

PIETY AND PROPERTY IN PRE-REFORMATION WIDOWS' WILLS

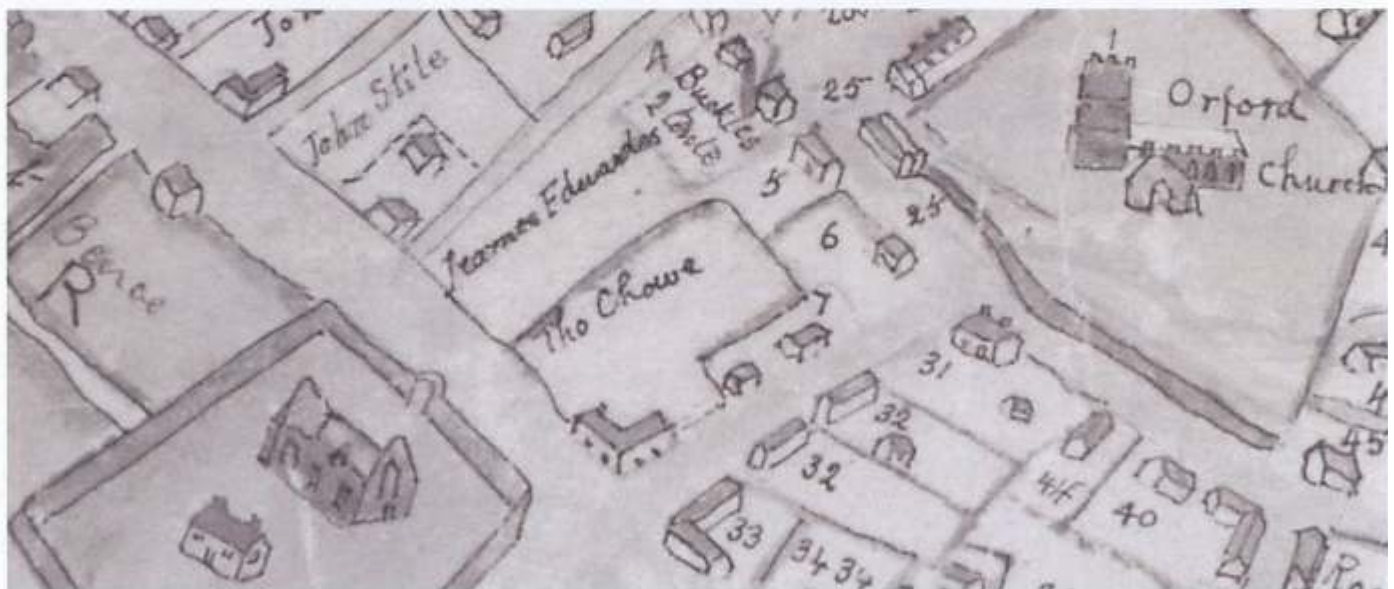
An article in *Bulletin 20* (Spring 2013) p 17 looked at the will dated 1531 of an Orford widow, Alice Bache. This article examines further wills made by women, mostly within 70 years of the beginning of the upheaval which was the Reformation¹, and one made afterwards, during the brief reign of queen Mary when Catholicism returned.

There are too few wills made by women from Orford and the parishes in its hinterland to conclude they were any more devout than their husbands were. However, with any real property (land) owned by their husbands normally settled in their wills, widows were free to dispose of the personal property (money and chattels) they had in any way they chose. Thus clothing and household items were often bequeathed, but only after the testatrix had made provision for the welfare of her soul. This selection of (mostly) widows' wills sheds light both on their religious faith and their colourful clothes. It also uncovers two interesting stories from a time when the Church, its buildings, institutions and ceremonies permeated everyone's lives, but was also being challenged.

A ladder to Heaven from Broad Street, Orford

In 1483 **Margaret Alysandir** of Boyton made her will and left 2s 6d for a priest to celebrate a mass at Scala Coeli in Rome or at the Chapel of the Blessed Mary of the Pew, which was in Westminster.

The *Scala Coeli* indulgence originated in the chapel of Santa Maria Scala Coeli in Rome, part of the monastery of Tre Fontane built on the site of the prison where St Paul was kept in captivity prior to his execution. In 1138 the French monk St Bernard, while celebrating mass in the chapel, saw in a vision a soul for whom he was praying ascending a ladder from Purgatory to Heaven. The church thereafter offered, in return for payment, to celebrate a special requiem mass, the result of which would be that the soul of the deceased would be 'fast-tracked' to Heaven².



The roofless remains of the Friary on Norden's map of c1600 (*New Orford Town Trust/Orford Museum*).

This appealing indulgence seems to have become 'franchised' because in 1476 it became available in the lower chapel of the Chapel Royal at Westminster. This explains why Margaret Alysandir was able to give the alternative of Westminster rather than Rome for her mass. In 1504 the indulgence was granted to Westminster Abbey, perhaps to help pay for the new chapel built by king