

THE MONUMENTS OF St MARY'S CHURCH, FAIRFORD - 3

WILLIAM OLDISWORTH (1609-1680)



William Oldisworth came from a well-established and very extensive family, some of whom achieved national prominence. The family had connections with several Gloucestershire parishes including Fairford, Bourton-on-the-Hill and Coln Rogers, as well as Kencot in Oxfordshire and further afield, particularly in London. William died in 1680 and his is the oldest of the four Oldisworth family monuments in St Mary's church. The Oldisworth connection with Fairford may date back to Tudor times as the Gloucestershire historian Ralph Bigland states that the corn tithes for Fairford were leased to a Nicholas Oldisworth soon after 1544. William Oldisworth was the great grandson of George Lygon who was the lord of the manor of Fairford in the 16th Century.

William was the son of Robert Oldisworth and his wife Meriell, the daughter of Sir Nicholas Overbury. Most of Robert's ten children were baptised at Bourton-on-the-Hill near Moreton-in-Marsh including William who was christened there on 30 April 1609. Two of the children eventually became rectors of Bourton-on-the-Hill: Nicholas, a renowned poet who died of the plague in 1645; followed by Giles who was rector from 1645 to his death in 1678. Several other Oldisworths of various generations also served the church but William took a different career path. After spending just a year at Queen's College, Oxford William entered the Middle Temple in London in 1629 to study law. Little is known of William's subsequent career in the legal profession but he had probably spent some years in London because on 7 June 1638 he married Mary Austin at St Saviour Southwark. Mary was the daughter of the lawyer and poet William Austin, one of the first trustees of Dulwich College. William Oldisworth must have practised law as he mentions the bequest of his collection of "Books of the Common, Civil and Statute Lawes" in his will.

In 1613 William's father Robert had leased the manor of Coln Rogers from the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester Cathedral, a lease that was later renewed until 1650 at which point William bought the manor outright after the Dean and Chapter had to forfeit their estates. However, William had to revert to leasing the manor in 1661 when the Dean and Chapter recovered their rights to the manor after the Restoration of the Monarchy. The estate at Fairford was also leased for 21 years in 1661 and in fact

remained in the hands of the Oldisworth family until sold to John Raymond Barker in 1794. It is possible that Robert and Meriall lived in Coln Rogers until Robert's death in 1664, while William and Mary resided in Fairford. William was certainly resident in Fairford in the 1640s as he is credited with having at least some pieces of Fairford's renowned stained glass windows removed to prevent them from destruction during the Civil War.

In 1660 and 1661 William Oldisworth and his friend Andrew Barker became the centre of attention in several pamphlets published by both sides of a growing religious intolerance between Anglicans and 'Dissenters'. The first pamphlet claimed that Fairford's Justice of the Peace (not named but William was the local Justice at this time) had failed to prevent the abuse of a group of dissenters by Anglicans and that as a result his house and that of Andrew Barker had been invaded by a plague of frogs. At least four other pamphlets followed until the ridiculous story petered out.

In addition to the law, it seems that William Oldisworth also had a keen interest in medicine. He received his licence in 1662 from the Archbishop of Canterbury who at that time could license physicians and surgeons. This is referred to on William's monument in the terms "medici & dispensatoris" and his will bequests his books on "phisick and Chirurgerie" including a copy of Gerard's Herbal, a huge volume on plants which includes information on their medicinal use. Indeed, William's library must have been extensive and wide ranging as his will also mentions books on heraldry, gardening and cookery.

William Oldisworth died on 3 October 1680 at the age of 71 and was buried at Fairford two days later. In Bigland's 'Collection' of Gloucestershire church monuments published in 1794 it is recorded that William's grave was marked by an inscribed slab close to the altar. This and four other stones, including those of his son Austin (died 1717) and his grandson William (died 1714), were later covered up by raised paving.

William and Mary had at least ten children, seven sons and three daughters. The sons either went into the church or commerce. His son Nicholas was a merchant and died in Spain in 1678 and left a lengthy and very interesting will. Three other sons, Austin, Edward and Robert moved to London and were involved in the cloth trade, while another two, James and William, became clergymen.

After William's death his wife Mary moved to Kencot, presumably to be looked after by her son James who was the rector there. Mary died in 1685 and is buried in the church at Kencot and is commemorated along with eight other members of the Oldisworth family on a series of floor tiles.

William's well-preserved monument in St Mary's church, Fairford is set close to the altar. The text is in Latin and extols the William's virtues as a God-fearing family man, lawyer and physician. The plaque is surrounded by a border of foliage surmounted by a smaller plaque showing the heraldry of the Oldisworth family (three lions passant) impaling those of the Austin family (two chevrons separated by three golden crosses) above which is a crest of a red lion rampant holding a golden scroll.

A curious feature of William's monument (indeed of all the monuments close to the altar in the church) is that it is surrounded by an outline of what was probably a different and larger border indicated by a lighter colour on the stonework. Whether this indicates that the Oldisworth monuments originally had been of a different design or had superseded other monuments or had an additional border that was later removed is not known. The latter suggestion is a distinct possibility as the style of the outline border appears to be of a later date than the memorial in some cases.

The other Oldisworth monuments in the church are those of William's son James (died 1722); William's grandson William (died 1714); and William's granddaughter Muriel Loggan (died 1754).