

John Wood - 8

George Wood, unidentified artist of Dunster

David Crellin and Penny Gay

'Indirect evidence gives a hint but not the whole answer.'¹

At some point in a piece of research there can come a time when the likelihood of finding further direct evidence begins to fade and it is then that it becomes tempting to place too much emphasis on circumstantial details. The danger with this is that, however persuasive they may seem, coincidental clues cannot in themselves establish conclusive proof. Even so, as is the case when several random pieces of a jigsaw cannot be made to fit, there still remains the belief that they must all undoubtedly belong in some way; that if only they could be neatly slotted into place, then at last the whole picture would become clear. It might be wise, therefore, not to dismiss indirect evidence as mere supposition just yet, but to make a note of it here and defer judgement about its relevance until later. The theory put forward in the following paragraphs should be considered in this light and seen simply as a plausible hunch.

There was certainly logical evidence to suggest that George Wood of the parish of Bath St James, husband of Elizabeth Harrison of Selworthy, could well have been the elder brother of the John Wood baptised in Bath in 1704.² Furthermore, the Chancery record dated 1753 confirmed that George Wood of Selworthy had definitely been a bookseller in Dunster and had died intestate in January 1738/9.³ But was there any further information to be found about him?

A chance find using Google's search engine brought to light an unexpected discovery. Two paintings by a George Wood, dated 1735, had been offered for auction some years ago and were pictured on the auctioneers' website.⁴ In the sale catalogue they were described by the auctioneers, Finch & Co. of London, as being '*in the naïve style of an estate cartographer*' and were sold on that occasion to an unknown private buyer. However, as recently as 2019, both paintings were bought by the National Trust and are now on display in Dunster Castle.

One depicts the Castle viewed from '*Enstaw Wood*'⁵ (believed to be Henstey Wood, which lies to the south-east of Dunster).



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The other illustrates the view towards Minehead harbour from 'Cunagree'⁶ (thought to be the hill named Conygar,⁷ which lies north of the town of Dunster).

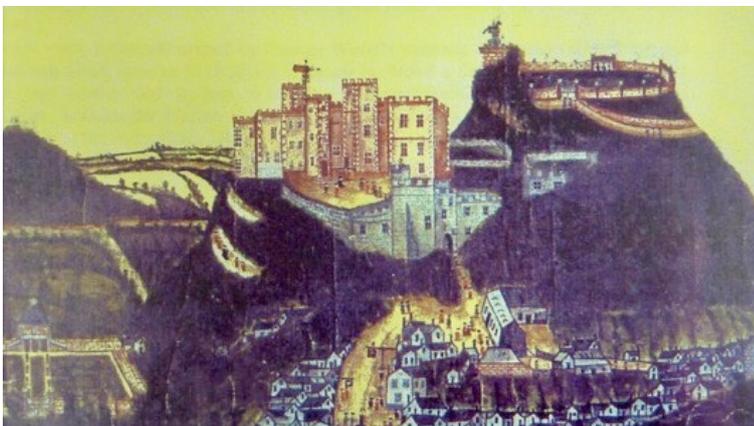


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Both pictures were painted in watercolour, detailed in pen and ink and heightened with gum arabic. The style is certainly naïve. Yet there is something quaint and exquisite about the clean colours and sharp delineation of fields and buildings. As well as epitomising the neatness and accuracy of a topographer, these paintings, with their rolling hills, sultry skies and luminous light on land and sea, somehow also manage to capture the subjective feeling and unique style of the artist. And of course, they are historically interesting in that they reflect a view seen almost three hundred years ago. They would have been completed during the lifetime of Alexander Luttrell of Dunster Castle, who died in 1737, leaving considerable debts and an only daughter aged eleven. A receiver was appointed and the castle was then shut up. It was believed that only the family plate was sold – but is it possible that the paintings by George Wood may have left the Castle at that time too?

Each of these two watercolours, now owned by the National Trust, includes a Key, listing the locations illustrated. These would almost certainly have been recorded at the time the pictures were painted. They are handwritten in flowing copperplate style, beginning with the title of the view portrayed and continuing ... *Exactly Delineated by Geo: Wood 1735*. Recent expert opinion has confirmed that this reference ... to the meticulous exactness of the artist was well justified.



Part of a third painting by George Wood, thought to have been a local artist,⁸ was one of a number of illustrations published in a report entitled *Dunster Castle: A Survey of the Historic Landscape*, first commissioned by the Exmoor National Park Authority in 2004 and carried out by the Debois Landscape Survey Group. This third picture by George Wood, also dated 1735, shows the north side of the Castle, as seen from Conygar.

View of Dunster Castle from the North
From a painting by George Wood, 1735⁹

John Phibbs, an experienced surveyor with the Debois Survey Group, who worked with designed-landscape historian Kate Felus to produce the 2004 survey of Dunster Castle, has little doubt about the validity and historical value of George Wood's paintings. He believed that the view

*... provided a useful and topographically reliable glimpse of the landscape in the vicinity of the Castle in the first half of the eighteenth century. Nearly everything seen in the view is corroborated by evidence elsewhere. It is also the first evidence we have for the existence of the lost walled garden below the Castle to the north-east of the Tor.'*¹⁰

This is reassuring, because an important factor in the theory being put forward here may lie not so much in George Wood's ability to paint naïve yet pleasing watercolour views of Dunster and Minehead, but in his accuracy as a landscape surveyor. It could have been pure coincidence, but it is intriguing to recall, that in 1735 – the same year that George Wood produced these paintings – John Wood, architect of Bath, rightly recognised for his skill and precision as a surveyor, published his well-known Map of Bath.

Despite this curious coincidence, there is as yet still no documented proof of any family connection between John Wood, architect of Bath, and George Wood, local artist of the Dunster area of West Somerset. In fact, after lengthy research for information possibly relating to John Wood's brother, only five isolated pieces of definitive evidence have been found:¹¹

- John Wood of Bath, son of George Wood, and his wife Mabel, had an elder brother named George, who was baptised at Bath St James in 1698.
- George Wood of the parish of St James, Bath married Elizabeth Harrison of Selworthy on the 17th of February 1723/4 at St Petroc's Church, Timberscombe, West Somerset.
- Whilst in London in early 1729, John Wood, architect of Bath, received news that a ship carrying materials to be used in the building of Tyberton, Herefordshire, was grounded off the North Devon coast. In a letter to William Brydges of Tyberton, Wood himself confirmed that he had sent his brother (unnamed) down to Bideford to oversee the safety of the all-important cargo.
- George Wood, a bookseller in Dunster, was buried in Selworthy in January 1738/9.
- After her husband's death, Elizabeth Wood continued in the business of bookbinding and the teaching of writing and arithmetic.

The theory presented here – that these fragmented pieces of evidence could also relate to the identity of an unknown local artist named George Wood who painted three watercolours of the landscape around Dunster in 1735 – is based on the following suppositions:

- that George Wood, son of George and Mabel of Bath, was the George Wood of the parish of Bath St James who married in 1723/4, settled in Selworthy and became a bookbinder/bookseller in Dunster
- if this was so, then in 1729 he would have been conveniently placed to travel to Bideford and supervise the safety of John Wood's stranded cargo
- a brother of John Wood, architect, might well have inherited or acquired a similar aptitude for drawing and surveying, with the result that his landscape paintings are recognised as being topographically accurate
- this was particularly likely in the case of George and John Wood of Bath, who are now thought to have been the sons of a writing master. The art of calligraphy requires skill in the handling of pen and ink, as well as a certain amount of artistic harmony, neatness and precision.

- a bookseller/bookbinder would certainly have had easy access to paper and possibly to other materials required for artistic work
- George Wood heightened his paintings with gum arabic. Whilst this would have been a medium commonly used by artists at that time, the fact that he was also a bookseller – and that his wife is known to have continued in the business of bookbinding after his early death – could be particularly relevant. No doubt anyone who worked with books would have been familiar with the practical advantages of using gum arabic as a paper adhesive: it was clean, easy to apply and passed through a tacky stage while drying.¹²
- gum arabic was also a medium frequently used by a writing master in the 1700s to increase the viscosity of the ink, which was particularly important in the days of the quill pen. It would make the ink flow well and prevent it from feathering.¹³
- George Wood of Selworthy died in January 1739. This could be the reason that no paintings by a George Wood dated later than 1735 have come to light.
- even more debatable as valid evidence, but relevant nonetheless, is the fact that no alternative George Wood has yet been found living in the Dunster area in 1735 who might fit the mould of a watercolour artist quite as persuasively as George Wood of Selworthy

These incidental clues all seem pertinent in some way, but the danger is that in the absence of conclusive proof, they assume far too much significance. Clearly, it would be more convincing to be able to argue the case for this whole speculative theory if there was even the smallest hint of valid evidence to support it. Yet sometimes, when the circumstantial details begin to stack up, there comes a feeling that they cannot all be coincidental; that there is a realistic possibility that they could be pointing the way towards the truth.

Further investigation:

1. An image of a painting named *Minehead Harbour* can be found online at artuk.org.¹⁴ It is described as 17th Century British School, Oil on Board, and is over a metre wide. This painting belongs to Minehead Town Council, but is currently in the care of the Somerset Museums Service at the Heritage Centre in Taunton.¹⁵

It certainly portrays a view similar to the one seen in the later watercolour by George Wood, *Minehead Quay from Conygar*, and was painted in much the same naïve style, but the theory that he painted both pictures calls for further investigation.

Should it eventually be accepted in the art world that the 17th century oil painting and the 1735 watercolour were painted by the same man, that would clearly rule out any possibility that the artist could have been a George Wood baptised in Bath in September 1698.

2. Professional judgement and expert analysis regarding the elegant copperplate captions inscribed directly below the two framed watercolour paintings, might prove significant. If it could be established that these were likely to have been written by George Wood himself, it would certainly add weight to the idea that he was the son of a writing master.

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References and notes:

¹ <https://www.archives.com/experts/henderson-harold/genealogical-proof-standard.html>

Indirect Evidence To The Rescue; Harold Henderson, Aug 25, 2011

² *Crellin D. and Gay P. John Wood Article 7: John Wood's Brother; historyofbath.org*

- ³ The National Archives, Kew: Chancery Record C11/2147/14: Wood v Leigh. Bill and answer; Plaintiff Elizabeth Wood of Minehead, Defendant Thomas Leigh
Also see historyofbath.org Crellin D. and Gay P. John Wood Article 7: John Wood's Brother
- ⁴ <https://www.finch-and-co.co.uk/artwork-detail/812187/18674/the-prospect-of-dunster-castle-from>
[Click on full screen] These two paintings, previously sold at auction, have been bought very recently (2019) by the National Trust.
- ⁵ NT Image No. 847413: Title: Dunster Castle, Somerset by George Wood (fl.1735); watercolour on paper
- ⁶ NT Image No. 847414: Title: Minehead by George Wood (fl.1735); watercolour on paper
- ⁷ Meaning and Variants of the name Conygar: See John Field: *English Field Names: A Dictionary*: Newton Abbot, David & Charles 1972: variants included under the entry Conegar (meaning rabbit warren) Conygree, Coneygree, (pp. 51/52); under Cunigar – Cuningger, Cunygre (p.57)
Conygars or rabbit warrens were deliberately established in sandy parts of estates, though some places so named may well refer to areas naturally inhabited by rabbits without human aid. The man-made rabbit 'gardens' often contained pillow mounds (artificial warrens made of earth and stone). Two of these were mistakenly identified as barrows by John Wood when he surveyed what he thought to be the site of his Moon Temple on Lansdown Hill. The field next to St Laurence's Chapel on Lansdown was also named Coneygare and there are a few other similarly-named fields in the Bath area. [Michael Williams]
- ⁸ Dunster Castle, Somerset: A Survey of the Historic Landscape. Commissioned by the Exmoor Park Authority in 2004; researched and written by Kate Felus and John Phibbs of the Debois Survey Group, Gloucester; text reference to 'local artist' Vol. 1, p. 17
- ⁹ Ibid: image showing 'the lost garden' in Vols. 1 and 2: from 'The prospect of Dunster Castle from Cunagree exactly delineated by George Wood, 1735': Private Collection.
Also included in *A Landscape and Archaeological Survey of Dunster Deer Park* (2011) by Colson Stone Practice, Landscape Architects, Taunton; fig. 4
- ¹⁰ Noted by John Phibbs, Debois Landscape Survey Group, March 2018
- ¹¹ Crellin D. and Gay P. John Wood Article 7: John Wood's Brother; historyofbath.org
- ¹² *Book Binding and the Conservation of Books: A Dictionary of Descriptive Terminology*:
<http://cool.conservation-us.org/don/dt/dt1671.html>
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ artuk.org - Search for 'Minehead Harbour'
- ¹⁵ Confirmed by Amal Khreishah, Curator of Archaeology, South West Heritage Trust

With acknowledgements to:

The National Trust for permission to reproduce images of the two watercolour paintings at present on display in Dunster Castle. The original paintings were bought by the Trust in 2019.

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