## Example of a 1000 CE will

## Acknowledgements and introductory notes

I first became aware that Anglo-Saxon wills were written in the plain English of their time thanks to a presentation at a 1994 conference of linguists and lawyers at Aarhus University in Denmark. The speaker, the late Professor Brenda Danet of the Hebrew University, had a collection of them.

I found this will as number 19 in *Anglo-Saxon Wills* by Dorothy Whitelock (Cambridge University Press 1930, paperback 2011). It is also available, in a slightly less abbreviated form, under reference S1534 at [www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=seek&query=S+1534](http://www.anglo-saxons.net/hwaet/?do=seek&query=S+1534), which gives the archive details and dates it as “probably c. 1000” CE.

I have tried to make my own translation with the help of Whitelock and:

[www.oldenglishtranslator.co.uk](http://www.oldenglishtranslator.co.uk)

[www.cambridge.org/fr/academic/subjects/history/british-history-1066/anglo-saxon-wills?format=PB](http://www.cambridge.org/fr/academic/subjects/history/british-history-1066/anglo-saxon-wills?format=PB)

Bosworth-Toller *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/finder> (based on Joseph Bosworth’s *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* <https://archive.org/stream/anglosaxondictio00tolluoft#page/1/mode/1up>)

[www.lexilogos.com/keyboard/english.htm](http://www.lexilogos.com/keyboard/english.htm)

<http://symbolcodes.tlt.psu.edu/bylanguage/oenglish.html>

<http://placenames.org.uk/>

[www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare](http://www.measuringworth.com/ukcompare)

Rather than paraphrase for an elegant, modern style I have tried to preserve the original’s vocabulary and word order as far as reasonably possible in the hope of giving modern readers some feel for the style of the original. But I am no linguist and would welcome improvements and comments from any Old-English experts who stumble upon this page. Added words and punctuation marks are bracketed.

I have tried to preserve the punctuation, but allowing for the fact that some dots in the original indicate full stops (American periods), others represent commas or semi-colons, and some (which I have omitted) indicate numbers.

## Wulfgeat’s will

þis is Wulfgates gecwide æt Dunnintune þæt is þonne þæt he geann ærest

This is Wulfgeat’s will at Donington, that is: he gives first

gode his sawelscættas þæt is . 1. hid æ Tærdebicgan. 7 . 1 . pund penega. 7

to God the fee for his funeral that is 1 hide at Tardebigge; & 1 pound in pennies; &

VI 7 twentig freotmonna for his sawle. 7 into Wigeracæstra an bryþen mealtes

26 freemen for his soul; & to Worcester a [steeped grain] malt brew[,]

healfes of Dunnintune healfes of Cylleshale; 7 into sancte Æþelbrihte

half from Donington and half from Kilsall; and to St Ethelbert’s

healfes pundes weorð. 7 into sancte Guðlace healfes pundes weorð. 7 into

the equivalent of half a pound; & to St Guthlac’s the equivalent of half a pound; & to

Leomynstre .IIII. aldhryðra. 7 into Bromgearde .I. hryðer oðer into Cliftune

Leominster 4 mature oxen; & 1 to Bromyard; another ox to Clifton;

7 into Heantune. .IIII. hryðra 7 to Pencric .II. hryðra 7 into Tweongan

and 4 oxen to Wolverhampton; & 2 oxen to Penkridge; & to Tong

.II. hryðra 7 he geann forgifnesse ælcan þara þe wið hine agylt hæbbe for

2 oxen. & he gives forgiveness to all those of you who have wronged him for

his sawle þearfe. 7 he geann anes geares gafol his monnum to gyfe. swa heo þa

his soul’s need. & he gives his servants a year’s rent. May they who

áre brucon swa heo þa ælmessan gelæstan þa ðer to londe foð. 7 he geann his

have the benefit of the land honour my charitable bequests. & he gives his

hlaforde .II. hors. 7 .II. sweord 7 .IIII. scyldas 7 .IIII. spera. 7 .X. mæran. mid

master 2 horses & 2 swords & 4 spears & 10 mares with

.X. coltan. 7 he bit his hlaford for godes lufan þæt he beo his wifes freond 7 his

10 colts. & he asks his lord for God’s love that he be his wife’s friend & his

dohter 7 he ann his wife þæs landes æt Cylleshale. 7 æt Eowniglade. 7 æt Hrodene

daughter’s. & he gives his wife these lands at Kilsall; & at Evenlode; & at Roden

þa hwile hire dæg beo. 7 ofer hire dæg ga þæt land eft in min cynn þa ðær nehste

for her lifetime. & after her death goes that land again in my family for those who are nearest.

syn. 7 Wulfgyfe minre dohter þæt land æt Dunnintune swa hit stont. 7 æt

& to Wulfgyf my daughter that land at Donington as it stands. & at

Þornbyrig þæt land þe wæs mid hire moder golde geboht æt Leofnoðe. 7 Wulfgyfe

Thornbury that land that was bought with her mother’s gold at Leofnoth. & to my daughter Wulfgyf’s

suna mire dohter þæt land æt Ingewyrðe. 7 Wilflede minre dohter þa oðre hide æt

son that land at Ingewyrth; & to Wilfled my daughter the other hide at

Tærdeb'i'cgan 7 Ælfilde mire magan þa hide beneoþan wuda eall swa wit on wedd

Tardebigge; &to my kinswoman Alfild the hide beneath the wood as we agreed.

gesealdon. 7 gif ic lengc beo þonne heo þonne hæbbe ic þæt land æt Wrotteslea.

& if I live longer than she I am to have that land at Wrottesley.

7 ealle þa ðe to mire ahte fon gylde Brune .XX. mancses goldes. 7 ic geann

& all those who receive anything of mine are to pay Brune £2.50. & I give

him .VI. mæran. mid .VI. coltan to þance. 7 þa hors þa þe þær to hlafe beon mine

him 6 mares with 6 colts to thank [him]; & the remaining horses [are to] be my

wife 7 minre dohtran eallum gelice fela. 7 þeo wellinc æt þære wic into

wife’s & my daughters’, to each the same number. & the spring at that village to

Dunnintune. 7 Æþelsige. leof cyð þis mine hlaforde 7 ealle mine freondum.

Donington. & Æþelsige, dear[,] make this known to my lord & all my friends.

## Notes on the nature of Anglo-Saxon wills

In his preface to Dorothy Whitelock’s 1930 edition (see below) Professor H.D. Hazeltine writes that:

* 1. Gifts (whether effective on or before death) were originally made orally in the presence of witnesses, but by 1000 CE the custom had grown up of providing written evidence to ensure that they survived failing memories and the death of the witnesses. But this document (whether a note in the land book or a separate document like Wulfgeat’s) was only evidence of the gift, not the (necessarily oral) gift itself, so this document is not a will in the modern sense.
  2. Whilst in some cases the will appears to have been unilateral, “in most cases at least it is bilateral and is in fact a contract between the donor … and one or more of the principal donees”.
  3. Even the apparantly unilateral nature of the gifts to the church were in truth contractual: “The men of this world want things in the next; while the men of the next world want things in this. By their gifts the lay folk buy things in the spiritual world; and by their counter-gifts and counter-performances the clerical folk buy things in the corporeal world.”
  4. The will does not convey title to the donee but merely records a contractual promise that it will be conveyed when the time comes.