

◆ The builder of Penhurst manor house

by Jeremy Goring

This article aims to explain how a Sussex clergyman of relatively humble birth came to acquire a considerable landed estate – and why, as a childless old man, he chose to build upon it a fine house that he probably knew he would not live in for long. The strange story of John Gyles throws light on economic, social and religious developments in eastern Sussex in the first half of the seventeenth century and may serve to modify a number of popular assumptions.

It has long been believed that, like other fine old houses in the Sussex Weald, Penhurst manor house was 'built by an ironmaster'. Moreover, it has sometimes been stated quite specifically that it was built in 1640 by William Relfe, who owned and occupied a forge and a furnace in the vicinity. But there are problems here. If Relfe was the builder the date cannot be right, for he died in 1638, having moved away from Penhurst many years previously. If he did build the house he would have to have done so before 1612, by which time he was living in the neighbouring parish of Ashburnham.¹

Relfe was certainly just the sort of person who might have been expected to build himself such a fine house. At that time, as the baptismal registers of Penhurst and Ashburnham show, he had a growing family and may have felt the need for more spacious accommodation. Furthermore, like so many ironmasters in Elizabethan and Jacobean Sussex, he was socially 'upwardly mobile'.² In May 1605, when he purchased 330 acres in Brightling, Dallington and Penhurst from the impoverished Sir John Ashburnham, he was styled 'yeoman'. In May 1606, when he bought from him lands called Crepe and Gennings (extending to 140 acres) in Penhurst, Relfe called himself 'gentleman'.³ It would have been natural for him at this stage to decide to build himself a house that was imposing enough to announce to the world that he had joined the ranks of the gentry. However, if he had built a house in Penhurst he could not have done so on the demesne lands of the manor, but only on land that he himself owned.

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Relfe, in his bid to elevate his status, ever thought of building a house in Penhurst. From an early date he seems to have had his eye on Ashburnham, where there was a house that he apparently coveted. This was Court Lodge, which he was eventually

able to buy and rebuild in fine style in 1611, when its owner's financial difficulties obliged him to sell it. In the same year the Ashburnham family sold Ashburnham Place to a pair of property speculators from London named Edward Bromfield and Thomas Overman. In the course of time this house also became Relfe's when in 1634 Bromfield, who had bought out Overman's interest, sold the property to him. In 1637 Relfe settled it on his second son, William, as a marriage portion, but his ownership was short-lived; two years later the young man followed his father to the grave.⁴

THE BUILDER'S IDENTITY

To discover the identity of the builder of the manor house at Penhurst it is first necessary to investigate the ownership of the manor. After the Penhursts, its medieval lords, had 'daughters out' at the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was conveyed by marriage to the Burrells, who sold it to the Michelbornes, who in their turn sold it in 1617 to Edward Bromfield and Anthony Carleton. The two speculators held on to it for some years, doubtless waiting for a purchase that would bring a good profit, and on 1 June 1635 sold it to John Gyles of Ninfield for what was then the astronomical sum of £3540.⁵

The deed of purchase states that what Gyles acquired was 'the manor or lordship of Penhurst' with all 'its messuages, lands and tenements, houses, edifices, buildings, gardens, orchards, meadows, pastures', all its rents and royalties in Brightling, Dallington, Penhurst, Ashburnham, Ninfield, Wartling, Herstmonceux and Catsfield, together with the advowson of Penhurst church. There is no mention of a capital messuage or a manor house in the long list of its properties, but in a lease of the manor granted a month earlier



Fig. 1. Penhurst Manor House, south elevation.

to Thomas Mercer, yeoman, of Bodiam, there is a reference to 'the site of the manor or farm of Penhurst'.⁶ This could mean that the medieval house had become little more than a ruin. In any event, it is probable that no lords of the manor had lived there for nearly a century and that whatever survived of the old house was then occupied by a tenant. Soon after leasing the manor Mercer did in fact move to Penhurst, but it is not known exactly where he lived.⁷

When Mercer's 16-year lease of the manor expired in May 1651 Gyles was still living in Ninfield, a place that (prior to the Ashburnhams' arbitrary closure of the ancient right of way across their estate) was only a three-mile ride from Penhurst. Now that he was at last in full possession of his Penhurst property, which usefully included a stone quarry, he was free, if he so wished, to set about building a house there. Perhaps it was in order to raise money for this work that in June

1651 he mortgaged 160 acres of land in the parish for the sum of £1200.⁸ That the house was built at about this date has long been recognized. Nikolaus Pevsner, who visited what he mistakenly called 'Court Farmhouse' when preparing the Sussex volume of his *Buildings of England*, thought the house to be 'Mid C17 probably'.⁹ More recently David and Barbara Martin have concluded that the present manor house dates from the period 1650–55 and was originally a 'south addition' to the surviving medieval mansion (Fig. 1).¹⁰

At first sight Gyles seems an unlikely sort of person to have built such a fine house. Unlike others engaged in the buying and selling of property in the Weald at this time, he was not a country gentleman or a property dealer or an ironmaster. He was, as he always styled himself, simply a 'clerk'. Born in Eastbourne in 1584, he was the only son of Thomas Gyles, yeoman, who later became a churchwarden at St Mary's.¹¹ It is not

known where John went to school, but in 1602, not long after his eighteenth birthday, he was admitted to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. As a 'sizar' he would have received an allowance to enable him to study, but in return he would have been obliged to perform menial tasks, such as cleaning the boots of the better-off undergraduates. He evidently spent seven years at Cambridge, graduating B.A. in 1607 and M.A. in 1610, and in November 1611 was ordained deacon and priest by Bishop Harsnet of Chichester and promptly instituted into the vicarage of Ninfield.¹² Gyles seems to have been a dedicated parish priest who, unlike incumbents employing low-paid curates to do the work for them, served the cure himself. He remained vicar of Ninfield for 33 years and might have done so for longer but, after the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642, he fell foul of the new authorities. In November 1644 he was abruptly evicted from his benefice and also from the vicarage of Peasmarsch, which he had held in plurality since 1638, with a curate officiating on his behalf.¹³

In both parishes the sequestrators alleged that Gyles had been guilty of 'several misdemeanours', but no indication was given of what he was alleged to have done. In other Sussex parishes the sequestrators, having received complaints from disaffected parishioners, were able to produce ample evidence of a clergyman's misdeeds, but it appears that no-one in Ninfield had a word to say against their vicar. Whatever his alleged 'misdemeanours' they were not in the same league, for example, as those of the notorious rector of Cliffe by Lewes, Anthony Huggett, whose parishioners accused him of lying, drunkenness, 'incontinency' and wife-beating.¹⁴ It is likely that Gyles's only offence had been his failure to comply with Parliament's demand that he should contribute money to its war chest. After his eviction it appears that, unlike Huggett, who was 'hunted and pressed so close' that he had to take refuge with a family in a neighbouring parish who 'hid him under a bed', Gyles retained the respect and affection of his parishioners, among whom he continued to reside until 1652. In that year, having sold Ingrams, the house where he had evidently been living for over 20 years, he left Ninfield and went to live in Penhurst.¹⁵ To find out why he decided to do this it is necessary to take the advice of the Frenchman who, seeking an explanation for a man's unusual behaviour, said: '*Cherchez la femme*'.

The search for a woman stops with a widow named Joan Alfrey, to whom in December 1647 Gyles and Benjamin Scarlett of Eastbourne (his nephew by marriage) sold a farm in Bexhill called The Glyne.¹⁶ Joan, the daughter of Walter Roberts of Boarzell in Ticehurst, had first married Anthony May, a childless widower, who was seated at Pashley in the same parish; the wedding had taken place in Wadhurst church on 23 December 1624.¹⁷ May died in 1636, having fathered three sons, and under the terms of his will stipulated that his wife, who was his sole executrix, was to have all the 'rents, issues and profits' of Pashley manor until his heir reached the age of 21. Moreover, she was to have full possession of the manor house during that time and, after her son had inherited the property, the use in perpetuity of a number of specified rooms and, presumably to avoid conflict with other women in the house, 'free liberty of the use of the kitchen'.¹⁸ Although she had been so well provided for, Joan had evidently grown weary of widowhood and had decided to marry again. In about 1640 she became the third wife of Richard Alfrey of Potmans in Catsfield, whereupon she and her three sons moved in with him. He did not long survive the marriage: he died in 1642, shortly before the birth of a posthumous son. Being less wealthy than Joan's first husband and already having an adult son by an earlier marriage, Alfrey was unable to make such ample provision for his widow as May had done. She merely had the right to stay at Potmans for one year — which might be extended to three years if Alfrey's old mother, who was presumably also living in the house, were to live that long.¹⁹

It is possible that ever since she had gone to live at Potmans she had been well acquainted with Gyles, whose home — just over the parish boundary in Ninfield — was only a mile away. What is certain is that after she left Catsfield she herself moved to Ninfield, where she was stated to be living in the 1647 deed. In 1650, however, she was said to be residing in Ticehurst, probably at Pashley manor house, which her eldest son Edward had then inherited and where, as has been seen, measures had been put in place to avoid conflict in the kitchen.²⁰ However, she seems to have been back in Ninfield in 1651 when her son Adrian May put up the money to buy Ingrams from Gyles.²¹ What exactly she was up to at this period can only be conjectured, but it can be said for certain



Fig. 2. Penhurst church, John Gyles's chapel.

that, over the years, her relationship with Gyles had developed to the point where she was willing to marry him and he, confirmed bachelor though he might once have been, wanted to marry her. The marriage duly took place on 5 March 1654 in Penhurst church, just across the garden from the couple's fine new house (Fig. 2).²² Compared with Boarzell, where she had grown up, and Pashley, where she had spent some years as lady of the manor, the house that Gyles had evidently built for her was of modest proportions, but it was probably bigger and certainly better than some of the places where she had been obliged to live in her widowhood. And, as those who have slept in it can confirm, the pair of them had a simply magnificent view from their bedroom.

Poor Gyles did not long survive his wedding day. On 4 July, being 'sick in body but of sound and perfect memory', he made his last will and testament and on 5 November, a month after his 70th birthday, he died. His death left his widow a rich woman. By his will, of which she was the sole executrix and her sons Edward and Anthony May were the overseers, Gyles granted his 'most

dear and loving wife' a life interest in the bulk of his estate, with the rider — rare in the case of someone of her age — that, if she gave birth, everything would eventually go to the child.²³ But unsurprisingly Joan, who could not have been younger than 45, proved not to be pregnant — and so nothing came of any hope that Gyles might have had of founding a new dynasty. She did not remain a widow for long because, having buried three husbands, she was soon on the look-out for a fourth. On 25 May 1655, less than a month after she had obtained probate of Gyles's will, she leased the manor and sold all its 'timber trees' to Sir Thomas Dyke.²⁴ And on 30 July she married John Busbridge, a widower a few years younger than herself, and, abandoning the house that had probably been designed with her in mind and that she had lived in for barely 18 months, moved into her new husband's rather more spacious manor house at Haremere in Etchingham.²⁵

It is likely that a few eyebrows were raised at the news that Joan had got married so precipitously to a retired Cromwellian colonel who, as a member of the County Committee, was part of the very

establishment that had been persecuting non-puritan clergy like Gyles. Be that as it may, some puritans are known to have criticized Busbridge for marrying a wife who was alleged to be 'very much against his being in public employment' and to have indulged in 'drinking and gaming' at Haremere.²⁶ How long such frivolities continued it is not known, but by 1668 Joan was a widow again and living in Dallington. If she was looking out for a fifth husband she evidently failed to find one; in 1682, when she died at Crowhurst, she was still Joan Busbridge.²⁷ She doubtless died a disappointed woman, since it is likely that one reason for her marrying Gyles had been to advance the career of Anthony May, her youngest and neediest son by her first marriage. It was almost certainly due to her influence that the priest had appointed him an overseer of his will and given him the option to purchase his moiety of Ashburnham forge and furnace. Joan had subsequently purchased the other moiety and presented it to her son, who had thus become the sole owner of what had once been a highly profitable business. But unfortunately by this time the industry was in decline and in 1664 Anthony May, then residing at Court Lodge in Ashburnham, was bankrupt and his works lay in ruins.²⁸

THE BUILDER'S RESOURCES

As his will shows, the property that Gyles possessed at the time of his death was surprisingly extensive. In Penhurst, apart from the manor and its demesne lands, he owned Levitts Farm, a water mill and the aforementioned stone quarry. In Ashburnham he owned a half-share of the forge and furnace that had once belonged to William Relfe. In Dallington he owned a moiety of the manor of Haselden, and in Mountfield he had a half-share in Ittington manor and in Woodsdale Farm and forge. In addition to all this, he owned lands in Bexhill, Ninfield and Hooe that, after his wife's death, were to go to the heirs of his 'loving sister' Mary, the husband of Thomas Taylor of Eastbourne.²⁹ The list of his properties shows that there is, after all, a grain of truth in the tradition that Penhurst manor house was 'built by an ironmaster'. Although Gyles, unlike Relfe, was not an entrepreneur engaged in the day-to-day business of running an ironworks, he had, as the part-owner of two forges and a furnace, a substantial investment in this important Wealden industry.

How did Gyles, a clergyman whose ecclesiastical income from tithes and rents had probably never been large, come to be rich enough to make such investments? He had certainly not inherited much from his father, whose goods had been valued for probate in 1612 at £54 16s. 2d. and who had bequeathed him little apart from his 'two best featherbeds'.³⁰ He might have acquired wealth by marrying an heiress but, as has been seen, he appears to have remained a bachelor until the last year of his life. Another possibility is that he had a rich patron.

It was certainly through patronage that he first got his foot on the property ladder. John Foster, who presented him to Ninfield vicarage and so provided him with a freehold and an income for life, turns out to have been born in Eastbourne two years before Gyles. Unlike him he was a gentleman by birth and a substantial landowner, who evidently purchased the 'next presentation' to the vicarage for the specific purpose of advancing the career of someone he had probably known since boyhood. After his premature death in 1632 Foster was described in the Eastbourne burial register as 'a worthy and religious gentleman, whom all the parishioners, rich and poor, gentlemen and yeomen, and all others will greatly want in time to come'.³¹ But by this time the humble yeoman's son, whose wants Foster had so generously relieved 20 years earlier, was on his way to becoming exceedingly prosperous. Had he found himself another, even wealthier patron?

In the early 1620s one of the wealthiest men living in Ninfield was Sir George Farewell. In August 1621 he and his wife, Mary, brought a boy to Gyles for baptism; he was christened James, but only lived till December. In November 1622 they brought another boy, also called James, who fortunately survived. In March 1624 Gyles baptized a daughter Dorothy and in October 1625 twin sons Joseph and Samuel, the latter dying soon afterwards.³² It would be only natural that the priest who ministered to the parents on such occasions, rejoicing with them in their joy and grieving with them in their sorrow, should come to have a special place in their affections. Farewell, moreover, seems to have been a kindly and generous-hearted man. When, years later, he came to make his will, he appointed his wife his sole executrix, 'entreating her to be careful for the good of our children and most for them that have most need of her help'.³³

In the days when Farewell had dealings with him, Gyles may have appeared to him to be someone who, from a financial point of view, was much in need of his help. Since the minister had helped him spiritually, he might have wanted to reward him materially, but it is unlikely that his freewill offerings would have amounted to a fortune. Nevertheless, Sir George, who had influence as well as money, may have been in a position to assist Gyles in other ways.

There is something of a mystery about George Farewell. What, in the first place, was he doing in Sussex? The younger son of a Somerset squire, he had married Mary Seymour, a kinswoman of the duke of Somerset, and at some stage had gone up to London — perhaps for the purpose of making enough money to keep his wife in her accustomed station. What he did in the city, where he evidently had family connections, is not known, but by 1610 he had clearly prospered sufficiently to acquire a knighthood — an honour that, following James I's accession, was normally obtainable by purchase.³⁴ It is not clear when he began to extend his activities into Sussex, but in 1619 he bought the manor of Bucksteep in Warbleton, which had tenements not only in that parish but also in Ashburnham, Brightling, Dallington and Ninfield.³⁵ In about 1620, when the owner of the manor of Moor Hall in Ninfield was obliged to mortgage it, Farewell (who was living in the manor house) agreed to purchase the estate, but by 1626 the sale had been voided because the money had not been paid.³⁶ It was probably in the course of the business of buying and selling property that Sir George encountered the kind of people that he would not normally have met socially, such as the ironmaster William Relfe, whose eldest son John married his daughter Margaret in 1627. Evidently delighted that his son should have allied himself to such a prestigious family, Relfe gave him his Court Lodge estate as a marriage settlement.³⁷ At that time the property included the Ashburnham ironworks that in 1640 John Relfe was to sell to Gyles and Scarlett — a deal that may have been facilitated by the clergyman's old association with Margaret Relfe's family. But by this time Sir George, who had returned to Somerset, was well out of the picture; he evidently had no property in Sussex after selling his manor of Bucksteep in 1636.³⁸

Another rich man resident in Ninfield in Farewell's time was Thomas Dyke, who lived

at Lower Standard Hill, in the same part of the parish as Moor Hall. In November 1616 he and his wife Joan brought a daughter Judith to Gyles for baptism and in November 1623 another daughter, who was christened Elizabeth.³⁹ Dyke was the eldest son of a man of the same name, a very wealthy yeoman ironmaster, who had died in 1615, leaving extensive property in Kent, Sussex and Yorkshire.⁴⁰ Thomas the younger was designated 'gent' in the Ninfield parish register, but he was becoming sufficiently rich and respectable to feel able to style himself 'esquire'.⁴¹ By the close of 1626, when another daughter (named Sarah) was born, he had moved away from Ninfield and was living on the fine estate that his wife had inherited at Horeham in Waldron.⁴² Nevertheless Gyles, who was Judith's godfather, evidently continued to keep in close touch with the family and, when Dyke made his will late in 1631, he appointed the man whom he called a 'minister of God's word' as one of his overseers. He made his wife his sole executrix on condition that she 'became bound in a sufficient obligation with the overseers' for 'the true payment of the legacies'. If she failed to do this, his eldest son Abraham was to take her place as executor; and if he also defaulted, then the overseers were to 'take the administration upon them and receive the moneys and debts towards the performance of this my last will'. At the same time he specified that they were to 'have all their charges and expenses which they or any of them disburse or lay out in receiving of my rents or accounting for the same'.⁴³ In the event it proved to be immaterial whether or not anyone had ever entered into any bonds, for not long after the testator's death (in April 1632) both Joan and Abraham also died.⁴⁴ When it fell to the overseers to take over the execution of the will it would have been natural for the one named first in the will — Dyke's cousin Thomas Scott — to have taken charge of affairs, but this is not what happened. It was in the presence of Gyles, not Scott, that the will was proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury in June 1632. By July 1633 Scott was evidently dead, for in that month the Court gave Gyles, the 'surviving overseer', authority to administer the estate during the minority of Herbert, Judith, Thomas, Elizabeth and Sarah Dyke. It was a formidable responsibility, since the money that they were to receive when they came of age amounted in total to over £5000.⁴⁵ Years afterwards Gyles hinted that he had

experienced some problems in dealing with these matters, for he stated in his will that Dyke's son and daughters would forfeit their legacies if any of them should 'implead, sue at the law or any way molest or trouble my executrix for or about any old reckonings or accounts concerning their father and mother's estate'.⁴⁶

What exactly were the legacies that Gyles had left to the Dykes? To Thomas, now a knight, he had bequeathed a valuable piece of ecclesiastical property — the 'perpetual advowson' of Ninfield church. Moreover, in the event of his executrix dying before all legacies and debts had been paid, Dyke and Benjamin Scarlett were to act as trustees of the estate and to receive £50 each for their pains. But a much bigger bequest went to Sir Thomas's son Thomas (Gyles's godson) who, after Joan's death, was to have the manor of Penhurst, the patronage of the church there and a moiety of the Ashburnham ironworks. The knight's daughter, Philadelphia Cripps (Gyles's goddaughter), was to have £200 plus a further £300 for her children, while another £500 was to be shared among her siblings. In addition to these bequests Gyles left money to Sir Thomas's three sisters: £100 to Judith (now married to Robert Edwards), £100 to Elizabeth and £50 to Sarah.

Such then were the legacies that the Dykes would have forfeited if they had decided to make trouble over any 'reckonings or accounts' dating back to the time when Gyles had been in charge of their parents' estate. That they did not do so is understandable but, from the historian's point of view, regrettable. Had they brought an action in Chancery or Star Chamber, the surviving court papers might have shed light on some of the darker passages in Gyles's life. As it is, some questions remain to be asked. Could it be that, as the overseer of Thomas Dyke's will, he had wrongly appropriated some of the 'moneys and debts' that he had been authorized to collect? And, if so, does this help to explain why he was thereafter evidently distrustful of overseers, including the two that, probably on his wife's recommendation, he had himself appointed? When he instructed trustees to perform the tasks normally entrusted to overseers, was he trying to ensure that, in the event of Joan Gyles's death, there would be no repetition of what had happened after Joan Dyke's? And there is one final question. If it was from Thomas and Joan's estate that he had pinched the money to purchase

Penhurst, was it in order to compensate for this that, at the end of his days, he decided to bequeath the manor to their grandson? Such questions, of course, are purely speculative. All that can be said for certain is that from 1632 onwards Gyles seems to have become more heavily involved in the affairs of the world than was customary for a 'minister of God's word' — and that, in one way or another, by fair means or foul, he was on course to becoming very rich.

At this period opportunities for getting very rich very quickly were rare in rural Sussex. Had a poor young priest like Gyles been presented to a parish in his native downland or somewhere on the coastal plain, he might never have had much chance of advancing his fortunes. But when his patron, John Foster, was looking around for a 'next presentation' to purchase it is possible that the only ones on the market were in the neighbourhood of Battle, where the great advowson-monger, Viscount Montague, splendidly seated at the Abbey, was in business. Although he was patron of no fewer than 16 of the 42 benefices in the deaneries of Dallington and Hastings, this nobleman, a devout Roman Catholic, had no interest in appointing people to them and was happy to sell off 'next presentations' to the highest bidders.⁴⁷ Among the livings in his gift was Ninfield, where there happened to be a vacancy in 1611 — which was how young Gyles came to be parachuted into a parish on the southern fringe of the Weald.

The Weald today is noted for its peace and beauty, but in the early seventeenth century it was one of the busiest and noisiest regions in the realm. The rapid expansion of the iron industry in Tudor times had transformed the landscape and, at the same time, greatly raised the value of land that had formerly been fit mainly for pasturing pigs. Property speculators from London like Edward Bromfield and Anthony Carleton came to sniff out the scene, while people from places even further removed from Sussex, such as Somerset-born George Farewell, came looking for opportunities to invest money in land. Encountering such people — and local men with a stake in the iron industry like the Relfes and the Dykes — may have led Gyles to think that, if he set aside whatever spare money he had for the purpose of investing it in land, he too might prosper.

That Gyles was an astute man with a good head for business is clear from his will, which was not

(as was so often the case) dictated on his deathbed but at a time when he was still well enough to express his wishes fully. Here he recorded the exact acreage of his lands and the precise amounts that he received by way of rent for each portion of them. In referring to the ironworks that he and Scarlett had bought from the Relfes, he was careful to specify that the plant comprised 'the forge and furnace with the coal places and mine places with all the waste grounds adjoining with the ponds and buildings thereunto belonging'. He was also very specific about the allocation of the cash bequests, totalling over £3000, which he made to his friends, relatives and godchildren. In the case of some great-nephews, to whom he had bequeathed £200 to be divided equally between them 'to bind them apprentice to some good trades', he stipulated rather harshly that, if they breached the conditions attached to the legacy, they were to have 'only twelve pence apiece and no more'.⁴⁸

THE BUILDER'S LEGACY

In his will Gyles bequeathed £5 to 'the poor' of Eastbourne and a pound each to those of Ninfield, Penhurst and Peasmarsh. An additional £10 was to go to needy people in Penhurst 'to set them on work':

'I give to the use of the poor of the parish of Penhurst the sum of ten pounds, the which my will is [that it] shall remain for ever for the use and benefit of the said poor to buy a stock of wool, hemp or flax, thereby and therewith to set the poor on work to make cloth that thereby they may have work and employment to earn wages to live upon. And the lord and lords of the manor of Penhurst successively — or, by their appointment, their tenants — dwelling in the manor house near the church, together with the assistance of the churchwardens and overseers of the poor of the same parish and the advice of the minister, parson and incumbent there, and for the time being, shall every year in Easter week or Whitsun week draw up an account of the said stock and examine where the said stock lieth and enter it into a book of accounts made for the same purpose and make [it] known to the rest of the parishioners, and keep the said stock whole and undiminished, but the increase

of the said stock to be bestowed upon such poor as are sick in the said parish and have greatest need.'⁴⁹

It is not known whether the tenants of the manor house, who, in the absence of resident lords, were responsible for carrying out these complicated instructions, ever got round to doing exactly as they were bidden, but in some form or other the charity survived until 1796.⁵⁰

Another provision of his will that may have been intended to perpetuate his memory in the parish is found in its preamble, where he makes provision for the disposal of his body:

'And as concerning my body I commit it into the hands of my executrix to be interred in the churchyard of Penhurst close under the chancel wall at the north side thereof towards the east end of the said chancel, where I would have to be set over my grave a firm structure of stone or brick, covered over with tile, in length, breadth and height as large as the said chancel, and the same to remain for ever appropriate for the rest of my body, bones and dust in a full assured hope of a joyful and blessed resurrection at the last day.'⁵¹

This 'structure', which elsewhere in his will Gyles refers to as a 'chapel', was in fact intended to be similar in size to the chancel chapels built in the late medieval period to accommodate the tombs of leading families; but what was actually erected, although of the same length and breadth, was not quite as high as the chancel. Gyles also stipulated that the structure should be 'maintained and re-edified' with an annuity of 40 shillings to be paid 'out of my manor and other lands in Penhurst for ever'. There is evidence that the testator's instructions were carried out. The responsibility for the repair of the building passed in due course to the lessee of the manor, Sir Thomas Dyke, who mentioned the matter in releasing the property to William Ashburnham in 1677.⁵²

What is perhaps most remarkable about the preamble to Gyles's will is the provision that it made for the committal of his soul. Here, most unusually, the dying man addressed God directly, as though in prayer:

'I do commit and commend my soul and spirit into thine hands, O Lord my Saviour, beseeching thine infinite goodness and mercy graciously to receive it unto thine

own self and for thy dear son's sake, my most blessed redeemer, who hath done and suffered all such things for me as I should but was not able in the least measure to do and suffer. *Meritum meum misericordiatu domine.* Thy mercies, o Lord, are great and far greater than all my sins. On thy mercies, which are infinite, I do rely and confide.'

These are different from the sentiments found at this period in the preambles to wills made by puritans, who usually placed greater emphasis on their own sinfulness and expressed the Calvinistic hope that, having been predestined to be saved, they would be numbered among the 'elect' in heaven.⁵³

Gyles's will reveals that he was much concerned about the plight of the non-puritan divines who, like him, had been turned out of their livings but who, unlike him, were without private means. He bequeathed £50 to 50 'sequestered ministers', each of whom was to receive 20 shillings. In a codicil he bequeathed an additional £100 to 'pious, poor, persecuted and oppressed ministers, with whose afflictions I cannot but sympathise and have a fellow feeling of them so as to commiserate them'. But strings were attached to the bequest. Fifteen pounds of the £100 were to go to 'the three ministers which at that time shall officiate at Ninfield, Peasmarsh and Penhurst for them to preach all upon a day on the same day of the month, the same month wherein I shall depart this life'; in each place there was to be one sermon a year for five years at the price of a pound a time.

His adoption of the medieval custom of bequeathing money for anniversary sermons — and his request that a chapel be built over his tomb — suggests that Gyles, like many sequestered clergy, shared the Laudian wish to restore practices that had disappeared at the Reformation. Be that as it may, there are signs that he was not thinking very clearly when he dictated this section of his will. Did he really think that sequestered ministers would have been permitted to preach in parish churches? And if he was requesting sermons from the ministers who were currently officiating at Ninfield, Peasmarsh and Penhurst, would he not have been doling out preaching fees to puritans — or at any rate to people approved by what to him was an oppressive regime?

Unlike many of his contemporaries Gyles, although he had suffered at the hands of the

puritan establishment, was clearly not partisan in his churchmanship. He was evidently on excellent terms with Thomas Smith, the minister who had presumably been 'intruded' into Penhurst rectory (of which Gyles was the lawful patron) by the new ecclesiastical authorities.⁵⁴ Smith, who was one of the witnesses of his will, was to have £5 and a 'mourning cloak' and was requested to bury his body at night and, on a subsequent Sunday, to preach a funeral sermon. But Gyles clearly hoped that in due course a man of his own stamp would be appointed to the living at Penhurst — and also to that at Peasmarsh, whose advowson he had purchased in 1639.⁵⁵ He bequeathed the patronage of Peasmarsh to his old college at Cambridge, but gave the 'next presentation' to his godson, Thomas Dyke, instructing him to present 'a learned, pious and orthodox minister free from the faction of the times'. Gyles's example serves as a reminder that at this period, when so much attention was focused upon conflict between puritan and Laudian extremists, there was a large body of clergy in the middle who wanted to stand apart from the 'faction of the times' and get on with the work they believed they had been called to do.

As is shown by the preamble to his will, Gyles believed that he had been called to serve and honour God faithfully in his life:

'In all humble obedience to the command of his holy and blessed word that I should set my house in order and so glorify him in my death as I have endeavoured to serve and honour him in my life, and I knowing that God's call is not afar off wherein I must be summoned to give an account of my stewardship touching the dispensation of those talents which my heavenly master hath instructed me withal.'

As anyone who has read through his lengthy last will and testament will be aware, Gyles did indeed 'set his house in order' most meticulously. Rarely has any testator ever given such careful attention to detail and been so specific in his instructions. But did he really render an acceptable account of his stewardship of the talents that God had given him?

He had clearly invested his money prudently and, in so doing, had greatly increased his wealth, but would his 'heavenly master' have approved of the use he had made of it? It is not the historian's role to make moral judgments, but in this case one does seem to be invited. Unlike his early

benefactor John Foster, John Gyles was probably not fondly remembered as someone who had shared his wealth with those less fortunate than himself. Had the man who claimed to have tried to serve and honour God in his life been obedient to the injunction not to lay up treasure on earth, but rather to sell all he had and give the proceeds to the poor? Although he stipulated that, if any money happened to be left over after his trustees had paid his debts and legacies, it should be divided among 'the poorest of my kindred', the money that he left specifically for the relief of poverty amounted to no more than a pittance. And was he not glorifying himself rather than God in requiring that a large and costly structure be erected over his grave?

Nevertheless, one thing that Gyles did in his life did bring lasting benefits: in building Penhurst manor house he did not labour in vain. In 1956 the house, which had been owned by the Ashburnhams and, as 'Church Farmhouse', had been occupied by their tenants since the end of the seventeenth century, was bought by Paul and Rosalind Broomhall. They lovingly restored the place, changed its name back to 'Manor House' and, for the first time since Joan Gyles abandoned it 300 years before, the house once again had

resident owners. The Broomhalls believed in sharing their possessions with those less fortunate than themselves and their house became, in the words of those who enjoyed it, 'an oasis of warm hospitality'. After they died their heirs made the property over to a charitable trust and it now houses the Penhurst Retreat Centre — a place of peace and beauty to which people come from all over the world to find refreshment for body and soul. Visitors who cross the lawn to the little parish church are able to pray and meditate in silence in the chapel set apart for the purpose — the very same 'structure' that Gyles had ordered to be built over his (now unmarked) grave. And so it can be said of him that, after a long lapse of years, there has been a rich fulfilment of his dying wish that God should be glorified by his death.

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NOTES

¹ The National Archives (hereafter TNA) PROB 11/177/65; East Sussex Record Office (hereafter ESRO), PAR 441, 19 Apr. 1607, 5 Feb. 1609, 31 Mar 1611; PAR 233, 11 Oct. 1612.

² For the social aspirations of ironmasters, see J. J. Goring, 'Wealden ironmasters in the age of Elizabeth', in E. W. Ives, R. J. Knecht & J. J. Scarisbrick (eds), *Wealth and Power in Tudor England* (London: Athlone Press 1978), 212–14.

³ ESRO ASH 4501/411, 412.

⁴ *Victoria History of Sussex* (hereafter VCH) 9, 237; TNA PROB 11/180/99.

⁵ VCH 9, 127.

⁶ ESRO ASH 4501/659, 660.

⁷ ESRO HBR 1/318; D. & B. Martin, *Rape of Hastings Architectural Survey* (hereafter ROHAS), P 35/3.

⁸ ESRO, ASH 4501/694, 695.

⁹ I. Nairn & N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Sussex* (Harmondsworth 1965), 579.

¹⁰ D. & B. Martin, *Historic Buildings in Eastern Sussex*, 6: Domestic buildings in the eastern High Weald 1300–1750 pt 2, 'Windows and doors' (1991), 114–16. David Martin informed the author that the medieval structure was pulled down at the end of the seventeenth century.

¹¹ ESRO PAR 309, 4 Oct 1584; W/A 13/209; W. Budgen, *Old Eastbourne* (1912), 173.

¹² *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, pt 1 (Cambridge 1922–7) 2, 216; W. C. Renshaw, 'Some clergy of the Archdeaconry of Lewes', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* (hereafter SAC) 55 (1912), 238.

¹³ F. E. Sawyer, 'Proceedings of the Committee of Plundered Ministers', SAC 30 (1880), 126; 31 (1881), 195; A. G. Matthews, *Walker Revised* (Oxford 1948), 356; ESRO PAR 440, 29 May 1641.

¹⁴ J. J. Goring, *Burn Holy Fire: Religion in Lewes since the Reformation* (Cambridge, 2003), 50–51.

¹⁵ ESRO HBR 1/794; ROHAS, P 31/2.

¹⁶ ESRO DUN 15/6.

¹⁷ J. Comber, 'Marriage chains', *Sussex Notes and Queries* 3 (1930), 60–61; ESRO PAR 498/1/1/11.

¹⁸ TNA PROB 11/171/81.

¹⁹ TNA PROB 11/169/80; Comber, 61. There seems to be no truth in Comber's suggestion that Joan may subsequently have married Richard Alfrey's brother Francis, who became rector of Penhurst.

²⁰ ESRO HBR 1/318.

²¹ Comber, 61; ESRO HBR 1/794; ROHAS, P 31/2.

²² ESRO PAR 441, 5 Mar 1654.

²³ R. F. Whistler, 'Penhurst: being some account of its iron works, manor house, church, etc.', SAC 36 (1888), 16;

- TNA PROB 11/246/189.
- ²⁴ ESRO ASH 4501/733, 734.
- ²⁵ Comber, 61; F. W. T. Attree (ed.), *Notes of Post Mortem Inquisitions taken in Sussex*, Sussex Record Society **14** (1912), 44.
- ²⁶ A. Fletcher, *A County Community in Peace and War: Sussex 1600–1660* (London: Longman 1975), 106, 309.
- ²⁷ ESRO ASH 4501/870; HBR 1/318.
- ²⁸ E. Straker, *Wealden Iron* (1931), 367–8; ESRO HBR 1/910; ROHAS, P 1/23.
- ²⁹ TNA PROB 11/246/189
- ³⁰ ESRO W/A 13/209.
- ³¹ ESRO PAR 309, 13 Sep 1582; Renshaw, 238; Budgen, 245–6.
- ³² ESRO PAR 430, 7 Aug 1621, 21 Dec 1621, 11 Nov 1623; 21 Mar 1624; 16 Oct, 3 Dec 1625.
- ³³ TNA PROB 11/202/239.
- ³⁴ Ms Farewell pedigree in the possession of Seymour Blake of South Petherton, Somerset; W. A. Shaw, *The Knights of England* (1971), **2**, 149.
- ³⁵ E. H. W. Dunkin, *Sussex Manors*, Sussex Record Society **19** (1914), 75.
- ³⁶ VCH **9**, 248; ESRO AMS 3526–7.
- ³⁷ ESRO HBR 1/910; ROHAS, P1/23.
- ³⁸ Dunkin 75.
- ³⁹ ESRO PAR 430, 6 Nov 1623; HBR 1/157.
- ⁴⁰ TNA PROB 11/125/20; Goring, 'Wealden ironmasters', 218, 220, 224–5.
- ⁴¹ ESRO PAR 430, 21 Nov 1616, 6 Nov 1623; TNA PROB 11/162/75.
- ⁴² ESRO PAR 499/1/1/1.
- ⁴³ TNA PROB 11/162/75.
- ⁴⁴ T. W. Horsfield, *The History... of the County of Sussex* (Lewes, 1835) **1**, 361.
- ⁴⁵ TNA PROB 11/162/75.
- ⁴⁶ TNA PROB 11/246/189.
- ⁴⁷ For Montague's patronage network, see J. J. Goring, 'The reformation of the ministry in Elizabethan Sussex', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* **34** (1983), 353.
- ⁴⁸ TNA PROB 11/246/189.
- ⁴⁹ TNA PROB 11/246/189.
- ⁵⁰ Whistler, 12.
- ⁵¹ TNA PROB 11/246/189.
- ⁵² ESRO ASH 4501/977.
- ⁵³ Fletcher, 63–4; Goring, 'Wealden ironmasters', 219–20.
- ⁵⁴ Thomas Smith, who succeeded Francis Alfrey (d. 1653) as rector, ministered at Penhurst until his death in 1660; Comber, 61; Whistler, 13.
- ⁵⁵ VCH **9**, 160.

