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**The Will of William Lilly
in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury**

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1 Probate Record of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury

The purpose of this short article is to introduce the will of William Lilly, a famous seventeenth-century astrologer.

The most famous collection of manuscripts related to Lilly is the Ashmole Papers in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. However, Lilly's will was not found there, because it is included in probate records in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury (PCC), the most prestigious court in England. If someone had personal property in more than one diocese, he could, in theory, undergo probate in the PCC.² Inventories of wealthy people tended to undergo probate at the PCC.

Details concerning PCC probate records are not well known, even for the number of surviving documents. It is possible to find inventories for those in any unique occupation, as in Lilly's case, that were not found in local record offices. To date, the occupation of astrologer has not been found in probate records through record offices; Lilly's is the only astrologer's will found thus far.

2 A short bibliographical note on William Lilly

William Lilly, a 'student of astrology', is an important figure both for academic researchers of early modern times and for practising astrologers. He is probably the best-known and most successful astrologer of the mid-seventeenth century, which was the 'halcyon days' of English astrology' as well as the 'crisis time of astrology'.³

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² Scott, M. (1997) *Prerogative Court of Canterbury: Wills and Other Probate Records*, PRO Publications, p. x.

³ Curry, P. (1985) 'Afterword', in Lilly, W., *Christian Astrology*, Regulas, pp.19, 45.

Katherine Briggs, an eminent folklorist, edited his autobiography and titled it *The Last of the Astrologers*. Lilly was not, of course, the last of the astrologers. There are still many practising astrologers, but he could be considered the last to have lived in a world where astrology was not yet ‘esoteric nor incredible’.⁴

He was of the last generation of astrologers who exercised substantial military and political influence, especially on the parliamentary side in the era of the English Civil War. Three years before the tumultuous event, the 1647 edition of *Christian Astrology* contains a detailed and accurately timed prophecy, scarcely disguised, of the coming demise of Charles I and the formation of a republic by Oliver Cromwell.

He is important as a representative figure before and at the beginning of the ‘decline of Magic’, to borrow Keith Tomas’s phrase.

Lilly published numerous almanacs, pamphlets, and major textbooks of astrology. He read Latin and was familiar with classical astrology books written by Ptolemy as well as by his contemporaries, and through his works, astrological knowledge survived to reach the modern English-speaking world.

A considerable amount of study, if perhaps not enough, has been conducted on this interesting astrologer. I would like to provide a short bibliographical note here.

The prime source on Lilly’s life and works is his autobiography. Originally, it was published by his close friend Elias Ashmole as *Mr. William Lilly’s History of His Life and Times* in 1715. This text was reedited and published by Katharine Briggs in 1974.⁵

Some of his works have now been republished in book form and on the Internet. Among them, the most important text is probably *Christian Astrology*, a comprehensive and vast textbook on astrology, which appeared in 1647. The second edition of this text was republished by Regulus

⁴ Ibid, p. 856.

⁵ Briggs, K.M., ed. (1974) *The Last of the Astrologers*, Folklore Society.

publishing house in 1985 as the third edition.⁶ This publication made a huge impact on the practice of astrology in the late twentieth century, and ‘the revival of Traditional Astrology’ started then.

His famous pamphlet *Merlinus Anglicus Astrologicus* (1644) was republished by Spica in 1998,⁷ and the facsimile text of *Supernatural Sights and Apparitions* (1644) can be found on the Internet.⁸ *Prophecy of the White King and Dreadfull Deadman Explained* (1644) was reprinted by Ascella.⁹

Of the secondary sources, Don Cameron Allen’s *The Star-Crossed Renaissance: The Quarrel about Astrology and Its Influence in England* (1941, 1966),¹⁰ Keith Tomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971),¹¹ Bernard Capp’s *Astrology and the Popular Press: English Almanacs 1500–1800* (1979),¹² Patrick Curry’s *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England* (1989),¹³ and Ann Geneva’s *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of Stars* (1995)¹⁴ are indispensable.

Derek Parker’s *Familiar to All: William Lilly and Astrology in the Seventeenth Century* (1975)¹⁵ is a readable biography of Lilly, if not very scholarly.

Finally, Geoffrey Cornelius’s short article ‘A Modern Perspective’, added to the Regulus edition of *Christian Astrology*, and his discussion on Lilly’s divinatory practice in *The Moment of Astrology* (1994, 2003)¹⁶ are interesting from a philosophical viewpoint.

⁶ Lilly, W. (1985; originally published in 1647) *Christian Astrology*, Regulus.

⁷ Lilly, W. (1998; originally published in 1644) *Merlinus Anglicus Astrologicus*, Spica.

⁸ Lilly, W. (1644) *Supernatural Sights and Apparitions*. Available at <http://www.ceskaastrologie.cz/Lilly2.pdf> (accessed 14 June 2013).

⁹ Lilly, W. (1644) *Prophecy of the White King and Dreadfull Deadman Explained*, Ascella.

¹⁰ Allen, D.C. (1941, 1966) *The Star-Crossed Renaissance*, Duke University Press, 1941; Octagon Books, 1966.

¹¹ Keith, T. (1971) *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson. (New York: Scribner 1971; Harmondsworth and London: Penguin, 1973; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978; London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997).

¹² Bernard, C. (1979) *Astrology and the Popular Press: English Almanacs 1500–1800*, Faber and Faber.

¹³ Curry, Patrick (1989) *Prophecy and Power: Astrology in Early Modern England*, Polity Press.

¹⁴ Geneva, A. (1995) *Astrology and the Seventeenth Century Mind: William Lilly and the Language of the Stars*, Manchester University Press.

¹⁵ Parker, D. (1975) *Familiar to All*, Jonathan Cape.

3 The Will of William Lilly, a Student of Astrology

The PCC was a very prestigious probate court in England under the control of the Church of England. Almost all the occupations mentioned in PCC probate records are those of traders, widows, gentlemen, and yeomen, as these were normal positions. Intriguingly, however, Lilly's will recorded him as a 'student of astrology'. One possibility is that the Church of England recognized and respected this occupation under the Christianity in the seventeenth century. As Katharine Briggs said, astrology still ranked as a science, even though Lilly's activities were condemned as witchcraft.¹⁷ However, no other astrologers are recorded in PCC probate records, so Lilly's case may be unique in these records. Lilly obtained a licence to practise as a physician from Dr Gilbert Sheldon, former archbishop of Canterbury, in 1670,¹⁸ so we can guess that Lilly had a special connection with the archbishop of Canterbury.

Some names were mentioned in Lilly's will, including that of Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke, lawyer, writer, parliamentarian, and Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England. Lilly bequeathed properties to Carlton, Whitelocke's son, in addition to Ruth Lilly, his wife; Robert Lilly, his brother; and Suzane Benson, his sister. Whitelocke's name appears in Lilly's autobiography,¹⁹ and given that Lilly left him a legacy, they seem to have had a closer relationship than earlier research suggested. Furthermore, after the Restoration, even in 1677, Lilly still kept strong connections with Republicans.

Unfortunately, no probate inventory, account, or other documents related to Lilly can be found in the PCC, so we do not know what kind of properties he owned at the end of his life. His will however suggests what kind of relationships he had, not only late in his life, but throughout his lifetime.

¹⁶ Cornelius, G. (1994, 2003) *The Moment of Astrology: Origins in Divination*, Arkana/Penguin, The Wessex Astrologer.

¹⁷ Briggs, 'Introduction', in Lilly, *The Last of the Astrologers*, p. xi.

¹⁸ Brodie, B.C. (1812) 'Collectanea Medica', *Medical and Physical Journal* 28, pp. 129–130.

¹⁹ Lilly, *The Last of the Astrologers*, pp. 41, 54, 63.

**Appendix 1: Will of William Lilly, Student of Astrology, 1677, in Prerogative Court of
Canterbury**

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T^② Willimi Lilly

In the name of god Amen

I William Lilly of Hersham in the Parish of Walton upon Thames in the Countie of Surry^③
Student in Astrology being at the writing hereof of perfect memory doe make and ordaine
this my last will and Testament in manner and forme following **rendring** my Soule into
the hands of God, my Body I leave to be buried at the discretion of Ruth Lilly my wife, **my**
worldly Estate I thus dispose **It**^④ I give and bequeath unto Ruth Lilly my wife during
her naturall life all that parcell of Ground called the Hurst wood containing by estimacon
Eighteene Acres be it more or lesse and all the profitts thereof **It** I give and bequeath
unto Ruth Lilly my wife during her naturall life the Close called Conyers adjoyning
to the Hurst wood and all the profitts thereof **Item** I give and bequeath unto my said
wife during her naturall life all thos^⑤ six closes called Roberts lane Closes being by estimacon
Fifteene Acres be they more or lesse and all the profitts thereof **It** I give unto my said wife
during her naturall life the wood Leacroft and the Corner Leacroft and the Three Closes
called Jimores lying all together and contayning by estimacon Two and Twenty Acres be
they more or lesse and all the profitts thereof **the reversion and reversions** of all which said
Lands after the decease of Ruth Lilly my said wife I give and bequeath unto Carlton Whitlock
Sonne of Sir Boulster Whitlock^⑥ K^{t⑦} and to [^]his heires and Assignes for ever **It** I give and bequeath
unto my Brother Robert Lilly the sume of Five pounds **It** I give unto William Lilly his Sonne the
Summe of Twentie Shillings **Item** I give unto my Sister Suzane Benson the sume of Tenn
Shillings **It** ~~I give and bequeath unto Ann Rogerson the Daughter of Henry Rogerson the~~
~~sume of Five pounds~~ **All** which said Legacies to be paid within one yeare next after my decease

It I desire of my wife that She will give unto Mary Willson at the day of her marriage Twenty Pounds for a peece[®] of Plate **Item** I will unto every one of my Six Servants the Summe of Twenty Shillings a peece **It** I give unto the Poore of the Parish of Walton Towne the Summe of Five

Pounds

Sententia lata cra valor^e hujus Testam^{to}

ptimo July 1681

Ac orib:

- - -

[folio 128 verso]

Pounds to be distributed at the Day of my Buriall by my good Freind Thomas Best

It I give unto the Poore of Hersham and Burwood the sume of Five pounds to be distributed by Henry Rogerson and John Coles at the day of my Buriall **It** all the rest of my Goods Cattells Chattells Reall and Personall moveables and immoveables plate money jewells houshall stuff Library of Bookes or whatsoever is knowne to be mine I give and bequeath unto Ruth Lilly my wife whome I nominate my full and sole Executrix of this my last Will and Testament hereby revokeing and renounceing all former wills and Testaments by me in any wise here=
=tofore made or declared **In witness whereof** hereunto I have Subscribed my name and Set my Seale the Fifth day of January in the Six and twentieth yeare of the Raigne of our Sovereigne Lord King Charles the Second One Thousand Six hundred Seaventy and fower (*signed*) *William Lilly* : Sealed declared and delivered up by the said William Lilly in the presence of these witnesses whose names are subscribed *Thomas Agar, Henry Rogerson* :

^ Obliterated * Ann Rogersuns Legacy of : 5^{li} : by me William Lilly : 8^o :

Jan 1677 *Richard Stevens, Thomas Deel William South*

Concorda^t cum Orili Testam^{to}

fca collacone per nos

(witnessed) Mar Cottle Leg^{rium}

Tho Nelliam N P

21^o Septembris 1681

Recepi Testme^{nto} originale dicti defuncti

C Whitelocke

Testibus

Tho Nelliam N P

vicemo Die Mensis Septembris Anno Domini Millesimo sexcentesimo et

Octogesimo primo emanavit Carleton Whitlock Legatario nominato in Testamento Guliami

Lilly imper De Hersham intra Parochiam de Walton Super Thamesin in Comitatu

Surrae Defuncti habentis &c Ad Administrandum bona jura et Credita dicti Defuncti juxta

Tenorem et effectam Testamenti ipsius Defuncti De bene et fideliter administrando eadem

Ad Sancta Dei Evangelia jurat Rutha Lilly Relicta dicti defuncti et Executrice in dicto

Testamento nominata oneri Executionis ejusdem Testamenti prius renunciante prout ex

Actis Curia liquet Lataque prius Sententia Diffinitiva pro valore et validitate ejusdem

Testamenti prout ex Actis dicta Curia etiam -- liquet et apparet

① Number of 'folio'.

② Testamentum

③ =Surrey

④ Item

⑤ those

⑥ Sir Bulstrode Whitelocke (1605-1675): lawyer, writer, parliamentarian and Lord Keeper of the Great Seal of England

⑦ Knight

⑧ piece