

Willance's Leap

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Willance's Leap – a memorial to a successful amputation of the leg after trauma in 1606

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Robert Willance (died: 12 February 1615–1616) of Richmond in North Yorkshire in England was a wealthy draper and a prospector in local lead mines.¹ After a heavy mist descended suddenly when he was out hunting in 1606, his horse panicked and bolted over the edge of an escarpment. The horse and rider fell 200 feet. The horse died but Willance survived, apparently his only significant injury being a broken leg. Fearing that the cold would cause gangrene before he could be found, he cut open the belly of his horse and manoeuvred his leg inside the belly to keep it warm. His leg was subsequently amputated and buried in the graveyard of St Mary's Church in Richmond. He never hunted again but two years after the accident he was elected Alderman (at that time the equivalent of Mayor) of Richmond. In the meantime, and as a memorial to his escape, he had marked the three bounds taken by his horse before it jumped over the cliff edge by three stones, on two of which were inscribed: '1606, Glory be to our merciful God who miraculously preserved me from the danger so great'. The stones have been replaced several times but currently (2023) only two are visible (Figure 1).

Willance died on 12 February 1615 (Julian calendar) or 1616 (Gregorian calendar) and was reunited with his leg in St Mary's graveyard. He left a large number of bequests to his extended family. To his wife he left only a ring and a

double ducat of gold, having presumably made other provisions before his death; but, according to Raine, other bequests included £300 to 'John Willance, alias Wetherilt, his supposed son by Agnes Witherilt' and £100 'to Elizabeth Willance, alias Coates, his supposed daughter by Margaret Coates, now the wife of Giles Alderson of Ravenseat in Swaledale', a farm well known to British television viewers as the site of *Our Yorkshire Farm*. There is no record of any bequests to any legitimate children. More conventionally Willance also left bequests to his 'god-barnes', this word being a local variation of godbayrne godbairn, and godbearn, all of which are Scottish and Northern English alternatives to godchild.²

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2. Oxford English Dictionary Online https://www.oed.com/dictionary/god-bairn_n?tab=meaning_and_use (accessed 7 September 2023).



Figure 1. Current memorial stones at Willance's Leap.

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