

## The Explorer Ralph Fitch: New Light on his Ancestry

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Ralph Fitch undertook extensive travels in India and Southeast Asia in 1583–91, and his account of his travels was published in volume 2 of Richard Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* (1599). The article on Ralph in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* begins by saying that his 'origins and date of birth are obscure.' However, Jerome Farrell, archivist of the Leathersellers' Company, of which Ralph was a member, noticed that several relatives to whom Ralph left bequests in his will of 1611 were associated with the parish of All Saints, Derby.<sup>1</sup> Farrell correctly deduced that Ralph himself hailed from Derbyshire. Farrell thought that Ralph was perhaps born at All Saints – a suggestion that is now enshrined in the Wikipedia article on Ralph.

Further light is shed by two Fitch wills, which establish Ralph's ancestry and pinpoint his probable birthplace. These are the wills of Ralph's father Thomas, composed 11 January 1558/9, proved 25 April 1560; and Ralph's grandfather, also Thomas, composed 22 December 1540 (probate date not recorded).<sup>2</sup> Father Thomas's will gives his parish as Mackworth, Derbyshire (just two or three miles from Derby), and specifies that he should be buried in the parish church there. Similarly grandfather Thomas's will, though composed at Morton, gives instructions that he should be buried at Mackworth church. Clearly Mackworth was the family's home parish, and it therefore seems probable that Ralph was born and baptized there. (The surviving Mackworth parish registers start at 1611, so confirmation is not available from that source.) Ralph's older brother Thomas eventually moved the short distance to Derby, where he was married at All Saints on 15 December 1561. As Farrell says, Ralph himself was no doubt apprenticed at the usual age of fourteen to a leatherseller in London.

Unfortunately these wills give little help with Ralph's birthdate. Grandfather Thomas's will mentions only one grandchild, viz. Thomas, so it seems reasonable to conclude that Ralph had not been born by December 1540. Father Thomas's will does mention Ralph (Raffe), as under twenty (i.e. in January 1558/9). This allows a birth date any time in the 1540s or 1550s, which is inconclusive. Farrell deduced, on the basis of a loan granted to Ralph as a young freeman in 1575–7, that he was probably born c.1552, and this remains the best estimate available.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome Farrell, 'An Elizabethan In Asia: Ralph Fitch', *Leathersellers' Review*, 2007-8, pp. 16-18.

<sup>2</sup> Both wills were made through the Diocese of Lichfield Consistory Court. The surname is rendered Feche in 1560 and Fyche in 1540.