

A Projected Pilgrimage from Suffolk to St Ninian, c. 1500

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The wills of prosperous East Anglians often include bequests to fund pilgrimages for the good of their makers' souls or the fulfilment of obligations. There was plenty of choice in this department: in addition to the major English shrines at Canterbury, Walsingham and elsewhere, there were many local cult-sites, each centred on a relic, image or some other object.¹ Probably, nobody in the region lived more than ten miles from such a place.

Occasionally, a testator wanted something more logistically ambitious. Composing his will in May 1509, William Godell of Southwold on the coast of northern Suffolk asked that a priest travel from England to Rome and spend a year there saying masses for his soul in five of the most important churches.² This short article deals with a closer but altogether less expected foreign destination recorded in another Southwold will, the shrine of St Ninian at Whithorn in Galloway.

It should be said at the outset that the evidence adds nothing to knowledge of the shrine itself or the way English people reached Whithorn. There are two reasons for drawing attention to it, the first being its simple rarity as evidence for interest from southern and eastern England in what has been called 'one of the strangest and most complex [cults] for any Scottish saint'.³ The second reason is its relevance to the recent surge of interest in Scottish cults and their wider associations, particularly work by Tom Turpie and the late John Higgitt on Ninian himself.⁴ These scholars draw attention to documentary and

iconographic evidence for the saint in late medieval English devotion, almost all of it relating to the archdiocese of York. Richard III, the most familiar English supplicant of Ninian during the period, had a suffrage to the saint added to one of his prayer-books and a scholarship at Cambridge named in the saint's honour, but very little can be said of other points south.⁵ There was no expatriate community of Scottish merchants in London to foster devotion to him there, as happened at Bruges and elsewhere in the North Sea world.⁶ Neither was any church dedicated to Ninian south of the River Trent, and his relics do not appear in the records of any English monastery or collegiate institution. His name is absent from the liturgical calendars of the English religious orders and secular church.⁷ Kent alone yields multiple, closely dated evidence. Surviving wills mention altars of St Ninian in the Carmelite church at Sandwich and St Andrew's church, Canterbury, in 1486 and 1499 respectively. Lights of St Ninian are also mentioned in the churches of St Mary (1482, 1488) and St James (1499) at Dover.⁸ In each location there was probably an image of the saint. The maritime context of these places is surely significant, as it is likely to be in the case relating to Southwold discussed here. Seafaring trade is the only clear catalyst for interest in Ninian on the part of someone living in the south or east of England during a period when political difficulties, geographical distance, lack of historical associations and the sheer volume of devotional alternatives all militated against basic awareness of the saint, let alone active devotion to his cult.

The Southwold will survives in one of the probate registers of the consistory court of Norwich.⁹ It was made by a woman named Alice Wood, wife of Robert Wood, in June 1497, and proved at the court in November of the same year. It gives a typically economical sketch of the status of its maker, who was evidently a person of modest rather than robust prosperity. By it, she requested burial in the cemetery of St Edmund's parish church,

Southwold, and left fourpence to the high altar. She asked that a certain tenement of hers be sold to pay her debts, fund the bequests of her late husband, John Colford, and pay for 'the completion of all the pilgrimages of Rowland Heylesden, that is, both to St Ninian in Scotland and other pilgrimages in England' (*ad perficiendum omnes peregrinationes tam Rouland Heylesden, viz ad sanctam Ninianum in Scocia, quam alias peregrinationes in Anglia*). No sum of money is mentioned in relation to any of this. Otherwise, she left a fishing net, brass pot and towel to Thomas Colford, and disposal of the rest of her goods to the discretion of Robert Wood, whom she appointed as executor of her will. There is no more significant information in the document, possibly because this is a nuncupative will. Such wills were usually dictated *in extremis* and are routinely terse. On the other hand, the wills enrolled in the Norwich registers, being abstracts of the original, formally witnessed documents rather than full copies, are often similarly short, whether or not they are nuncupative. Whatever the case may be, the number and destinations of the English pilgrimages alluded to in Alice Wood's will were presumably written down somewhere and accessible to her executors. Given the circumstances of the will's making, one is fortunate to find the reference to the Ninian pilgrimage preserved. It evidently stood out in Alice's mind for some reason, or else seemed worth emphasising because unusual and hence more liable to neglect than a destination like Canterbury or Walsingham.

One is also fortunate to know a little of Rowland Heylesden, a man whose name suggests that he or his ancestors came from the village of Hellesdon, four miles north-west of Norwich. His will, dated 6 November 1494, proved on 15 December in the same year, survives among the probate registers of the court of the archdeacon of Suffolk.¹⁰ This is undoubtedly the will of the same Rowland Heylesden, as by it he leaves some fishing nets and a rope to the personal use of Thomas Colford.¹¹ He was a resident of Southwold and

also requested burial in the parish churchyard there. Disappointingly, however, the will – which is also an abstract rather than a full transcript – does not mention any pilgrimages. Nor does it mention Alice Wood or John Colford. Given that Alice had remarried and was dead herself by the end of 1497, John Colford was probably dead by November 1494. Conceivably, he was a partner or associate of Rowland Heylesden in some fishing business, and his status devolved to his son when he died. This would explain Heylesden's bequest of the use of nets and rope to Thomas. How Alice acquired responsibility for Heylesden's pilgrimage obligations is unclear. It may be that she inherited them from her dead husband, which might imply that something happened to prevent Heylesden going on pilgrimage himself before the death of John Colford. In any case, as noted, the surviving text of the will is merely indicative of affairs that were known to the relevant parties.

The query that hangs over Alice Wood's will thus devolves to Rowland Helysden. The reason for his interest in Ninian, and by what means he knew of the saint, are completely obscure. As Alice's will suggests, the link need not have been personal. Heylesden may himself have inherited the obligation to go on pilgrimage to Whithorn priory from someone else. At least, however, the name of the saint and of Scotland were read and written clearly by the Norwich scribe. Whatever else underlies the evidence presented here, the legal and moral obligation at its root was apparently as firm as the pious intention to fulfil it.

Appendix

Norwich, Norfolk Record Office, probate register Typpes, fol. 138r.

As the registers of the Norwich consistory court are never produced for readers, the text that follows is taken from a microfilm. This film is dull and scratched, but the text is tolerably clear. The only real lack of clarity arises from the hand, whose scribe liked to contract and truncate words, sometimes in dubious ways.

Text

[In the margin] Testamentum Alicie Wode, nuper de Southwolde

In dei nomine amen, xxiiij die mensis Junij anno domini mccccclxxxvij. Ego Alicia Wode de Southwolde, vxor Roberti Wode, de eadem compos mentis & sane memorie, condo testamentum meum in hunc modum. In primis, commendo animam meam deo patri omnipotenti, beate marie virgini & omnibus sanctis, corpusque meum ad sepeliendum in cimiterio sancti Edmundi Regis & martiris in Southwold predicto. Item, lego summo altari eiusdem ecclesie iij d. Item, volo quod tenementum meum per executores meos¹² vendatur ad persolvendum debita mea & ad perficiendum & perimplendum legatum Johannes Colford nuper viri mei, ac etiam ad perficiendum omnes peregrinationes tam Rouland Heylesden, viz ad sanctam Ninianum in Scotia quam alias peregrinationes in Anglia. Ite lego Thome Colford, filio meo, 1 mansare de Sperlyngnett. Item, eidem unam ollam eneam ac unam tuellam de drap. Residuum vero omnium bonorum meorum supernis non legatorum do et lego dispositione Roberti Wode viri mei, quem ordino et constituo meum executorem, ut ipse ordinat & disponat pro anima mea prout ei melius viderit deo placere & anime mee prodesse hoc autem testamentum nuncupatum, scriptum in presencia domini Antonij Caluer presbiteri parochie ibidem & Margarete Gardener de Eston¹³ die anno & loco supradicto.

Translation

The testament of Alice Wood, late of Southwold.

In the name of God, amen, the 23rd day of the month of June in the year of our Lord 1497. I, Alice Wood, of Southwold, wife of Robert Wood of the same place, being of sound mind and healthy memory, make my will in this way. First, I commend my soul to God the Father the omnipotent, the Virgin Mary and all saints, and my body to be buried in the cemetery of [the parish church of] St Edmund, king and martyr, in the aforementioned Southwold. Item, I leave to the high altar of the same church 4d. Also, I will that my tenement be sold by my executors for the payment of my debts and to the satisfaction and fulfilment of the bequest of my late husband John Colford; and also to the completion of all the pilgrimages of Rowland Heylesden, that is, both to St Ninian in Scotland and other pilgrimages in England. Also, I leave to my son Thomas Colford one measure [of fishing net] called Sparlyngnett.¹⁴ Again, to the same, a brass vessel and a cloth towel. I leave it to my husband Robert Wood, whom I appoint and confirm as my executor, to dispose of the rest of my goods not bequeathed above for the good of my soul and the pleasing of God as he sees best, and for the fulfilment of this nuncupative will, written in the aforesaid day, year and place in the presence of sir Anthony Calver, priest of the same parish, and Margaret of Eston.

¹ See for example E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, 2nd edn (London and New Haven, 2005), pp. 190-205; R. Hart, 'The Shrines and Pilgrimages of the County of Norfolk', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 6 (1864), pp. 277-94.

² Kew, The National Archives, PRO, PROB. 11/16/407.

³ *Legends of the Scottish Saints: Readings, Hymns and Prayers for the Commemorations of Scottish Saints in the Aberdeen Breviary*, ed. A. Macquarrie (Dublin, 2012), p. 403.

⁴ T. Turpie, *Kind Neighbours: Scottish Saints and Society in the Later Middle Ages* (Leiden and Boston, 2015), pp. 95-116; J. Higgitt, 'From Bede to Rabelais – or How St Ninian got his Chain', in *New Offerings, Ancient Treasures: Studies in Medieval Art for George Henderson*, ed. P. Binski and W. Noel (Stroud, 2001), pp. 187-209; idem, 'Imageis maid with mennis hand': *Saints, Images, Beliefs and Identity in later Medieval Scotland* (Whithorn, 2003).

⁵ A. Sutton and L. Visser-Fuchs, *The Hours of Richard III* (Stroud, 2000), pp. 41-4.

⁶ Higgitt, 'From Bede to Rabelais', pp. 197, 201, 207-8 n. 44.

⁷ N. J. Morgan, *English Monastic Litanies of the Saints after 1100*, 3 vols (London, 2012-18), III, pp. 163-4 (with extensive bibliography).

⁸ *Testamenta Cantiana: East Kent*, ed. A. Hussey (London, 1907), pp. 45, 98, 100, 293-4 (not noted by Higgitt or Turpie).

⁹ Norwich, Norfolk Record Office, probate register Types, fol. 138r.

¹⁰ Ipswich, Suffolk Record Office, IC/AA2/3, fol. 165v.

¹¹ *Item lego Thome Colford unum le mansar' nett vocatur xij scor' nettes et unum le rope ad suum proprium usum.*

¹² She subsequently mentions only one executor.

¹³ Eston could refer either to the village of Easton, about 20 miles south-west of Southwold, or Easton near Norwich, lying about 40 miles north-west and close to Hellesdon.

¹⁴ I.e. 'sprat net', a net for catching sprats, or herring.