

WYNNE WILLSON BIOGRAPHY

SUMMARY TIMELINE/CAREER

Born: 28 August 1868

Assistant Master, Leys School: 1891-98

Assistant Master, Rugby School: 1898-1905

Ordained deacon (Worcester): 1903

Ordained priest: 1904 (this was apparently after 'years of doubt and hesitancy'¹)

Headmaster, Haileybury College: 1905-1911

Headmaster, Marlborough College: 1911-1916

Select Preacher at Cambridge: 1908 and 1916

Canon of Salisbury: 1912-1916

Dean of Bristol: 1916-1921

Volunteer in the Army Chaplaincy: 1917- 1918

Married Alice Lillian Wills: 16/9/1919 (2nd daughter of Sir George A. Wills, Bart. and Susan Britton Proctor). He was 51 years old, his bride, 37 years old

Bishop of Bath and Wells: 1/11/1921-1/11/1937 (retired) (consecrated by Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury at St Paul's Cathedral)

Died: 15 October 1946

More details:

Army chaplaincy: Willson, although 48, volunteered for the Army Chaplaincy. He was interviewed on 7 February 1917, and he asked to be posted to France or Salonika² but bouts of colon pain and shortsightedness meant that he had to serve in England.

EDUCATION/AWARDS:

School:

- Holmesdale School, Keymer, Surrey
- Cheltenham College (won a scholarship in 1881)

University: St John's College, Cambridge University – classical scholar - admitted Sept 1887; Scholar, 1889; Browne medal (awarded annually to students who win the Latin and Greek poetry competition, 1889; B.A. (Classical Tripos, 1st Class), 1890; M.A. 1894³

Hon. LL.D., Bristol, 1925

FAMILY:

Father: Reverend William Wynne Wilson (Codford St Mary)

Mother: Mary Ann Wynne Willson (ne Alexander). Daughter of Michael Solomon Alexander

¹ St John Basil Wynne Willson, ed Patrick Cowley, H. Morley & Sons Limited, York, p61

² Wikipedia footnote: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basil_Wynne_Willson; Index Card Museum of Army Chaplaincy; TNA WO374/77407 War office record Chaplain St J B WYNNE-WILSON. Army Chaplains' Department. | The National Archives <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C747500>

³ [https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search-](https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search-2018.pl?sur=&suro=w&fir=&firo=c&cit=&cito=c&c=all&z=all&tex=WL887SJ&sye=&eye=&col=all&maxcount=50)

2018.pl?sur=&suro=w&fir=&firo=c&cit=&cito=c&c=all&z=all&tex=WL887SJ&sye=&eye=&col=all&maxcount=50

Siblings: Dallas Alexander, Archdall Beaumont (*rector of St Nicholas, Hereford, 1908-23; rural dean of Hereford, 1909-20; domestic chaplain to bishops of Hereford, 1897-1901, 1919-20; examining chaplain to bishop of Durham, 1920-34; rector of Bishop Wearmouth, Sunderland, 1923-34; rural dean of Wearmouth, 1923-33*)⁴, Adelaide Mary, Dorothy Salome, Edith Hereford, Ursula Margaret⁵

Wife: Alice Lillian Wills (second daughter Sir George A. Wills) (July 1882-4/11/1850)

Children: None

Maternal grandfather: Michael Alexander, Bishop of Jerusalem, Jewish

Maternal grandmother: Deborah Alexander (née Levy), Jewish, from Plymouth

Paternal grandfather: William Wynne Willson (1802 - 1877). Banker? (1851 census, Bethnal Green, Middlesex, England—Wm Wynne Willson, 49, banker's clerk, was living with his wife Sophia, 52, and two sons: Wm Wynne, 15, and Alexander James, 8.)⁶ NB Sophia was second wife, married in 1847.

Paternal grandmother: Elizabeth née Beman

Father in Law: Sir George A. Wills, Bart

More details:

1. Father – William Wynne Willson. Distinguished Hebrew and classics scholar, St John's College, Oxford; ordained 1860
2. Maternal Grandfather: Michael Alexander, Bishop of Jerusalem

Michael Alexander emigrated to England in 1819 from Schönlanke, in the province of Posen, in what was known at that time as Prussia (now part of Poland). Married in 1824. Worked at home and abroad for the London Society for Missions to the Jews; 1832 appointed Professor of Hebrew and Rabbinical Literature at King's College, London; converted to Christianity (as did his wife) and ordained in 1827; became the first Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem (consecrated 1841).

3. Wynne Willson benefitted from inherited money through his wife, daughter of Sir George A. Wills

Sir George was Chairman of Imperial Tobacco. His father, alongside other family members built up a tobacco business under the name of Wills. It was taken over by Imperial Tobacco in 1901. The Wills tobacco business was founded by Henry Overton Wills I in the 1700s. He was Sir George's great great grandfather.

Sir George came from an eminent Bristol family who had been well-known benefactors to various institutions in Bristol. Sir George continued this tradition: he was a substantial benefactor to Bristol University, funding a residential hall for male students and then, with his brother, funding the new main University building which was opened in 1925; a benefactor to other Bristol institutions; a benefactor to the Diocese of Bath & Wells when his son-in-law was Bishop – he gave £5000 and then £20,000 to enable an increase in clergy stipends.⁷

⁴ <https://henson.durham.ac.uk/people/person4448>

⁵ <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Wynne-Willson-46>

⁶ <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Willson-3627>

⁷ Obituary, the Times, Thursday July 12, 1928

There is considerable debate over the role slavery played in the development of the Wills' family fortunes. In an article on the Royal Albert Memorial Museum website⁸ the author concludes: *"Thus the Wills' fortune was largely secured after the emancipation of enslaved Americans and (according to Alford) resulted from the skilful branding, advertising and marketing of their products. It was the smoking habits of their mainly working class customers that gave them their handsome income (Alford, 1973). Nevertheless, the foundations of their later success were laid in their earlier years when they were steadily expanding and improving their business operations, and when they were importing tobacco grown by enslaved people"*. The author also notes that the family benefited from their exclusive UK rights to the Bonsack cigarette-making machine in 1883, which mechanised cigarette manufacturing. In Bristol, the Wills name has become controversial, because of these links to slavery.

On Sir George's death, Wynne Willson's wife, inherited a substantial sum of money from her father's estate.

Bibliography:

Editor of The Granta, magazine founded in 1889 by students at Cambridge University

Wrote a lengthy article in the Strand Magazine on the history of Cambridge Union Societies, 1894⁹

Translations of:

- Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound
- Julius Caesar's Gallic Wars, Books 4 and 5
- Virgil's Aeneid, Books 5 and 6
- Lucian of Samosata's Wonderland (Vera Historia). (Book details: St J. Basil Wynne Willson, M. A., illustrated by A. Payne Garnett; Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons; 1899. Book can be seen here: <https://elfinspell.com/ClassicalTexts/Lucian/Wonderland/Bk1Chap1.html#chap1> (It may be worth buying this and having it on display with a page showing one of the illustrations)

LIFE AT THE PALACE

Archive material: Box 6. NB notes have been scanned from archive and put in WW section: Palace History - Documents\Interpretation Research\Sources\Primary sources\Bishops\Wynne Willson

1. Recollections of a former scullery maid – here from 1921-26
Details of her work, no of staff inside, perception of bishop and wife.
2. Notes on visit by Peter Courage (passing on recollections of his father who was butler in WW's time – and Charles Howard, under-chauffeur in WW's time. Recollections included.
 - Joey the pony – gangmower. Not popular with bishop, careered about the lawn – WW's pride and joy
 - Peter collecting scraps from Palace kitchen to feed from swans – regularly toppled into moat and purpose made pole designed to fish him out
 - Bishop's cars – list
 - Bishop golf player – played most afternoons with Reg Courage or Charles Howard

⁸ <https://rammuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Sir-Edward-Channing-Wills.pdf> (accessed 17/8/23). Sir Edward Channing Wills, Bart (1861-1921). Gillian Allen, Legacies of Devon Slave ownership Group. Alford reference is: Alford, B.W.E. (1973). W.D. & H.O. Wills and the development of the UK tobacco industry 1786 – 1965. London: Methuen.

⁹ <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951002786773n&seq=520&q1=Basil> (accessed 10/8/2023), Strand Magazine, Vol 7, Jan-June 1894, pp 507-512

- Staff allowed to entertain own guests in Palace for 2 months in the summer when the WWs away fishing
- Had happy memories of time at the Palace

NB see further recollections re Courage in WW biography pp47/48

- Notes on recollections of Mrs Dorothy Clothier (ne Day)
 - What life was like for the staff, etc Had very happy memories of time at the Palace.
- Memories of JP Wynne Willson, nephew

ITEMS FROM NEWSPAPER CUTTINGS

- Remembered as a modest man. One of his former diocesan priests recalled him as "...straight as a gun-barrel" 'He came to us in our parishes. He was a bishop, a pastor – not an ecclesiastic strutting about in gaiters; a humble man – conscious that he represented One who was born poor, lived poor and died poor!' (source: The British Newspaper Archive [BNA], Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette 26 October 1946, p7)
- Several references to a Wynne Willson Fund which distributed funds for the benefit of the clergy (eg Shepton Mallett Journal 25 March 1938, p8 – The BNA). Not clear if this was a fund that was personally funded by WW or by a benefactor wishing it to be known under this name. However, as this fund is operating in WW's lifetime, suspect that it was set up by WW. Charity Commission database does not record the fund in existence today. There is another Wynne Willson scholarship fund, still in existence, and administered today by the diocese which was funded by a benefactor wishing it to be known as the Wynne Willson scholarship fund. There is also a Wynne Willson War Memorial Recreation Ground which was set up by WW when he moved to Bathford and is for the provision of a recreation ground for the parish of Bathford
- Took up his seat on the episcopal bench in the House of Lords in 1927 when a vacancy arose (Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette - Saturday 19 November 1927, p20)
- A keen gardener??? In the Bath and District Gardener's Society, 28th Annual Chrysanthemum show, he won: 1st prize for vase of Chrysanthus, 2nd prize 6 vases single chrysanthus, 3rd prize for black grapes, 2nd prize for Cox's Orange Pippens and 2nd prize for a collection of vegetables – 3 caulis. (Western Daily Press - Saturday 05 November 1938, p12)
- Elected vice president of Somerset County Cricket Club (Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser - Saturday 02 April 1938, p7) Was this a courtesy post or was it because he was a cricketing enthusiast?
- Appointed president of Wells Association of Boy Scouts 1922 (South Gloucestershire Gazette – Saturday 28 January 1922, p6)
- Example of his generosity – article notes that he donated a sum of money to the Diocesan Board of Finance 'for special distribution to clergy in difficult circumstances....'(Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette - Saturday 08 September 1945, p9)
- Report of death of a former chauffer- Mr Hatch (Wells Journal - Friday 15 December 1944, p5)
- Marriage report and image (Sheffield Independent - Thursday 18 September 1919, p8, Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette - Saturday 20 September 1919, p30) see saved cuttings - illustrated

MISCELLANEOUS:

- Comments made about Wynne Willson by a diarist.
Herbert Hensley Henson (1863-1947) was a public figure and clergyman in the CofE. He kept detailed journals over several years and Wynne Willson is mentioned in them¹⁰ The following are extracts from his journals where Basil Wynne Willson is mentioned (often as Dean of Bristol).References to individuals in Henson's diaries could be quite caustic, sarcastic and barbed!
 - 4 May 1918: *Wynne-Willson took me for a walk after tea with the Bishop. We mounted the Cabot tower, & gained a noble view of the City and the adjacent country. We had a good deal*

¹⁰ <https://henson.durham.ac.uk/people/person4449>. Extracts from Henson diaries relating to Wynne Willson

of conversation before going to bed. Mine host's experience as Head-master of Marlborough gave interest & authority to his opinions on all the questions as to the handling of boys in the matter of sex-training.

- 17 June 1919: Wynne-Willson (Archdall Wynne Willson) & his wife came to dinner. He brought the news that his brother, the Dean of Bristol, was engaged to be married! How are the mighty fallen!
- 12 July 1919: *I was introduced to Mr Wills, & his daughter, the fiancée of Mr Dean, who came to consider the choice of curtains for the decanal drawing room! I have travelled far from the ascetic arduous of my Oxford Housedays, when I can contemplate without disgust a middle aged Dignitary engaging himself to a millionaire's daughter, & debating the price of furniture!! But, as the Bishop of Bristol sagely remarked, this marriage will qualify the Dean for appointment to any bishoprick in the country!*
- 14 December 1919: *After service we had supper in the Deanery. Mr George Wills, the Dean's father-in-law, who is a tobacco-millionaire, & Mr Peel, a Fellow of Magdalene College, Cambridge, were also there. There is no doubt about the intimacy of the alliance between the Church and 'Capitalism' in the City of Bristol. The Bishop evidently commends himself with great success to the commercial magnates of the City, and they are contributing to the diocesan funds with considerable liberality. But a suspicion grows on my mind that there must be a quid pro quo for this lucrative patronage, & that it may be something which a Christian Church ought not to be willing to yield.*
- 4 October 1921: *The papers announce that the Dean of Bristol has been appointed the Bishop of Bath & Wells. It is everywhere assumed that the wealth of the tobacco-king Wills his father-in-law has been not less effectual than his own merits in gaining this promotion.*

Despite these comments, Henley Henson influenced WW's religious thought and direction after he had become ordained. Henson was a priest and considered an outstanding churchman of his generation and a leading public figure. He was bishop of Hereford and then Durham.

2. Relating to Rugby school:

- Highly regarded during his time as Assistant Master at Rugby¹¹
- Donated to Rugby school 2 documents relating to an early poem (The Bastille) by Rupert Brooke written during his school days at Rugby. Documents were a copy of the poem and accompanying letter by RB to WW¹²
- Participated in a debate at the school in 1905 where the motion was: "That in the opinion of this House some form of compulsory military training is both necessary and desirable in England" (The Meteor, March 15, 1905). WW is reported as saying: "training of citizens is not militarism; militarism is professional soldiering. A man trained for a short time has not the disadvantages of a soldier, and he has his own profession as well. The real objection is that we are idle. War is a blot on civilisation; but we must take precautions. Many duties are shirked by appealing to liberty. Let us by all means discourage aggressive militarism, but let us make the country efficient to ward off attacks. Military training improves the general character and gives a man self-respect; it also prevents loafing." The motion was carried.

3. Relating to Leys school

- Made the following comment (Feb. 5th, 1915, when still at Marlborough College) in The Leys' Fortnightly, a school publication: *'I never spent happier years than those seven at The Leys, and I*

¹¹

https://rugbyschoolarchives.co.uk/PDFViewer/web/viewer.html?file=%2fFilename.ashx%3ftableName%3dta_meteor%26columnName%3dfilename%26recordId%3d835%26page%3d3%26end%3d6&searchText=Wynne%20Willson

¹²

https://rugbyschoolarchives.co.uk/PDFViewer/web/viewer.html?file=%2fFilename.ashx%3ftableName%3dta_meteor%26columnName%3dfilename%26recordId%3d108%26page%3d4%26end%3d5&searchText=Wynne%20Willson

always feel a thrill of excitement when I return to the spot where I had so many friends amongst boys and masters. My best wishes will always attend the School.'

4. Relating to Marlborough School

- 1933 Speech day¹³. Commented, in the context of welcoming the Bishop of Salisbury (Chairman of the School's Council), that *"the man who would fearlessly face the work of a modern Bishop must indeed be a dauntless soul"*. This statement is almost a foretelling of how Wynne Willson would feel when he was appointed Bishop of Bath & Wells: on his appointment, he wrote in a reply to a letter congratulating him on his appointment *"at this great crisis in my life"*¹⁴ – a man full of self doubt that he could rise and succeed to the role.
- His addresses at the Annual Speech Days showed humour
- His obituary written in the school's internal journal – the Marlburian, Dec 1946¹⁵ - made reference to the following:
 - a. His school nickname 'Boodle'
 - b. How he had wanted to go to Marlborough college as a schoolboy but had failed the Foundation scholarship examination but finally realised his ambition by become Headmaster
 - c. *'Widely loved wherever he worked for his simple, conscientious, affectionate personality.'*
 - d. Referred to the Times obituary *'which speaks of him as a "notable Bishop, one of whom his clergy really loved," and which tells of "his irresistibly rippling laughter" that "helped him to straighten out tangles"'*.
 - e. *'cared little for personal dignity'*
 - f. Remembered *'with affectionate gratitude the deep interest he took in them [the pupils] as individuals.....A stranger once commented on his fondness for children and asked if he had any family: his reply was: - "Yes, over 600 children," and he spoke from his heart.'*
 - g. The 1914 war hit him hard. Often spoke in sermons, delivered at the school, of pupils whose names were appearing in the casualty lists with deep affection. Wrote to former pupils serving in the trenches *'somewhat illegible letters whose content amply repaid the trouble of deciphering them'*.
 - h. *'.....towards the end of his time he felt that big changes were needed in the curriculum at Marlborough, and, conscientious and modest as ever, he doubted if he was the man to make them'*.
 - i. *'But in the regular intervals that brought each move in his career, we may see more than the hand of chance. His was a restless spirit, and, though he was completely devoid of any calculating ambition, he was avid of duty in any form, and he was ever seeking new forms of activity as he grew familiar with the one that he had in hand. Finally even his last task irked him, thought here it was mainly because he felt that his bad sight and failing health were preventing him from pulling his weight. Yet he stuck to it as long as his physical powers permitted, and he only retired from his Bishopric at the age of 69.'*

5.

AVENUES TO FOLLOW UP?

1. https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/19/archival_objects/381091

Letter to Emily Davies, 1864 - 1990

¹³ The Marlburian, July 21st 1913, Marlborough School Archives

¹⁴ Reply to Harry (surname unknown), October 1921, Leys School Archives

¹⁵ The Marlburian, December 1946, Marlborough School Archives

File — Container: GCRF 9/1/31 Reference Code: GBR/0271/GCRF 9/1/31

Letter assuring ED that he is not an enemy of women but has doubts about their success in business 'as capitalists', 1864. Includes a letter from the donor, 1990, with an annotated photocopy of the Bagehot letter which sent a few years before the original.

Repository Details: Part of the Girton College Archive Repository, The Girton College Archive website

Contact: The Archivist, Girton College Archive, Huntingdon Road, Cambridge CB3 0JG United Kingdom

+44 (0)1223 338897

archive@girton.cam.ac.uk

https://archivesearch.lib.cam.ac.uk/repositories/7/archival_objects/317880

2. 7 letters from Basil Wynne Willson to Oscar Browning, 1893 – 1902

Repository Details: Part of the Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge Repository

The Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge website

Contact: Archivist, King's College, Cambridge CB2 1ST United Kingdom

+44 (0)1223 331444

archivist@kings.cam.ac.uk

Additional Sources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basil_Wynne_Willson

Cambridge Alumni Database: <https://venn.lib.cam.ac.uk/cgi-bin/search-2018.pl?sur=&suro=w&fir=&firo=c&cit=&cito=c&c=all&z=all&tex=WL887SJ&sy=&eye=&col=all&maxcount=50>

Geni: <https://www.geni.com/people/Bishop-Basil-Wynne-Willson/6000000005576247106?through=6000000005575787095>