

Spheres of Influence? – The Life and Legacy of Charles Wildbore

By Roger Williams and Peter Moore

Introduction: Between Shadow and Light

Visiting Upper Broughton in 2025, as we did, there is little obvious trace of Charles Wildbore, who served as curate in the village for about 35 years from 1767 to 1802. His gravestone is still to be found outside the eastern end of St Luke's church, but his name is not otherwise seen. Charles Wildbore, however, is someone worthy of greater prominence: he likely had a significant impact on the village and villagers during his tenure there, as well as being renowned much more broadly.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Cha. Wildbore." The signature is written in dark ink on a plain background.

Charles Wildbore emerges from the records not with certainty, but with genealogical haze. His origins are ambiguous, his ancestry contested, and his rise – though measured – is stitched together with a blend of local circumstance and inherited speculation. He served as curate for Broughton Sulney parish for much of his life, engaged quietly with mathematical societies, edited popular mathematical publications, and navigated family trials with pragmatic resolve.

Yet the story of Charles Wildbore is more than a biographical sketch of a provincial clergyman. It touches on identity and inheritance; modest intellectual labour; family delight and concern.

The writers of this piece, being descendants of Charles Wildbore, take a particular interest in his broader family lines both forward and back: among others, the educators, ministers, and emigrants. Scores of his descendants carry on the family name in New Zealand and further afield; themselves sadly often not recognising this man's broader legacy which in some senses is as elusive today as Charles Wildbore's own ancestry was in his day. But the uncommon surname has proven to be something of a boon in researching the family: by 1881 there were fewer than 200 people in the UK with this surname (one in three of whom were in Notts or Leics) although it was becoming more present in other countries.

In what follows, the life of Charles Wildbore will be reconstructed not merely as a chronology, but as a constellation of ideas and relationships. It is a narrative told through documents, traditions, and familial echoes – an exploration of faith, intellect, and the patterns that bind them.

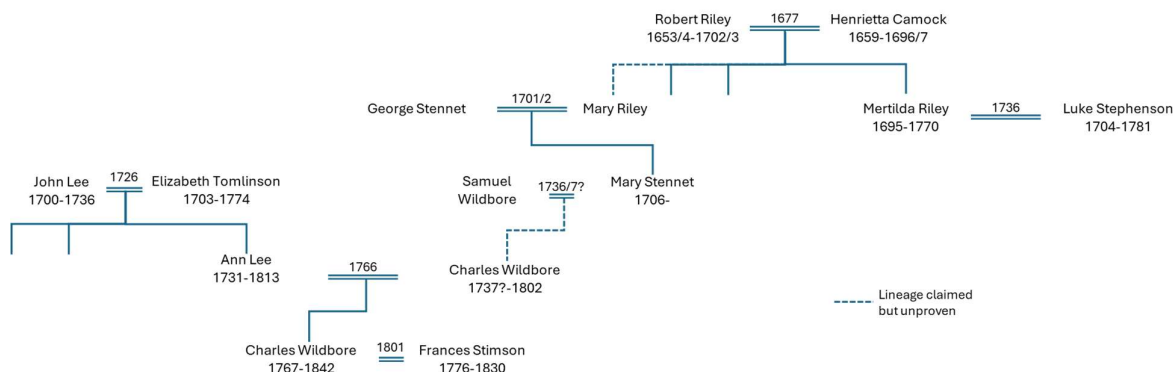
Origins and Ancestry: Circling Toward Truth

Charles Wildbore's life did not conform to the norms we hope for in historical research. His parentage and childhood is largely clouded; his path to ordination was not a standard one, having no known university education or degree; his interests were focussed; his contacts were significant.

Likely born in Nottingham in 1737, his parentage remains a matter of speculation, drawing on inconsistent and incomplete parish registers that offer more ambiguity than assurance.

Two baptismal candidates are of interest but stand in uneasy tension. One record, from St Nicholas, Nottingham, dated October 1737, names a mother “Elizabeth”, wife to a Samuel Wyldbore. Another points to Mary Stennet, married to a Samuel Wildbore in January 1736/7. The latter couple appear to have had at least one documented child, William, baptized in April 1740 – who died young, along with his father – but are also claimed to be the parents of Charles Wildbore. Records of the burial of a Samuel Wildbore appear in 1741 and 1743, so multiple potential paternal candidates exist. Elizabeth, widow of Samuel, died shortly thereafter. Another woman, Mary Wyldbore, widow, was buried in 1748, suggesting an alternative couple. But whatever the case, these blurred origin outlines appear consistent with the reports in contemporary sources that Charles became orphaned early in life, possibly before he turned ten, and was entrusted to the St Nicholas workhouse and Blue Coat (charity) school.

But Charles Wildbore’s origins were more than a genealogical inconvenience — they became central to his later claim over a significant educational post. In 1773 he claimed the right to the mastership of a school in Kirton, Lincolnshire, leaning heavily on his maternal descent, with his asserted mother, Mary Stennet, the daughter of Mary Riley, apparently the daughter of Robert Riley and Henrietta Cammock, although a baptismal record (or similar) to confirm this remains elusive. Compounding matters was the assertion by Luke Stephenson, the incumbent schoolmaster at Kirton and, at the time, vicar at Bunny, that Charles was the “great nephew” of his late wife, Mertilda Riley (Mary Riley’s sister) – a claim that would, if valid, support Charles as heir to the school’s founding patron. Whether this was truth, wishful lineage, or convenient fiction has never been conclusively determined.



In any case, Charles Wildbore needed to establish himself without close familial support, and only in mid-life was there anything approaching a family advantage to be obtained. The Blue Coat schooling completed, an apprenticeship was tried for the young Charles Wildbore, but failed as he found his mathematical interests and imaginings distracted him from the more mundane activities that an apothecary might need to engage in. Briefly running a school in Bingham was something he appears more suited to, but even that limited his ability to pursue his real desires.

Learning and Legitimacy: Mastership – Merit and Manoeuvre

As referenced earlier, in 1773, Charles Wildbore secured the mastership of Sir Thomas Middlecote’s Free Grammar School in Kirton, Lincolnshire – a post that would define a substantial part of his legacy.

Founded in 1624 under a private Act of Parliament (21 Jas. I. c. 8), the school aimed to offer instruction in Latin and Greek alongside practical English and agricultural education for boys from Kirton and surrounding parishes. But Charles Wildbore can't claim any credit for the school's most famous student: Luke Hansard, whose name is carried to this day on the Parliamentary records in England and other Commonwealth countries, attended shortly before he took control.

The school's funding was provided by land endowments, the rental proceeds of which were intended to support the schoolmaster's salary and operational expenses. The model for Charles Wildbore (and those who preceded him in the role) was to employ and delegate the day-to-day operations to a suitably qualified resident master and simply maintain an oversight and control function.

The position Charles Wildbore obtained had been surrendered to him by the aging Reverend Luke Stephenson of Bunny who affirmed Charles's claim, stating that Wildbore was "the true and undoubted Patron and Heir of the Founder," a declaration that lent both weight and legitimacy to Charles's appointment. (In passing, it is noted that there were other Wildbores residing in Bunny, but no familial connection between them and Charles Wildbore has yet been identified.)

Following his death, Charles' only son succeeded him in the role – though considerably less responsibly. Indeed, by the 1830s, mismanagement under Charles junior had become so pronounced that the school trust – one of many investigated by the Brougham Commission – was severely criticized for its failure to properly channel funds toward its intended educational purpose. Both the means by which the Wildbores had obtained the mastership and the financial and educational mismanagement by Charles junior were scrutinised. The result was a wholesale reform of the school's governance in 1851, the construction of a new schoolhouse in 1853, and severance of the Wildbore connection entirely.

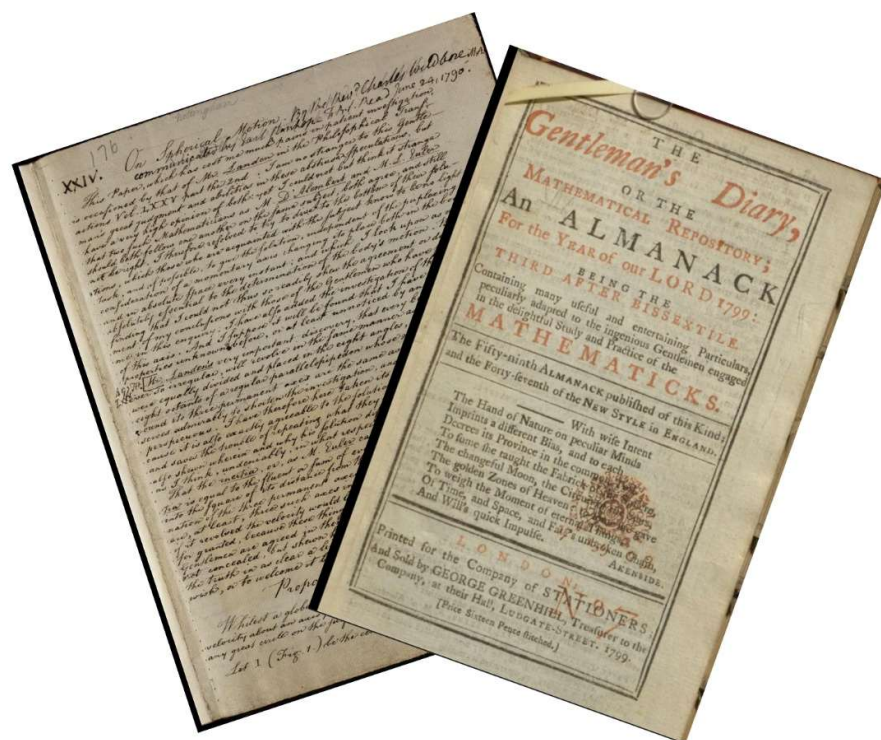
Calculating Legacy: Circles, Symbols, and Spherical Motion

While Charles Wildbore's formal employment was as the curate in Upper Broughton, his broader legacy possibly lies in his contributions to eighteenth-century mathematics and intellectual culture. Being a village cleric gave time and space to engage in his mathematical pursuits – as one contemporary biography notes, "When his mind was occupied in close study, he always walked to and fro in an obscure part of his garden, where he could neither see nor be seen of any one, and frequently paced, in this manner, several miles in a day."

And his study was not kept to himself. At quite a young age he started contributing to one of the period's most esteemed mathematical publications: *The Gentleman's Diary*, eventually becoming its compiler in 1780.

This almanac-style compendium – blending calendars, conundrums, and commentary – was a celebrated fixture among Britain's mathematical enthusiasts in those pre-internet days. It provided a platform for problem-solving, debate, and anonymous contribution, a tradition that suited Wildbore's modest disposition. His involvement appears under pseudonym ("Eumenēs"); indicative of a restrained self-promotion that could be found among clerical men of learning. Whether crafting puzzles, responding to queries, or offering editorial insight, his work in the *Diary* connected him with a broader intellectual network that spanned parishes, schools, and societies.

As a reviewer of their *Philosophical Transactions*, Charles Wildbore came into the orbit of the Royal Society – ultimately having a paper of his (“On Spherical Motion”) read to the Society by Earl Stanhope in 1790. The presence of his name in mathematical circles reinforces his reputation as more than a provincial cleric or schoolmaster. His was a mind actively engaged with numerical and philosophical inquiry, balancing pastoral duty with cerebral delight – sometimes to the detriment of the former. His correspondence shows he kept abreast of developments in the mathematical field, including demonstrating familiarity with works of Leonhard Euler – arguably the 18th century’s leading mathematician.



There is an unverified account in his obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (and repeated in Chalmer's biography) that Charles Wildbore was solicited to become a member of the Royal Society, but this honour was modestly declined. In an apparently no longer extant letter to the then president, Charles Wildbore remarked, among other things, “that his ambition had never led him to visit the metropolis; and if he accepted the honour of being one of that learned society, he should wish, not to be a *passive*, but an *active* member; to be which he supposed that it would be necessary for him to come forward in the world, which he had not the least inclination to do, preferring his village retirement infinitely beyond the ‘busy hum of men,’ and to be styled ‘the humble village Pastor,’ without the addition of the initials F. R. S.”

Another intriguing question relates to the lead water butt in Upper Broughton, adorned with zodiacal symbols and dating from Charles Wildbore's curacy there. Although no definitive link confirms his involvement in its construction or design, its presence is suggestive. Whether he was artist, patron, or merely local enthusiast, the butt's astrological imagery signals a fascination with the heavens – symbolic, intellectual, or both.

Through his mathematical pursuits, Charles Wildbore demonstrates the capacity for rural scholarship to transcend local boundaries. In a time when intellectual prestige was often anchored in metropolitan or institutional affiliation, he navigated obscurity with quiet erudition, corresponding with many leading academicians, and leaving behind leaden clues – with his printed work and maybe the water butt.



Ecclesiastical Footprints: Establishing a Centre of Gravity

Though perhaps overshadowed by his educational and intellectual endeavours, Charles Wildbore's clerical career appears steady and laid-back – although there is an interesting record from 1770 where the archdeacon's visitation noted the curate (i.e., Charles Wildbore) had been attending independent meetings in another town, which suggests some dissatisfaction with the Anglican practices or theology. No further mention of this is made.

Charles Wildbore worked through two short curacies at the beginning of his clerical career, in Orston and Keyworth, before over 30 years at Broughton Sulney parish (Upper Broughton). His appointment coincided with a generational change in the Rector, and a possible impetus for some change in the style of the church's management. It would be some decades after Charles Wildbore's tenure that the church building itself would be rebuilt.

Unusual for clerics of the time, there is no record of Charles Wildbore matriculating at either Oxford or Cambridge, nor any references to his attendance. His handwritten copy of the paper read at the Royal Society does append "M.A." to his name, but we have found no evidence to suggest this was anything other than possible embellishment.

His tenure in the parish suggests diligence in the role. No sermons or treatises remain, but legends such as the connection with the lead water butt suggest either a personal touch or influence in shaping the aesthetic of village life.

There is some evidence that Charles Wildbore was considered for appointment as the vicar of the nearby parish of Kinoulton in 1775, following the death of its incumbent, but that position instead fell to the vicar of Colston Bassett. However, Wildbore interest in Kinoulton was not completely extinguished, as Charles' son had his first curacy in that parish in 1792 (and various of his future daughter-in-law's relatives also appear in that parish).

In 1796 Charles Wildbore obtained the vicarage of Tilton-on-the-Hill in Leicestershire for his son, Charles junior. Another Wildbore family appears in this village, but any connection of them to Charles Wildbore has yet to be discovered. In any case, the parish appointment is illustrative of a parental desire to provide for his family. That Charles junior later depleted family resources and burdened the

Kirton school trust only reinforces the poignancy of this act – a gesture of hope shadowed by future disappointment.

Charles Wildbore's ministry appears neither flamboyant nor radical, but consistent. In a period marked by religious upheaval, Methodism's rise, and rural disenfranchisement, his curacy at Upper Broughton offered a thread of stability.

Marriage, Money, and the Will: The Domestic Sphere

Behind the clerical responsibilities and intellectual pursuits of Charles Wildbore lay a domestic narrative shaped by alliance, foresight, and financial pragmatism. His marriage to Ann Lee of Greasley in 1766 joined not merely two individuals but two familial lines having a potentially entwined history. And the Lee name continues to appear in the family to the present day, probably with little recognition of its original significance – Ann and her two sisters inherited the wealth represented by several properties from her father and grandfather.

Ann was the daughter of John Lee, who died when she was still a child, and her upbringing was subsequently anchored at the site of the former Beauvale Priory, under the guardianship of her mother's second husband, Richard Sander, a tenant farmer on the estate. While probably unknown to Charles or Ann at the time, the Beauvale connection held historical resonance: the site, formerly a Carthusian priory, had been granted to William Hussey, the son of John Hussey, 1st Baron Hussey of Sleaford, following Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. Intriguingly, Charles's maternal ancestry – if one accepts the Riley link – traces to one of John Hussey's brothers, making their father, Sir William Hussey, Chief Justice from 1481 to 1495, an ancestral link (but *not* a common ancestor). Although this connection rests on speculative foundations, it is fascinating: a couple, now joined in marriage, with each member potentially associated to the same historic personality in different ways.

Charles and Ann had a single child, Charles junior, born in July 1767. As the only child, Charles junior's future would clearly have been a matter of serious concern to his father – both personally and financially. Despite the senior Wildbore's efforts to secure his son's ecclesiastical and educational advancement (including a Cambridge degree), Charles junior's financial behaviour proved damaging. His mounting debts and poor fiscal management led the elder Wildbore to construct a will in 1802 that carefully guarded the family's assets.

The will transferred both real and personal estate to Ann for the term of her natural life, with further instructions for the estate to be placed under the trusteeship of John Stimson of Egleton, Rutland: his son's father-in-law. From this trust, an annual allowance of £100 was to be paid toward settling Charles junior's debts, rather than granting him direct access to the principal assets. This cautious structuring illustrates both the trust placed in family allies and the frustrations wrought by his son's recklessness. A codicil added several days later confirmed that, should Charles junior leave a widow, she would retain lawful dower rights – suggesting that even amid concern and disappointment, Wildbore maintained a sense of fairness and familial duty. The language in the will, and the nuances of its execution, reflects a man attuned to the legal and personal implications of legacy.

Probate was granted to Ann in March 1803, with the estate valued under £600 – maybe modest, considering the breadth of Charles Wildbore's interests. For context, as curate Charles Wildbore probably earned about £30 p.a. plus accommodation and related benefits valued at around £40 p.a., and the estimated average annual wage in the area would have been about £16/5.

The narrative of Charles Wildbore's family life is not one of unchecked prosperity or dynastic success, but rather of thoughtful stewardship. In his marriage to Ann and in the protective clauses of his will there are glimpses of a man balancing affection and realism – safeguarding the past while anticipating the uncertainties of the future.

Descendants and Diaspora: Circling the Globe

Though Charles Wildbore left behind a modest estate and a single child, the lineage he set in motion would expand far beyond the confines of Upper Broughton. The generational journey of this Wildbore family – shaped by ambition, adversity, and emigration – reflects the broader transitions of nineteenth-century English society.

Charles junior, born in 1767, inherited both opportunity and challenge. As noted, his control over his deceased father's assets was constrained. But he did succeed his father to the mastership of the Kirton School, which was free of those financial constraints. Charles junior mismanaged its resources further, including mortgaging the Trust's properties for his own benefit and, as earlier noted, attracting criticism in the Brougham Commission's report. Even prior to this, in 1822 he was declared insolvent, and by 1826 he was engaged in parish relief work — constructing roads rather than leading congregations.

Despite these setbacks, Charles junior and his wife, Frances Stimson, had eight children. Two sons, Charles and John Lee Wildbore, would carry forward the family's ecclesiastical and educational imprint. The elder, Charles, attended prestigious schools including Repton and Rugby, and entered the ministry serving in Clee. The son of that Charles (yet another Charles) in turn continued this clerical tradition in Humberston, preserving continuity across generations.

John Lee Wildbore, however, followed a more circuitous path. He taught for a time at the Kirton school but left abruptly during its institutional reorganisation through the 1840s, absconding to Canada and leaving behind his wife and 7 surviving children in England. He eventually returned to London to reunite with his family and live out his days in more modest employment. His branch of the family would prove the most prolific.

John's eldest son, Charles Lee Wildbore, emigrated to New Zealand in 1874 at the age of 41. There, the Wildbore name flourished. Charles Lee Wildbore would today count well over 200 great-great-grandchildren – the most numerous branch of the family.

From insolvency to emigration, and from modest curacies to imperial frontiers, the story of Wildbore's descendants reflects the unpredictable arcs of family legacy. What began in Nottinghamshire amid uncertainty and modest means grew – not always gracefully – into a lineage marked by reinvention and endurance.



The Euterpe - Carried Wildbore family to New Zealand in 1874

Death and Legacy: A Completed Orbit, An Enduring Track

Charles Wildbore died in October 1802 in Upper Broughton; his widow Ann died in 1813 and her burial is recorded in the Upper Broughton church register, but sadly no gravestone appears to remain with her name.

Charles Wildbore's legacy cannot be measured in material wealth alone. His imprint lingers in memory and institutional reform. The Kirton school, once bound to him through lineage, position, and controversy, underwent reorganisation following the failings of his son – ultimately replaced by a new establishment but whose name today still honours the original patron, Sir Thomas Middlecott. The pages of *The Gentleman's Diary*, shaped in part by Charles Wildbore's mathematical mind, remain archived testimonies to his quiet contributions.

His family story – marked by financial turbulence, emigration, and endurance – radiates outward through time. The antipodean descendants of his great-grandson, Charles Lee Wildbore, extend a genealogical arc that began in uncertainty and hardship. In the rhythm of ministry, the cadence of humble scholarship, and the echoes of emigration, Wildbore's influence persists.

Although his beginnings were unclear, his ending appears quietly resolute. He left a community served, a family provided for, and a name carried far beyond the parish bounds of Nottinghamshire. In the annals of lives both ordinary and extraordinary, Reverend Charles Wildbore's story should endure – not because it was without error or ambiguity, but because it was very human.

For Further Reading:

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WILDBORE, (Charles), in: Alexander Chalmers, *The general biographical dictionary: containing an historical and critical account of the lives and writings of the most eminent persons in every nation; particularly the British and Irish; from the earliest accounts to the present time*, new ed., rev & enl (London: Printed for J. Nichols and Son, 1812–1817), vol 32; 54f.

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And for the VERY technically minded: Charles Wildbore, "On Spherical Motion: By the Rev. Charles Wildbore; communicated by Earl Stanhope, F.R.S.", *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, LXXX (1790), 496.

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