

John Wood, son of a Writing Master

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Although it had proved so difficult to establish any certain line of descent for a George Wood or Atwood who married Mabel Champneys, probably in the early 1690s, there still remained a slim chance that, given his wife's connection to the Chapman family, more would be revealed about his trade or occupation during the years after his marriage, when he was presumably working to provide an income for his family. It was unlikely, but might yet come to light, that there was evidence tucked away somewhere among the Chapman documents that he was a builder and therefore conceivably the father of John Wood the architect. But, in that case, it was very puzzling to find this clear indication in the parish register that, in 1704, George Wood was definitely an exciseman.

It was interesting to discover that the need for more thorough research into the much debated 1704 baptism entry '*John Wood Son of George Wood exciseman*' had already been highlighted over fourteen years earlier in a letter published in *The Survey of Old Bath* in November 2004. Researcher Philip Jackson, a member of *The Survey* and originally a Yorkshireman, pointed out that there were '*oddities in that entry in the St James' Register, which suggest further investigations would be useful.*'¹ Apart from the fact that the wording and handwriting in the first part of the baptism record did not seem to tally with other entries on the same page, Jackson was highly dubious about the fact that the father, George Wood, was recorded as an exciseman. One of the problems with this, apart from the argument that it clearly contradicted the widely-held belief that John Wood's father had been a builder, was that the work of an exciseman normally involved a move from one area to another every three years. This important fact (and also Mowl's very pertinent observations in *Architect of Obsession* that John Wood "*emerges out of a mysterious blank*" and that he had been "*engaged in unstated activities in Yorkshire*"²) apparently inspired Jackson's personal quest to find evidence that John Wood the architect was, like himself, from Yorkshire.³ Sadly however, in the eight years before his death in 2012, he could never find proof that John Wood the architect had any Yorkshire connection at all. But what he did track down was confirmation of the date and details of George Wood's appointment as an exciseman.

Included in the Minutes of the Board of Excise and dated 17th June 1702 is the following entry for a Geo. Wood:

... That Geo. Wood certified by Mr. Craddock officer of Bath to understand Arithmetick & write a good hand has leave to be instructed by the said Mr. Craddock ...

*Recommended by Captn. Hobbs and Mrs Mary Chapman both of the City of Bath who are willing to be his surety.*⁴

There can be no doubt that this was the George Wood recorded as exciseman in the St James' Parish Register in 1704. The family link between George Wood's wife, Mabel, and the two guarantors is clearly shown in the Chapman family tree in the previous article. Mary Chapman and her younger sister Ann (wife of Captain Hobbs) were the first cousins of Mabel Wood. Mary, although unmarried, is here given the courtesy title of Mrs (customary at that time for a woman with an income and in charge of her own household). What is also clear from the entry is that George Wood's appointment was as a supernumerary, which meant, as Jackson pointed out at the time, that he probably wouldn't be moving every three years as had originally been supposed. It also suggested that working as an exciseman might have been a supplementary occupation. However, if it was, then it didn't altogether seem to dovetail very convincingly with the work of a builder. George Wood had a wife and three children to support by 1702, so he must have had other work before his appointment as an additional exciseman. It was vital at this point to discover exactly

what else he might have done to earn a living. Almost unbelievably, it was Mary Chapman's Will that at last confirmed George Wood's occupation—and he was certainly not a builder.

Mary, the eldest surviving daughter of Robert Chapman, apothecary and Alderman of Bath, was named as sole executrix of her father's Will, probate 1701, and, by 1705, following the early deaths of her younger sister Ann and Ann's husband Captain Emmanuel Hobbs, Mary had inherited the whole of her father's Estate, including properties in Southgate Street. She died in March 1721, and her Will included the following bequest, which was granted *'in Trust'*. Certain conditions were clearly set out in the Will for the two trustees, in order to ensure at least some basic protection and security in the future for Olive Crouch (Mabel Wood's widowed sister) and for Mabel, wife of the said George Wood, and then for any of Mabel's children (not named) still surviving after her death. However, the mystery of George Wood's occupation was solved at the very beginning of this particular settlement:

... I give and bequeath all my messuages and or tenements and parts of messuages or tenements situate in Southgate Street within the City of Bath, now in the possession of George Wood Writing Master and Robert Lane Innholder as under tenants thereof, unto William Collibee, Apothecary and Walter Chapman the younger, Sadler, both of the City of Bath, for all the Estates, Terms and Interest I now have or shall have therein at the time of my decease, in Trust ...

So here was proof that, certainly by 1721, George Wood, father of John baptised in Bath in 1704, was not a builder, but a writing master.

Mary Chapman's Will was not the only document to disclose significant fragments of information about the Wood family. In 1726 there was a serious fire which destroyed the houses that lined the sides of Southgate Street. In his Essay, John Wood himself referred to the fire consuming *'the old thatch'd Hovels fronting the Street ...'*⁵ Their destruction, therefore, may or may not have been bad news for those who were living there at the time. However, in the case of the property left in Trust in order to secure some kind of a future for Mabel and her surviving children, the aftermath of the fire necessitated a written renewal of any previous agreement.

Dated 30th December 1727, this new Indenture confirmed that William Collibee and Walter Chapman remained as Trustees of:

*... All that plot of ground whereon a Tenement lately stood situate lying and being in Southgate Street without the South gate of the said City ...*⁶

—and, as was the custom when a contract was renewed, any conditions stipulated in previous legal documents were meticulously recorded again. The 1727 Indenture therefore reaffirmed that the property in Southgate Street had been bequeathed *'in Trust'* to William Collibee and Walter Chapman in such a way that it might provide some future security for Mary Chapman's cousin Mabel Wood and her children. The terms of trusteeship were once more set out and the Wood family described, now in a little more detail, as:

... Mabell Wood wife of George Wood late of the City of Bath School Master, John Wood and Anne Wood their Son and daughter ...

Since Mabel is described as wife and not widow, presumably *'late of'* should not be taken to mean that George Wood had died, but that he was no longer living in Bath or working there as a schoolmaster.

Curiously, not only did George Wood seem to arrive in the world unannounced by a baptism, but he seemed to depart without any burial. Mabel died in 1731 and was buried at St James' Church in Bath, yet nothing further is known about her husband. However, the importance of the further snippet of evidence found in the Indenture is that it verifies the fact that George and Mabel Wood had a son John, and seems to confirm that they were all still alive at the end of 1727. This is

significant, given the doubts expressed about the authenticity of the 1704 baptism record and also the fact that in a letter to the troublesome Bath landlady Mrs. Anne Phillips dated April 1727, the Duke of Chandos assured her that his architect, John Wood, had promised to send directions down to his father for alterations to be made to the kitchen chimneys of the houses being built near the Cross Bath.⁷

Although the revelation that George Wood was a writing master or schoolmaster came as a surprise, it was not inconsistent with the fact that, in 1702, Mr Craddock, Excise Officer of Bath, had certified that he wrote a good hand. Furthermore, as a one and only occupation, teaching children to write may not have been very well paid and presumably left time for the duties required of a supernumerary exciseman.

Yet, this new information certainly threw the debate about the identity of John Wood, architect, into complete confusion and initially looked set to destroy the whole theory that John Wood the architect had been born in Bath and was the son of a builder. But, in fact, how reliable (and also how plausible) was the claim that the father of John Wood, architect, had been a builder? The evidence found so far has proved to be flimsy.

Furthermore, one of the arguments *against* this widely-accepted belief, is the likely lack of opportunity there would have been for a builder's son to receive the basic education needed to enable him then to acquire all the additional knowledge and skill that the young architect had certainly accumulated by the time he arrived in Bath in 1727. On the other hand, if John Wood had been the son of a writing master, then perhaps there would at least be some explanation for his neat, well-formed handwriting, his ability to write a correctly set-out and clearly worded letter, and his insatiable enthusiasm for reading and writing books. So, despite the fact that this unexpected discovery undoubtedly negates the long-established belief that John Wood was born in Bath, the son of a builder, it might (barring further more definitive evidence being found to prove beyond doubt that the architect's father was a builder) nevertheless offer a more credible theory instead: that John Wood, architect, was born in Bath, the son of a writing master.

There is, in fact, one piece of very intriguing circumstantial evidence, hinted at in a paragraph written by John Wood himself in his *Essay*, which could substantiate this idea. After describing in some detail the early history of the Chapman family, about whom, despite a few errors, he seems remarkably well-informed, John Wood refers to *The Memoirs of Bath*, preserved in the Chapman family, which had been passed down through the generations and eventually fell into the hands of Robert Chapman, Alderman and apothecary.

*... 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: but before his Death the memoirs, preserved in it, were copied by one from whom I had great Part of what I have already, or may hereafter insert in the Essay, concerning the History of Bath, from the End of the fourteenth Century to my own Time ...*⁸

In fact, the possible import of these words was first pointed out as long ago as 2005 by none other than Elizabeth Holland, a highly respected topographical researcher and herself descended from the Chapman family of Bath, who, straight to the point as always, wrote:

*Wood states that he obtained his information about life in Bath from memoirs coming from Robert Chapman, which someone copied for him. It seems quite possible that the copy was made by George Wood, the writing master, Mary's tenant; though if this really was John Wood's father, one would have thought he would have said so, and not referred to him anonymously.*⁹

No-one could put it better.

References:

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

Wills and Probate:

Images of the following original handwritten manuscripts recording Probate of the following Wills are accessible, with subscription, on ancestry.co.uk under the heading England & Wales, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1384-1858:

Robert Chapman, apothecary of Bath, Probate 15 July 1701

Mary Chapman, his daughter, Probate 20 March 1721/22

- ¹ Philip Jackson: *The Survey of Bath and District*, No. 19, Nov. 2004; p.21, Notes and Queries
- ² Tim Mowl and Brian Earnshaw: *John Wood Architect of Obsession*; Millstream Books, Bath, 1988; Chapter One, p.9
- ³ Paul Jackson: *In Memoriam – Philip Jackson 1922-2012: The Survey of Bath and District*, No. 27, October 2012, p. 6
- ⁴ The National Archives, Kew: CUST: Minutes of the Board of Customs, Excise and Customs and Excise, 17 June 1702; see acknowledgement below
- ⁵ John Wood: *Essay Towards a Description of Bath: 2nd Edition 1749; Part Two, Chap. XII, p. 232*
- ⁶ Bath Record Office: BC/6/2/3/1523: Lease of a plot of ground and backside in Southgate Street; 30 December 1727: part of the collection of Title Deeds to properties owned by Bath Corporation known as 'Furman Counterpart Leases', previously researched by The Survey of Old Bath and currently being transcribed and catalogued in detail by Elizabeth Holland
- ⁷ The Duke of Chandos to Mrs Phillips 6 April 1727; Chandos Letterbooks: Huntington Library, California: Stowe Manuscripts: ST57, Vol. 29, f.290
- ⁸ John Wood: *Essay Towards a Description of Bath; Part Two, Chapter X, page 205*
- ⁹ Elizabeth Holland: *This Famous City: The Story of the Chapmans of Bath – The Death of Robert Hobbs Otherwise Chapman: The Survey of Bath and District No. 20, October 2005, p.22*

With thanks to Elizabeth Holland of The Survey of Old Bath for guidance relating to George Wood's occupation and also for sharing research carried out by Philip Jackson regarding the reference to George Wood in the Minutes of the Board of Customs and Excise. See reference ⁴

December 2018