

RETHINKING THE OWSTON SURNAME'S SOURCE

A NEW THEORY SUGGESTING OWSTON, WEST RIDING, YORKSHIRE

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For those of us who wear the Owston surname and its Ouston variation, it has been long since a matter of debate on where and when this toponym originated. Several theories have emerged; however, they have not produced a satisfactory answer. Because of this, Owston family researchers have been resigned to dismiss all such theories due to an insignificant connection to the East Yorkshire Owstons.

From its construction, Owston has both Old Norse and Old English elements. The name's first half is derived from the Old Norse *austr* meaning "east." The suffix, *tun*, is Anglo-Saxon for farmstead (Mower, 1924; Smith, 1962). While similar names can be found throughout Britain at times, the pervasive nature of its existence in the East and North Ridings of Yorkshire has continued to the present with approximately 500 bearers worldwide.

While it has been suggested and dismissed that the West Riding parish of Owston was the source for our common surname, a recent rediscovery of certain records have provided a new look at this theory. Although nearly 60 miles distant from the Ryedale District where the Owston surname flourished, a connection of various evidentiary pieces, while remaining inconclusive, provide this as a possible theory. The caveat to this discussion is that nothing presented is conclusive and many dots remain unconnected; therefore, the following remains just a theory.

THE WILL OF JOHN OUSTYN OF PLACE NEWTON

In 1994, Roger J. Ouston procured the services of a professional to translate four Owston wills from Latin to English. The oldest of these dating from December 16, 1452 is the key to this particular theory. Three months prior to his death, John Oustyn of Newton (now Place Newton) set forth his last will and testament devising the execution of his estate upon his demise.

Although a number of items were dedicated for specific purposes, the remaining estate was divided into thirds: one-third of his goods and fortune was dedicated to his wife Joan, a second third was a gift to the ministry of one William Oustyn, and the final third was dedicated to John himself. It is unknown what the third dedicated to himself covered as he had previously outlined his wishes for his burial and specific gifts earlier in the will; however, it is possible that these items are inclusive in this third ("Will of John Oustyn," 1452).

Many of the named items were ecclesiastical gifts that included provisions for services for his burial. Among other provisions, the will dedicated funds to be dispersed to any member of the clergy who attended these services – four pence was to be given to each chaplain and two pence for each clerk ("Will of John Oustyn," 1452).

Back tithes of six shillings and eight pence were to be paid to the Prior and Convent at Walton (near Beverly) and an extremely generous sum of three pounds was dedicated to the repair (i.e., "the fabric") of the local parish church at Wintringham. Other gifts were dedicated to the church at York. He additionally bequeathed six shillings and eight pence to each of the six sons of William Halbarne of Wintringham, and he provided one sheep to each of his four servants ("Index of the Wills," 1889; "Will of John Oustyn," 1452).

His overwhelming generosity and the size of the estate would indicate that John Oustyn was financially blessed. The fact that he was probably the first of just a handful of individuals who were buried within the confines of the church building at Wintringham indicates that he was not only spiritually blessed, but that he was an influential person within this community (Dennison & Richardson, 2008).

Despite these aspects of John's personal life, the key to the present theory is that John was living in Wintringham – one of the parishes in the Ryedale District. Contained within the Ryedale District are Sherburn, Ganton, and other towns that would figure in the ancestries of the majority of Owston and Ouston families. To our knowledge, John Oustyn is the first person of an Owston related surname documented as living within this geographic region.

JOHN DE OUSTON OF PICKBURN

While not specifically identified as one and the same, a John de Ouston, Esq. and his wife Joan are recorded as initiating a quit claim deed of his share in a watermill at Atwick on 8 September 1391. The current parish of Adwick le Street borders Owston, South Yorkshire ("Estate Papers," n.d.). With the genitive pronoun "de" or "of" attached to Ouston, it would appear that John was of or from Ouston (now spelled Owston) and this locational designation served as an identifying surname for John.

Later transactions with Walter de Calverley in 1401 and 1423 place John de Ouston in Pykburn or Pickbourne (now Pickburn) in league with John Bigot (Bigod/Bygod), the Lord of Settrington; Marmaduke Darrell, the Lord of Sessay in the North Riding; Robert Mauleverer; and Ralph Bigot. In 1401, Caverley transferred his lands in Yorkshire to these five men. By 1423, those who took possession of the lands released these from feoffment and these holdings were returned to his son who also named as Walter de Caverley (Margerison, 1901 & 1903). Joan Bygod, the sister of John and Ralph Bygod, was married to the elder de Caverley (Booth, 2007).

Pickburn, the home of John de Ouston, is a hamlet located within the West Riding parish of Broadsworth that borders the parish of Adwick le Street, which in turn borders the parish of Owston. While nothing overtly makes the connection between John Oustyn of Place Newton and John de Ouston of Pickburn, the dealings with the Bygod family may have influenced John and Joan to move to Wintringham – a neighboring parish of the Bygod's lands in Settrington ("Yorkshire Genealogy," 2011).

There are several other pieces of circumstantial evidence that strengthen the hypothesis that both men are one and the same. While neither were part of the nobility, both were men of financial means. This is evident in John de Ouston's land dealings and the description of John Oustyn's estate in his will (Margerison, 1901 & 1903; Oustyn, J., 1452).

Additionally, John Ouston of Pickburn (who is variously recorded as John Owston) filed a will on March 11, 1409 (O.S.). Since the will was never probated, it signifies that it was abandoned and this could be due to John's move to a new area. As stated previously, John was still living in Pickburn as late as 1423 (Margerison, 1903; "York Medieval Probate Index," 2016). Since no other will was filed in Yorkshire under any variant of Ouston until 1452, this adds to the possibility that both men were identical ("York Medieval Probate Index," 2016).

ROGER ATTE STYGHIL

John de Ouston's identity is further revealed in the first Calverley transaction where his official seal appears with the legend: "S - Iohannis - Ouston - Styghil" (Margerison, 1901). The lone "S" is probably an abbreviation for "Sigilum": Latin for "seal." The addition of the Styghil name gives a clue to John's former identity as John atte Styghil. Bardsley (1901), in his *Dictionary of English and Welsh Surnames*, suggests that Styghil is in reference to a "stile" or a passageway through a break in a fence or steps over a fence. While "stile" is infrequent in modern English, it appears part of the word "turnstile." Over time, Styghil metamorphosed into the surnames of Stile, Stiles, Style, and Styles. Someone who was identified as "atte Styghil" could be said to have lived at or near the stile.

Within the parish of Ouston (now Owston), Roger atte Styghil and his son John are mentioned in a number of land transactions. Additionally, the transaction regarding the mill at Adwick le Street also references Roger atte Styghil ("Estate Papers," n.d.). Roger's cognomen is variously spelled Styghil, Styhil, Styhill, Steghell, Stele, and Stehill ("Abstracts of the Feet of Fines," 2011). In the listing of the poll tax for 1379, Roger atte Styhill, a merchant, and his wife Alicia were assessed at two shillings – the highest rate for the entire parish. Only one other parish resident was assessed at this amount (Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Association; 1892).

Earlier in 1348, Roger atte Stehill of Ouston witnessed a transaction between John, the son of Thomas atte Stehill, and Matilda de Ouston and her daughter Agnes. Matilda is identified as the late wife of Adam son of William de Ouston. Although it cannot be ascertained whether the "atte Stehill" family were related to others using the "de Ouston" designation, Roger's son John apparently adopted "de Ouston" when he left the parish (Ellis, 1893).

Additionally, John's seal includes a coat of arms, which are described as follows: "A shield of arms, couché: a fess between three birds. Crest, on a helmet with lambrequin, a bird. Within a cusped border" (Margerison, 1901, p. 229). Since John is listed in all documents without title except "esquire," it is uncertain how he possessed the right to bear arms on his seal and it is not known to which name these arms were registered.



An artist conception of John de Ouston's crest that is based on the description of his seal. Tinctures are unknown, as the seal would produce a monochromatic impression. The original seal would be a cruder version of the above.

WILLIAM OUSTYN/OWSTYN

Although circumstantial evidence indicates that John and Joan de Ouston of Pickburn may be the same individuals as John and Joan Oustyn of Place Newton, this is not the only two dots that may or may not be satisfactorily connected. For this theory to be conclusive, a link from John Oustyn to the known Owston families of the Ryedale District must be made. At the present, the connection is only geographical and no known documents connect the families.

In his will, John Oustyn references a chaplain named William Oustyn as the recipient of one-third of the residue of John's estate and who was named as its executor during probate. Nothing is known of the relationship between these two men; however, it is safe to assume one existed. With William's death occurring as late as 1484, he could have been John's son, nephew, grandson, or even a much younger brother (Leadman, 1895; "Will of John Oustyn," 1452).

While their relationship is not documented, William Owstyn was chaplain and a priest of the second chantry at altar of St. Nicholas in St. Leonard's Chapel at Hazelwood in the parish of Tadcaster, West Riding (now in North Yorkshire). The Vavasour family was the patron of the second chantry and coincidentally owned a farm named Ouston (now the Township of Oxton) in Tadcaster (Caine, 1897; Leadman, 1895).

In addition, William Oustyn and a Margaret Owstyn were both listed as members of the Guild of Corpus Christi in York. Although nothing indicates that Margaret was William's relative, it is a possible that she was his sister or even his wife or daughter. While William's status as a member of the clergy is currently unknown, if he were ordained, the Roman Catholic Church would have prohibited marital relations ("The Register of the Guild," 1872).

It is not clear, however, if William's role as a chaplain required ordination. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* indicates that celibacy was not required of clerics who were not ordained: "In the medieval Church things were very different. Almost all young men with any little education preferred to enroll themselves in the ranks of the clergy to receiving the tonsure, hoping that some chance of employment or of a benefice might come their way. They were still free to marry and sometimes they married openly" (Thurston, 1908 § "In England").

Therefore, it is possible that William had married and had issue. Even if William was his son and he had no issue, the lack of sons mentioned within John's will does not conclusively prove that there were not others to pass the surname to future generations. Any number of scenarios might explain such an absence; however, these are all in the realm of speculation.

CONCLUSION

The next historical document relating to the Owston surname in the Ryedale District was the will of John Owston of Willerby. In addition to his wife Isabel and four unnamed daughters, only two Owston males were listed in this 1520 will – John, an heir and William, a witness. Neither is listed by relationship.

Within a century following the death of John Oustyn of Place Newton, two wills indicate that the number of male Owstons in the Ryedale District had steadily increased. The 1558 will of John Oustane of Staxton in Willerby identified several relatives including his sons Christopher, George, Thomas, Robert, Phillip (who appears to be deceased at the time), and William.

He also provided for his brother Gyles and his nephews John and Robert. Two Owstons served as witnesses to John's last will and testament: John Owstan and Sir Robert Owstan, vicar of Stillington. It is presumed that these are his nephews. John is probably an ancestor of the Ganton family of Owstons. Robert is identified as Robert Howston in the list of vicars for St. Nicholas' Church at Stillington. He was instated in 1538 and vacated the position due to his death. The next vicar, William Magson, MA was instated 1585 (Scott & Hinson, 2014). It is not known whether a gap spanning several years transpired between the death of Robert and his replacement.

In addition to John Oustane's 1558 will, Peter Owston of Sherburn's 1567 will lists his three minor sons – William, John, and Francis. Peter Owston was the progenitor of the Sherburn family of Owstons. All those surviving with the surname from this lineage descend from the eldest son, William who died in 1602. Not counting any Owston males who were not identified, the number (including the deceased) had risen to at least fourteen by the 1550s.

Although formulating a conclusion is problematic due to a lack of direct evidence, it is possible that John Oustyn of Place Newton is the same individual as John de Ouston of Pickburn. It is also feasible that this same John Oustyn is the ancestor of the various clans of the Owstons of the Ryedale District. Since no evidence exists to prove or disprove either situation, the theory is presently inconclusive; however, it still is within the realm of possibility and warrants future research.

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