

Heraldic visitations and early genealogy

The family tree depicted in this document is dated to the early eighteenth century but is copied from the Herald's Visitation of 1619. Originally messengers of monarchs and noblemen, heralds became officers of arms responsible for the registration of coats of arms and pedigrees.

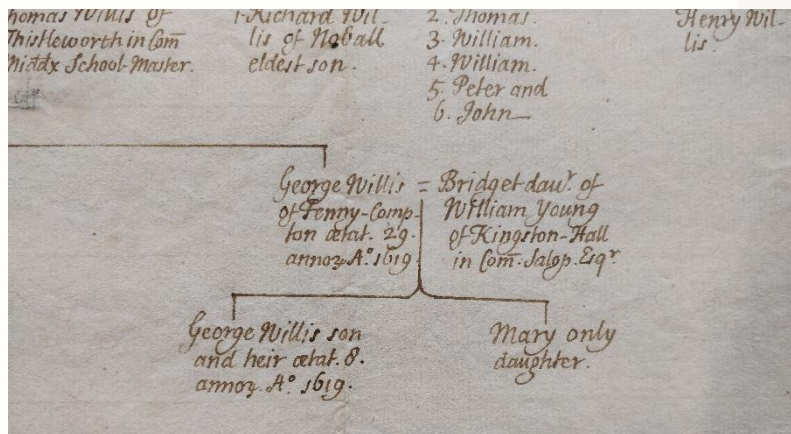
A heraldic visitation was a tour of the country in which heralds would visit counties in turn to investigate family pedigrees and authorise claims to bear arms.ⁱⁱ The pedigrees produced through visitations can support genealogical research, but they should be verified wherever possible with evidence from original sources.ⁱⁱⁱ A printed copy of the Warwickshire Visitations of 1619 can be found and searched by name on Ancestry.^{iv}

The tradition of visitation has faded, but the College of Arms continues to act as the authority on coats of arms to which genealogical evidence must be submitted for approval.^v

Early members of the Willes family

Though originally from Oxfordshire, the medieval Willesees found their Warwickshire beginnings in the purchase of land over the county border at Napton and later Fenny Compton; ownership of these lands is demonstrated in various deeds and wills in the Wyllys (an alternative spelling) family of Fenny Compton collection (CR0149).^{vi} On this family tree, the Willes name begins at Richard Willes of Napton, married to Joan James, from whom the link to Keverell name appears to have been established.

Several generations of the Wyllys family lived at Fenny Compton, with evidence from their records suggesting they farmed livestock and their lands. However, one member, George Wyllys, took a different path, emigrating to America in the 1630s. Wyllys later served as Governor of Connecticut between 1642-1643, where a Puritan colony had been founded in 1636 following a war with native Pequot tribe.^{vii} Long after the family's resettlement, the last of their Fenny Compton estates was sold in 1767 to William Holbech.^{viii}



CR4141/7/952, Willes family tree, Warwickshire County Record Office. Section showing George and Bridget Wyllys.

The Willesees, Newbold Comyn and Leamington Spa

While the Fenny Compton connection faded, a younger branch of the Willes family established themselves at Newbold Comyn and owned the estate from the sixteenth century until the mid-twentieth century. The 160 acres of land were jointly sold to William Morcote and Richard Willes c. 1540, but it appears that an intermarriage of the two families led to the inheritance of Morcote's portion of the estate.^{ix}

Later members of the Willes family led public lives, including Edward Willes (b. 1702), who became a lawyer and judge, spending most of his career in Ireland. Others also took up high-ranking legal roles or became involved in parliamentary politics.^x

However, a later Edward Willes (b. 1787) kept his ambitions closer to home. Mr Willes played a role in the development of Leamington in the early nineteenth century, as revealed in his estate correspondence and files.^{xi} His notable projects included commissioning the building of Christ Church and repurposing much of the Newbold Comyn estate for new public gardens, now Jephson Gardens. Willes's contribution to Leamington is commemorated in the obelisk which stands in the gardens, built in 1875.^{xii}

The family's attachment to Newbold Comyn inevitably declined in the twentieth century when the estate was sold on, and the house was later demolished in 1965 having fallen into dereliction.^{xiii} The ancestors of the Willesees may have dispersed but their local legacy is still clear to see.

ⁱ 'Heraldry of Royal Leamington Spa', *Leamington History Group*, <https://leamingtonhistory.co.uk/heraldry-of-royal-leamington-spa/>

ⁱⁱ 'Heraldic Visitations', *GenGuide*, <https://www.genguide.co.uk/source/heraldic-visitations/> [accessed 27/04/2023].

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Heralds' visitations', *Medieval Genealogy*, <http://www.medievalgenealogy.org.uk/guide/vis.shtml> [accessed 27/04/2023].

^{iv} 'Warwickshire, England Visitations, 1619', *Ancestry*, <https://www.ancestryinstitution.co.uk/search/collections/6347/> [accessed 27/04/2023].

^v 'Services', *College of Arms*, <https://www.college-of-arms.gov.uk/services> [accessed 27/04/2023].

^{vi} See CR0149, Warwickshire County Record Office.

^{vii} 'George Wyllys: Governor of the Colony of Connecticut 1642', *Connecticut State Library* <https://ctstatelibrary.org/george-wyllys/> [accessed 27/04/2023].

^{viii} See CR0457/44/63-64, Warwickshire County Record Office.

^{ix} 'Newbold Comyn', *Leamington History Group*, <https://leamingtonhistory.co.uk/newbold-comyn/> [accessed 27/04/2023]; see also CR4141/2/80, Warwickshire County Record Office.

^x See C.920.WIL (P), *Notes for a talk given by Edward Willes esq. of Newbold Comyn to the Leamington Society 29.1.1959, made by the County Record Office*, in Warwickshire County Record Office library.

^{xi} See CR4141, Warwickshire County Record Office.

^{xii} 'Willess Obelisk' Official List Entry, *Historic England*, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1381328?section=official-list-entry> [accessed 27/04/2023].

^{xiii} 'Newbold Comyn', *Leamington History Group*, <https://leamingtonhistory.co.uk/newbold-comyn/> [accessed 27/04/2023].