

SUMMARY: The excerpt below is the section on the nobility from an unpublished manuscript entitled 'The State of England Anno Dom. 1600' written by Sir Thomas Wilson (d.1629). It is generally claimed that the author was the nephew of the Dr. Thomas Wilson (1523/4-1581) who was appointed as a Privy Councillor on 12 November 1577 and who served as one of Queen Elizabeth's two Principal Secretaries. However according to *The Dictionary of National Biography*, the alleged relationship has not been established:

*Wilson, Sir Thomas (d. 1629), record keeper and author, was said to have been the nephew of Thomas Wilson (1523/4-1581), secretary of state to Elizabeth I, but there is no corroborative evidence for this and he is not mentioned in the elder Wilson's will.*

The relationship is significant because of Sir Thomas Wilson's claim that the source for his statements concerning the nobility was material collected by 'an uncle of mine who was Principal Secretary to the Queen'. Wilson speaks of 'divers books' which were 'collected' by his uncle, thought to be Dr. Thomas Wilson, and claims that he himself has compared these books one with another ('conferring these books together'). Since Dr. Thomas Wilson had died on 20 May 1581, and since he had presumably collected these books some years prior to his death, the material in them must have concerned the revenues of noblemen in previous reigns and in the early part of Queen Elizabeth's reign. The books in question were likely subsidy books, in which the yearly revenues of those who were liable to pay the subsidy were 'rated', so that the amount of the subsidy could be calculated based on each individual's annual revenue.

After having drawn attention to these 'books' in order to give credibility to his statements, Sir Thomas Wilson quotes only a single figure from them, claiming that in them Oxford was 'rated' in 1575 at £12,000 a year. The figure is clearly spurious. Oxford's annual inherited income, including income from his lands and his office of Lord Great Chamberlain, is firmly established by several extant historical documents at approximately £2250 per year (see TNA C 142/136/12, WARD 8/13 and other documents on this website). How Wilson arrived at the figure of £12,000 per year is inexplicable, unless he misread £2000 as £12,000. Moreover Wilson's claim that Oxford was rated at £12,000 in 1575, and two years later had sold all his lands is also flatly contradicted by the historical documents (see the records of Oxford's land sales on this website). Although Oxford had sold lands in some outlying counties by 1577, the core lands of the Oxford earldom in East Anglia remained intact at that time.

Moreover, since Dr. Thomas Wilson had died on 20 May 1581, he could have had no knowledge of Oxford's annuity or its source, since the annuity was not granted until 26 June 1586 (see TNA:E 403/2597, ff. 104v-105), and since the wording of the document states that it was payable from the Exchequer, not from the revenues of the bishopric of Ely. In fact, contrary to Sir Thomas Wilson's claim, it was not Oxford, but the Queen herself who benefited for two decades from the revenues of the bishopric of Ely. She kept the see vacant, and took the revenues from it, from the death of Dr. Richard Cox in 1581 until she appointed Dr. Martin Heton as bishop in 1600.

Nor can Sir Thomas Wilson's statements concerning Philip Howard (1557-1595), 13<sup>th</sup> Earl of Arundel, be attributed to information allegedly obtained from his uncle, Dr. Thomas Wilson. Philip Howard was the eldest son and heir of Oxford's first cousin, Thomas Howard (1538-1572), 4<sup>th</sup> Duke of Norfolk, who was attainted and executed in 1572. Philip Howard was not restored in blood until March 1581, only two months before Dr. Thomas Wilson's death, and the latter could therefore have had no knowledge of Philip Howard's later career.

It would appear that Sir Thomas Wilson attempted to lend credibility to his statements by invoking the authority of materials collected by his distinguished uncle, Dr. Thomas Wilson. However it is evident that his uncle could not have been the source of the material in this section of his manuscript. Sir Thomas Wilson was not in a position to have access himself to documents which would have provided him with detailed information concerning the revenues of the nobility, and it thus seems likely that his principal source of information was rumour.

The excerpt below is taken from a 2006 reprint by Vance Publications of Fisher, F.J., ed., *The State of England, Anno Dom. 1600 by Thomas Wilson*, Camden Miscellany. vol. xvi (London: Camden Society, 1936), pp. 21-3.

#### The State of the Nobility and the Number

I have seen divers books which have been collected by secretaries and councillors of estate which did exactly show the several revenues of every nobleman, knights and gentlemen through the realm, and curiously collected by an uncle of mine which not long since was Principal Secretary to the Queen, but it were too long in this simple discourse to set down the particularities thereof. But conferring these books together, I find great alterations almost every year, so mutable are worldly things and worldly men's affairs. As namely the Earl of Oxford, who in the year 1575 was rated at 12,000 a year sterling, within 2 following was vanished and no name of him found, having in that time prodigally spent and consumed all even to the selling of the stones, timber and lead of his castles and houses, and yet he liveth and hath the first place amongst earls. But the Queen is his gracious mistress and gives him maintenance for his nobility's sake, but (to say truth) out of the bishopric of Ely, which since his decay could never see other bishop. And other, the Earl of Arundel, about the same time, was reckoned not much inferior to him in state, and before him in dignity, and in one 6 months all was confiscate to the Queen for treason. The other earls, some daily decay, some increase according to the course of the world, but that which I have noted by perusing many of the said books, and of the later sort, is that still the total sum groweth much to one reckoning, and that is to £100,000 rent yearly, accounting them all in gross to avoid prolixity. If a man would proportion this amongst 19 earls and a marquis, it would be no great matter to every one £5000 rent, but as some exceed that much, so many come short of it.

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The 39 barons and 2 viscounts do not much exceed that sum; their revenue is reckoned together to amount to £120,000 yearly.

The bishops' revenues amount to about £22,500 yearly altogether, whereof 3 of them, viz., Canterbury, Winchester and Ely, receive rent per annum betwixt £2000 and £3000, the rest betwixt £1000 and £500, and some less.

The deans are the chief ecclesiastical persons of every cathedral church next unto the bishops, whose command over the prebends and canons is more than the bishops', and their commodities in letting the church lands and bestowing the places and offices is very great. Otherwise their revenue is not much, the best not exceeding £300 yearly, and the rest some £200, some £100, and many less. Their whole revenue accounted through England amounted to the sum of £4500 yearly or thereabouts.

But this must be understood, that the state of the clergy is not altogether so bare as may perhaps be conjectured by the smallness of their revenue, for that they never raise nor rack their rents nor put out tenants as the nobleman and gentleman do to the uttermost penny, but do let their lands as they were let 100 years since, reserving to themselves and their successors some commodities besides the bare rent, as corn, muttuns, beef, poultry or suchlike, but to say the truth, their wings are well clipped of late by courtiers and noblemen, and some quite cut away, both feather, flesh and bone.

These are the states of the nobility, both clergy and lay, which are called *nobilitas maior*. There rests to touch those of the meaner nobility which are termed *nobilitas minor*, and are either knights, esquires, gentlemen, lawyers, professors and ministers, archdeacons, prebends and vicars.