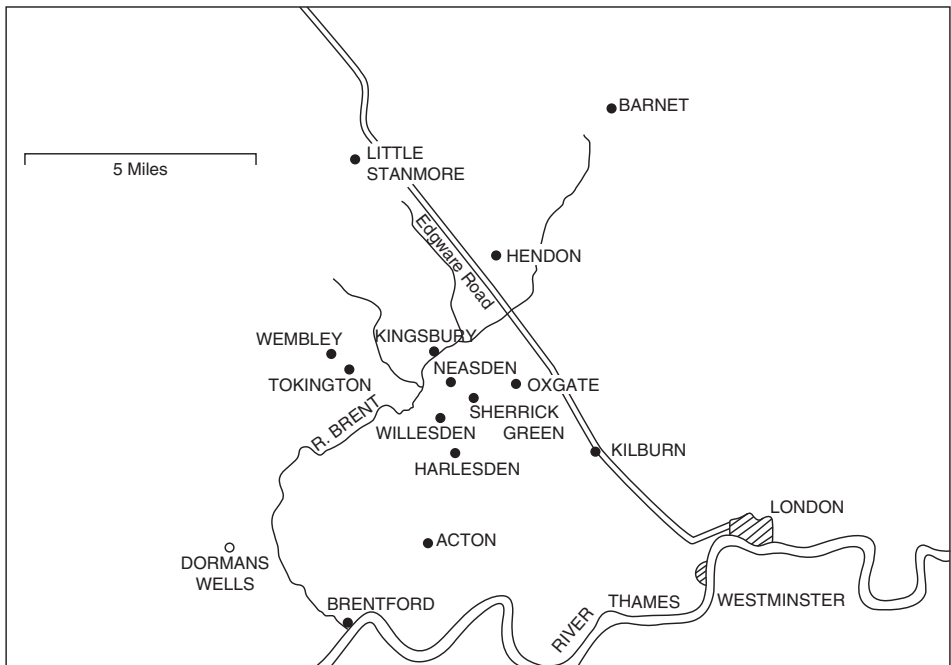


1

Family Matters: The Roberts Family of Willesden

The main chronological focus of this book is the period between 1470 and 1585, a century which spans the reigns of seven monarchs (Edward IV, Richard III, Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth), or ten, if the brief interval in 1470–71 when Henry VI was restored, and the even briefer reigns of Edward V and Lady Jane Grey, are also included. In terms of the individual readers and book owners whom this study investigates, that long century also encompasses the lives of a father, Thomas Roberts (1470–1542), and his son, Edmund Roberts (1520–85). Thomas and Edmund were members of the Roberts family whose main property holdings were in and around Neasden and Willesden in the county of Middlesex (see Map 1). Thomas was a lawyer whose practice was in the London parish of St Clement Danes; to different degrees both men were active in public life, and were assigned a variety of roles in local government and administration. Their careers and activities may be traced through the public record, from which a rich picture of their social and civic associations may be derived. A variety of documentary sources, including wills and records of property transactions, testifies to the steady rise in the family's fortunes during the sixteenth century, a period during which they increased their personal wealth through favour, business transactions, and judicious marriage alliances. These sources offer much information about family history and the Middlesex land base that underpinned their prosperity, and a close reading of these documents also provides insight into their extensive network of personal connections within the locality; this network sustained Thomas Roberts and his sons through a period of political instability and uncertainty. Before considering these men as readers, this chapter will situate them as family men, in terms of both their ancestry and their descendants, and as members of a closely interwoven local community.

Family Matters: The Roberts Family of Willesden



Map 1 Map of Willesden and Neasden.

THE FAMILY SEAT AND SOME FAMILY HISTORY

The groundwork for the family’s Tudor aggrandizement had been laid during the two previous centuries by the steady acquisition of parcels of land and the patient rationalization of property holdings. The nucleus of the family seat, Neasden House, which by the mid seventeenth century was the largest house in Willesden, was a collection of seven tenements on Bower Lane which ran east from Neasden and then south to Sherrick Green.¹ Members of the Roberts family had long possessed property in this area. A confirmation of a transaction between John Le Mileward of Willesden and John de Middleton, citizen of London, in the reign of Edward I (1272–1307) describes some of the lands involved (a field called Thorncroft and lands in Brentcroft and Sheeproad) as adjacent to lands owned by Thomas Roberd, a witness to the charter.² Other

¹ For records relating to these properties see LMA, CLC/313/L/H/002/MS25122/383 (Taylors); TNA, E 40/6875; E 40/11588; E 40/11844 (Hales); E 40/11648; E 40/12065; LMA, CLC/313/L/H/002/MS25122/1354 (Bucklands).

² TNA, E 40/11648; the exact date of this document is obscured.

Sixteenth-Century Readers, Fifteenth-Century Books

contemporary documents confirming John de Middleton's land holdings in the area mention William Roberd either as the owner of nearby properties (lands at Sherrick, southeast of Neasden, and Sheeproad) or as a witness.³ A later transfer of Neasden lands to John de Middleton during the reign of Edward II lists John Roberd as a witness.⁴ The exact relationship between Thomas, William, and John Roberd cannot be determined, but other records from the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries suggest that the family had multiple branches: for example, a petition of 1394 mentions Richard Robard and Ralph Robard with John Kynge the elder, 'all of Willesdown'; a guarantee of surety of 1406 lists a Thomas Roberd amongst other Middlesex men; and a quitclaim of 1421 given at Paddington was witnessed by Richard Robert, John Roberd, and William Robert.⁵ Ralph Roberts held Taylors cottage in Neasden, and made a grant of it in 1393 to his son, Thomas, to whose widow it was later assigned in 1411/12.⁶ In 1424 and 1425 John Roberts consolidated his lands at Sheeproad by exchange with Robert Curson, clerk, one of the largest landowners in Willesden.⁷ The first of these documents styles John Roberts as 'Seniorem de Willesdon', indicating that there were two John Robertses at this date; although it might be simplest to assume that these were father and son, that is by no means the only possible formulation that would account for identically named older and younger men within the same family. The John Roberts 'gentilman' mentioned in the gift of goods and chattels made by John Careley of Willesden in 1468 must have been the younger of these men.⁸ This John Roberts is described in a note in one of the family's books as holding lands *infra Manorum de Nesdon* ('within the manor of Neasden'), and as having died in 1476, a date confirmed by a document of 1480 that describes

³ TNA E/40/6874 (Sherrick), E 40/7893 (Sheeproad); listed as a witness in TNA, E 40/6806, E 40/7892, and E 40/6800.

⁴ TNA, E 40/12065, dated 1325.

⁵ Respectively, *CCR Richard II*, 1392–96, p. 199; *CCR Henry IV*, 3 (1405–9), p. 152; *CCR Henry V*, 2 (1419–22), p. 138. An indenture of 1438 mentions lands belonging to William Robert in the vicinity of East Bedfont, see *CCR Henry VI*, 3 (1435–41), p. 182.

⁶ As noted in BL, MS Stowe 862, f. 45^r: 'All that I find of this, is, a grant of it by Ralph Roberts to his son Thomas 16 Ricardi secundi, 1393, and an assignment of it to the widow of the said Thomas, among other lands etc. by certain trustees, 13 Henry 4^{ti}.' This Thomas Roberts was probably the Thomas Roberd recorded in 1406 in a memorandum of mainprise for John Lyn, chaplain, see *CCR Henry IV*, 3 (1405–9), p. 152.

⁷ TNA, E 40/7644, E 40/10379.

⁸ WAM, 17021; *CCR Edward IV*, 2 (15 Edward IV), p. 424 (no. 1521).

Family Matters: The Roberts Family of Willesden

him as ‘nuper of Willesden’ and ‘Gentilman iam defuncto’: this John Roberts was Thomas Roberts’s father.⁹

By 1510 Thomas Roberts held five houses in Neasden village, plus numerous crofts and open-field land from Neasden prebend.¹⁰ Thomas continued to enlarge the family estate, acquiring other property held from Neasden and Chambers prebends and holding leases of various estates. These included lands that he held for a decade on behalf of the heirs of Thomas Frowyk, and others that he managed on behalf of John Page, the son of William Page of Harlesden.¹¹ In a complex tangle of legal transactions, Thomas Roberts also leased other lands that had formerly belonged to William Page and which had since been alienated to Westminster Abbey.¹² For much of the sixteenth century, Westminster Abbey leased its Neasden estate to successive members of the Roberts family: firstly to Thomas from *circa* 1516–39, then later to John *circa* 1553–56, and then to Edmund (1566–69).¹³ The estate continued to be leased to later generations of the family until it was broken up and sold in the mid nineteenth century.¹⁴

The full extent of Thomas Roberts’s disposable property can be seen from his will of 1542, which left the bulk of his estate to his eldest son and heir, Michael, but also parcelled out other properties amongst his other children.¹⁵ Edmund was bequeathed three tenements in Harlesden, named ‘Robertes Crofte’, ‘Dorans’, and ‘Panyermane’, all of which were rented out and being farmed at the time. Other tenements in Harlesden (Downes and Brays), and some properties in Willesden, again all currently rented and farmed, were left to Thomas’s youngest son John, along with the manor of Fosters in Acton. Thomas’s daughter Anne, who was married to Thomas Smythson, was given a tenement in Tothill Street in Westminster, next door to the Swan

⁹ BodL Rawlinson C. 299, f. 1^r; WAM, 17022; see the section titled ‘Father and Son: John Roberts (d. 1476 and Thomas Roberts (1470–1542))’.

¹⁰ VCH, p. 217.

¹¹ TNA, E 210/10147; BodL MS D.D. All Souls c 124/85a; TNA, C 1/349/1; C 1/349/2; C 1/349/3; C 1/767/20. See further discussion in Chapter 2, section titled ‘Thomas Roberts at the Inns of Court’.

¹² WAM, 17026; CPR Henry VII 1494–1509, p. 517.

¹³ WAM, 4680, 4697, 4706, and TNA, SC 6/HENVIII/2415, m. 16; WAM, 33185 and CPR *Philip and Mary*, 3 (1555–57), p. 352; WAM, 33187.

¹⁴ See the discussion in VCH, p. 216.

¹⁵ LMA, DL/C/356.

Sixteenth-Century Readers, Fifteenth-Century Books

(presumably a tavern). The only unmarried daughter, Alice, was bequeathed nine tenements in Pety France in Westminster.

Thomas Roberts's predecessors had lived in a house on the east side of Neasden Lane, called Lyttel's or Barnhaw, but he rebuilt or greatly enlarged the property in this vicinity that his ancestor John Roberts had acquired from John Atte Wood.¹⁶ Improvements to this property, now called 'Catt at Woodes', were continued by Thomas's son Michael, who refers in his will of 1544 to his 'mansyon and dwelling house in Neasdon'. The will's description of this property, though no doubt characterized by the inclusive formulae habitually used in law, evokes an extensive estate which consisted of 'gardeyns, orchardes, pounds, ffysshinges, yarges, doofehouse, banksides, meddowes, woodes, underwoodes, hedgerowes'.¹⁷ This house formed the family's main residence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After Michael's death the manor or prebend of Neasden was leased for thirty years to Ursula, his widow, to whom Michael left the estate for her lifetime, stipulations that caused conflict between her and his brother Edmund.¹⁸ Ursula was also to have tenements in St Albans which might have been part of her dowry, since they are not mentioned in Thomas's will of two years before. Michael reiterated that property at Fosters in Acton and some tenements in Harlesden were to go to his brother John, and a tenement in Tothill Street in Westminster to his sister Anne and her husband Thomas Smythson, as directed by their father's will two years previously; a tenement and garden plot in the parish of St Clements in London was left to his brother Edmund, and another tenement in Tothill Street went to a priest named John Busshop.¹⁹

The family estate was further extended by Edmund Roberts, who purchased Middletons manor from Richard Barley in 1563.²⁰ This property, which consisted of five houses, land, and rents, in Willesden and Hendon, greatly increased the Neasden estate. Edmund also leased the manor or prebend of Harlesden in 1576 for a period of twenty-one years, a lease that was continued by both his son and

¹⁶ BL, MS Stowe 862, ff. 42^v–43^r.

¹⁷ TNA, PROB 11/30/205.

¹⁸ See further discussion in Chapter 5, section titled 'The Use of Sarum: Cambridge University Library, MS Ii.6.7 and Cambridge University Library, MS Ii.6.2'.

¹⁹ John Busshop was probably the John Bishop who a little while later became vicar of Willesden (from 24 January 1546 to 1552).

²⁰ TNA, CP 25/2/171/5ELIZITrin.

Family Matters: The Roberts Family of Willesden

grandson.²¹ Edmund's son Francis Roberts bought Oxgate manor in 1587, along with other properties; when he died in 1632 he was said to be seised of thirty-four messuages and 1,654 acres in Willesden, a manor and land in Acton, a small estate in Kingsbury, and other estates in Lincolnshire.²² Unlike his father and grandfather, who had both made marriages with women from families with London connections, Francis Roberts married more locally: his wife, Mary Barne or Barnes, was the daughter of John Barnes of Willesden, esquire. The match may indicate that the status of the Roberts family had risen amongst the Middlesex gentry, and marriage within this more local context gave rise to the possibility of consolidating the family estates, a process that was continued after Francis's death by his grandson and heir William (Francis's eldest son, Barne, predeceased him in 1610). William Roberts married Eleanor Aty, the daughter of Robert Aty of Kilburn Priory. Through this marriage William added considerably to the family estate, which he further augmented by buying up ecclesiastical properties during the Civil War and managing to retain them at the Restoration. William Roberts demolished the medieval cottages that surrounded Catewodes and converted their sites and Bower Lane into gardens and orchards for his house, by then renamed Neasden House, 'and the orchards & gardens adjoining were lands belonging to divers small cottages which were pulled down in ye memory of some yet living, by Sir William Roberts Knight, about ye year 1656, and ye grounds enclosed with brick walls, at a great expence'. The eighteenth-century writer of this account added a symbol before 'living' to direct the reader to a list of names in the right margin (John Plomer, William Harman, George Cook, Nicholas).²³ By 1666 Neasden House was assessed on twenty-one hearths and was the largest house in Willesden.²⁴ However, after the death of Sir William Roberts in 1662 the Roberts estate began to contract. His son and grandson, both also named William, had to sell properties in order to clear their debts, and this process continued in the early part of the eighteenth century when the estate passed into the hands of a different branch of the family.²⁵

²¹ *VCH*, p. 212.

²² His will is TNA, PROB 11/160/635; for the inquisition post mortem see TNA, C 142/482/65. The Lincolnshire estates may indicate inheritance through a family connection with the Robertses of that county.

²³ BL, MS Stowe 862, f. 40^r; a diagram on f. 39^v shows the layout of the properties.

²⁴ TNA, E 179/232/32 f. 26; see Davies, Ferguson et al., *London and Middlesex 1666 Hearth Tax*, ii.1623.

²⁵ *VCH*, pp. 217–18.

Sixteenth-Century Readers, Fifteenth-Century Books

FATHER AND SON: JOHN ROBERTS (D. 1476) AND
 THOMAS ROBERTS (1470–1542)

The Thomas Roberts who is one of the two main subjects of this study was born in September 1470 during the turbulent tenth year of Edward IV's reign. A record of his birth is inscribed at the beginning of one of the family's books, BodL Rawlinson C. 299, a collection of medical recipes and other practical texts. On f. 1^r is a note recording the date of the Battle of Barnet in 1471, when the Yorkists defeated the Lancastrians: *Bellum de Barnetfeld fuit in die Pasche xiiij die Apriles littera dominicalis F anno domini millesimo cccclxxi anno regnis rex Edwardi quarti xj* (see Figure 1).²⁶ This statement takes up just over three lines, and the fourth line has been completed with the words: 'Thomas Robertz then xxx wekes olde'. The addition is written in different ink and by a different hand, and comparison with a surviving copy of Thomas's signature shows that this was undoubtedly Thomas's own hand.²⁷ One of the ways in which individuals reckoned their ages in the pre-modern period was by reference to memorable historical events, and the Battle of Barnet must have resonated with particular local significance for Thomas since Barnet itself lay not far north of Neasden where the Roberts family lived.

Further records on the same leaf reveal that Thomas's father John died in 1476 when his son was only six years old: *Johannes Robertz pater dicti Thome Robertz coroner Middlesex obiit xj die Septembre anno domini millesimo cccclxxvj & anno xvj R E iiiij^{ti}*, and specify that Thomas was recognized as his father's heir two years later: *Ad curiam tentam apud Nesdon in parochia de Willesden anno xvij R E iiiij^{ti} compertum fuit per homagium curia predicta quod predictus Thomas Robertz fuit filius & heres predicti Johannis Robertz ad omnia terra & tenementa dicti Johannis infra Manerium de Nesdon et quod dictus Thomas tunc fuit etatis viij^{to} an annorum* ('At the court held at Neasden in the parish of Willesden in the eighteenth year of the reign of King Edward IV, it was proved through homage to the aforesaid court that the aforesaid Thomas Roberts was the son and heir of the aforesaid

²⁶ An English version of this historical record is given later in the volume, on f. 51^r, there written in black ink by a rough hand that is perhaps Thomas Roberts's: 'Barnetfeld was the xiiij day of Aprill beyng Ester day the yere of our lord a ml cccclxxj & a° xj R E iiiij^{ti}.'

²⁷ Thomas's signature survives on a certificate of assessment for John Harman in Pynnor, 14 January 6 Henry VIII (1515), see *LP Addenda Henry VIII*, p. 36. Comparison of the two reveals that the capitals 'T' and 'R', and lower case 'h' and 'b', are identical. The document is accessible via *State Papers Online*.

Family Matters: The Roberts Family of Willesden

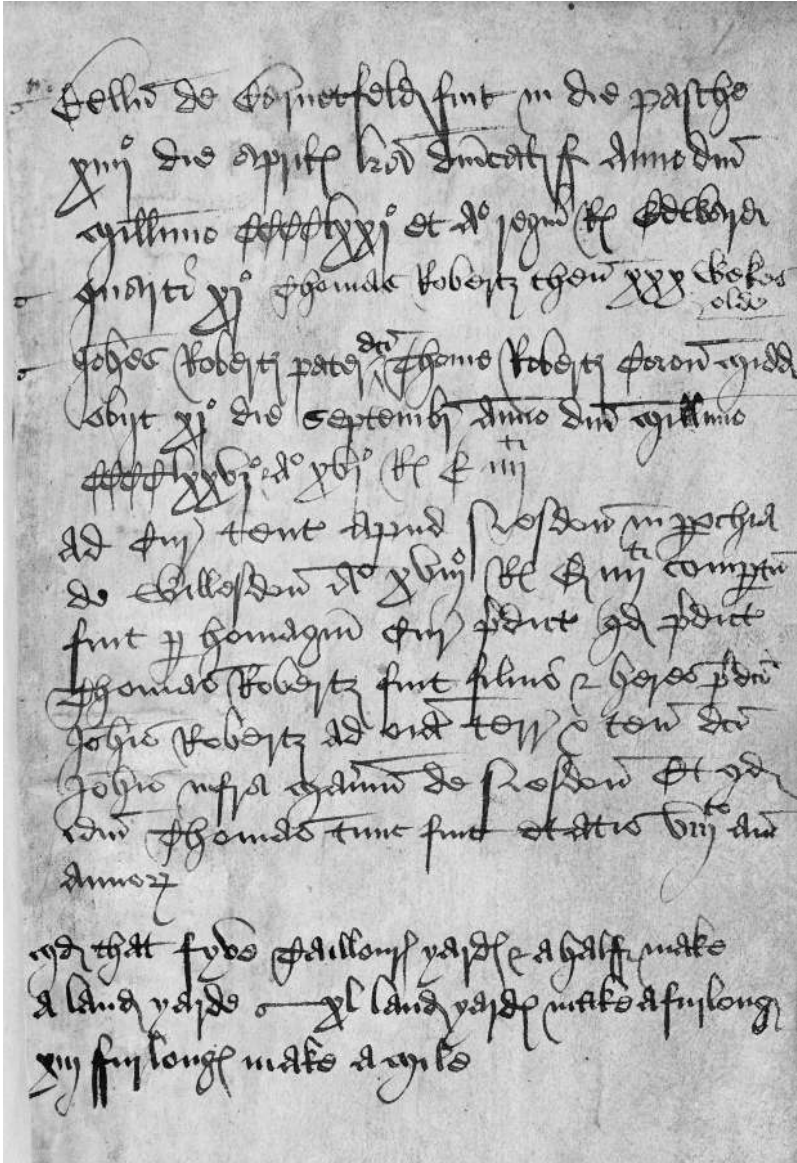


Figure 1 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C. 299, f. 1r. Note of Battle of Barnet and Thomas Roberts’s birth. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Libraries, the University of Oxford.

John Roberts, to all the lands and tenements of the said John within the manor of Neasden, and which said Thomas at that time was eight years of age’). John Roberts is named in, and was sometimes a witness to, a number of Middlesex

Sixteenth-Century Readers, Fifteenth-Century Books

property transactions in the 1460s.²⁸ The latest of these, which dates from 1468, styles him as ‘gentilman’: John Careley, ‘husbondman’ of Willesden, made a gift and confirmation by charter with warranty of all his lands and tenements, rents, reversions and services, meadows, woods, and pastures in Willesden, to three other Willesden men: John Roberts ‘gentilman’, Roger Frende ‘yoman’, and John Halle, ‘husbondman’.²⁹ In a previous transaction from 1466 which involved George Adyf, vicar of St Dunstan in the West, and John Ball, chaplain, who were the grantors of a demise of property in Middlesex to Anne Cristede, John Roberts appears as a witness, along with John Carley, John Hall, Roger Frene (probably the same as Roger Frende), and John Twyforde the elder (later one of the witnesses to the 1468 transaction).³⁰ Similarly, John Roberts had also been a witness to the quitclaim of lands in Acton, Yellyng, and Fulham made by Beda Hede of Kyngesbury to Thomas Frowyk and others in 1462.³¹ Yet John Roberts evidently had interests and connections in London as well as in Middlesex, because he is named very precisely (‘John Robert of Nesedon in Willesden parish co. Middlesex’) in a gift of goods and chattels made on 1 April 1470 by William Hulet or Hewlot, citizen and ‘butcher’ of London; the other citizens mentioned in the same transaction are Thomas Pernell and Thomas Alderton, both ‘bochers’, and a ‘bruer’, Robert Michell, along with William Bolton, rector of the parish church of St Nicholas in the Shambles, within Newgate.³² William Hewlot repeated this gift of goods and chattels on 15 October 1474, this time naming as the recipients Thomas Parnyll, butcher of London, and Peter Hyll, notary of London, as well as John Roberts.³³

The name ‘John Roberts’ occurs in several other mid fifteenth-century Middlesex records, but it is not easy to be sure that these references always

²⁸ WAM, 17019, 17020, 17021.

²⁹ WAM, 17021, *CCR Edward IV*, 2 (1468–76), p. 424 (no. 1521); given at Willesden 1 November 1468 and witnessed by John Twyford the elder, Robert Twyford, John Downe, John Twyford the younger, and David Wasse.

³⁰ *CCR Edward IV*, 1 (1461–68), p. 399; given at Willesden 5 December 1466. Anne, the wife of John Cristede, was the daughter of Henry Boys and Alice his wife, herself daughter of Agnes Guybon of London who had enfeoffed the property to Adyf and Ball, along with William Barneville and John Hardy, now deceased.

³¹ *CCR Edward IV*, 1 (1461–68), pp. 136–37. The other recipients were William Eston and Richard Bernes; the other witnesses were William Berneville, Ivo Chalkhyll, John Erlyche, John Veyser the elder, John Veyser the younger, and Thomas Lutton.

³² *CCR Edward IV*, 2 (1468–76), p. 126 (no. 495).

³³ *CCR Edward IV*, 2 (1468–76), pp. 362–63 (no. 1306).

Family Matters: The Roberts Family of Willesden

signify the man who was Thomas Roberts's father. Whilst some references clearly designate other men who happened to have the same name (such as the John Robert mentioned in a recognizance of 1452 who is described as a miller of Langford, near Harmondsworth), most probably do relate to the Willesden family.³⁴ For example, a John Robert was a witness in 1448 to a charter with warranty of all the lands, rents, and so on in Paddington made by the widow Margaret Hille to Thomas Wesynham and others.³⁵ A similar transaction made in 1450 by William Dorset to Lettice, widow of Robert Frampton, and others, involving lands in Paddington, Westbourne, Kensington, and Knightsbridge, also lists a 'John Robart' amongst the witnesses, and the location suggests that this was probably a member of the Willesden family.³⁶ The John Robert who witnessed the transfer of lands in Neasden in 1454 from John atte Hall to John Careley is clearly the same person mentioned in the other documented transactions that involve the same parties.³⁷ A grant of land by John Roberts to John Gloucester in 1449 offers some significant detail about family history; John Roberts stated that: *dicta tria crofta iure hereditario post decessum Thome Roberd de Wyllesden housbondman patris mei michi descendentant* ('the said three crofts descended to me lawfully by inheritance after the death of my father Thomas Roberts of Willesden, husbandman').³⁸ This indicates that the name of Thomas Roberts's grandfather was also Thomas, but it does not seem that this was the Thomas who was the son of Ralph Roberts because the later eighteenth-century account of the family's properties explicitly states that the name of Thomas Roberts's great-grandfather was John.³⁹ It is quite possible that Ralph Roberts had another son named John: some earlier fifteenth-century references to John Roberts of Willesden dating from 1419 (failing to appear to answer a charge of trespass) and the mid 1420s (land transfers) attest to a John Roberts who flourished at the appropriate time, and as we have seen one of these documents uses the style 'Johannem Robard Seniore de Willesdon', indicating that there was more than one man with

³⁴ CCR Henry VI, 5 (1447–54), pp. 334–35.

³⁵ CCR Henry VI, 5 (1447–54), p. 93.

³⁶ CCR Henry VI, 5 (1447–54), p. 191. See also the reference to William Roberd of Westbourne 'husbondman' in the parish of Paddington in 1437, CPR 1436–41, p. 103.

³⁷ WAM, 17018.

³⁸ TNA, E 40/7253; John Roberts's small round seal, with a design of a five-pointed flower, survives on this charter.

³⁹ BL, Stowe 862, f. 42^v; ff. 38r–59^r of this manuscript comprise transcripts of a sixteenth-century rental and other material relating to the manor and prebend of Neasden.