

# CAPTAIN JOHN WOODLIFF

A. VERE WOODMAN, F.S.A.

To the second charter, granted by King James I on the 23rd May, 1609, to "The Treasurer and Company of Adventurers and Planters of the City of London for the First Colony of Virginia", there is appended the names of the 659 adventurers or stockholders<sup>1</sup>, one of whom, John Woodliff, gentleman, was a native of Buckinghamshire.

His grandfather, Robert Woodliff, who was seised of the manor of Peterley, married Anne, daughter of Sir Robert Drury of Hedgerley. At the time of his death on 7th January, 1593, Drugo or Drewe, his son and heir, was aged 21 years and more.<sup>2</sup> Drewe Woodliff married Katherine, daughter of John Duncombe of Moreton in Dinton, 30th November, 1581, at Aylesbury, where their daughter Mary was baptised 17th March, 1582/3. Their son John was baptised 27th December, 1584, at Dinton. Catrine Woodliff, perhaps Drewe's wife, was buried at Dinton, 26th July, 1592. Drewe Woodliff was buried at Great Missenden, 9th July 1627.

John Woodliff may first have voyaged to Virginia about the year 1608, for on 14th June, 1619, when, at his petition, the Company granted him a patent to plant 200 persons in Virginia before the end of six years, it was stated that he had disbursed £62 10s. eleven years since and the like time spent in the Plantation in the place of Ensign. As the Company's shares were £12 10s. each, it is evident that he had subscribed for five shares, each of which entitled him to 100 acres of land. But about a month later, on 13th July, his patent was, with the Company's consent and "the liking of the said John Woodliff", altered to go in the name of Sir Thomas Wainman. Possibly he was already in negotiation with Sir William Throckmorton and his associates who, on 3rd February, 1619, had agreed with the Company to transport divers persons into Virginia, to build a town there and to settle inhabitants for the advancement of the country: for on 19th August, 1619, John Woodliff of the town of Buckingham, esquire, chartered at £33 per month "the good ship called the "Margaret" of Bristol of the burden of 45 tons or thereabouts" which was to sail for Virginia with the first fair wind and weather after 15th September.

On 4th September John Woodliff of Prestwood Co. Buckingham, esquire, signed an agreement with Sir William Throckmorton of Clowerwall co. Glouc. knight and baronet; Richard Berkeley of Stoke Gifford co. Glouc. esquire; George Thorpe of Wanesswall co. Glouc. esquire, and John Smyth<sup>3</sup> of North Nibley Co. Glouc. gentleman who, in their own names and in the name of Sir George Yardley, Governor of Virginia, had procured in February a grant to establish a plantation, for the better government of which there

had been delivered to the said John Woodliff a commission nominating him Captain and Governor. It was agreed by all the parties that the place in Virginia where the Governor should settle should be called Berkeley and the lands about the same Berkeley Hundred.<sup>4</sup> And as the same John Woodliff had at his own charge about April last transported four men into Virginia—now abiding with his wife and children—who are to serve him for four years, and had furnished them with arms and apparel, it was agreed that his charges should be allowed him and that the said men should be servants to all the parties. Woodliff also agreed that none of his men, or those derived from Sir Thomas Wayneman, should be settled within ten miles of the Colony. He was to be allowed one twenty-fifth part of the profits arising from his Colony and if Sir George Yardley should relinquish his fifth part he should be admitted to it; also he was to stand adventurer with Sir William Throckmorton for a third part of his venture.

The first of the instructions he received for the government of Berkeley was "We ordain that the day of our ship's arrival at the place assigned for plantation in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God". As this was two years before that held by the Plymouth Colony in December 1621, it would seem that the first Thanksgiving Day in America was celebrated by a Buckinghamshire man.

Ferdinando Yate, who had been appointed ancient by the Adventurers, has left a day-by-day account of the voyage to Virginia in a letter to George Thorpe. The *Margaret* sailed from Bristol on 16th September and had mainly fair weather although a storm on 9th October "grew soe extreme that we were lieke to cutte our maine mast by the bord and then it pleased God to favor us in slakeing the wind a litle which caused us to stay our hande and so by the helpe of the Allmighty we enduered the storm all that day and night". On the evening of 30th November they came to an anchor at Kecketan<sup>5</sup> in a good harbour where "my Captain went ashore to see some of his friends and my self with him" thus leaving the seas this last of November 1619.

A list of the men sent for plantation under Captain Woodliff has survived. It is dated September 1619 and marginal notes of uncertain date—perhaps 1621—in John Smyth's hand reveal a high death rate among the early settlers. Of thirty-four emigrants, twenty-five were dead, two slain and one drowned. Ferdinando Yate had returned to England in March 1620/1. Another four, who were in Virginia for four years from mid summer 1619, had also died: they may have been the four men transported by Woodliff in April 1619.

George Thorpe explains this excessive mortality in a letter to John Smyth dated 19th December, 1620. He says "you will hear many strange reports both of the death of our own people and of others, yet be not discouraged therein for I thank God that I never had my health better. I am persuaded that more do die here of the disease of their mind than of their body by having this country's victuals over-praised unto them in England and by not knowing they shall drink water here".

John Smyth's letter to Richard Berkeley dated 1st June, 1620, hints at some dissatisfaction with Woodliff. He says that the payment to Mr. Williams for the freight of our ship and Toby Felgate's<sup>6</sup> wages must be paid for by the four

parties because the fifth part cometh not either from Sir George Yardley or Mr. Woodleefe and he doubts very much whether he [Woodliff] "will be able to hold a third part with Mr. Tracy". He has sent Mr. Woodleefe's letter again "which gives us small content and the foolery of his contemplated new magazine—not to be furnished for £1000—less". He marvels that they have had no letters "only our ancient Yate, none of the wisest, writeth too much but all of one side".

In 1620 John Woodliff had received a grant of 530 acres from Sir George Yardley and it is possible that the adventurers considered that he was devoting too much time to his own plantation. Be this as it may, his commission as Governor was revoked on 18th August, 1620, and George Thorpe<sup>8</sup> and William Tracy of Hayles, co. Gloucester, were appointed to supervise the affairs of the settlement and on 28th August they received a commission nominating them Governors.

In March 1622 disaster in the shape of a massacre by the Indians overwhelmed the Colony and more than a quarter of the white inhabitants perished. Eleven, including George Thorpe, were killed in Berkeley and that plantation was more or less abandoned.<sup>9</sup>

John Woodliff seems to have escaped the massacre, for in a list of patents, sent to England in 1626, he is said to hold 550 acres in the territory of Great Weyanoke. He had, however, died before 1637 when his son John<sup>10</sup> had a patent for 530 acres in Great Weyanoke, bounded on the north by James River, and 20 acres in Charles hundred bounded on the east by James River, due to him in right of descent from his father Captain John Woodliff of Charles City to whom it was granted by Sir George Yardley in the year 1620.

I must acknowledge my indebtedness to our member Mrs. Frederick Lee Allman, of Washington, for transcripts of many of the Smyth Papers and for other assistance. Without her kind help this short article would not have been possible.

<sup>1</sup> Among them were Sir Drue Drury, Sir John Burlacie, Edward Fleetwood, John Waller, Edmund Brudenell and Sir Thomas Wenman of Thame.

<sup>2</sup> Chan. Inq. p.m. Ser. II, cccxxiv, 34.

<sup>3</sup> John Smyth was steward to Lord Berkeley. His letters and papers, which contain most of the information about Woodliff, are preserved in the New York Public Library.

<sup>4</sup> Berkeley Hundred lay on the north bank of the James River. It was reputed to contain 8,000 acres.

<sup>5</sup> Kecoughtan, later Elizabeth City.

<sup>6</sup> Toby Felgate was master of the *Margaret*; his wages were £4 10s. a month.

<sup>7</sup> William Tracy, to whom Sir William Throckmorton had assigned his interest in the venture, left England for Virginia at the end of August 1620. He died the following year, 8th April.

<sup>8</sup> George Thorpe had left for Virginia in February 1620.

<sup>9</sup> This massacre marks the end of the attempt to found a College in Virginia towards which Wing had contributed in 1619, "paid out of the church box to Virgiana ijs vjd."

<sup>10</sup> A deposition made by Captain John Woodleife in 1666 states that he was then aged 51 years or thereabouts.

---

*It is with great regret that we have to record the death of Mr. A. V. Woodman after this issue of the Records had gone to press. An obituary notice will appear in the next issue.—ED.*