

# Francis Willughby

A Natural Historian and his Collections

## Family seats

The Willoughby family held two major seats during the 17th century – Wollaton Hall in Nottinghamshire, built by Francis's great-grandfather Sir Francis Willoughby in the 1580s, and Middleton Hall in Warwickshire.

Middleton Hall was originally a medieval building. Early in their marriage, Francis's parents took over the Warwickshire estates and Middleton Hall was to be his home throughout his life. A serious fire at Wollaton meant that the Willoughbys did not move there when his grandfather Sir Percival died in 1643. Middleton was shut up when Francis's widow remarried in 1676, but his books and natural history collections stayed there in storage until removed by his children to Wollaton about 1689.

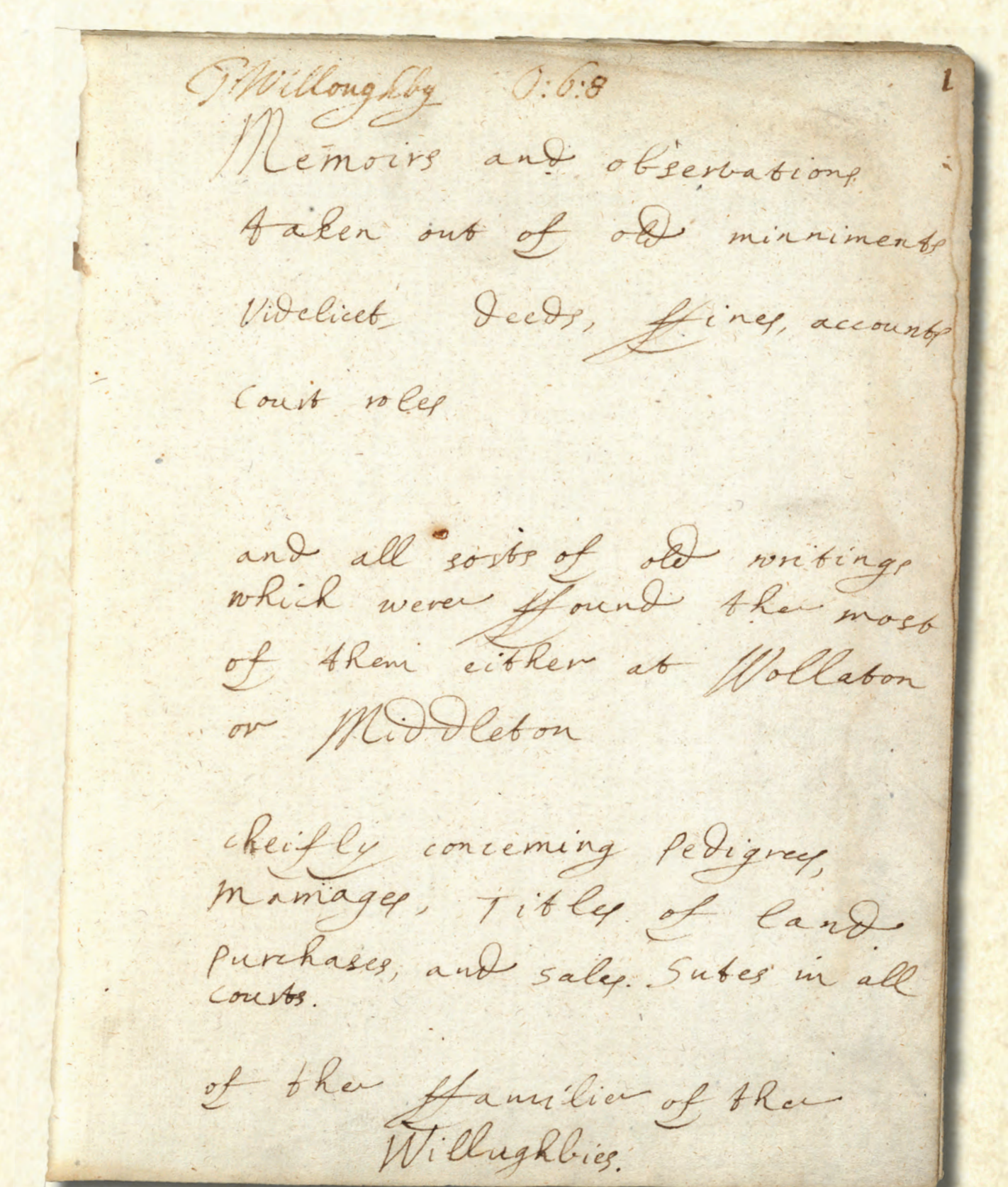
Francis Willughby had no inherited title, though predecessors had been knighted in special circumstances and his eldest son, also Francis, became a baronet. Francis the naturalist had a strong interest in his family's history and, with John Ray, created a comprehensive listing of their property records. His second

son Thomas became the 1st Lord Middleton and was a prominent Tory peer. He re-established Wollaton as the main family seat. New gardens were laid and the park was landscaped in the latest fashion.

Today both houses are managed as historic buildings and are open to the public. Middleton Hall fell into disrepair in the 20th century and an ambitious restoration programme is being carried out by the Middleton Hall Trust. Wollaton Hall, set in a deer park, is home to Nottingham City's Natural History Museum. Interpretation of Wollaton's history uses the story of Thomas and Cassandra's restoration of the house and grounds in the 1690s, and of their preservation of their father's collections, to raise public awareness of the scientific achievements of Francis Willughby and John Ray.



Thomas, 1st Baron Middleton (1672-1729) succeeded to the Willoughby estates when his brother Francis died aged 20 in 1688. His portrait, in ceremonial robes, was painted in 1713 by Godfrey Kneller. Image courtesy of Lord Middleton



In Francis Willughby's hand, the title page of 'Memoirs and observations', which contains the results of detailed inspection of family archives by Willughby and Ray. Middleton Collection, Mi LM 13



The great hall of Wollaton Hall shown in use as a dining room in the 17th century, as imagined by Joseph Nash in *The Mansions of England* (1841). Coloured engraving. Manuscript Collection, MS 739

Middleton Hall, Warwickshire is a complex series of buildings that grew over the centuries from a 12th-century origin. Recent restoration has revealed many features from the 17th century period. On the right of this montage of photographs is the Georgian addition, the entrance to the modern courtyard, and the restored jetted building. In the centre is the east view of the jetted building followed on the far left by the courtyard view of the structure now known as the John Ray building. Built in 1647 and remodelled c.1710 by Sir Thomas Willoughby, it is preserved as the quarters once occupied by Ray. Photographs © Dorothy Johnston

