

Some Tudor Scriveners

by
Vic Harrup

The picture on the cover of the published early seventeenth century wills of the Archdeaconry of Suffolk shows the scrivener sitting by the bedside of the dying person recording their final wishes regarding their estate. It implies a verbatim record taken just the once, but evidence from earlier wills suggests otherwise. Many fifteenth century wills were written in Latin and these and ones in the first three decades of the next century, studied in some detail by the author, are often too 'neat' to have been the result of a single 'sitting'. Surely, except in the case of a simple list of bequests, some note-taking would be required and then a fair copy made, witnesses called to verify the dying person's wishes were correctly recorded, and the final will and testament put in safe keeping. There is usually only a short period of time between the will being written and probate granted, so wills were usually written in the last days or week of life.

The wills referred to relate to ordinary people in the Butley area, not those with major bequests to make. The latter may well have made wills before their final illness and, probably being literate, could make their own notes. Evidence of probable note taking comes from the unusual survival of the will of Elizabeth Mose of Boyton 'rehearsed before the said parson by mouth', all deleted, and the actual will, accepted for probate, on the reverse. The two versions are not identical, although the same in the case of some bequests, but omitted from the final version were references to her husband's daughters from a previous marriage, and an unnecessary confirmation that John Mose should have all the legacies in his father's will. The fact that Elizabeth had also been married previously was made clear when her son Nicholas Bukton was given Christian and surname in the final version. There were additional bequests, including a 'pair of langett bedes of gette', that is a rosary made of jet beads. Another will, written in the first person, was amended to read 'he gave'. Few wills were signed, so the alterations imply that the testator had died before the will was read out to him for confirmation. William Cokeson of Capel, who had been the surveyor and outrider of lands for the Prior of Butley would have been literate, but was 'labouring in the extremities of death not able to declare and express his last will and testament' in 1540.

Most wills written at this time were well ordered, although the bequests of bedding, furniture and utensils coming before houses and land, as often happens, seems odd. There are few deletions, corrections or amendments, and the preambles were so uniform as to be formulaic much of the time. Variations only occur after the end of Catholic control of the church in England. So can we picture the average case of a dying person wishing to set down their wishes for what was to happen to their belongings? They would have to send for a literate person to write the will, and probably seek their advice too. Who were the possible scriveners in small villages? Usually there was only the parson and perhaps one or two others. However, in the Butley area there were the canons at the Priory too. One has to rely on the names of the witnesses to obtain a clue. The churches of Butley, Capel and Gedgrave were provided with priests from the Priory, so it is not surprising that all but one of the early sixteenth-century wills were witnessed by a canon serving at the Priory. It was different in Boyton, where the