

### George Thicknesse 1714-1790

George Thicknesse, who tenanted Arlescote House for the latter part of his life, was a very interesting character. A kindly and well-loved headmaster (high master) of St Paul's School, London, he retired on the grounds of ill-health to live in south Warwickshire. It is unclear whether his breakdown was physical, mental or spiritual – however his instructions for burial among the suicides and unbaptised are intriguing.

**Thicknesse, George** (*bap.* 1714, *d.* 1790), schoolmaster, was baptized on 22 November 1714 at Farthingoe in Northamptonshire, one of the sons of John Thicknesse (*c.*1670–1725), rector of Farthingoe, and Joyce, daughter of the Revd Thomas Blencowe, rector of Thenford, Northamptonshire, and niece of Sir John Blencowe; Famous eccentric, author, traveller and sometime Government official and patron of the arts Philip Thicknesse was a younger brother.

George Thicknesse was admitted scholar of Winchester College in 1726 and matriculated as a fellow-commoner from King's College, Cambridge, in 1738 but did not graduate—and presumably did not reside—as he had already, in 1737, become chaplain (or usher) of St Paul's School, London. In 1744 he was elected surmaster, and in 1748 high master. The appointment of a non-graduate must relate to the catastrophic decline of the school under his predecessor, George Charles, who was dismissed for brutality; the school had only thirty-five boys when Thicknesse succeeded him.

Under Thicknesse, St Paul's rapidly recovered in numbers and reputation. According to his eccentric and admiring brother Philip he relied on reasoning and never used the rod, but discouraged any tendency in the boys to poetry and declined to meet Dr Johnson, as 'he deemed him only a poet'. He certainly retained the affection of his pupils, especially Philip Francis, who called him 'the wisest learnedest, quietest and best man he ever knew' and, though occasionally reprimanded, he retained also the trust of the governing body, the Mercers' Company.

In 1758 Thicknesse suffered what may have been a brief mental breakdown. He retired, on a pension of 100 guineas a year, in 1769 and spent the rest of his life in Warwickshire, first in the house of a Winchester school friend at Mollington (*this was William Holbech of Farnborough Hall, who died of a stroke whilst at dinner with George Thicknesse*) and later at Arlescote House, near Edgehill.

There he died, unmarried, on 18 December 1790; he was buried, in accordance with his instructions, on the north side of Warmington churchyard, 'in a plain coffin' with 'no mound or ... gravestone or monument'. His pupils, however, placed a marble bust of him by John Hickey, with an inscription by Philip Francis and Edmund Burke, in St Paul's School in 1792.

J. H. Lupton, *rev.* Arthur Hugh Mead

## Sources

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## Likenesses

J. Hickey, marble bust, 1792, St Paul's School, London

## Wealth at death

Had pension of 100 guineas p.a. from governors of St Paul's School; also £50 p.a. under will of William Holbech from 1771; in 1785 Philip Francis gave £20; in 1786 William Perry, another former pupil, offered rent-free accommodation; lacked private means.

## The Will of George Thicknesse

Finding myself indisposed in Body but of sound Mind and considering I am likely to die worth but little, I give and bequeath all the Money I have or may be and to me at the time of my death together with all my Household Goods, except the bunch of Grapes wrought in Needlework which I return to Mrs Lloyd who gave it me, and except the family pictures which my Brother may have if he chuses, to my good and faithful Servant Catherine Lewis as a poor reward for her long and ill-requited Service, desiring her to burn all the Letters she may happen to find in my Drawers or elsewhere with all other the papers whatsoever desiring her also that she will take especial care that I be buried in the Church yard of whatsoever Parish I happen to die in without any useless Ceremony and Expence and like an ordinary Man as I am. This is my last Will. In witness whereof I have here put my Hand and Seal this 30th day of January 1773, Geor. Thicknesse.

I have said in my will above that I would be buried like an ordinary Man but, that being an expression of some latitude, this is intended as an explanation of it. In the first place I would not have any undertaker employed but let the ordinary Carpenter of the Parish make me a Plain Coffin of Elm wood, let there be no Pall, to cover it nor any other foppery. I would not have any bearers except those who carry my Corpse to the Grave and let them be six labouring Men of the Parish to be paid for their trouble at the discretion of my Executrix but not exceeding five shilling a piece. Let me be buried in the Church yard and at such time after my decease as shall be most convenient to the Curate. Let no body else be invited to the funeral but the persons herein described. Let no drink be given except a Pint of Ale to each of the Bearers and to the Clergyman of whatever Liquor he chuses. Let no Stone tell where I lie nor any ones dress Habit say that I am dead. Geor. Thicknesse.

If I die in the Parish of Warmington with the Rector's leave I would chuse to be buried on the north side of the Church as near the Building as may be without detriment to it.

Whereas I made a Will several years ago while my Brother Philip Thicknesse was abroad without letting me know whither he travelled or whether he would return or not, which Will I happen not to have by me at present and very uncertain of what may happen I think it may be proper to mention by way of Codicil such things as belong to him and which I desire my executrix would deliver to him if I should happen to die unexpectedly and first the Writing Table in the Great Parlour, a Reflecting Telescope, a Glaziers diamond, a Copper Plate of our arms, a large Snuff Box with our Family Arms engraved on it, several Books borrowed of him, several Family Pictures, some prints he left with me and likewise the Glass apparatus for impregnating water with fixed air. In Witness of this I have hereunto added my Name and Seal both which he perfectly knows. Geor. Thicknesse. Signed and sealed in the presence of God this thirteenth day of June in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty nine and in the 75 year of my age.

And whereas I have been since informed that Mrs Thicknesse says that the Cows are not the property of Mrs Lewis, Now I do declare that about 30 years ago she desired me leave to buy a Cow of a neighbouring farmer at Turnham Green to which I consented. This Cow by some accident died. Upon this loss and having been supplied for some considerable time with excellent Butter and Cream I went to a Man that had some aldernay Cows to Sell near Kensington and agreed with him that I should have my choice out of thirteen Cows for five Guineas. I told Catherine where and at what price she might have her choice, gave her the five Guineas and she went bought a cow. Since that she has constantly brought up the calves and paid for the keeping of them, wherever I have since lived and to this day constantly paid the Rent of Fields necessary for the maintainence of her Cattle. This is the truth as I hope to be saved. Witness my Hand. Geor. Thicknesse, June the fifteenth 1789.

October 12th 1789 Whereas I have long ago made the Will within written but without Witnesses, I do hereby recognise and confirm the said Will in the presence of the persons who have hereunto set their

names. Geor. Thicknesse. Signed Sealed and Delivered in the presence of us J Roddis, Eliz Hambridge Junr

And whereas I have for some time left off riding, I have given my Bay Mare to Mrs Catherine Lewis to be kept and maintained at her expense. Since which she has one Colt and probably another coming, of all which she has the property. Witness my hand this twelfth day of October 1789. Geor. Thicknesse.

18th January 1791

Appeared Personally John Rushworth of Banbury in the County of Oxford Gentleman and Richard Heydon of Banbury in the County of Oxford aforesaid Mercer and being sworn on the Holy Evangelists to depose the truth made Oath as follows that they severally knew and were well acquainted with George Thicknesse late of the Parish of Warmington in the County of Warwick deceased for several years before and to the time of his death and that during such their knowledge of and acquaintance with him they several times seen him write and subscribe his name and thereby came to know and be acquainted with his manner and character of Handwriting and Subscription and having now with Care and Attention viewed

and perused the paper writings hereunto annexed. (They testified that the will and codicils were all in his handwriting). They were sworn before me John Farrer Commissioner.

This will was proved at London with five codicils the 21st day of January in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety one.....by the oath of Catherine Lewis, Spinster the sole Executrix named in the said will.

#### Mrs Lewis

George Thicknesse's housekeeper Mrs Lewis was buried in 1809. A description of this can be found in the Gentleman's Magazine.

Interment of housekeeper Mrs Lewis, brought from Bodicote, having given same direction about her own burial. "The coffin of common plain boards, was tied at the front of a post-chaise and when at the churchyard gate was carried to the church and grave without pall or covering, and deposited beside her master; nor does any raised turf mound or memorial whatever, mark the place. But a singular circumstance took place.

"The Clerk came to me (being the Curate) the day before, saying that he had been desired to make the grave in a different way from the others and wished to know if I would permit it. I told him, as there were no graves on the north side of the churchyard that he might make it from north to south, if they liked, and especially if her Master had been buried so. He accordingly made the grave from north to south, with her head, I think, next the Church, which I understand to have been the way her Master had been buried in; and it was not until some weeks after, I discovered that her Master was buried only in the reverse way from the usual practice; i.e. the head lying next the east; so that by the above mistake she is laid at the feet of her Master, and the two bodies form a T. The spot where they were buried cannot be distinguished, and only lives in the memory of the Clerk and some inhabitants."