

Oxfordshire

SIMON WISDOM (C.1507-C.1587)

Simon Wisdom, an immigrant into Burford in the early 16th century, rose to become the town's wealthiest and most influential man, developing extensive business and farming interests, dominating the town's civic life for several decades, and accumulating and remodelling several town properties. His merchant's mark remains visible on a number of buildings around the town.

Wisdom may have moved to Burford in the 1520s, perhaps as an apprentice from the large village of Shipton-under-Wychwood some 3 miles to the north. He became established and successful during the 1530s. He is first recorded as a burgess (i.e. a member of the town's governing corporation) in 1538, and in the two lay subsidies (or royal taxations) levied in 1544 he paid the third and fourth largest amounts in tax. By his mid thirties, therefore, he was already a substantial figure. By 1559 he was the town's wealthiest tax-payer by a considerable margin, a position he sustained for almost another 30 years. He died in December 1586 or early 1587, aged around 80, having lived through most of Henry VIII's reign, the reigns of Edward VI and Mary, and much of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

Trading Activities

Incidental references suggest that Wisdom combined several activities and traded in major commodities, though he appears to have been a substantial trader within his locality rather than personally involved in international trade (as had been common for leading Burford merchants in the 15th and early 16th centuries). He is known to have sold fish in the 1540s, and in 1560 he was described as a mercer, i.e. a seller of fabrics and hose. He was also described as a clothier, denoting not only a dealer in cloth but possibly someone who organized and funded cloth production. His will mentioned a wool-house, which suggests involvement in wool trading. The local basis of his activities is emphasized by his possession in 1552 of 143 acres of arable land, and by the fact that he was fined in the manor court for causing damage to his neighbours' property with his ploughing.

Wisdom's role in Burford

Wisdom's position in civic life was commensurate with his wealth. For at least seven years between 1538 and 1568 he served as one of the town's two bailiffs or chief magistrates. He was steward (a more senior officer) in 1553, and in at least 10 years between 1559 and 1581 (possibly for the entire period) he was alderman of Burford, i.e. the head of the town's corporation. In this capacity he welcomed Queen Elizabeth to the town in 1574. He was also prominently involved in civic initiatives. In 1571 he collaborated with other townsmen in founding a grammar school, and contributed seven tenements to its endowment. He also composed the school's 'Constitutions and Orders', which regulated its management. In 1579 he re-edified a small almshouse.

As Wisdom's contribution to the school's endowment shows, the scale of his business generated surplus wealth which he invested in property. In 1552 he held 8 burgages (or house plots) in High Street and a burgage and a half in Sheep Street. He remained a substantial property-owner at his death, when he disposed of seven houses (one of them called a 'mansion'), together with tenements in Priory Lane and his wool-house.

Wisdom belonged to a Protestant milieu. In 1530 he was charged with possessing three books of scripture in English, and was presumably related to the Protestant preacher Robert Wisdom of Burford (1540s). His will contains a Protestant assertion of the price of Christ's sacrifice. His vigorous involvement in Burford Grammar School suggests a concern for literacy, while the Burford historian R H Gretton has noted that he possessed 'a particular taste for system and organisation', which might be considered a characteristic feature of Renaissance culture. Certainly Wisdom was a dynamic man, whose life and personality reflected, in his corner of Oxfordshire and the Cotswolds, many of the dynamic features of 16th-century England.

Wisdom's buildings

Most of the Burford buildings which bear Wisdom's merchant's mark seem to have been remodelled in the mid-to-late 16th century, suggesting that Wisdom not only accumulated a fair number of houses, but frequently rebuilt or modernized them.

The earliest association of a house with Wisdom is his lease of 134 High Street in 1552. In 1555 we find him at 115 High Street (now called Wysdom House or Hall), as attested by his merchant's mark and the date on an inside panel. This was almost certainly his main dwelling and the centre of his business empire, with wings and outbuildings set on a wide plot which stretched back to Pytt's Lane. Wisdom also owned the adjoining building to the south (now the Highway Hotel, 117 High Street), and it is clear that at one time these buildings were linked. The ground-floor layout shows how the two interlock, with a narrow passage between them at the rear.

In 1576, to help fund the new Grammar School, Wisdom rebuilt the houses near the bridge (now 1 High Street), raising the roof and converting them into three dwellings for rent. A plaque on the wall commemorates this. Two years later he renovated 96 High Street, placing the date and his mark in the spandrels of the doorway. A further renovation was carried out in 1582 at 123 High Street, a late medieval timber-framed building with double jetties to the street. Here he built out the ground floor to the line of the top floor and filled in the space above with a timber structure, so giving extra space at ground and first-floor levels. Again he placed his mark and the date above the doorway. He also seems to have held 12 Witney Street, now Bull Cottage

Wisdom's will lists the numerous properties he still owned at his death, most of them sublet. They included Mollener's House, John Walbrige's house, Richard Chadwell's house (probably Titcombs on Witney Street), Toby Dallam's house, William Partridge's house, lands and tenements in St John's Street (now called Priory Lane), and the old house called the wool house ('Wullhowse'), probably at 3 Witney Street. His own house (presumably 115 High Street) was described as a 'mansion or dwelling house'.

In addition, Wisdom was responsible for founding the Wisdom almshouses in Church Lane. They were demolished in the 19th century, when a plaque commemorating his benefaction was transferred to the old grammar school.

Robert Peberdy and David Clark

Read more in the EPE book *Burford: Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town* by Antonia Catchpole, David Clark and Robert Peberdy (published 2008)

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