

HENRY BROWNE (died 1714)

The last will and testament of Henry Browne of Fairford is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, he wrote his will whilst being “very sick and weak in body but of perfect and disposing mind and memory thanks be given unto God” on the 2nd of November 1714 and, remarkably, was buried in St Mary’s churchyard the very next day. In fact he did not actually write his will because he signed it with an ‘X’ being unable to write. He left all his property and goods to his wife Elizabeth but bequeathed £400 (equivalent to about £42,000 in 2020 terms) to his daughter Elizabeth when she reached the age of 21 years or married before that age with her mother’s consent. His daughter was baptised at St Mary’s on the 31st of October 1714 so Henry probably only lived a day or so after the birth of his child.

Henry made the proviso that if his daughter died before she could receive her legacy then smaller sums of money would go to three of his relatives: his brother William Browne and his sisters Ann Floud (or Floyd) and Priscilla Thomas. The interesting point about this is that all these relatives lived in Virginia in North America.

The first attempt to colonise the land that eventually became the State of Virginia took place in 1585 but it took many years through much hardship before the colony, centred on Jamestown, became successful. By 1700 the population of the crown colony of Virginia, then the largest and richest colony in America, was only about 70,000 so the Browne family who moved there from England can be seen as pioneers.

Henry Browne’s link with Virginia is all the more intriguing because Henry was a tobacconist and tobacco was Virginia’s main export for much of its early history. Was Henry’s business supported by his family connections in Virginia? There is no written evidence of this but it seems a distinct possibility.

Henry was probably still in his thirties when he died. He had married Elizabeth Jenner in St Mary’s on the 29th of August 1700 but he was most likely born elsewhere as he does not appear in the Fairford baptismal register. In his will he named his wife as his executrix and the witnesses were John Bayly, John Jenner (possibly a relative) and Fairford’s then vicar the Reverend Frampton Huntington. Henry Browne had been a church warden from 1712 until his death and was therefore well known to the vicar.

On the 6th of November 1712, almost exactly two years before Henry Browne died William Jeffryes wrote his own will. He was buried one week later and by coincidence he was also a tobacconist of Fairford. These two men are the earliest known tobacconists of Fairford. Of the almost 600 wills of Fairford residents only one other tobacconist is known, Richard Comely who died in 1753.