

# Robert Welborne, “Unworthy Servant of Christ”, and his Coin Collection

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During the compilation of Dr Andrew Burnett’s splendid three-volume monograph on the history of coin collecting in the British Isles between Tudor times and the middle years of the eighteenth century<sup>1</sup>, I had the very considerable pleasure of being asked to read through, and comment on, almost the entirety of its text in its draft form.

Among the issues that Dr Burnett and I debated between us was the possible fate of what was clearly an impressive coin collection formed by Henry Mordaunt, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Peterborough (1621-1697). What appears to have been the collection concerned was offered for sale in November 1695, ostensibly as the property of an unnamed “ancient gentleman”, but as the individual offering the coins for sale was “one Welborne, who is Steward to the Earl of Peterburrough”, the antiquary Edward Lhwyd justifiably concluded at the time that this was “the collection of his master”<sup>2</sup>.

Nothing further is reported about the dispersal of the Earl of Peterborough’s collection, but I took it upon myself to suggest to Dr Burnett that some or all of the coins concerned might have passed into a coin collection subsequently bequeathed to Christ Church, Oxford, by Rev.Robert Welborne (c.1695-1764), Rector of Wendlebury, Oxfordshire, whose father, Robert Welborne, was likely to have been Peterborough’s man of business<sup>3</sup>. It was not possible to offer this as more than a conjecture, for the precise nature of the coin collection bequeathed to Christ Church in the mid 1760s was obscure to us, and an additional complication arose from the fact that the primary printed source for this bequest, William Jones’s biography of the Right Rev.George Horne (1730-1792), successively President of Magdalen College, Oxford, Dean of Canterbury, and Bishop of Norwich, gives two conflicting accounts of it. The first of these, quoted below, records that Welborne bequeathed his Greek and Roman coins to James Gilpin, a barrister who was Recorder of the City of Oxford<sup>4</sup>, and suggests, by implication, that it was Gilpin who subsequently gave the coins in question to Christ Church<sup>5</sup>; while the second, derived from a letter written to an unnamed friend by the future Bishop Horne in December 1764, not long after

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<sup>1</sup> A.Burnett, *The Hidden Treasures of this Happy Island, A History of Numismatics in Britain from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, London, 2020, 3 vols.

<sup>2</sup> Burnett, *op.cit.*, vol.1, 368-9, quoting a letter from Edward Lhwyd to Richard Mostyn dated 26 Nov 1695. The Earl of Peterborough is known from other sources to have possessed coins struck at the classical sites of Istrus (on the Black Sea coast of present-day Romania) and Laodicea ad Mare (in present-day Syria), as well as an Alexandrian coin of Gallienus. Lhwyd states that the coins offered for sale in 1695 were of ‘silver and brasse’ and comprised “13 hundred pieces”.

<sup>3</sup> Burnett, *loc.cit.*

<sup>4</sup> James Gilpin (1709-1766). In addition to being Recorder of Oxford, he also held office as Christ Church’s Chapter Clerk and Auditor (he had previously been a Westminster Student of Christ Church between 1728 and 1741).

<sup>5</sup> W.Jones, ed., *Memoirs of the Life, Studies, and Writings of the Right Reverend George Horne D.D., late Lord Bishop of Norwich*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, 1799, 45-6.

Welborne's death, states that Welborne "bequeathed his gold and silver medals to Mr. Gilpin, and some copper ones to Christ-church"<sup>6</sup>.

There the matter has rested, but I recently came across in the online register of wills proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC) a will, proved there on 10 November 1764 (PROB 11/904/30), teasingly headlined as being that of "Robert Welborne, servant of Wendlebury, Oxfordshire". Further investigation quickly showed that the word "servant" was some past indexer's unhelpful shorthand for "unworthy servant of Christ", as Welborne describes himself in the text of his will, and that the will was indeed that of the Rector of Wendlebury.

The will has now enabled me to put on record the exact terms of Welborne's bequests to Christ Church and to James Gilpin, and to offer an interpretation of them which differs somewhat from that deducible from Jones's biography of Bishop Horne. I have also been able to locate the wills, also proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, both of the Rector's father, Robert Welborne, and of the Rector's mother, Mary Welborne, the latter, as will emerge, unexpectedly relevant.

Robert Welborne, Rector of Wendlebury from 25 June 1730 to his death on 8 October 1764<sup>7</sup>, had been elected as a Queen's Scholar at Westminster School in 1709, and had been elected from there to Christ Church, Oxford, in a competitive examination held in the summer of 1713, as a Westminster Student of that college. This provided him with a small annual stipend to meet his living expenses from the date of his admission to Christ Church as an undergraduate, together with an entitlement to remain in residence at Christ Church after he had taken his BA and MA degrees for as long as he stayed unmarried, subject to the proviso that when he had attained a statutory level of seniority within the College it would be incumbent on him to take priest's orders in the Church of England. This Welborne duly did in 1722, and he was thus still a Student of Christ Church when he was inducted as Rector of Wendlebury, vacating his Studentship a year later on the expiry of a "year of grace" granted by the Christ Church authorities<sup>8</sup>.

It is appropriate at this point to reproduce what is said about him by William Jones in the first of the relevant passages in his biography of Bishop Horne, for what is said there sets Welborne in his intellectual and social context :

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<sup>6</sup> W. Jones, *op.cit.*, 194-5.

<sup>7</sup> As was customary at the time, Welborne held other livings simultaneously with that of Wendlebury as his career progressed, although throughout his time as a parish priest Wendlebury remained his residence and principal focus. The first of these livings was Bletchley, Buckinghamshire, of which he was Rector between March 1741/2 and the summer of 1744, when he had to give up Bletchley to a young relative of the irascible patron of the living, the antiquary and coin collector Browne Willis. He then took on the living of Lowick, Northamptonshire, of which he was Rector between August 1744 and November 1761 ; the patron here was Lady Betty Germain (1680-1769), heiress by a complicated succession to the Northamptonshire estate of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Peterborough, and Lady Betty, who would have been old enough to recall Welborne's father's services to the Mordaunt family, may have offered him the living in recognition of this.

<sup>8</sup> Wendlebury was a Christ Church living, its advowson having been purchased for the college in 1708 in pursuance of a policy to make available to its ordained graduates a wider range of parish incumbencies than those with which Christ Church had been endowed at its foundation in the mid sixteenth century. The requirement for Welborne to vacate his Studentship arose from a prohibition on Students retaining their status and stipend if they accepted "a living with cure of souls" more than a short distance from Oxford.

The Rev. Mr. Welbourne of Wendelbury near Bicester in Oxfordshire, whom, from the monastic spirit of a single life, and a remarkable attachment to the study of Antiquity, Mr. Horne delighted to call by the name of *Robertus Wendelburiensis*, was very much respected and beloved, and often visited by Mr. Horne as long as he lived. Educated at Westminster and Christ-church, he was a scholar of the politer class; and a deep and skilful student in the Scripture, of which he gave a specimen in an interpretation of the last words of David from the Hebrew. He went farther in this, and with better success, than the learned and ingenious Dr. Grey, the versifier of the Book of Job<sup>9</sup>, after the manner of Bishop Hare's Psalms, with whom he had been acquainted. He wrote well in English and Latin, and composed several learned works, which had their exceptional passages, from a visible inclination towards some of the peculiarities of the Church of Rome. He had lived several years in strict friendship with Dr. Frewen<sup>10</sup>, the physician, in whose house he always resided when he made a visit to Oxford; also with the Reverend Sir John Dolben<sup>11</sup>, of Finedon in Northamptonshire, the learned, accomplished, devout, and charitable father of the present Sir William Dolben<sup>12</sup>, member for the University of Oxford; and also Mr. Counsellor Gilpin; to the last of whom he left his collection of Grecian and Roman coins; which, if I am rightly informed, is now in the new library at Christ-church.

The text of Welborne's will, signed by him and witnessed on 30 September 1760, shows that he made separate bequests of coins to the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church and to Gilpin. The first bequest is expressed as follows :

Also I give to the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church in Oxford the fairest and best of my Greek and Roman coins and medals not excepting the rest if they shall be deemed worthy of their acceptance in number above five hundred to be and remain in the College Library as a poor testimony of the love and honour I retain for the place of my education and of the sense of the benefits I have received from it

The bequest to Gilpin, at a subsequent place in the will, is expressed thus :

Also I give to James Gilpin Esquire Recorder of the City of Oxford all my antique silver coins and medals English or foreign and two gold ones amongst them

It will be seen from this that of the two conflicting accounts of the fate of the collection offered in the biography of Bishop Horne, the second, that offered in a

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<sup>9</sup> Rev. Richard Grey DD (1696-1771), author of a metrical translation into Latin of the Book of Job, published in 1742.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Frewin MD (1678-1761), the leading Oxford-based physician in this period. Frewin had been a Westminster Student of Christ Church between 1698 and 1709, subsequently becoming a Faculty Student of Christ Church and Camden Professor of Ancient History in the University of Oxford. Welborne's closeness to Frewin is evidenced by the fact that in his will Welborne bequeathed to a Mrs Mary Waldo "my bust of Dr Frewin which I would have to be packed up in a wooden case and sent according to her order"; this would have been a copy (in plaster ?) of one of the two extant marble busts of Frewin by the fashionable sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac.

<sup>11</sup> Rev. Sir John Dolben, Bart. (1684-1756), Vicar of Finedon, Northamptonshire, and Prebendary of Durham.

<sup>12</sup> Sir William Dolben, Bart. (1727-1814), MP for Oxford University February – March 1768, Northamptonshire 1768-74 and for Oxford University again 1780-1806. He deserves to be remembered today as an early advocate for the abolition of slavery.

letter from Horne written in December 1764, is nearer the mark, but nonetheless a mistaken one. On a proper interpretation of the will, what Welbourne must have intended was that the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church should be offered their choice from his collection of Greek and Roman coins, regardless of the metal in which individual coins might have been struck<sup>13</sup>, and that his collection of “English and foreign” coins struck in silver, together with the two gold ones, should pass to Gilpin.

Unfortunately in the present context the late Dr Humphrey Sutherland, reviewing the history of the Christ Church coin collection in an article published at the outset of the Second World War<sup>14</sup>, made no reference to any coins received by Christ Church from Welborne, an omission doubtless reflecting the fact that there were no coins obviously identifiable as deriving from the Welborne bequest among the coins from the Christ Church collection which had then recently been deposited in the Heberden Coin Room on long term loan.

The bequest was however notified to the Christ Church authorities within a month after Welborne’s death on 8 Oct 1764, for a contemporary minute of a meeting of the Dean and Chapter held on 2 November 1764 records :

Ordered that Mr Cracherode together with Mr Gilpin be desired to inspect & take an account of the coins bequeathed to the Dean & Chapter by the Revd.Mr.Welborne, & make a report to them of the same<sup>15</sup>.

As students of the history of collecting in Britain will recognise, “Mr Cracherode” was none other than Rev.Clayton Mordaunt Cracherode (1730-1799), who was to bequeath to the British Museum many years later his magnificent library and his no less splendid coin collection. Cracherode, like Welborne, was a Westminster Student of Christ Church, but the particular reason for his involvement, along with Gilpin, in making an assessment of Welborne’s coins, will probably have been that in 1763 he had been appointed as Christ Church’s Wake Librarian, i.e. the college officer carrying responsibility for the library, manuscripts, and coin collection left to Christ Church under the will of William Wake, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1716 to 1737.

That is as far as the Christ Church records take us, for if Cracherode and Gilpin submitted a report to the Dean and Chapter, as they certainly should have and very probably did, no minute of any resulting decision was taken.

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<sup>13</sup> It is theoretically possible that Welborne expressed his separate bequests in the terms that he did because all the Greek and Roman coins that he possessed were struck in base metal, but it would be odd indeed if a collection of over 500 coins in these series did not include a single coin struck in silver. It is especially unlikely that any Greek coins that he happened to own were all struck in copper or brass rather than in silver.

<sup>14</sup> C.H.V.Sutherland, ‘The Coin Collection of Christ Church, Oxford, a chapter in the history of coin collecting’, *Oxoniensia*, vol.v, 1940, 140-5. At this time Christ Church had no designated archive (as Dr Judith Curthoys, Christ Church’s current Archivist, has kindly pointed out to me), and Sutherland was dependent on information about bequests or gifts of coins to the collection that had been supplied to him by W.G.Hiscock, the college’s then Assistant Librarian, whose help he duly acknowledges.

<sup>15</sup> Christ Church archives, Chapter Book 1754-1780, D & C i.b.6, 112. I owe this reference to Dr Curthoys, who has also searched in the Chapter Book for any subsequent minute relating to Welborne’s coins and has found no further mention of them.

It is however difficult to imagine that the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church did not select for their college's collection any of the coins offered to them under Welborne's will, particularly in light of the fact that the bequest was made in testimony of the "love and honour" that Welborne felt for his place of education, and it may yet be that a more careful investigation will turn up evidence bearing on the nature of any Greek or Roman coins that came into Christ Church's possession from Welborne's estate.<sup>16</sup>

As to the fate of the Earl of Peterborough's collection, it is clear enough that Robert Welborne, the Rector of Wendlebury's father, had indeed been Peterborough's steward. The best evidence for this, independently of the rarity of the Welborne surname and the coincidence that Welborne's father had the same given name, is that references in documents relating to transactions in which members of the Mordaunt family were involved around the end of the seventeenth century show that Robert Welborne, the family's man of business, was domiciled in the parish of St. Margaret's, Westminster, and it so happens that the will of the Rector's father, Robert Welborne, dated 31 August 1716, proved PCC 1 August 1717 (PROB 11/559/232), shows that he was the owner occupier of a "house on the Mill-Bank [present day Millbank] in the parish of St Margaret Westminster".

By 1716 Robert Welborne, who describes himself in his will as "gentleman", was the owner of landed property at Barton-le-Clay, Bedfordshire, where he owned what was presumably by then his principal residence. The will provides in some detail for the distribution of his money and possessions, including a bequest to his eldest son Robert of "all my books and pictures and the curiosities which I had from Dr Waldoe"<sup>17</sup>, but makes no mention of a coin collection. That does not necessarily mean that Welborne had not hung on to all or part of the Peterborough collection, for he might in theory have passed on any coins that had come to him in this way to his son Robert during his lifetime, but Robert Welborne junior would only have been a twenty-one year old undergraduate at the time that his father's will was drawn up, and the will as a whole provides no indication that Welborne's estate contained any items that had previously been in the possession of the Earl of Peterborough or of other members of the Mordaunt family.

I conclude from this that it is not in fact likely that the coins bequeathed by Rev. Robert Welborne to Christ Church and to James Gilpin derived to any material extent, or indeed at all, from the collection formed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Peterborough, and an alternative scenario is likely to be involved.

In constructing this scenario, one relevant factor is that Alchester, the site of a legionary fortress dating from the early years of the Roman occupation of Britain,

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<sup>16</sup> The fact that Welborne had made a bequest to Christ Church and that it comprised 'classical coins' was not completely forgotten within the college, for the bequest was referred to by Rev. Henry Lewis Thompson in what was long the standard history of the college, *Christ Church*, 1900, 159. Thompson, incidentally, was the grandfather of James David Anthony ("Tony") Thompson (1914-1970), a member of the staff of the Heberden Coin Room from 1936 onwards, and Assistant Keeper of Coins there from 1957 to his death.

<sup>17</sup> The rarity of the Waldoe surname suggests that "Dr Waldoe" should be identified as Daniel Waldoe (died c.1713), a surgeon in the East India Company's Service at Bombay, the "curiosities" therefore very probably deriving from the Indian sub-continent.

lies within the boundaries of the parish of Wendlebury, and that coins and other items from this site would have been turning up on a regular basis during Welborne's incumbency there, which spanned a period of over thirty years. Indeed, the distinction drawn between his "fairest and best" Greek and Roman coins and "the rest" in the terms of his bequest to Christ Church could well have stemmed from the fact that Welborne was himself conscious that some of the Roman coins in his possession, being site finds from Alchester or from elsewhere in the neighbourhood, were not of what we would today describe as being of "museum quality", and thus would not be entirely suitable for acceptance by the Dean and Chapter.

A rather more unexpected but more certain element in such a scenario, this time explicitly documented, lies buried in the will of the Rector's mother, Mary Welborne, dated 29 May 1727, proved PCC 8 Oct 1729 (PROB 11/633/13). Mary Welborne has not until now been recognised as a female coin collector, and there were very few female coin collectors around in Britain or Ireland during the early years of the eighteenth century, but she provides in her will for a bequest to her son Robert expressed in the following terms :

I do give unto my said son Robert Welborne all my silver medalls containing in weight forty four ounces, and all my pictures, and my great bible with cutts bound in turkey leather

"Medalls", I would suggest, is here used in the wider sense, encompassing coins as well as medals, that was common usage at the time, but, whether this is so or not, it is apparent from the wording of the bequest that Mary Welborne was in possession of a meaningful collection of numismatic items struck in silver<sup>18</sup>, and it is easy enough to summon up a vision of Mrs Welborne, by then a widow probably in her fifties or early sixties, weighing or supervising the weighing of these to see what total figure for their weight in silver should be put in her will.

Beyond that, it can be speculated that the reason why her son Robert, in his own will, might have divided his coin collection into two portions, one to be offered to Christ Church, and one destined for James Gilpin, was that the Greek and Roman part of the collection was that which he had put together himself, and the "English or foreign" part of the collection, virtually all of it silver, was in essentials that which he had inherited from his mother<sup>19</sup>. But that would be mere speculation, for nothing whatever is known about the nature and fate of that part of Robert Welborne's collection bequeathed to Gilpin. Gilpin indeed, as it turned out, was only to survive Welborne for a couple of years, and his holdings of coins, such as they might have been, were not significant enough in his own mind to deserve a mention either in his will, dated

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Burnett helpfully comments (by email) that "44 ounces (presumably Troy) is almost 1400g, which would be about 4-500 Roman denarii", although he also observes that there would perhaps have been other more modern coins as well or instead. It can be worked out that if Mrs Welborne's collection included heavier silver items of fifteenth, sixteenth or seventeenth century date their overall number would have been significantly fewer.

<sup>19</sup> Coin collections made by women during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were more likely to have had a significant English element than collections of the same date put together by clergymen or by others who had had a classical education.

24 July 1763 (PROB 11/925/345), or in a final codicil to it, dated 8 February 1765, composed after Welborne's coins would have passed into his possession<sup>20</sup>.

It would be wrong to end this note without a mention of what Robert Welborne would have hoped to be his lasting contributions to the religious welfare and intellectual life of his parish. As historians of English church architecture have noted, very few new churches were built anywhere in England between the restoration of Charles II in 1660 and the end of the eighteenth century. Those that were built were chiefly replacements for earlier church buildings which had been destroyed by fire or of which the medieval fabric was insufficiently stable to remain upright and watertight. The parish church at Wendlebury fell into the latter category, being declared unsafe in 1757 and having to be demolished, apart from the church's medieval bell tower, in March 1761, and it was under Welborne's stewardship that a replacement nave, chancel and transepts were rapidly constructed. In the 1974 edition of the volume on *Oxfordshire* in the Buildings of England series, compiled by Joanna Sherwood and Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, the resulting church is somewhat uncharitably described as a "mean rebuilding of 1761"<sup>21</sup>, but this does not take account of the fact that the tower and one of the new transepts had had to be demolished in their turn at the beginning of the twentieth century, and proper credit should be given to Welborne for the promptness with which the building operations were completed<sup>22</sup>.

Welborne also had an ambition to set up a new "parochial library" in Wendlebury, intended for the "use of the neighbouring clergy or other litterati", and bequeathed to the Dean and Chapter of Oxford under his will "so many of my own books as I think proper for that purpose", appending to his will a list of the books concerned with their titles and dates and places of publication. The books were to be "placed upon shelves fitted up in the room over the vestry" of the new parish church, and care and custody of the library was to be vested in the Rector of Wendlebury for the time being.

Although the library was duly set up after Welborne's death, on the terms stipulated in Welbourne's will and elaborated in a notebook of Welborne's preserved today in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, Welborne had made an inconvenient stipulation "prohibiting the admission of any book or books into the said library written or that shall be written in any modern language", i.e. confining the library to books in Latin, Greek or Hebrew, and it is no surprise that the library fell into disuse and that the books were first removed to the rectory and eventually simply discarded<sup>23</sup>. Why Welborne should have made this stipulation is something of a puzzle, but the list of

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<sup>20</sup> It was probably wrong, in retrospect, for James Gilpin to have been included in the register of coin collectors that is printed in the third volume of Dr. Burnett's *The Hidden Treasures of this Happy Island*, since he would only have possessed his legacy from Welborne for a short time and there is no other real evidence for his having had a coin collection.

<sup>21</sup> L. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *Oxfordshire*, 1974, 832.

<sup>22</sup> The inscription on a wall tablet erected to Welborne's memory in Wendlebury parish church records that "by his learning and exemplary life he procured himself the respect and esteem of all who knew him, and by his constant exercise of every duty belonging to a parish priest, as well as by every sort of assistance towards the rebuilding of this parish-church, which was pulled down in March 1761, and rebuilt and fit for service 25<sup>th</sup> April 1762. His name will be dear to the parishioners of Wendlebury as long as it shall be remembered".

<sup>23</sup> A useful summary of the history of the Wendlebury parochial library is provided by N.R. Ker and M. Perkin (eds), *A Directory of the Parochial Libraries of the Church of England and the Church in Wales*, 2004. 384.

books intended for the library appended to his will suggests that he was more deeply read than most of his Church of England contemporaries in the writings of such Fathers of the Church as St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory Nazanzien, and maybe there was something in William Jones's assertion that Welborne had "a visible inclination towards some of the peculiarities of the Church of Rome".