

John Wood and the Chapman Connection

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The decision to research the family of George Wood, exciseman, father of the John Wood baptised at the church of Bath St James in 1704, led to some very unexpected discoveries. Initially, it was hoped that further information might be found about the paternal lineage of this family, and that, given the clues revealed in the heraldic seal of John Wood the Elder, it might be possible to find a link between George Wood of Bath and the Wood/Atwood family of Harston, Devon. Unfortunately, this has so far been impossible to prove. Surprisingly perhaps, it was on the maternal side of the Wood family that a very significant family connection was eventually traced.

The search for further information about George Wood began well when it was found that, in addition to the questionable entry for a John Wood baptised in August 1704, the parish register for St James' Church, Bath contained baptism records for four daughters and another son of a George Wood from the year 1694 through to 1707. John Wood was the fifth of six children.

It appeared from the baptism records that George Wood was also known by the surname Atwood. His two eldest children, Elizabeth (1694) and Agatha (1696), were both recorded as daughters of a George WOOD, whilst, as the father of a son George (1698) and a third daughter Ann (1701), he appears to have been named initially as George ATWOOD, but with the 'AT' then crossed out. John (1704) was described in the register as the son of George WOOD, exciseman, and finally, in July 1707, there can be found a baptism record for Olive, daughter of George ATTWOOD—followed by the burial five weeks later of Olive WOOD, a young child. These last two entries, which must surely relate to the same infant, highlight the inconsistency found in the surname recorded at different times for members of this same family. Yet it would be foolish to imagine that such an insubstantial clue might suggest a link to the Wood/Atwood family of Harston, Devon, simply because they had also been known to use both surnames.

Unfortunately, far from being helpful, the fact that the surname Wood or Atwood seems to have been interchangeable within this family (as indeed it had been originally with the Wood family of Devon) proved to be a complication that hindered the search for the lineage of George Wood of Bath.

An additional problem was that George could well have been born in the years following the unrest of the English Civil War, possibly after 1653, during Cromwell's Puritan Protectorate. This is a most frustrating period for family history researchers, because there are large gaps in the records. Parish registers weren't always kept efficiently or effectively and it quickly became obvious that the Bath St James' register was very scrappy and incomplete through the late 1650s and into the early 1660s. So it was perhaps predictable that an exhaustive search for the baptism of any George with the surname Wood or Atwood might come to nothing. Disappointingly, even extending the search beyond Somerset, it has so far proved impossible to identify who George Wood was or where he came from.

Not only was there no record of any likely baptism for a George Wood or Atwood, there was also no trace of his marriage. It was therefore fortunate that the baptism entry for his eldest daughter, Elizabeth, contained a further unexpected detail that would prove to be crucial—the christian name of George Wood's wife and the full name of her father: '*[1694] Augt. 26th Elizabeth ye daughter of Georg Wood & of Mable (ye daughter of John Champless) his wife was bapt.*'

The baptism entries for the next three children—Agatha (who died aged two), George and Ann—confirmed that in each case their father was George and their mother was Mabel, but did not include their father's occupation. The entry for John Wood on August 26th 1704 (interestingly dated the same day and month as the baptism of Elizabeth ten years earlier) has been the subject

of much debate. It is generally agreed that the words *John Wood Son* .. were not written by the clerk at the time, but presumably inserted later. Furthermore, unlike the records for the baptisms of the four previous Wood children, it does not confirm that John's mother was Mabel—and it is the only one to disclose the father's occupation. In 1704, George Wood was recorded as an exciseman, which clearly contradicted the theory that it was *his* son John who became an architect, since the father of John Wood, architect, was widely believed to have been a builder.

The origins of George Wood therefore remained a mystery. All that could be established was that he married someone recorded in 1694 as '*... Mable daughter of John Champless ...*' It was time perhaps to look for further information about Mabel Wood, whose maiden name was probably Champneys.

Just as the Wood/Atwood uncertainty had caused a problem, so too did the difficulty many parish clerks seemed to have with writing the surname Champneys correctly and legibly. This has meant that entries in the registers are often indecipherable even to the most careful transcribers. There is a limit to what a search engine, even set to 'soundex', can cope with: Champless, Chamless, Champnes, Champnesse, Chamnes, Champners, Chamnis, Chamlis, Champines, Champnyes, Champnies, Champny and Channeyo—all these different interpretations of the same name have emerged in the course of this research. One online transcription of Mabel's baptism at St James Bath on the 26th June 1664 names her as Isabell, the daughter of John and Phillip Hamgneis.

Records confirm that by 1600 there was a well-established branch of the Champneys family in Orchardleigh, Somerset, and that there were also smaller family groups of that name living in Wedmore (North Somerset), Thornbury (Gloucestershire) and Bristol. However, no existing evidence seemed to link any of them with Bath.

The most promising theory seemed to be that John Champneys, father of Mabel, was descended in some way from a John Champney (*sic*) and Mary Bonni (*sic*) who were married in Bath Abbey in 1601. They had three sons, all baptised in Bath Abbey—Edward (1601/2), Hugh (1606) and John (1613)—and also a daughter named Mabel (bp. 1604). Mabel's youngest brother John would have been over 50 years old by the time a second Mabel Champneys was baptised at the church of St James in 1664, but the fact that this John also had a *sister* Mabel makes a connection to this particular family a distinct possibility. Family naming patterns can be significant and Mabel was not a common first name.

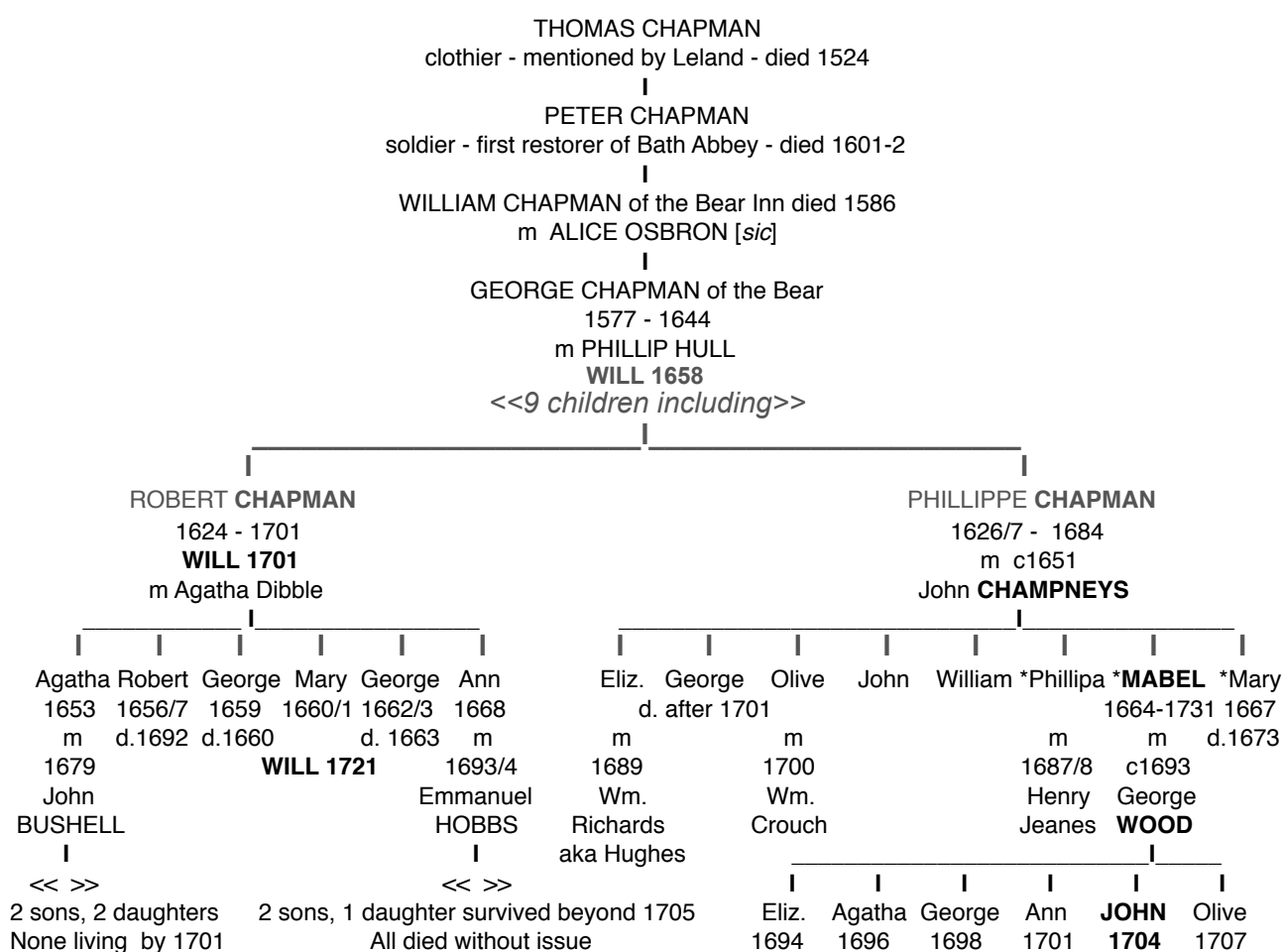
Mary *nee* Bonni (the mother of the four children baptised in Bath) was probably the Mary Bony (*sic*) baptised in Bath Abbey in 1578, father John, and there were a number of records tracing the Bony family (various spellings) in Bath, dating from the marriage of Mary's father John in 1577. However, there was no trace of John Champneys in Bath before his marriage there in 1601. It was more usual then for a marriage to take place in the bride's parish, which makes it possible that he was not from Bath at all. That being the case, even if he could be identified, it was looking increasingly unlikely that further research into the Champneys family would add anything helpful to this particular piece of research.

With the Atwood/Wood and the Champneys ancestry ruled out, there was just one further lead to follow up. The only remaining known ancestor of John Wood, son of George and Mabel, was his maternal grandmother—Phillip (maiden name as yet unknown), wife of John Champneys. Before the days of genealogical websites and computer search engines the process of discovering her identity would have been a daunting task, but fortunately the unusual name of Phillip for a girl, and also a limited likely location and time span for her baptism, meant that the list of possibles was not too long. One entry from the Bath Abbey Register looked to be particularly promising—Phillippe, daughter of George Chapman, was baptised on the 5th of January in 1626/7. Furthermore, it soon became clear that she belonged to a family well-known in Bath's history, already the focus of a great deal of research, who might hold the key to a wealth of accessible and valuable primary source material.

Phillippe's father, George Chapman, often referred to as George of the Bear, married Phillip Hull in February 1615/16 in Bath at the church of St James. They produced six sons and three daughters, but Robert Chapman (baptised in 1624) and his sister Phillippe (1626/7) are the only two who have been included in the family tree below, since they are the children most relevant to this research. George of the Bear died in 1644, apparently leaving no Will. However, his wife Phillip Chapman did leave a Will, proved 20th July 1658, which included bequests to the then five children of her daughter Phillip:

... Elizabeth Champines and George Champines, Olive Champines, John Champines and William Champines my grandchildren to every one of them twenty shillings apiece of lawful money of England to be paid to them at their respective ages of one and twenty years ...

With this evidence it was possible to piece together a family tree to illustrate the connection between the family of George and Mabel Wood and the previously researched Chapman family of Bath.¹



*Following Phillippe Chapman's Will, subsequent records confirm that three more girls were born to John and Phillippe Champneys. There are baptism records for Mabel (June 1664) and Mary (October 1667 – burial 1673) – and also a marriage (but no baptism) for a Phillipa Chamneys (sic) in 1687/8, who may have been born in about 1660, during the lean years of the St James' parish register.

No baptism records were traced for the five Champneys children born before 1658. George is known to have been living in Bath in 1701 – and there are marriages recorded in the Abbey register for Phillipa (to Henry JEANES in February 1687/88); Elizabeth (to William RICHARDS in January 1689/90); and Olive (to William Crouch in April 1700). Apart from their grandmother's Will (1658), no records were found to confirm that John and William Champneys had ever existed, or what happened to either of them after 1658.

What is both intriguing and significant is that, through his maternal grandmother, Phillippe nee Chapman, the John Wood born in Bath in 1704, was, without doubt, a direct descendant of Peter Chapman, renowned in Bath's history for being the first man to take on the task of restoring the Abbey following the Dissolution in 1539. Although this was an exciting discovery and introduced a completely different dimension to the research, evidence that John Wood of Bath was descended from the Chapman family did not, in itself, confirm that he was therefore John Wood the architect.

Yet, armed with conclusive proof of a direct line of descent from Peter Chapman to the John Wood baptised in Bath in 1704, it now seemed relevant to look for references in his *Essay Towards a Description of Bath* which might highlight the fact that John Wood, architect, had a particular interest in or was especially knowledgeable about this branch of the Chapman family. Though not definitive proof, such evidence would surely be a further step towards establishing that the two John Woods were, in fact, the same person.

After introducing Peter Chapman in Part Two of his *Essay*, and describing how, by 1572, 'he had so far repaired the East End of the North Isle of St Peter's Church as to secure it from the Inclemency of the Weather; and while West Gate was rebuilding ...',² John Wood devotes the final two pages of Chapter X to details of Peter Chapman's many military achievements and gallantry, his coat of arms, and his descendants—a son William, a grandson George, and two of his great grandsons, Simon and Robert:

*The first, inheriting the military Principles of his great Grandfather, served his Country as a Captain of Horse; but the second was educated in the Business of a Surgeon and Apothecary; he was born A.D. 1623; and taking up his abode in Bath, he served the office of Mayor of the City in the Years 1668. 1678, and 1689.*³

Robert Chapman is also described as

*... memorable in the City for the uncommon Favours which King James the second bestowed upon him for his Care of the Queen, as her Apothecary, during her Course of Bathing in the Year 1687: And this eminent Man, in his profession, dying on the 20th of March, A.D. 1700-1, the Male Line of the Elder Branch of the Chapman's Family thereby became Extinct ...*⁴

From these brief references alone (and there are yet more details to be found in the original text of his *Essay*) it is clear that John Wood focused considerable attention on one family in particular. This would appear to raise a very relevant point. Out of a number of important families in Bath equally worthy of mention, it seems significant that he chose to include so many facts about this particular branch of the Chapman family, to the exclusion of all others. Moreover, apart from containing remarkably specific information about the direct descendants of Peter Chapman, the *Essay* also includes a passing reference to another maternal ancestor of the John Wood who was baptised in Bath in 1704—his great, great grandfather, John Hull:

*... While this Work was about, Dr. Bettenson began a Court of Houses at the South End of the Body of the City, on a Piece of Ground, formerly Part of the Priory, and by Indenture bearing Date the 20th of August 1583, leased to one John Hull, a Shoemaker, from whom it is now corruptly called the Bull Garden ...*⁵

Parish records show that Phillip Hull, who later married George Chapman of the Bear, was baptised on the first of May 1588 at the church of Bath St James. The baptism entry does not record her father's name, but a John Hull married Agnes Moore at the same church in March 1581 and, as well as his daughter Phillip, there are a number of baptism entries in the parish register for other children born to a John Hull between 1582 and 1599.

It could be argued that, after much time-consuming research, a John Wood who did not arrive in Bath until 1727 might have been able to amass most of this information for himself, but it is hard to believe that a newcomer to Bath would have thought it important to discover and record so much in

such detail or that a stranger would have developed an almost compulsive obsession to write it all down. John Wood's *Essay* sometimes seems to brim over with the kind of anecdotes familiar only to those who had grown up surrounded by local folklore and legends. The descriptions appear to be the outpourings of a man not only thoroughly steeped in the city's landscape, but also completely at home with its history and its people. The often trivial and inconsequential details referred to are surely not the kind of facts that a previously unknown architect, with no personal knowledge of Bath until he settled there at the age of twenty-two, would purposefully have researched and then so eagerly recorded. It is, in fact, very difficult to accept that a John Wood who originated in the county of Yorkshire or in London could ever have been inspired to set down this unique, often bizarre, *Essay Towards a Description of Bath* with such impassioned self-assurance.

The proven connection between the Chapman family and Mabel nee Champneys, mother of John Wood, could certainly be said to cast a new light on certain passages of the endlessly scrutinised *Essay*. It would eventually also lead to a further discovery relating to the much debated occupation of George Wood. This in turn would add far greater significance to another reference to be found within the text of Wood's *Essay*—possibly a very meaningful piece of information, already pointed out, but then queried, by Elizabeth Holland in *The Survey of Bath and District* as long ago as October 2005.⁶ But that was before the direct family link between the Chapmans and the Woods had been discovered.

References and notes:

Baptisms, marriages and deaths: *Images of handwritten original entries of Somerset, Church of England, Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1531-1812 are now accessible online, with subscription, on ancestry.co.uk*

These often provided far more accurate information than the transcribed indexes previously listed and proved essential in order to check the exact wording and details of records entered in the register by the parish clerk at the time.

FreeReg.org.uk provided consistently careful and accurate transcriptions of most of the parish registers in Somerset.

Wills and Probate: *An image of the original handwritten manuscript recording Phillip Chapman's Will (Probate 20 July 1658) can be viewed, with subscription, on ancestry.co.uk under the heading England & Wales, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1384-1858*

¹ *It is important to note here that listed as one of the objectives in the Constitution of The Survey of Old Bath is to study the Chapman family. Elizabeth Holland of The Survey, who is a Chapman descendant, has already published her very extensive research into the Chapman family of Bath in a series of articles entitled 'This Famous City: The Story of the Chapmans of Bath'; all editions of The Survey from 1994 to the present are now published on The History of Bath Research Group website: historyofbath.org*

² *John Wood, Esq.: Essay: Towards a Description of Bath; Second Edition, Corrected and Enlarged, in Two Volumes; printed by W. Bathoe, the Strand, and T. Lownds, Fleet Street, London; Part 2, Ch. X, p. 201*

³ *Ibid. Part 2, Ch. X, p.204*

⁴ *Ibid. p.204-5*

⁵ *Ibid. Part 2, Ch. XII, p. 231*

⁶ *Elizabeth Holland: The Death of Robert Hobbs Otherwise Chapman: The Survey of Bath and District No. 20, October 2005, p.22. Also published on The History of Bath Research Group website*