



News and events

- Hertfordshire Association for Local History's Annual Symposium 2022 will be on Saturday 19 November at the Katherine Warrington School. There will be eight talks on the theme 'Wining and Dining in Hertfordshire'. For details, go to www.halh.org.uk
- Next meeting:** Our next meeting will be on **Wednesday 19 October** when Mike Smith will give a talk about '**Mapping Wheathampstead**', drawing on the county maps, the 1758, 1799 and 1840 maps, Ordnance Survey maps, aerial photography and LIDAR.

A letter from 1776

An intriguing item turned up at an auction in Cheshire on 10 September. Lot 469 was a letter dated 17 November 1776 and addressed to "William Lee Esq. at the Rev. Mr Wheeldon's at Wheathampstead, St Albans, Herts".

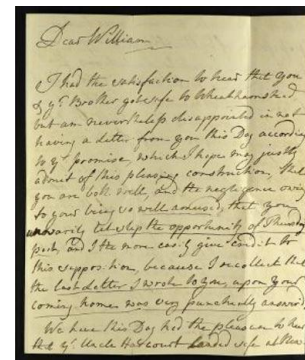


It had been posted in Hartwell, Northamptonshire and was from William Lee's father, also named William. What was the connection between the Lee family and the Rev. John Wheeldon, rector from 1773 to 1800, who lived in the Old Rectory in today's King Edward Place?

The letter starts with the writer reproaching his son for not writing a letter to assure his father of his safe arrival in Wheathampstead. It goes on to tell the good news that "this day" they had heard that the boy's Uncle Harcourt had landed safely in New York after the King's Troops had taken possession of it, and that "as there are great expectations that all differences will be amicably adjusted between the Americans and England, we flatter ourselves there will be no dangerous service for him to perform". [We now know that this optimism was misplaced; the American War of Independence continued until 1783.]

The letter then reports the sad news of a "Melancholy Accident" at Hartwell, involving the gardener's son, Miles. The boy had got a gun and been playing with his school fellows in an effort to fire it. When one of the boys struck the arm of the boy who held the gun it went off and shot Miles

"quite through the body in a most miserable manner." "There was no hopes of his recovery from the very first, and he died yesterday morning about 11 o'clock".



In the next paragraph Mr Lee thanks his son for "a bundle of very good toothpicks" left on his chest of drawers the morning that William and his brother George departed for Wheathampstead: "I believe I am indebted to you or George". He then expresses concern about the "powder I gave you the night before we parted" and gives instructions as to how to use this "should you have any want of physick". The advice was to consult Mrs Wheeldon if he needed to rather than keep the powder as it "will suffer from being kept long in a paper". What kind of powder would this have been? Most likely it was a "fever powder" of the type patented in 1747 by Robert James, physician and friend of Samuel Johnson.

The letter ends with loving messages to both William and George from their father and also from Mamma who "desires hers to you both".

More research is needed. What was the link between William Lee and Rev. Wheeldon, perhaps via Cambridge University? Who exactly was Uncle Harcourt? What was his experience in the American War of Independence and afterwards? Did he stay in the army?

Ruth Jeavons

(thanks to Jon Mein for spotting the letter)