

William Witt, by grandson James Martin, c.1910

[James Martin](#) (1831- 1871) wrote the following about his grandfather [William Witt](#) (1776-1856) in the family bible - transcribed by Verity Baylis, a great-granddaughter of James Martin

"My Great Grandfather, a DeWitt, came over from Holland with William III and settled in the Isle of Wight where my grandfather William Witt was born.

He fought under Lord Howe off Cape St. Vincent and was presented with the Freedom of the City of London where he commenced business as a Wine Merchant in Skinner Street, Bishopsgate Within. The De was dropped when going into business. Lord Howe was created an Earl after the battle which was fought in June.

My father married Mary, I believe the eldest daughter of William Witt. He was educated at a Military College, I think Addiscombe, at the expense of his uncle, Lieut. Colonel Francis Pitney Martin, his uncle dying, he left the College and went into business after selling out a reversionary interest on a large estate in Wiltshire.

My Uncle William died in Tasmania a few years hence aged 91. A sister of his, a clergyman's Widow died there aged 84. My grandfather died at Winchmore Hill near London at about 85 or 86 after three days illness"

While there is much in this that can be verified, some is clearly incorrect while some is speculation or embellishment at best. The comments below (*in Italics*) are with the original transcription. I have added some as well.

James Martin's Uncle William Witt died on 19 Aug 1902, aged 88. If James wrote the above account 'a few years hence', then it was probably written around 1905 to 1910, by which time James would have been nearly 80 himself.

Much of James Martin's account corresponds exactly with previous research findings (i.e. before the bible surfaced), and surely provides confirmation of such previous research, and vice versa. It is also obvious that some of James Martin's account is nonsense! This is hardly surprising, as James was only 7 when his family departed England for a new life in Australia (1838). Most, if not all, of his knowledge of his grandfather's life would have been second-hand, and such stories have a habit of getting mixed up along the way. My observations are -

I wouldn't call it nonsense, more like the recording of incomplete or unconfirmed word of mouth stories. I was always told that we were descended from a family who escaped France during the revolution and given that Martin is a common French name and (De) Witt sounds Dutch.....

- *"My Great Grandfather, a DeWitt, came over from Holland with William III..." This is impossible. William III arrived from Holland in 1689, whereas James Martin's great-grandfather William Witt was not born until 1749. If any Witt ancestor arrived with William III, it may have been James Martin's great-great-great-grandfather John Witt, who married Sarah Neighbour on 3 May 1693 at Freshwater, Isle of Wight. John Witt may have originally been John DeWitt - if he really did arrive from Holland with William of Orange!*

I'd be comfortable with James Martin's great-great-great-grandfather John Witt (DeWitt). We do have a small amount of DNA from Brittany, apparently.

- *"... and settled in the Isle of Wight where my grandfather William Witt was born." James Martin's grandfather William Witt was born 7 Oct 1776 at Newport, Isle of Wight, so this bit rings true.*

No issues here, looks good to me.

- *"He fought under Lord Howe off Cape St Vincent..." This is nonsense, as Lord Howe was NOT at the Battle of Cape St Vincent (1797), though some sort of naval career did seem a possibility. And, despite my initial scepticism, it turns out that William Witt DID serve in the Royal Navy before settling in London. See David Witt's account of William Witt's time in The Royal Navy.*

1795-1797 Crew member of Royal Navy ship La Juste

- *"...and was presented with the Freedom of the City of London..." Unlikely, but true! See final section of David Witt's account of William Witt's time in The Royal Navy.*

This is the reference: **"King's Freeman"**

The City of London had regulations forbidding those who were not "Freemen of the City" from practising their trade there, but to ease unemployment among ex-servicemen, the Government had passed legislation exempting them from such "restrictive practices". They simply had to produce a certificate outlining their service, and those who escaped the ban in this way were known as "King's Freeman". William applied for such a certificate on 19 January 1810, quoting his service on HMS Cambrian. The application, and, on the back, the certificate issued by the Navy Office next day, are preserved in the Corporation of London's Record Office in the Guildhall. He presumably needed this piece of paper to be able to run his wine business in Bishopsgate. It was this reference to his ship, added to James Martin's record, that enabled this phase of his life to be traced.

- *"... where he commenced business as a Wine Merchant in Skinner Street, Bishopsgate Within." This is undoubtedly true. William Witt was a wine cooper/merchant at Skinner Street from 1814 (possibly earlier) to 1840.*
- *"The De was dropped when going into business." Not by James Martin's grandfather William Witt, it wasn't. If we were ever DeWitts, the De had been dropped over a hundred years before.*
- *"Lord Howe was created an Earl after the battle which was fought in June." Rubbish. Lord Howe was already an Earl, and the Battle of Cape St Vincent was on 14th FEBRUARY (1797). However, Lord Howe had led an important victory over the French on the 'Glorious' 1st JUNE 1794, capturing (among others) the French ship 'La Juste'. This was one of the ships upon which William Witt later served, although there is no evidence (yet) that he was involved in it's capture. Maybe James Martin got his wires a bit crossed here?*

James did not have the resources we do to fact check this information and if it's not true, so be it.

- *"My father married Mary, I believe the eldest daughter of William Witt." Mary was actually the 4th eldest daughter of William Witt.*

- *"He [James Martin senior] was educated at a Military College, I think Addiscombe, at the expense of his uncle, Lieut.Colonel Francis Pitney Martin, his uncle dying, he left the College and went into business after selling out a reversionary interest on a large estate in Wiltshire." There must be some truth here, although Verity Baylis wrote - "It was in fact Francis Pitney Martin's brother George who was a Colonel in the Hon. East India Army, Madras, and Francis was a merchant in Frederick's Place, Old Jewry [London]."*

The Martin family owned a property in Trowbridge, Wiltshire, and James's father John Martin was born there. See p2&3 GeorgeMartin-ElizabethAnnPitney (Link on James Grandparents)

PROPERTY: LDS Film No.1278998: Land Tax and Personal Estate Records for Trowbridge, Wiltshire, England from 1773 to 1782.

George Martin appears in the Land Tax Records in Trowbridge in 1773 for *Bulgon Castle (sic) (tax 16s.8d.) and Part of the Halve (tax 6s.3d.). His Personal Tax on Fifty Pounds was 7s.6d. The same as above was recorded for 1774.

Another three Martin names mentioned in these records were Abraham, Thomas and Daniel. (Sometimes noted as "Bulgins Castle").

In 1780, George Martin paid land tax on a dwelling house occupied by himself (1/2/3), and paid tax on a field in part of the Halve which was also occupied by himself - (4/2). The same again in 1781 and 1782. He died in 1783 and disappeared from the land tax records in that year. Abraham, Thomas and Daniel were still appearing in the records in 1783.

THE HALVE: Named after the half acre strips in the open fields - an interesting survival of medieval agriculture. From the late 18th century, the houses in this street were the homes of middle-ranking clothiers and their employees. First on the left is Trellis Cottage, sole survivor of a terrace of six. Then there is a mid-19th century ashlar house, with a row of one and half-storey cottages at right angles to the road, followed by a range of two and three-storey houses dating from the 1790's with some fine examples of Trowbridge brick. On the right-hand side stands Dorset House, three storeys in brick and of the early 19th century. Next is the building occupied by Cousins and Wright, again three storeys and dating from the early 19th century, but this time in stone.

- *"My Uncle William [Witt] died in Tasmania a few years hence aged 91." Uncle William Witt died 19 Aug 1902, actually aged 88. Mary Witt's brother.*
- *"A sister of his, a clergyman's Widow died there aged 84." This must be James Martin's aunt Hannah WITT (wife of John SMITHIES, a Wesleyan Missionary), who died at Emu Bay, Tasmania, on 9 Jun 1889, aged 81. Mary Witt's sister.*
- *"My grandfather died at Winchmore Hill near London at about 85 or 86 after three days illness." Accurate, apart from the age. His grandfather actually died at Winchmore Hill aged 79, after (according to The Times newspaper) "... a short but painful illness".*