

### **Upbringing:**

Father dominant person *'ruled house with firm but wise discipline'* Strong Evangelical churchman, witness to the Oxford Movement<sup>1</sup> and the ongoing debate during the latter half of the 1800s between clergymen, politicians and the general public on the direction the Church of England should take. WW described as a sensitive boy and in awe of his father and feelings of *'insignificance and inability alongside his able and learned father'*. Daily prayer, hymns and readings were daily part of household life in the parsonage.

Mother described as 'delicate, gentle and very sweet natured' and 'fully loved' and 'understood' her son. Relationship with mother very strong and she lived with him until her death when WW was Dean of Bristol. She predicted *"My Basil will be a bishop"* when he was only four!

Family was not wealthy and father added to income by tutoring. Author notes that this life as a child of a country parson opened WW's eyes to the *'trials and troubles, the pains and problems'* of the country parson which was to have such an influence on his support and respect for his diocesan parsons when he became bishop

WW reported as kind and thoughtful towards his younger sisters

### **Career as teacher:**

Leys school: described as a *'brilliant'* teacher with *'incisive wit'*; caring and kind towards the pupils; *'left a memory honoured and cherished by many'*. WW said himself that he *"never enjoyed teaching boys more than I did in my days at The Leys"*

Rugby: Mostly taught classics to sixth form. Quoted as devoted to his work, a *'good and capable teacher who had the capacity to inspire his pupils'*. Liked by pupils. Had a strong moral compass for himself and encouraged others. Of his departure to take over as Headmaster at Haileybury, Rugby; headmaster wrote *"You have done more for the religious side and the work here than any master in my time"*

Haileybury: Noted in the book as a time in which WW was most *'deeply hurt'*. He took Rugby school as his role model and sought to impose this on Haileybury which didn't endear him to pupils and teachers who were against losing their long established customs and tradition. (However, this didn't stop him being appointed subsequently as Head of Marlborough College.) He sought to make the school a better and more just environment for its pupils and went about this with *'unflinching determination'*. He instigated and administered a substantial building programme which improved boarding conditions for the boys. In later years he was reticent about his time there. He is described by someone at the school at the same time as follows in the book: *"compared with Lyttleton (former head) the new Master had little dignity and never stood on it. With his straw hat tilted over his nose, and his untidy trousers, he dodged about in an impatient trot, like a terrier after rats, sniffing at*

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<sup>1</sup> The Oxford Movement, which started at Oxford University and its leaders included both clergymen and academics. The Movement supported a more ritualistic approach within the Church, stemming from concerns about 'the neglect of the daily service, the desecration of festivals, the Eucharist scantily administered, insubordination permitted in all ranks of the church, orders and officers imperfectly developed (...)'. It sparked great controversy amongst politicians, the Church hierarchy and also the general public, culminating in the passing of the Public Worship Regulation Act of 1874. This Act introduced legislation that banned the use of what was seen as the re-introduction of ritualism within the Anglican Church;

*anything suspicious. He worried both himself and us. We smarted under unfavourable comparisons with Rugby, and criticism was not any more welcome because it was deserved”* Whilst there, he changed the prefect system with ‘privileges being sharply curtailed, especially in the matters of caning and flogging. Described as follows: *‘Singleness and determination of purpose was a characteristic of him and he would not diffuse his energies.’*; having ‘relentless conscientiousness’ in carrying out his aims; having *‘vigour and vision’*.

Marlborough: We see the continuing theme of a man lacking in vanity – *‘he cared little for personal dignity’*. One of the Masters spoke of the deep interest he had in the pupils. He was observed to have a great fondness for children. Asked if he had any family, his reply was *“Yes, over 600 children”*. Described as having *‘bubbling-over’* enthusiasm. The 1914 war was described as hitting *‘his affectionate and conscientious nature very hard’*. He personally wrote to Marlburians serving in the trenches

**Character**: shy and retiring, insecure about his abilities (it was said of him: *‘It is strange that one with such intellectual gifts and wise understanding should always have been so distrustful of himself and so falsely aware of his own incompetence’*), lacking in vanity, determined/strong-willed, single minded, affectionate, kindly. A man of the people, had a hatred of shams.

Sense of humour: When as bishop he asked a friend: *“What is the greatest bar to spiritual progress in this country? Cows, Cows. What keeps the farmer from church?-Cows. What makes me late when I am motoring about the country to preach as a village church?-Cows”*.

Open and friendly: A parishioner writing to him on his departure to Well stated: *“I so sincerely regret your leaving Bristol because you have been the first Dean I have met, who has seemed to me like an ordinary human being. I do not wish to say an unkind word about anyone, but my past experience has been of such aloofness that the Church became a stranger to me. Your attitude (....) has brought the Church nearer to me and to others”*.

Strong sense of justice

Didn’t seek the limelight

### **Role as Priest**

Dean of Bristol: WW great friends with the then Bishop of Bristol (Dr Nickson). Took over chairmanship of the board of governors of the cathedral school and turned round its finances. A married sister kept house for him (along with her 2 young daughters) whilst her husband was away at war. Described as being really *‘fond of young folk and he never tired of giving them a good time, though he was a strict disciplinarian and stood no nonsense’*. Set out to create strong ties between the cathedral and Bristol Corporation. Attended many functions as part of building relationships. Met his wife to be (she was described as *‘well known for her active interest in many good causes, religious, philanthropic and social’*) and married her

Broadminded – invited men of other faiths to preach in the cathedral. This open mindedness continued throughout his life. At the end of his tenure as Bishop of Bath & Wells he said: *“In my first address at Bath, I said: ‘I come in all friendliness of spirit to all phases of churchmanship’. Honestly, I can say that I have done my utmost to be just and fair. I have striven, and in the doing I have enjoyed much warmth and friendship with all schools of thought”*.

He was presented with a Pastoral Staff made from old beams of the cathedral when he left following his appointment as Bishop of Bath & Wells..The staff was surmounted by the St Andrews cross and a

silver band on the staff bore the inscription "A parting gift from the staff of Bristol Cathedral, All Saints' Day, 1921"

During WWI went as Chaplain in the army whilst Dean and took pains to be instructed in how to take confession should the need arise during his military service – as chaplain he had to minister to all faiths.

Wells: When offered the bishopric of Bath & Wells, WW had great uncertainties around accepting the role based on his own perception of himself and if he had the necessary skills. He did accept and received many letters of congratulations. One was from the editor of one of the London papers who wrote: *"Long ago.....when we first met .....- you showed so much tact and diplomacy that I said: 'This man one day will be bishop' "*. Thus, others had seen his destiny, even if he could not see it himself.

His growing up in a country parsonage equipped him to understand the life of a country parson. He was also familiar with the West country and loved the countryside. He felt at home in the small city of Wells with its surrounding countryside. His wealth acquired through marriage allowed him to live in and maintain the Palace.

He made sure that he arrived at Wells without fanfare although *'he used to say jokingly of his move to Wells....., that it was conducted in the grand style of Jewish patriarchs – tents, camels and personages were multitudinous'*.

He made the Palace a home. *'In the palace the Bishop lived well, though not extravagantly, as would anyone who appreciated home comforts, and was spared financial limitations. He enjoyed offering hospitality, and many were his guests; even a few had a semi-permanent home with him. There was always fun at the palace – homely fun, intellectual and ecclesiastical wit, and, if one could play croquet or talk about golf and fishing, it was all to the good. And one was expected to smoke in company with the Bishop's perpetual pipe and innumerable matches'*.

*'The Bishop's domestic staff were his personal friends and that was why 'domestic problems' were few'* and included the butler, Mr Courage.

WW went out of his way to be very supportive of the country parson who he felt had a harder job and greater challenges to face than was the case of the town clergy. As bishop, he didn't stand on ceremony when encountering people. He offered the hand of friendship. *'He made the clergy realise that he, and therefore the diocese, had a large and tender heart, and was by no means wholly absorbed in impersonal administration and financial transactions'*. He set out to lighten the unexpected burdens some of his clergy found themselves carrying. One way he did this was to send clergy and families away on holiday for a rest and he personally funded holidays: *'Over and over again he sent priests and their families away for a holiday. A brief letter would be sent with a cheque "Please use the enclosed to get away for a holiday as soon as possible"'*. Other reasons also led the bishop providing funds, always done with the recipient being sworn to secrecy. As the author noted, the bishop could afford to do this, but he went on to say that the wealthy don't always give away their wealth.

Another example of WW being fond of children and having a good relationship with them: 'Mrs Porcher, whose husband was the late Rector of Weston-super-mare, well describes this affection. *"The Bishop loved the children of his clergy. Ours were all devoted to him, and were wildly excited when they heard he was coming to the rectory. The small son, in particular, for he always received by post on the morning of the Bishop's arrival a challenge to a football match on the rectory lawn – the Bishop and his chauffeur versus Michael and the garden roller playing in goal. And what a match it*

*was, fast and furious it went, and how muddy became the Bishop's shoes! Did he care? Not a bit! I had forcibly to clean his shoes and gaiters under great protest from him. One wet day when the promised match could not be played, I heard a great scuffling in the study and roars of laughter. When I went to investigate, two guilty boys stood hand in hand – the Bishop and Michael – and at their feet the remains of what had been a very nice waste paper basket. "It was awfully naughty of us", confessed the Bishop, "but it was such fun, and made a jolly good football."*

Focused his work on the diocese – he believed a *'diocesan bishop should be in his diocese'*. A Dean of Wells wrote: *"If he had chosen a motto for his episcopate (...) he might have selected (...) 'I dwell among my own people'. He did so, not only because he thought it his duty, but because he really loved them. And when he came to lay his burden down it became apparent to how great an extent he had won their love".*

Daughters of the clergy admired *'his handsome looks'*.

At Wells he became a diabetic and in later years began to lose his sight.

He supported the cause for voluntary hospitals<sup>2</sup> and thus supported Wells Cottage Hospital

Displayed strong fatherly care of the priests coming to him as ordination candidates.

Tolerant of all *'degrees of churchmanship'*. He believed that *'the Anglican Communion was the home where different theological views intermingled to the religious enrichment of the entire Church'*.

Was not a fan of the telephone. By the 1930s, it was common for affluent homes in the UK to have their own telephones, but WW was *'perturbed by – what seemed to him – the perpetual use of the phone in the homes of his wife's many relatives. When a critical call had to be made from Wells, it was often Mrs Wynne Willson who had to use the public kiosk. There was a joke that this was the way in which she caught her colds'*.

Enjoyed providing hospitality to many, supported by his wife.

Supported George VI at his Coronation as his Prompter. His counterpart on the right of the King was the Bishop of Durham, according to the long-standing custom, who was Hensley Henson, the diarist (see comments made by HH in document WYNNE WILLSON BIOGRAPHY) and long-standing friend.

*'The Coronation was by no means all joy to Wynne Willson. For weeks and months previous to it, there were the usual fears about health and the dread of making a mistake. There was the horror of being in London he so disliked, because of its noise and bustle, its crowds and traffic. However, he steeled himself to the ordeal, took his part with quiet dignity and sighed with happy relief when it was all satisfactorily over. He was even surprised to find that he had enjoyed the memorable service but he did not delay to hasten back by road – his loathing of trains was intense, and he would do anything to avoid them - to his beloved Wells'.*

Resigned due to ill health (increasing severity of diabetes), threatened loss of sight, and recurrence of serious vocal troubles all of which WW felt were severe restrictions on his ability to serve as Bishop. The Tithe Act, (2 October 1936) was also a factor in his decision to retire. This Act significantly reduced the income that clergy would receive (the value of benefices was reduced by 45% or more) in his diocese. The clergy were already poorly paid and this would add to their financial

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<sup>2</sup> Voluntary hospitals were characterised by their independent status and their reliance on philanthropy and other private sources of funding. They were administered by committees of lay governors serving in a volunteer capacity and were staffed largely by physicians and surgeons working in honorary and unpaid posts.

difficulties (as noted elsewhere WW had personally financially supported his clergymen where necessary). *'During his sixteen years as bishop, many had been his worries and problems, but none so truly touched and finally broke him, as this new burden of finance now forced upon his own clergy'.* He *'was literally terrified and wounded by the grim prospect of the additional penury of the priests'.* He could see no way out of this and *'in sorrow, he had to pass on its solution to his successor'.*

Known for his humour, wit and infectious laugh.

A great speaker – incisive, lucid, illuminating. But again not aware of his skills in this. Advocated and practised short sermons – he *'was impatient of talk for talk's sake'.*

### **Retirement and death**

Retired to a house in Titan Barrow in the parish of Bathford, near Bath.

Continued playing golf, enjoyed the countryside around and about, *'and retained to the end a keen interest in the men who worked on the land'.*

Was much troubled by the WWII conflict as it brought home so many memories of men he had known who had lost their lives in WWI and he feared and grieved for the men he knew that joined up to fight in WWII.

Ill health finally meant that he was restricted to his home. In 1946, Queen Mary spent an afternoon with him. On 15 October, 1946, he passed away, attended by the Bishop of Bath & Wells and Dean of Bristol, in his last hours.

Gifted a playing field (with his wife) to the parish of Bathford.

Tribute given by Bishop of Bath & Wells at his funeral. *"There are others better able to speak of Bishop Wynne Willson's work, for it is one of my regrets that I only came to know him during the past four months. During that time I realised the immense sympathy which he showed in the exercise of his ministry. That he loved the diocese there can be no doubt. He was touched on the day of my enthronement when, in your name and mine, I sent him a message of affectionate remembrance. Whenever I went to see the Bishop, his first question was always, "How is the diocese?". We thank God that he has enriched the diocese, not only by his material gifts, which were many, but by the whole quality of his ministry"*.

### **Leisure activities**

Enthusiastic and highly proficient fly fisherman, fond of golf *'although he was no great performer'.*

Enjoyed playing croquet regularly at the Palace.

Prolific pipe smoker

### **Other**

A Freemason

When as bishop he asked a friend: *"What is the greatest bar to spiritual progress in this country? Cows, Cows. What keeps the farmer from church?-Cows. What makes me late when I am motoring about the country to preach as a village church?-Cows"*.

1925 University of Bristol conferred on WW the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws for *“A life devoted in its first part to education, in its latter stages to the service of the Church, and throughout its course to the broad-minded teaching of Christian principles....”*