

# A MEMORIAL TO THE SMITH FAMILY: THE LISTED STONES OF WIVETON CHURCHYARD

*By Pamela and John Peake*

*The gravestone of Thomas Smith, one of the oldest and most easily identified stones in the churchyard of St Mary, Wiveton, lies just inside the gate and to the right of the gravel path. Who can fail to notice it with the tools of a millwright's profession so clearly depicted above the inscription and then not pause and wonder at the life and times of Thomas Smith? Living to the grand old age of 82, he was born in 1643, just one year after Abel Tasman discovered New Zealand in the South Pacific. He was too late to see the fire across the marsh that destroyed so much of Cley Newgate and certainly too late for the heyday of Wiveton as a port, but it is just possible that he heard stories from his grandparents about these events. Then what about the other Smith gravestones that lie close by and are from a similar period of time? Are they all members of the same family?*

*The discovery that a line of these gravestones is a 'listed' site in Wiveton coincided firstly with some work being done on the early Parish Registers, then with an opportunity to look at a collection of Smith family papers in the Wiveton Deed Box. It all conspired to make this an opportune moment to investigate further and find some answers to these questions.*

## Introduction

Lying within the Parish of Wiveton are five 'listed buildings', some of which can be anticipated like the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, and Wiveton Hall. Then there is the mediaeval stone bridge over the Glaven, the windmill close to the Blakeney/Wiveton boundary and finally, to complete the list, a row of four gravestones in the churchyard, quite an unexpected inclusion.

The listed headstones are between 10m and 15m north of the tower and lie in the centre of a row which extends to the path. They commemorate various members of the Smith family. From north to south they are numbered 126, 125, 124 and 123 (and circled) on the Churchyard Plan which is featured in a separate article in this issue of the Journal.<sup>1</sup>

Adjacent to these listed stones to the east and lying alongside the path to the north porch is a short row of three more stones. Closest to the church is a stone for John and Ann Smith, then to the north of it is a fine old altar tomb; the last headstone in this row is inscribed simply with the initials H S and it is impossible to comment further. The location of these three stones is marked on the Churchyard Plan as 119, 120 and 121 when reading from south to north. In all, this gives a total of six Smith family stones.

Each headstone and the altar tomb is briefly described below and this is followed by a full copy of the monumental inscription as it can be read today. At first glance this may appear excessive, but reference to the altar tomb clearly highlights the problem. There are three known earlier attempts at deciphering this inscription, two of which have only been partially published, namely Blomefield's note of circa 1748<sup>2</sup> and the local Women's



**The four 'listed' stones (together in a line)**



**The altar tomb**

Institute listing of 1976.<sup>1, 3</sup> W.N.Dew in his 1885 listing of memorials both inside the church and outside in the churchyard made no reference to it.<sup>4</sup> Together with what can be seen of the inscription today, we have after 252 years only an incomplete record. Stones are at the mercy of the weather, lichens and other plants when left unprotected and, in the past, the churchyard was used as pasture for grazing animals.

### **The Listed Headstones**

1. Thomas Smith

Limestone. A rectangular shaped stone with moulded and curved top. The various tools of a millwright are clearly depicted above the inscription:

Here lyeth the Body of Thom<sup>s</sup>. / Smith Millwright he departed / this life April y<sup>e</sup> 16  
in 1725 / Aged 82 Years

2. Ann Smith

Limestone. A rectangular shaped stone with simple curved top. Central inset of circle with anchor lying above the inscription:

Here lyeth the Body / of Ann the wife of / Francis Smith / who departed this / life  
the 28 day of / March 1736

3. Francis Smith

Red sandstone. Rectangular shaped stone with curved top. A crossed torch and horn lie above the inscription:

Here lyeth y<sup>e</sup> Body of / Francis Smith who de / parted this life y<sup>e</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> of /  
December 1724 / Aged 54 Years

An accompanying verse is now quite weathered and the last few lines are substantially below ground level. It was recorded in 1976<sup>3</sup> thus ..... Naked as from earth we came / And crept to life at full / We to the earth return again / with ou ---

4. Elizabeth and Francis Bond

Limestone. A rectangular shaped stone with ornate curved and scrolled top. An hourglass flanked by wings lies above the inscription:

Here lyeth y<sup>e</sup> Body of / Elizabeth y<sup>e</sup> wife of / Edmund Bond daugh / ter of Francis  
and Ann / Smith who departed / this life y<sup>e</sup> 23<sup>rd</sup> of May / 1731 Aged 27 Years / Also  
here lyeth Francis

### **The Unlisted Headstones**

5. John and Ann Smith

Red sandstone. A rectangular shaped stone with simple curved top, no additional decoration. Inscription :

To / the Memory of / John Smith / who departed this life / the 1<sup>st</sup> day of Feb 1787 /  
Aged 58 Years / Also / Ann his Widow / who departed this life / the 16 day of Dec  
1794



## 6. Philip Smith

An altar top tomb with brick base and red sandstone slab top. The bricks appear to be mediaeval in origin<sup>6</sup> and the base is now disintegrating.

There is a manuscript note by Blomefield<sup>2</sup> recording in circa 1748 ..... 'Philip Smith 1736 and 4 children'. The slab is now so severely weathered that there is absolutely no trace of this information.

The WI Listing of 1976 records:

Here lyeth the body of / HANNAH his wife / who departed this life / the 13th of ...

Although there is no record of her burial in the Wiveton Parish Registers<sup>5</sup> this inscription would suggest that Hannah Smith was interred in this tomb sometime after 1748 or, at the very least, that the inscription was added after this date. The latter may also have been worked in a different style of lettering from the original inscription seen by Blomefield and this may account for its survival.

Despite the weathering, it is still possible in a cross light to see the upright strokes that make up the name HANNAH and these same letters can be further verified by gently tracing with a finger tip. There is no doubt this is followed by a series of letters in the same sized script as HANNAH that match the surname SMITH; these are much harder to see and are at variance with the transcription above. It should be added that several visits were made to this stone over a period of months and it was only after an unusually wet spell that 'SMITH' appeared. Of the rest, there are only tantalising fragments of letters to be seen in the line below.

Using all the above information and drawing on entries in the Parish Registers<sup>5, 7</sup> it is possible to reconstruct the family relationships of the Smith family represented by the stones (Figure 1). All are descended from Thomas Smith, millwright, and each of the surviving eldest sons is represented in the family plot. The importance the family placed on this close relationship and on their status in Wiveton is emphasised not only by the position of the stones in the churchyard but also by the erection of a stone to John and Ann Smith that is probably not a gravestone but a memorial, as there is no record of either being buried in this churchyard.

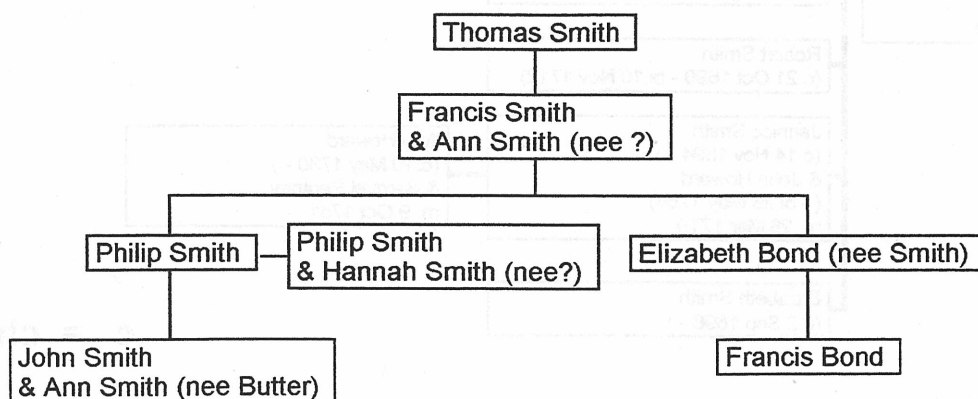
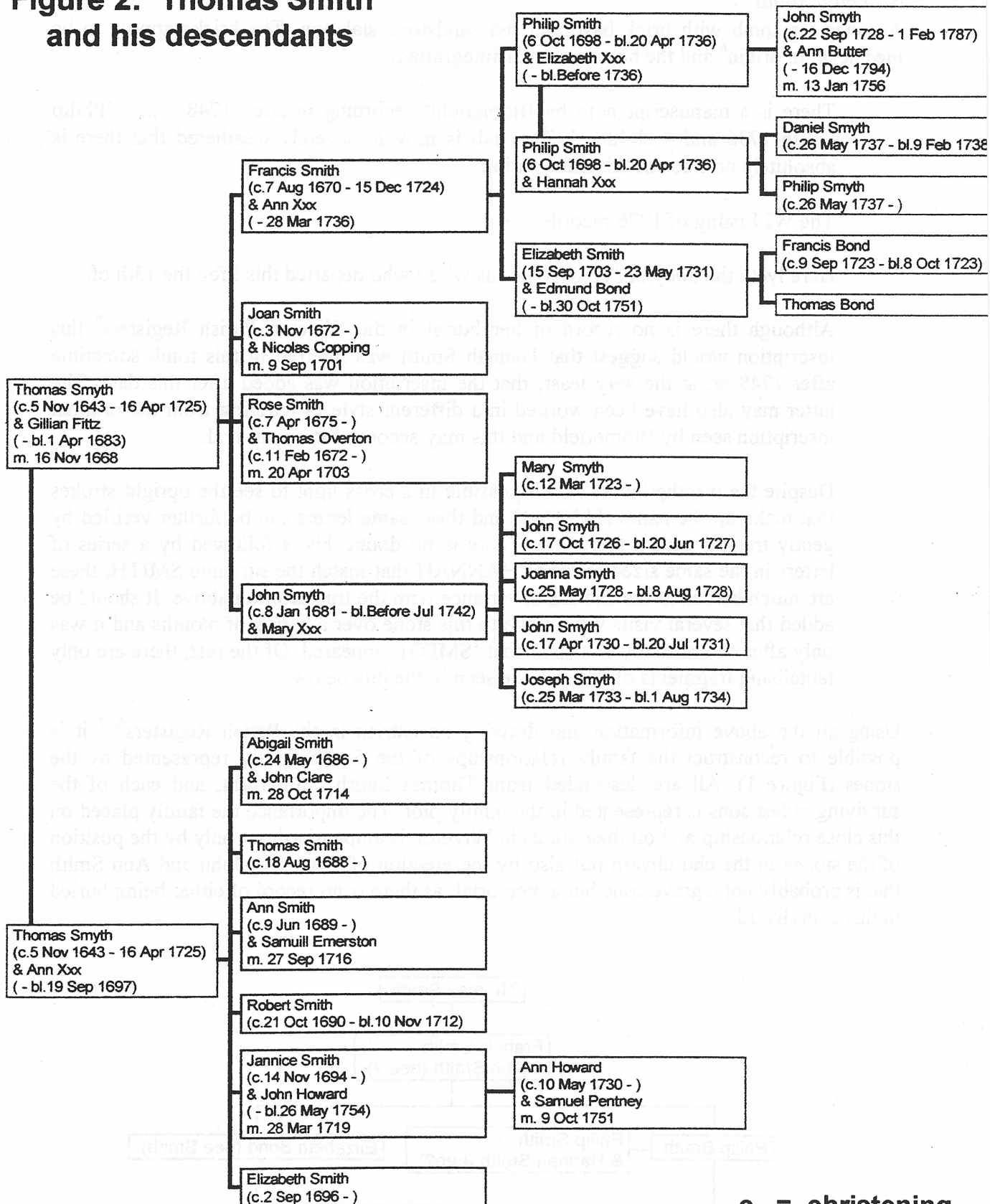


Figure 1: Relationship of individuals named on stones



**Figure 2: Thomas Smith and his descendants**



**c = christening**

**m = marriage**

**bl = burial**

## Wiveton Parish Registers

The Wiveton Parish Registers begin in 1558, and are nearly complete: the only missing years are for marriages between 1672-1681 and for burials between 1676-1682. Their condition is remarkable considering their age; there is some soiling, which appears to be water damage, and then some fading which sadly reduces their legibility in a few places. The original registers are now deposited in the Norfolk Record Office where copies are available on microfilm, although a private transcript was made some years ago by Harry Poyner, shortly before they left the parish.

These Registers are an important source of information for reconstructing not only families, but also communities, providing records of baptisms (christenings), marriages and burials, with occasional illuminating asides. For example, dates of birth, death and whether a child was 'base' born (i.e. illegitimate) may be included with information on the local rectors, curates and churchwardens. They show how quickly infants were baptised, the intervals between births associated with breast feeding together with infant mortality rates. Second (or more) marriages also show up as being common, especially when young children were present. Indeed these marriages could often happen with haste and would seem to be a matter of practicality rather than sentiment (see Note 1).

Using this information a family tree for Thomas Smith and his descendants is given in Figure 2; this tree concentrates on the core of the family and only begins to illustrate some of the links to other families in Wiveton and neighbouring villages. Indeed all the men married at least one wife from outside the parish. It is obvious there are discrepancies between the information presented in this Figure and that given on the stones and in other documents. Many of these variations are relatively minor and do not detract in the least from the overall picture that is being constructed for the Smith family, in fact they should be anticipated wherever people and records are involved. Some examples are given in Figure 3, where it would appear that Elizabeth Bond was buried shortly before she died, Ann Smith appears to have died three years after she was buried, while Ann Smith (nee Butter) died in the wrong century. Although the Parish Registers are a more reliable source of data than monuments or transcriptions, entries being made closer to the actual event, they are still not infallible.

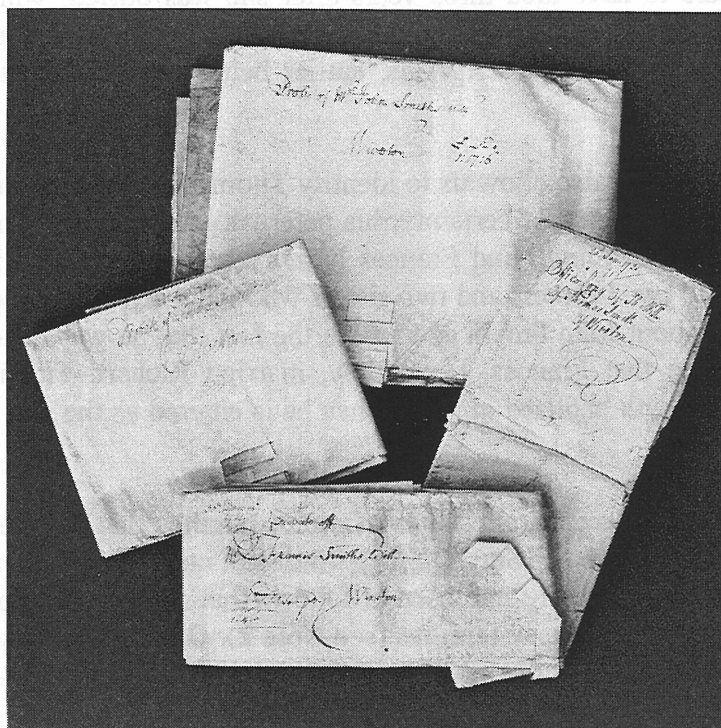
The Parish Registers can also allow us to identify Thomas Smith's parents, his brothers and sisters and to a lesser degree of certainty, his paternal grandparents. Thomas was baptised the second son of John Smyth and Frances Neale who were married in Wiveton and he appears to have had two brothers and two sisters who were also christened there. Very little is known for sure about John Smyth apart from the fact that he was dead by 1661 for there is an entry showing that Frances, his widow, married Richard Fitz in that year. He is possibly the John Smyth baptised in 1614 when he is entered as the son of yet another John Smyth.

From 1558 there are several parallel lines of Smith families that can be followed, whether they are spelt Smith, Smythe or Smyth. Since it was not until the nineteenth century that the spelling of names became really stabilised, it follows that all variations of a surname should be considered when tracing early families (see Note 2). On the very first page of the burial register there are four Smyths recorded, one of which is Richard who was clearly a wealthy

**Figure 3: Comparison of dates from different sources**

Information on stone		Information in Wiveton Parish Registers	Information from other sources
Name	Date of Death	Date of Burial	Date of Death
Thomas Smith	16 Apr 1725		16 Apr 1725 (2, 4)
Thomas Smyth		19 Apr 1725	
Francis Smith	15 Dec 1724	18 Dec 1723	15 Dec 1724 (2, 4)
Ann Smith (wife of Francis Smith)	28 Mar 1736	31 Mar 1736	28 Mar 1739 (2); 20 Mar 1736 (4)
Philip Smith	weathered	31 Mar 1736	'1736 buried with 4 children' (3)
Hannah Smith (wife of Philip Smith)	weathered	no entry	...'13th of' (2)
Elizabeth Bond (nee Smith, wife of Edmund Bond))	23 May 1731	11 May 1731	23 May 1731 (2, 4)
Francis Bond	no date	8 Oct 1723	none
John Smith	1 Feb 1787	no entry	1 Feb 1787 (2, 4)
Ann Smith (nee Butter, wife of John Smith)	16 Dec 1794	no entry	16 Dec 1704, amended to 1804 (2); 16 Dec 1794 (4)

### The Smith wills





ship owner from the evidence of his will.<sup>8</sup> His sons, John and James are further mentioned as being ship owners and it is possible to trace a tenuous line down from these Smyths to John Smith ... 'of Wiveton the Haven man' ...<sup>9</sup>

The Norfolk Quarter Sessions Order Book records in January 1652/3 that all ships, from wherever, that enter Blakeney Haven were obliged to pay dues to John Smith of Wiveton towards *the maintenance of the Haven and the Seamarks therein*. Could this be Thomas Smith's father? This clearly remains pure speculation unless supporting evidence can be found.

When considering Frances Neale, Thomas Smith's mother, the story is quite different. Frances was the daughter of John Nealle and Joane Base, both descended from well-established families in Wiveton that quite clearly can be traced back to the opening pages of the registers (Figure 4). There is also information in the Wiveton Deed Box (see below) that confirms these relationships, for Frances and her sister, Elizabeth Coney, inherit land from their father John Nealle who had it in turn from Thomas Nealle. Interestingly, John Base, Joane's nephew, was a blacksmith in Wiveton<sup>10</sup> while Richard Smyth mentioned above, had a daughter Margret Smythe who married Barnard Basse, 1560.

To finish with Frances Neale, it is just worth noting that there is a Rich Fitts mentioned in the Hearth Tax for Wiveton in 1664<sup>11</sup> and a Rich Fitts in both Wiveton and Cley-next-the-Sea for 1666.<sup>12</sup> Earlier still, there is a memorial to Richard Fytz in Letheringsett Church dated 1630, followed by references to the Fittz family as blacksmiths, also in Letheringsett. The connection with the Fittz family seems to have been maintained as Thomas Smith married Gillian Fittz in Wiveton in 1663.

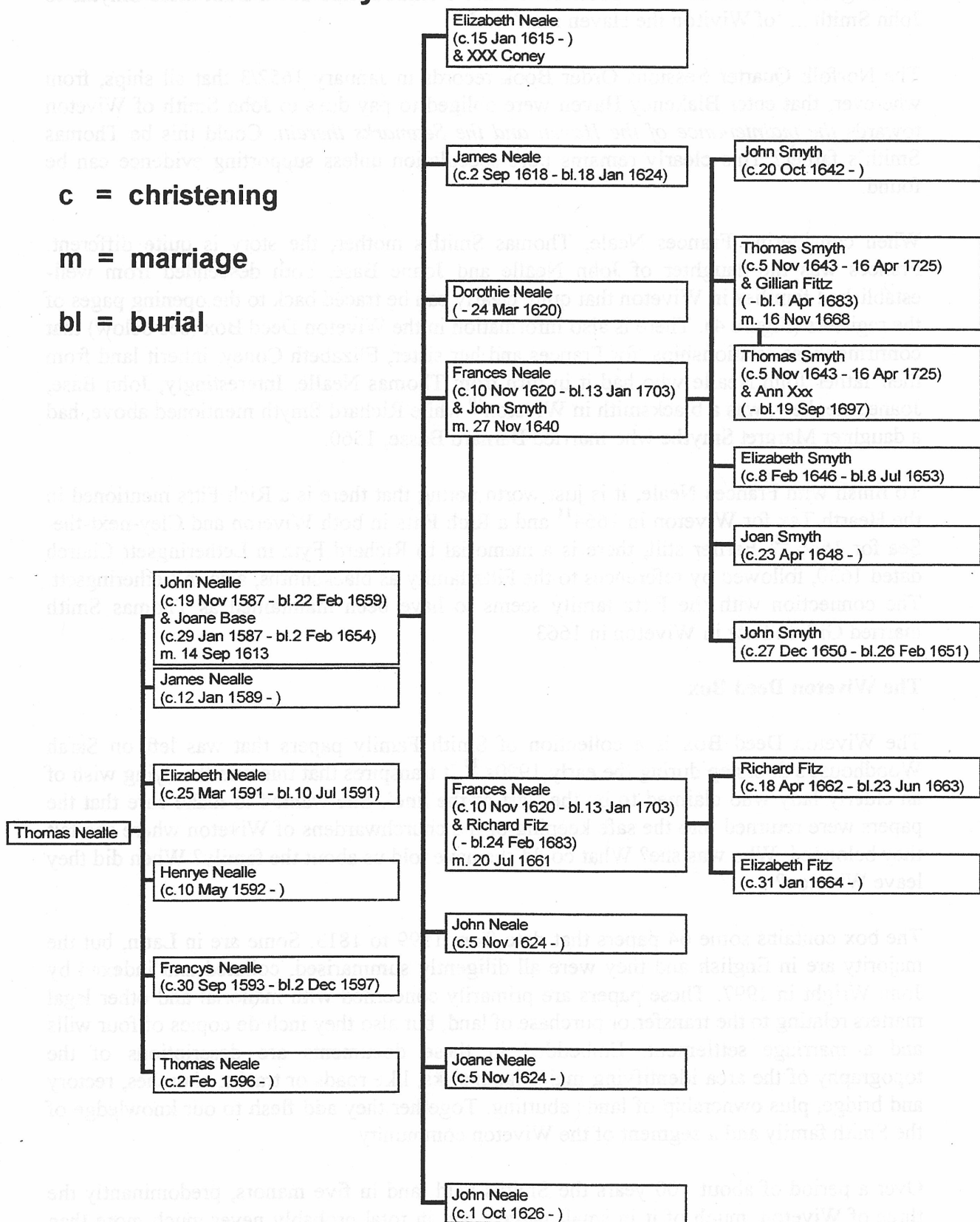
### **The Wiveton Deed Box**

The Wiveton Deed Box is a collection of Smith Family papers that was left on Sarah Woodhouse's doorstep during the early 1990s.<sup>13</sup> It transpires that this was the dying wish of an elderly lady who claimed to be the 'last of the line'. She wanted to make sure that the papers were returned into the safe keeping of the churchwardens of Wiveton where she felt they belonged. Who was she? What could she have told us about the family? When did they leave Wiveton?

The box contains some 64 papers that date from 1599 to 1813. Some are in Latin, but the majority are in English and they were all diligently summarised, collated and indexed by John Wright in 1997. These papers are primarily concerned with manorial and other legal matters relating to the transfer or purchase of land, but also they include copies of four wills and a marriage settlement. Embedded in these documents are descriptions of the topography of the area identifying major landmarks, like roads or tracks, churches, rectory and bridge, plus ownership of lands abutting. Together they add flesh to our knowledge of the Smith family and a segment of the Wiveton community.

Over a period of about 100 years the Smiths held land in five manors, predominantly the three of Wiveton, much of it in small parcels and in total probably never much more than 10 acres. For four generations they were millwrights or millers, with one, Francis Smith, also being called a wheelwright, so they were craftsmen linked through marriage to other

**Figure 4: Thomas Smith and the Neale Family**



**Note: Thomas Smith (Smyth) is on the right**

craftsmen and landowners, undertaking some farming and owning beasts and 'implements of husbandry'.

The wills show the importance placed on land in the Smith psyche. Provision is made for it to be retained, wherever feasible, in the male bloodlines and as a last resort to pass to a daughter or her son. Where the sons were under the age of 21 the mother was to have legal responsibility until they could inherit, but if the widow was to remarry then instructions were given for all responsibilities to revert to another member of the Smith family or to a close friend. The clarity of the instructions for ensuring the inheritance of land within the family may have been a reaction to the complexity of land-holding at the time, both legal and practical.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to sons, daughters appear to have received legacies of money and the widows were given use of property until they died or remarried. Two of the men, Francis and Philip, were comparatively young when they died and made provision in their wills for the possibility of children being born shortly after their death.

The position of the windmill can be tied to a field now bounded by Sandy Lane on the south and the road between Wiveton and Blakeney to the west, shown on the 1820 Parliamentary Enclosure Award as Mill Field. The Mill was still standing in 1786, although by this time it was mortgaged and appears to have passed out of the Smith family and by 1796 it had been demolished.

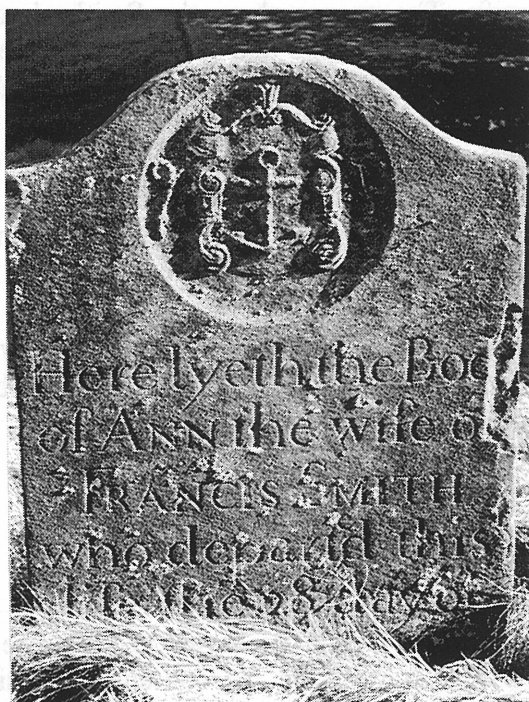
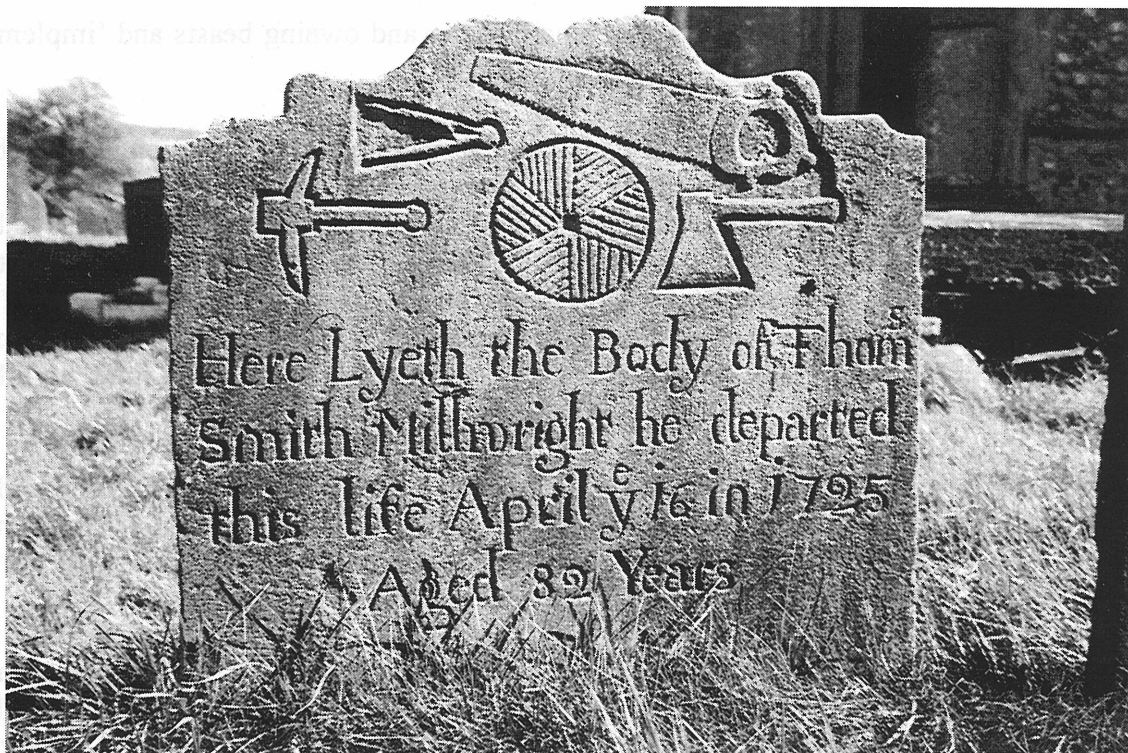
Where they lived is not quite so easy to identify. The papers show the Smiths had an interest in several messuages (dwelling house plus outbuildings and garden) in Wiveton, while in the will of Philip Smith (1736) there is mention of 'furniture of the best chamber' and 'the bed in the kitchen chamber'. This presumably refers to a house on two floors and with more than one room upstairs, as 'chamber' refers to a room above the ground floor. One of the messuages lay in Chapel Lane, while another was not far from the church, just across the green; perhaps it is not too fanciful to speculate that at least some of the Smiths could have looked across to the church and the family gravestones!

What a legacy the Smiths left us! A series of eighteenth century stones that are today the oldest standing in the Churchyard. They have created a window of opportunity to look back and begin to unravel the community in which they lived.

### **Acknowledgements**

We thank Peter Carnell for stimulating our interest in Wiveton; Sarah Woodhouse for loaning us the Wiveton Deed Box and John Wright for making the contents accessible; Harry Poyner and John Algar for additional information from Parish Registers. Lastly, but far from least, Mary Ferroussat for her enthusiasm and many hours spent with us looking at and discussing gravestones.





## Notes

1. The dates used in the registers prior to 1752 employed the Julian Calendar which was introduced by Julius Caesar and then replaced in Britain by the Gregorian Calendar named after Pope Gregory XIII. The important change was that January 1<sup>st</sup> became New Year's Day from 1752, prior to which time it had been March 25th. So the period between January and March 24th was transferred from the year 1751 to 1752. In this account, all the dates have been changed to conform with the modern Gregorian Calendar.

2. Throughout this article Thomas has been written as a Smith in the text, rather than Smyth because that is how he is recorded on his headstone and how he has become known to us at the present time. The spelling of a surname for all other individuals is the one given in the earliest reference to them which is usually at the time of their baptism or marriage.

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