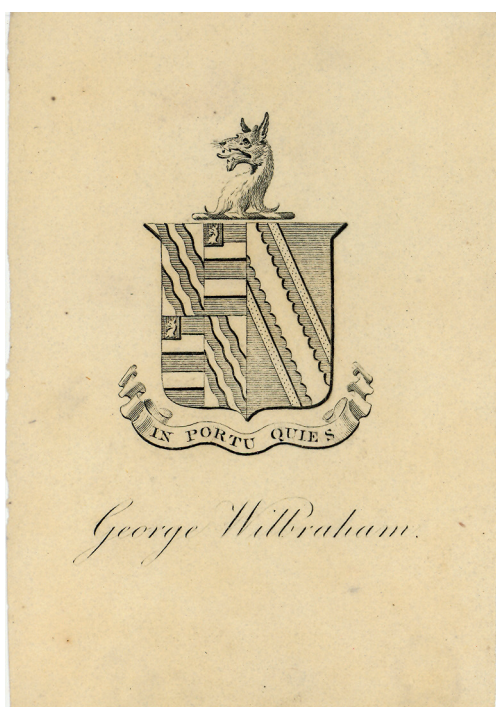


*A widow, a magistrate and a murder?*

This *ex libris* is an example of the connection to the past bookplates can yield; these small prints have the potential to be access points for great history, story and anecdote. An unremarkable bookplate, to be sure, this steel engraving is no more memorable than any other common armorial bookplate. But behind this print is an intriguing story of intrigue, madness and murder.

A 19th-century British noblewoman, Frances Williams-Wynn, kept a journal of interesting vignettes she heard from relatives and friends. In 1864, she published her *Diaries of a Lady of Quality*. Within this compilation of ghost stories, Williams-Wynn recorded her impressions of great men and women, as well as short stories and anecdotes. One such telling is the story “The Old Woman of Delamere Forest,” to which a connection to the owner of this bookplate, George Wilbraham, can be found.

This Georgian-era legend revolves around a Dutch widow, Anna Maria Hollingsworth, who sought refuge in Cheshire’s Delamere Forest. George Wilbraham was a magistrate in Delamere in the 1820s and the widow called upon him

one day to solve a mystery. It was Anna Maria’s belief that her son had been murdered by her neighbours. She reported that she had witnessed a young man with carpenter’s tools enter into the neighbour’s house the night before. This young man did not come back out; only the neighbour and his son, with a heavy sack. Anna Maria followed them and watched as they tried to sink the sack in a shallow pond. Failing, they dragged it out and went deeper into the forest, and they later reappeared with spades and no sack.

After hearing Anna Maria’s tale, Wilbraham decided to indulge her. He investigated and probed and discovered no fresh graves were found in the forest, but reports surfaced from nearby Whitechurch that an unidentified man’s body had been found. Anna Maria immediately identified the man as her son. Wilbraham continued his investigation and made enquiries about Anna Maria’s son. He discovered the son was reportedly alive and still in Hanover.

Wilbraham wrote to the young Hollingsworth and entreated him to come to Delamere to prove that he was still alive. The young man went to Delamere House and was reacquainted with his mother and sister. The magistrate observed that both seemed to recognize him, but Anna Maria seemed unwilling to accept that her story should be refuted. In solidarity, Anna Maria renounced the young man as an impostor and her daughter even claimed that the young man had flirted with her and proposed marriage. The young man went away and Anna Maria remained adamant that her son had been murdered.

There is no further mention of the life of George Wilbraham, but we can at least say that, if true, this story accounts for one adventure in Cheshire worthy of a Gothic mystery. Even the most unassuming print, such as this bookplate, has the potential for intriguing connections.

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The Rare Books and Special Collections Bookplate Collection can be accessed from the UBC Library Digital Collections site, <http://digitalcollections.library.ubc.ca>.