

John Willis
(1698-1760)

John Willis was a native of Child Okeford and kept school at East Orchard, near Shaftesbury, for thirty years. Massey tells us that he "was a fine penman, but never published anything from the rolling-press ... except a few single copies, for the use of his own school, engraved by Mr. George Bickham and Mr. Thorowgood....As this gentleman never had the small pox, it is reported that he had a strong notion or opinion, that if he came to London, he should have it; on which account he could not be prevailed on to see that famous city, though he had a strong inclination to it".

One state of the fine mezzotint portrait by E. Fisher after a painting by T. Stokes is lettered "To the Gentlemen of the Orchard School Society this plate of John Willis is inscribed by their most obedient, humble servant John Ryall ... at Hogarth's Head in Fleet Street".

An account of this writing-master is given in Hutchin's History of Dorset, Vol. III, p. 552: "Mr. John Willis, Master of Orchard School, who died April 23rd 1760 in the 63rd year of his age, of unblemished integrity etc etc... so renowned for his exquisite and surprising command of hand and skill in penmanship ... that people of all ranks sent to him their sons, not only from London, the principal city ... but from Holland, Switzerland, Nevis, Montserrat, Antigua, Barbadoes, Carolina and other colonies in America. His singular abilities rendered him superior to all praise and made his death a public loss". He was buried at Ewerne Minster in 1760. The following lines are part of the epitaph on his tomb:

Envy be dumb, great Willis scorns thy spite.
Thou must allow that he alone could write.
Most distant regions celebrate his fame,
The world concurs to eternize his name.
In all things equal to the best of men,
But had himself no equal with the pen.