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Biography of Sir Francis Willoughby (1546-1596)

Francis was the second son of Sir Henry Willoughby and his wife Anne, née Grey, and was probably born at Woodlands in Dorset.

His father inherited the Wollaton and Middleton estates on the death of Sir John Willoughby in January 1548/9, but died in August the same year while fighting in Kett's Rebellion. Francis's mother had died the previous year, and Francis spent the early part of his childhood being looked after in Essex by his guardian and uncle, George Medley. His other uncle the Duke of Suffolk, guardian of Francis's elder brother Thomas, was executed in 1554 following the failed plot to place Lady Jane Grey on the throne, and Medley was incarcerated in the Tower of London for a short time, bringing more confusion to Francis's life.

Francis was educated in London, Saffron Walden, and Jesus College, Cambridge. In 1559 Thomas died and Francis unexpectedly became heir to the Wollaton estate (which he came into full possession of in 1564), comprising the two principal manor houses of Wollaton and Middleton and extensive land and coal mines in a number of counties. He also maintained town houses in Nottingham, Coventry and elsewhere, and lived the life of a wealthy country gentleman. He was knighted in 1575.

Sir Francis's marriage with Elizabeth Littleton was stormy, and not helped by a large number of retainers who, according to Cassandra Willoughby in her history of the family, interfered in the couple's affairs. Their problems were made public by Francis's sister Margaret, Lady Arundell, who had always disapproved of the match. After some violent clashes in 1578 and 1579, the couple separated, before reconciling in 1588.

In 1580, work began on a project by Sir Francis to build a sumptuous modern residence, in which he hoped Queen Elizabeth would stay. Robert Smythson (d 1614) was the architect and general overseer. Work on the new Wollaton Hall was completed in 1588, although Sir Francis did not move into the mansion. Revenues from Sir Francis's coal pits declined in the late 16th century, and the vast expense of the new Hall led to financial difficulties for Sir Francis, who borrowed large sums from various lenders.

Sir Francis was interested in agricultural and industrial innovation. He engaged in woad-planting schemes at Wollaton and in Ireland in the 1580s, and in the 1590s invested in ironworks at Middleton in Warwickshire, Oakamoor in Staffordshire, and Codnor in Derbyshire.

His relationship with his son-in-law Percival Willoughby, whom it was intended would inherit the bulk of Sir Francis's estates, was often strained. Soon after Lady Willoughby died in 1595, Sir Francis married Dorothy Tamworth. He died in London on 16 November 1596, amid suspicions that he had been poisoned, leaving Dorothy pregnant. The pregnancy threatened to disinherit Percival altogether, but in the event the baby was a girl, and soon died.

Family

Sir Francis refused a proposed marriage to the daughter of his new guardian, Sir Francis Knollys, in 1564. Instead, he married Elizabeth, daughter of his neighbour John Littleton of Frankley, Warwickshire (d 1595), and had:

- Bridget, m [Sir Percival Willoughby \(d 1643\)](#) in 1580
- Dorothy m Henry Hastings in 1587
- Margaret m Robert Spencer of Wormleighton, Warwickshire, in 1587
- Winifred m Edward Willoughby
- Abigail m William Pargiter
- Frances m 1stly John Drake and 2ndly Montague Wood
- sons who died young, the last dying in 1580

Sir Francis's second wife, whom he married in August 1595, was a widow named Dorothy Tamworth. She bore him one posthumous child:

- Frances (b 1597), died in infancy

Dorothy married 3rdly Philip Wharton.

Archive Collections

- Title deeds, settlements, estate and legal papers relating to Sir Francis Willoughby's ownership of the Willoughby estates are part of the [Middleton Collection](#) held in Manuscripts and Special Collections at the University of Nottingham.

Published Sources

Correspondence and details relating to Sir Percival Willoughby are contained within Cassandra Willoughby's two-volume history of the Willoughby family, part of the [Middleton Collection](#) held at Manuscripts and Special Collections at the University of Nottingham (reference Mi LM 26-27), and published as:

- Chandos, Cassandra, Duchess of, *History of the Willoughby Family* . Published in Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *Report to the Commissioners on the Manuscripts of Lord Middleton Preserved at Wollaton Hall, Nottinghamshire* (1911) [King's Meadow Campus East Midlands Collection Em. D2 HIS]
- Chandos, Cassandra, Duchess of (ed. Wood, A.C.), *The Continuation of the History of the Willoughby Family* (The University of Nottingham, 1958) [King's Meadow Campus East Midlands Collection Not 4H.V38 WIL]

See also:

- Friedman, A.T., 'Portrait of a Marriage: The Willoughby Letters of 1585-1586', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* , Chicago, 11 (1986), 542-555

- Friedman, A.T., *House and household in Elizabethan England: Wollaton Hall and the Willoughby family* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) [King's Meadow Campus East Midlands Collection Not 4H.D64 WOL]
- Smith, R.S., *Sir Francis Willoughby of Wollaton Hall* (Nottingham: City of Nottingham Art Department, 1988) [King's Meadow Campus East Midlands Collection Pamphlet Not 4H.V38 WIL]
- Smith, R.S., *Early coal-mining around Nottingham, 1500–1650* (University of Nottingham Department of Adult Education, 1989) [King's Meadow Campus East Midlands Collection Not 1.O46 SMI]
- Smith, R.S., 'Sir Francis Willoughby's ironworks, 1570–1610', *Renaissance and Modern Studies*, 11 (1967), 90–140 [King's Meadow Campus East Midlands Collection Not 4H.V38 WIL]
- Smith, R.S., 'A woad-growing project at Wollaton in the 1580s', *Transactions of the Thoroton Society*, 65 (1961), 27–46 [King's Meadow Campus East Midlands Collection Periodicals]
- Smith, R.S., 'Willoughby, Sir Francis (1546/7–1596)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [[available online to subscribers](#)]