Wood the Elder was named Jane or Jenny,<sup>5</sup> so a marriage on the 27th January 1725/26 at the Church of St Mildred's, Bread Street, London between a John Wood and a Jenny Withers looked promising, particularly as John Wood himself confirmed that he returned to London from Yorkshire at the end of 1725.<sup>6</sup> Apart from the entry for the marriage in the parish register, there were two other documents - a marriage bond and a marriage allegation - to provide further information about this couple: John Wood was a bachelor, aged 21 and upwards and Jenny Withers was a spinster, aged 22. Both were then 'of the parish of St Margaret's, Westminster'.<sup>7</sup> The image below (left) shows the signature on the marriage bond and the one on the right is the signature of John Wood the Elder, architect, found on a later document. Except for the addition of a spiral on the final 'd' in the second image, there is certainly a resemblance between the two.



A further intriguing point about the signature on the marriage bond is that it appears to be very similar to the writing in the first part of a baptism record for a John Wood, written in the Bath St James' parish register and dated the 26th August 1704. It was first pointed out in 2004 by the late Philip Jackson, a Friend of The Survey of Old Bath and a respected researcher, that the words 'John Wood son ...' were in a different handwriting to the rest of the entry.<sup>8</sup>



Given the inclusion of the Withers arms in two quarters of John Wood's heraldic shield, the marriage between a John Wood and Jenny Withers was a significant find. However, it created a further puzzle. The rules of heraldry are that if two people marry who both have a claim to a coat of arms, then their separate arms are set side by side, or *impaled*, in one shield. If the wife was a sole heiress, a small version of her arms would be placed '*in pretence*' in the centre of her husband's shield - and then it would be the children of the marriage who might be entitled to adopt the arms of both parents - but quartered. So if John Wood the Elder did create the design of the book plate for himself, he made a basic heraldic mistake. If he and his wife Jenny really had a legitimate claim to the arms of the Woods of Harston and the Withers of Manydown, then it would have been their son who was entitled to the Wood/Withers arms marshalled into quartering.

This apparent error could have been yet another reason for any researchers well-versed in heraldry to dismiss any thoughts that the shield on the book plate - and also engraved on the silver instrument set - was of any authentic heraldic or genealogical significance. A shield which marshalled the arms of the armiger himself and those of his wife into quartering revealed either igno-

rance or an arrogant disregard of the traditions of heraldry. So once again, the obvious conclusion was that the quartered arms were most likely to have been another of John Wood's chimerical creations, with visual references to his surname and his weird yet wonderful beliefs. However, conversely, to be able to incorporate all this within two legitimate coats of arms representing the surnames Wood and Withers suggests that this obsessive architect was also no fool when it came to heraldry. Yet, if that was the case, why would he have made the mistake of quartering the arms linked to the family names of himself and his wife, instead of impaling them? In fact, what this research has at last revealed is that there is no evidence that John Wood the Elder was ever guilty of any such heraldic error at all.

From 1727 until at least 1735, John Wood the Elder is known to have used seals with two different non-heraldic designs on letters to William Bridges at Tibberton, Herefordshire.<sup>9</sup> Two of the seals - displaying an example of each design - were relatively undamaged and clearly identifiable. These are pictured below with the permission of the Herefordshire Archives Service.



Letter from John Wood  
to William Bridges

17th August 1728<sup>10</sup>



Letter from John Wood  
to William Bridges

17th October 1730<sup>11</sup>

The impressions made by these seals can easily be recognised as a classical head profile (thought to be of no known identity, but typical of the Florentine Renaissance style popular in the 18th and early 19th centuries) and a single tree bearing acorns, on a mount.

Many of the seals are too damaged to produce a clear image, but it has been possible to confirm from fragments that, between 1728 and early 1729, the seals depicted the classical profile and all but one of those on letters dated from April 1729 until May 1735 showed the design of the oak tree bearing acorns. For just one letter, dated 28 Feb 1730/31, Wood had reverted to using the seal with the head. There was no crest on either design and they would certainly not be classified as heraldic shields.

However, perhaps the most important discoveries were made at Bath Record Office, where three documents, signed and sealed by John Wood the Elder and dated for the years 1739, 1745 and 1750 have recently been found.<sup>12</sup> All of them provide evidence that, certainly within that time span, he consistently used a seal depicting a shield with the Wood and Withers arms correctly impaled in true heraldic tradition and the Wood of Harston crest of the demi wild man bearing a club and a

branch of acorns. No examples have been found in Bath Archives of him using a seal with a quartered design, right up until the time of his death in May 1754. The image below shows the seal attached to an agreement dated 1739 between John Wood and Ralph Allen. The document concerned the conveyance of several messuages in Grand Parade, Bath.



Courtesy of Bath Record Office: Ref. BC/6/2/9/2629/1

In addition to the documents at Bath Record Office, there are also nine further letters at Bristol Record Office from John Wood to the Chamberlain of Bristol, dated from March 1741 until March 1743, all of which show the seal with the Wood/Withers arms impaled, not quartered.<sup>13</sup>

Even so, serious doubts and questions must still remain regarding John Wood's legitimate right to use the impaled arms of two long-established armigerous families. Did he adopt the coat of arms of the Wood/Atwood family of Harston simply because he had the same surname or did he believe that he was entitled to it through inheritance? Who was Jenny Withers - and did she, in fact, have any rightful claim to the arms of the Withers family of Manydown? Nevertheless, whatever the answers, definitive evidence that certainly between 1739 and 1750 John Wood the Elder used a seal depicting a valid heraldic design, with the Wood and Withers arms impaled and not quartered, does at least confirm a greater degree of knowledge and understanding of the rules of heraldry than he has been given credit for. And that being the case, is it possible that he adopted the traditional coat of arms of the Wood/Atwood family of Harston, not simply because he shared their surname, but because he believed he had a legitimate claim to it?

Furthermore, since all the evidence found so far points to the fact that, certainly on official documents and letters, John Wood the Elder used only a seal displaying the Wood and Withers arms impaled, this surely raises the question as to whether the quartered shield, which, according to the traditions of heraldry, signified that the armiger had a father named Wood and a mother whose maiden name was Withers - was not designed for John Wood the Elder at all, but was the heraldic design rightfully inherited by his son?<sup>14</sup>

#### *References and notes:*

- <sup>1</sup> *John Wood: Architect of Obsession: Tim Mowl and Brian Earnshaw; Millstream Books, Bath 1988; p. 160*
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

- <sup>4</sup> T. Mowl and B. Earnshaw: *op. cit.* p. 159 and fn. 37
- <sup>5</sup> [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk): Somerset, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages, and Burials, 1531-1812: Baptism entries for Thayer Allen Wood (1736) and James Wood (1737); parish register of Walcot St Swithin, Bath; mother's name recorded as Jenny  
Probate of Will of John Wood the Elder (1754); wife Jenney (sic) appointed sole executrix
- <sup>6</sup> *An Essay Towards a Description of the City of Bath: John Wood: 2nd Edition 1749; Part Two, p. 232*  
*John Wood first met with Robert Gay in London on the 31st December 1725.*
- <sup>7</sup> [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk): London and Surrey, England, Marriage Bonds and Allegations, 1597 - 1921  
*This marriage seems to contradict a theory first put forward by Walter Ison in his book *The Georgian Buildings of Bath: London: Faber 1948*, in which he claims that John Wood married a Jane Chivers in Bath - probably soon after his arrival there in May 1727. This will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent article.*
- <sup>8</sup> Philip Jackson: *The Survey of Bath and District No.19, November 2004; Notes and Queries*
- <sup>9</sup> Originally referred to in the book by T. Mowl and B. Earnshaw: *op. cit.* p.159 and fn. 36
- <sup>10</sup> Herefordshire Archives Service: *The Tibberton Papers: Ref. No. A 81/111/54: Classical profile*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid: Ref. No. A 81/111/78: Oak tree bearing acorns, on a mount*
- <sup>12</sup> Bath Record Office: Ref. Nos: BC/6/2/9/2629/1 (1739); BC/6/2/9/2642/1 (8 June 1745); BC/6/2/9/2221/1 (2 May 1750)
- <sup>13</sup> Bristol Record Office: *Miscellaneous letters to the Chamberlain of Bristol from John Wood: Ref. nos: 01152/9; 01152/39; 01152/40; 01152/42; 01152/44; 01152/45; 01152/47; 01152/62; 01152/66*
- <sup>14</sup> *In November 1754 - almost 6 months after the death of John Wood the Elder - both his widow and his son were using a quartered seal with the Wood and Withers arms displayed in quarters 1 and 2 - as in the book plate, but with completely new arms in quarters 3 and 4. This is certainly significant and needs to be considered and discussed in more detail.*

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