



Who was Mr Ratford?

Like many historical inquiries, the answer to this question is still unclear. During the summers of 2010 and 2011, Cambridge Archaeology Field Group was invited to carry out excavations by the National Trust, in a paddock adjacent to the Home Farm on the Wimpole Hall estate near Cambridge. In 2009, while a telephone cable was being run through the paddock, some hitherto unidentified buried masonry had been encountered. CAFG were asked to investigate this in July 2010.

No building had stood on the site in recent times, but documentary research revealed a 1638 Survey plan of the Wimpole Estate by Benjamin Hare (CRO: R77/1, copy). This appears to show a house at the approximate position occupied by a William Stok. In the 1790's the buildings of Home Farm were erected and the house demolished sometime early in the 19th century. On Sir John Soanes' design drawing for the 1794 farm buildings, the outline of a structure is labelled 'Mr Ratford's House' and the house also appears on Henry Repton's annotated plan of 1801 (Parks & Gardens). It was this structure that CAFG were determined to learn more about.

Could we also learn more about its occupant, the enigmatic Mr Ratford? Well, the first thing to say is that the Ratford/Radford surname, allowing for phonetic variations in spelling, is quite common in west Cambridgeshire. Among the birth, death and marriage records (FreeReg, Familysearch) for Cambridgeshire between 1500 and 1850, there are hundreds of references for Ratford/Radford. However, the numbers for Wimpole are more manageable, and we have unearthed some interesting records of the Wimpole Ratfords.

In 1735 we find details of the burial of an Eleanor Ratford at Wimpole, whose parents are noted as William and Susanna Ratford. Throwing some light on law and social conditions at this time, it is noted in the records for Eleanor's burial, that she was 'Buried in woollen affidavit made by Mary Wright'. Paupers would have been buried

naked, but for those wealthy enough to afford a shroud, it would have had to be made of wool. The Burial in Woollen Acts of 1666 - 1680 (BHO 1666, 1677 & 1680) required the dead to be buried in pure English wool and the fact to be confirmed by the swearing of an affidavit in front of a Justice of the Peace. This was an attempt to protect the English wool industry. The penalty for non-compliance was a fine of £5.

On 5th March 1758 the record of Sarah Ratford's baptism notes that she was 'privately received into the church'. This is a little unusual, as it indicates that her parents could not, or did not want to have her baptised before the full congregation of the church. Baptisms were normally carried out during a formal service.

A William Ratford is one of two witnesses to a marriage at Wimpole on 14th September 1755, where the groom, unable to write his name, had 'made his mark'. More of the Ratford clan appear as witnesses to a marriage on the 18th September 1770, where we find both a John Ratford and a John Challard cited. As the Ratfords and Challa(n/r)ds appear as witnesses to several marriages at Wimpole, it would appear that they were regarded with some esteem in that small community.

The burial of a William Ratford is recorded on 10th August 1771, whose occupation is given as carpenter. On 12th September 1781, a Sarah Ratford (daughter of John and Ann Ratford), married a Joseph Dubois at Wimpole. Here, a William Challan(r?)d is one of the witnesses. The baptism of a Catherine Dubois is recorded on 22nd June 1786. On 18th February 1803 we find the burial record of Anne Ratford, while sadly her daughter, Sarah Dubois, is already recorded as a widow at her burial on 5th Nov 1808.

The details of two Ratford/Radford wills may be found on the National Archives database. That for a John Ratford (PROB 11/1269) 'otherwise Radford of Wimpole otherwise Wimple in the county of Cambridge by trade a carpenter first' was presented on 1st December 1795 and probate is dated 1st March 1803. He leaves a sum of money and other investments to his wife Ann, who he makes sole executrix. Twelve months after the death of Ann, a sum of money is to be paid to his daughter Sarah, while his granddaughter, Ann Dubois is to receive 'all my chattels and goods'. Sarah is also to receive 'my bed and bedsted with the ... effect furnature and every kind belonging to it and likewise my ... round mehogany card table and likewise my

wainscot beawreo'. John further bequeaths 'my little freehold estate lying in Bourn' to his wife Ann: the will is dated 20th May 1794.

Curiously, in the Cambridge Chronicle and Journal for September 26th 1795, we find the following brief notice among the events in Cambridgeshire for the previous week: 'On Friday died; in his 66th year, Mr John Ratford, shopkeeper, of Wimple in this county.'

The will of Ann Ratford (PROB 11/1391), John's wife, was proved on 27th April 1803. In it she bequeaths to her daughter 'Sarah Dubois wid of Wimple all my wearing apparel of every description all my Stock in the public funds upon government Security and the Interest arising from the Same that may be due at the time of my decease and I also give and bequeath to my Said Daughter Sarah Dubois all Dividends that may be paid for and all account of a note of law of Mr William Fishers Cambridge was a Bankrupt and also all other my Household Effects of every description And I do hereby constitute and appoint my Said Daughter Sarah Dubois my sole Executrix for executing this my will'. The will was dated 4th December 1802.

Ann Dubois, the granddaughter of John and Ann Ratford, appears in the records of apprentices and masters for Cambridgeshire in 1804 (CFHS, PRO IR1/71/143). A master paid stamp duty on indentures at the rate of 6d (sixpence) for every £1 under £50 which he received for taking on the apprentice, and the rate of 1s (one shilling) for every £1 above £50. We find that Ann was apprenticed to Geo. Smith and his wife at Wimpole, a 'Mantua Maker'. This unusual term may derive from the French *manteuil* or *manteau*, meaning a coat. However, a Mantua was actually a highly fashionable dress, often worn by ladies at court. The term Mantua-maker came to denote a women's dress maker in the 18th century (WikiMantua, VAM). The indenture of Ann's apprenticeship was made on 26th June 1804 for a period of 5 years dated from 8 March 1803 at a cost of £35 plus 17shillings and 6 pence (Bill Hughes pers. Comm.).

In a further will, that of a Joseph Dubois (Mike Coles pers. comm.) dated 29th July 1789, he describes himself as a cook, living in London. The implication is that he may have been employed by Lord Harley at Wimpole. Here we might recall the ceramic balls found during our excavations, which might have been employed in the 'blind baking' of pastry. In his will he leaves one shilling to his wife Sarah and to 'her' daughter Ann £5, while the bulk of his estate (several hundred pounds), is left to his family in France and friends in London! (PROB 11/1181).

A William Ratford appears in the correspondence of Edward Harley, 2nd Earl of Oxford and one time owner of the Wimpole estate among others. Several series of letters have been deposited in the manuscript archives held at the University Of Nottingham (MSSWEB). Those relating to Wimpole are to be found mainly in the PI C 1 series covering the period 1711 – 1739 and summaries may be viewed online.

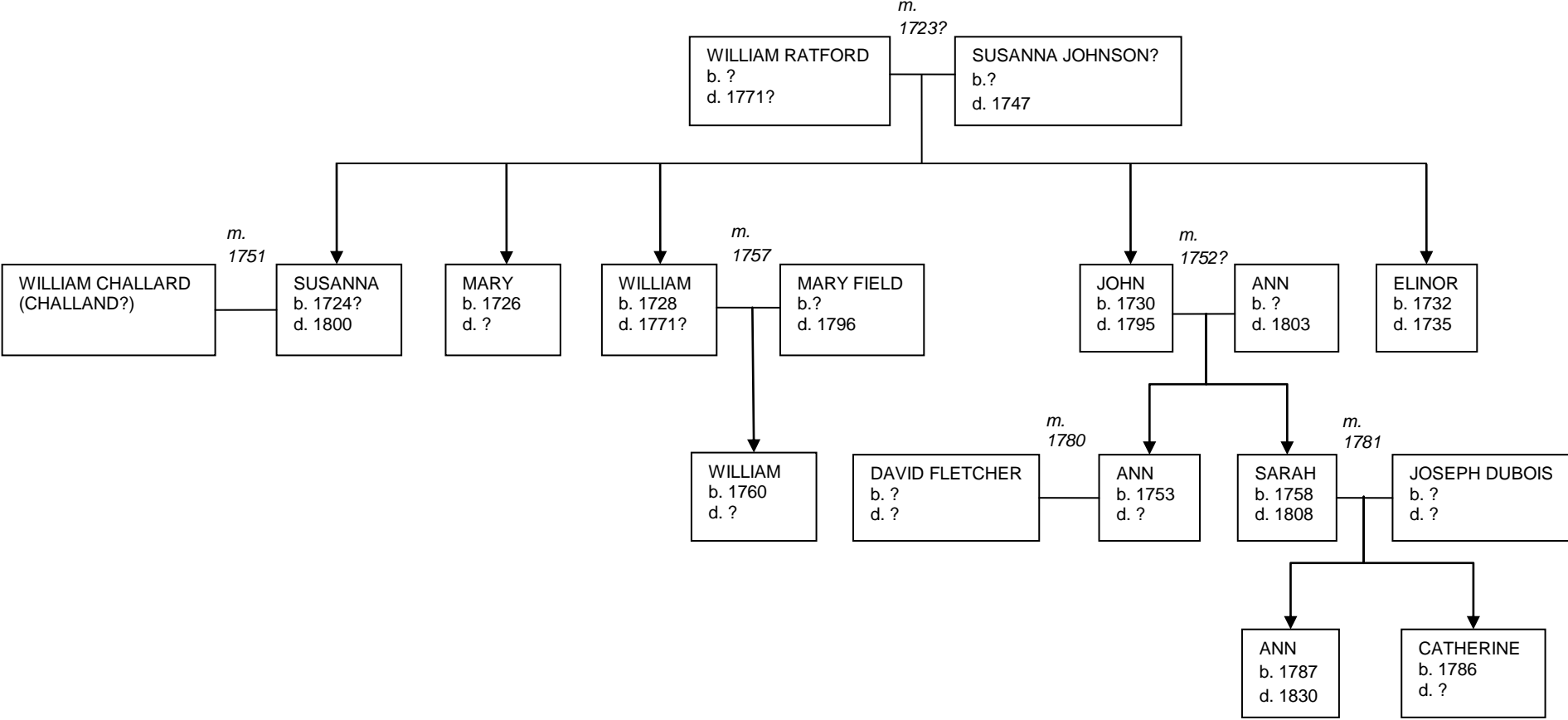
Some excerpts:

PI C 1/338	15/04/1721	From John Cossen (one of Lord Harley's estate managers); he reports that he has asked a Mr Godfrey to employ a William Radford to measure 50 oak trees which are to be sold and 'keep an account'.
PI C 1/403	04/05/1723	From John Cossen, Grantham, to Edward Harley, Lord Harley [later 2 nd Earl of Oxford], Dover Street, London; he is writing to Mr Godfrey and William Ratford concerning Lord Harley's business and has left money with Mr Godfrey to pay for certain expenses.
PI C 1/540	09/02/1727	From John Cossen, Wimpole, to Edward Harley, 2 nd Earl of Oxford, Dover Street, London; warns the earl that a John Pamphlin is on his way to see him about 'the land leased to William Ratford'.
PI C 1/569	13/06/1727	From John Cossen, Wimpole, to Edward Harley, 2 nd Earl of Oxford, Dover Street, London; stating that he 'has failed to reach agreement with William Ratford and others about dividing Jekin's farm; is to let the whole to John Handley if this is approved by the earl'.
PI C 1/696	25/03/1731	From John Cossen, Wimpole, to Edward Harley, 2 nd Earl of Oxford, Dover Street, London; writes that 'Mr Ratford's apprentice has smallpox and has been isolated in the little house at Kingston Wood'.

PI C 1/718	13/07/1731	From John Cossen, Wimpole, to Edward Harley, 2nd Earl of Oxford, Dover Street, London; imparts the news that Mr Ratford's boy has died of a 'violent pain in his head'. (His apprentice or son?)
PI C 1/745	18/06/1734	From John Cossen, Wimpole, to Mr William Thomas at the Earl of Oxford's, Dover Street, London; as per instructions received from 'My Lord', has ordered the maid Frances Rawley to have the house cleaned and has asked Mr Belcher to clean the sash windows; adds that 'William Ratford has been in charge of making sure that no tiles are loose or missing on the roof of the new library'.
PI C 1/777	08/01/1736	From John Cossen, Wimpole, to Mr William Thomas at the Earl of Oxford's, Dover Street, London; writes that 'William Ratford and his men are waiting for orders before they fell trees for the year's repairs'.
PI C 1/780	01/02/1736	From John Cossen, Wimpole, to Mr William Thomas at the Earl of Oxford's, Dover Street, London; proposes, along with William Ratford, that 'some dead elms and ashes be cut down to provide wood for the year's repairs'.
Pw2 Hy 265	12/12/1738	Letter from W. Ratford, Wimpole, Cambridgeshire, to [E. Harley] 2nd Earl of Oxford, Dover Street, London; states that 'he has packed up and sent the books as instructed'.

The family tree below is an attempt to define the relationship between the various Ratfords that have been identified as living in Wimpole during the 18th and 19th centuries. There are still many gaps and other Ratfords who do not appear to fit into a single family lineage: there may well have been more than one family living in and around Wimpole, with this relatively common surname. Neither have we managed to definitely identify which 'Mr Ratford' lived in the house near to Home Farm. There may well have been one or more generations of the same family living there, either independently or all together. The excavations certainly reveal an extensive enlargement of the property, probably sometime in the mid 18th century. Could this have been to accommodate such an extended family?

A DESCENT OF THE RATFORDS OF WIMPOLE



The house has taken on the appearance of more than just a country estate workers cottage, with its well built brick foundations and has the feel of belonging to more of the 'middling sort', perhaps a Yeoman farmer. From the evidence of the wills, John Ratford and Ann his wife might appear as good candidates, having a reasonable inheritance to pass on to their children. The first William Ratford we encounter might also have a claim to have inhabited the house. We see in the Harley letters that he has appeared to have risen from being a carpenter, to an all-round 'Mr Fixit', carrying out errands for the Earl of Oxford.

As it is clear that the house survived well past the building of the new farm buildings, being shown on maps of 1801 and 1820, perhaps some of the later generations also lived there. The daughters of John Ratford (Ann and Sarah Dubois), were both resident in Wimpole at the time of their baptisms. Do we see in the number of pins and the three thimbles (see the article by Terry Dymott) found during the excavations, evidence of the dressmaking skills learnt by Ann Dubois at her mother's, or grandmother's side, which led to her gaining an apprenticeship with a prestigious ladies apparel maker? Might these skills have led to work for the residents of the Hall itself? The gilded button found during the 2011 excavation might have come from a household uniform being worked upon in the house. Perhaps it was worn by someone employed at the Hall, the former carpenter William Ratford for instance, or the cook, Joseph Dubois?

Short of finding one of the excavated writing slates having an inscription to the effect of '*xx Ratford lived here 17xx – 18xx*' we may never know for sure just who Mr Ratford truly was. However, the study of this single Cambridgeshire family has revealed a fascinating insight into the lives of those living and working on a major landed country estate. It may well keep the members of CAFG busy for many years to come.

Version 1.0

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