

ART. VI.—THREE PARSONS OF THE PAST, AS SEEN
IN THEIR WILLS.

THE "last will and testament" of some one of that great multitude over whose mortal remains

"The earth who shelters in its vast embrace
The sleeping myriads of the mortal race"

has closed for many a generation is by no means the least interesting of the various documents which come under the notice of the student of the past. Such a document may contain records of facts in vain sought for elsewhere, yet which would not, *a priori*, be expected from such a source. And so it happens that the local historian, the archæologist, and the ecclesiologist, as well as the genealogist, resort to such documents in the hope of finding therein items overlooked or undiscovered in more likely localities or by the higher historians. In them, besides glimpses of the personality of the testator, of his likes and dislikes, his whims and his oddities, the ecclesiologist may find information relative to the churches of his country, great or small, extinct or extant—as, for instance, to their dedications, their altars, their chapels or their tombs.

Both the interest and value of ancient wills is in direct ratio to their antiquity; and as we approach modern times both these qualities come very near to the vanishing-point, though not in the gradual way which might have been expected. As a matter of fact, the Reformation forms, in this respect, as decided a critical point as a cataract does in the course of a river. And over that particular cataract what priceless possessions, gems of art, invaluable records of the past, painted, sculptured, carved, and written, were swept by the frightful flood of fanaticism! Few, very few, are the wrecked relics which have been cast up by the calmer stream below. The differing interest of old wills may be judged from a comparative view of those of three Vicars of a South-down parish—Ringmer, to wit—of the thirteenth, the sixteenth, and the eighteenth centuries respectively.

Let us premise that Ringmer, the scene of their pastoral labours, is a parish lying at a short distance from the northern slope of the Southdown hills, three miles north-east of Lewes. The parish contains four hamlets or vills, two of which, Wellingham and Ashton—or Hastone in the most ancient manuscripts—are earlier mentioned in medieval documents than the inclusive name of the parish itself. Thus, in the earliest Subsidy Roll dealing with this part of Sussex—namely, in the twenty-fourth year of Edward I.—the vills of the parish

are mentioned, with their contributions, but Ringmer itself, *eo nomine*, does not appear. The place has had no part to play in history. The only great ones of the earth I can connect with it are King John, who once passed through it on one of his many rapid journeys; and Edward II., who, during his exile in Sussex while Prince of Wales, used to hunt and hawk about this neighbourhood, keeping a stud of horses at Ditchling, no great way off, where he lodged. When King, he once passed through the village on his way eastward from Lewes to Battle, possibly casting regretful thoughts back to the time when the Downs with their bustards, the herons of Ringmer Park, and the tall deer that the Conqueror "loved like a father," which abounded in Broyle Chace—another of Ringmer's game preserves—had afforded him and his hounds so many days of sport. Besides these royal personages there have been two distinguished men, worthy to be had in remembrance, who have been associated with Ringmer, namely, William Penn and Gilbert White.

The former found his bride, Gulielma Springett, here, and doubtless often visited her at her home, the fine old dwelling called Broyle Place. The better part of this old three-gabled mansion has since been pulled down, and it has now devolved into a farmhouse.

Gilbert White, whose "Natural History" is now in its eighty-first edition, was a frequent visitor to Ringmer, to the house which still stands among the pines and elms which crown the village green. Here he came annually for thirty years to visit his aunt, who was married to Henry Snook, son of one of the Vicars whose wills we will now discuss.

We shall find some difference in form as well as contents between the earliest of these and the latest. For with the coming of the feudal system at the Norman Conquest came the prohibition of that power of disposing by will of real property which the Saxons had so freely exercised, so many interesting examples of which may be seen in Kemble's "Codex Diplomaticus." Probably this change was the least oppressive of many to the Saxons, for before taking away their power of leaving their lands to their heirs, the Conqueror very thoughtfully had taken away the very lands themselves from the wretched Saxons.

This disability lasted until the time of Henry VIII., when "the Statute of Wills" permitted freehold land to be bequeathed, but copyhold only in those cases where the custom of the manor or special grant permitted. Of the latter one instance may be given, when, in the thirteenth century, the Prior and Convent of St. Swithun, of Winchester, granted to their men of Alverstoke various liberties, *inter alia*, to make

wills and to dispose of their children and "avers" (beasts of burden) and to sell and alienate their land. Otherwise medieval testators had recourse to charter, deed of gift, or feoffment. Such appears to have been the form adopted by Henry, Vicar of Ringmer, in the year of Grace 1275. The actual document is not extant, but there are contemporary manuscripts which embody the terms, intentions, and conditions drawn up by this ancient testator. For the amount accruing from his various properties not having proved sufficient to discharge the obligations entailed, the various parties concerned, as the chaplain-elect, the Dean of South Malling, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, concurred in rearrangements embodied in deeds wherein we find quoted the original will, in which he says :

"I Henry vicar of Ringmer, give and bequeath all my lands, meadows, rents and possessions and all my acquisitions (as are shown in my charter) which I hold of various lords, to Dan William, chaplain my comrade who has long and faithfully helped me by his ministrations in the chapel of Ringmer offered for the souls of those on behalf of whom I the said Henry have received alms during my life. But if the said possessions do not suffice for his support I give and bequeath to him the sum of twenty marks for improving his condition, so, nevertheless, that the said twenty marks be handed over to the keeping of some good men or to the custody of Master John de Wichio, until my executors shall have decided in what manner they can be invested in lands or rents to the advantage of the said William."

The charter to which the Vicar refers contains details of his possessions and the purposes which he had in mind when bequeathing them as a trust to William, the chaplain—namely, that he and his successors should celebrate daily Masses in Ringmer Chapel for the repose of the testator's soul and the souls of all the faithful, for his benefactors; for St. Mary also, and for the Holy Spirit. The document, translated as the will, from the Latin, runs :

"Let the living and those to come know that I Henry vicar of Ringmer have given conceded and by this my present charter confirmed to William of Pontefract chaplain all my lands rents and possessions, and all my other belongings with meadows, pastures, and all other things appertaining as well in the manor of Malling as in the manor of Glynde saving however to my friend and brother the land which he holds of me in Glynde Also all my houses and rents situate in Lewes and Cliff namely at Wike twenty-one acres of land in Burdunes Hame three acres and a half and two crofts lying opposite the house of Richard Capre and one croft near his

enclosure and one acre at the House of Le Ridere and the whole croft which lies at Wintersgate which formerly belonged to Simon Albi except one acre lying to the north and which Stephen Clerk holds of me and five perches of land which Roger le Viteler held of me upon which the house is situate and in Osselmescroft one acre in Wetelond at Hestone and in Whasten one acre in Cumbe one acre in Northlongeland and in Lyge one acre and a half in Westwise de Hestone two acres. Also the whole house rooms and garrets standing on the lay-fee where I Henry have long dwelt. Item, half an acre and the house situate upon it near the land of Philip Breybon Item, the house and croft which once belonged to Ysabelle upon condition that she may remain in it during her life. Item, the houses and possessions which I hold of the Lord Archbishop upon the bridge of Lewes Item, the house which I bought of Simon de Niwicke Item, the rent which I bought of Johanna once the wife of Michael Marshal Item, the house which I bought of John Dusenell Item, the land and croft which I once bought of Albreda daughter of Emma de Cliva Item, the house and messuage which I bought of Nicholas Renals Item, the house and messuage which I bought of Walter Squintere and of Helwysa his mother Also the house and messuage which I bought of Roger de Cusario and his wife to have and to hold of me and my heirs while he lives so that another chaplain shall succeed him one after another successively and in perpetuity by arrangement of the Dean of Malling for the time being So that all and singular every day shall celebrate Mass in the chapel of Ringmer namely four masses for my benefactors, and for the faithful on behalf of whom I have received alms while living and two masses for St. Mary and one for the Holy Spirit. I will also that the said William shall fully discharge the whole service to the Lord Archbishop for the lands and messuages which he holds or ought to hold of him In the same way let him satisfy all other lords for all other tenements which the charters show I hold of those lords

“ In testimony of which John Marshall witnesseth and many others.”

The properties mentioned in this will and charter would seem to make quite a landed proprietor of this country parson; but when properly appreciated, their whole amount only sums at $32\frac{1}{2}$ acres of land and five crofts (small pieces of land with a cottage on each) and eight houses, exclusive of those “ upon the bridge of Lewes.”

This bridge is now but a single-span structure of no architectural beauty, but in medieval times no doubt it was a longer erection of several arches, prolonged into a causeway

at each end, for in all probability in those days the river was not confined so strictly into a narrow stream at this particular spot; but when engineering was in an elementary stage and drainage imperfectly understood, the land on either side the river was in a swampy state, with subsidiary streams here and there, as we may see in any ill-drained, low-lying marsh. Hence, more than one arch would be required to carry a bridge, and a causeway over the wet lands, doubtless often overflowed at high tides, would be a necessary adjunct; and thus there would be space thereon for the houses and possessions which had been built upon the bridge.

As the Archbishop was their owner, he, or one of his predecessors, may have been the builder of this bridge—a most meritorious act in medieval times, as many a last will and testament witnesses. Thus we find Lady Joan Burgavenny, member of an ancient Sussex stock, leaving a substantial sum for mending “foul wayes and fabul brugges.” Others, not content with post-mortem benevolences, built bridges during their lives, as the two ancient sisters who erected the celebrated “Auld Brig o’ Doun.”

It is not possible to locate all the other lands and houses as accurately as those buildings on the bridge of Lewes, but some of them are to be traced by names in use to-day. One of them, for instance, “*Domus le Ridere*,” is in all probability the present Ryder’s Wells, a moderately-sized house and grounds between Wellingham and Lewes; and if this be the case it can claim a higher antiquity than the Vicar’s time, for it is mentioned in Earl Warenne’s endowments of the Priory of St. Pancras in Southover, near Lewes. It is said also to be mentioned in Domesday. Another property scheduled by the Vicar is “*Winter’s Gate*.” This is probably “*the Wynters*,” or “*Winter’s Pouch*,” in Ringmer. “*Hestone*,” which occurs more than once in this will, is identical with “*Hastone*,” the modern Ashton Green in the same parish. It is mentioned at an earlier date, when, in 1230, the Dean and Canons of South Malling entered into a deed to assign the tithe arising from a hidate of land at “*Hastone*, in the parish of Ringmere,” to the repairs of the collegiate church.

Another Ringmer place-name still extant is “*West Wise*,” now Westwish, in Ashton tithing; but “*Osselmescrofte*” is a lost locality. “*Wetelond at Hestone*” is not easy to assign, since the first word may mean “*wheat*” or the adjective “*wet*.” The latter is the more probable, since many place-names about Ashton refer to water, for it is a locality bordering on the “*Laughton levels*,” at that time little better than a great swamp or marsh. Thus, “*wishe*” means a watery meadow, and is often met with in that neighbourhood, and in this will as

“Westwise”; while a more modern place-name thereabouts is “le wateryng place,” mentioned in the Court Rolls of the manor in the sixteenth century.

As we have seen, all this property did not suffice to maintain the “Mass priest,” and in consequence a reduction was sanctioned by the Archbishop of the number of Masses to be said from the original number to five weekly—three for the testator, one for the Virgin Mary, and one for the Holy Spirit—the endowment as a whole being assigned to the emoluments of the sacrist. From contemporary manuscripts we learn that the first sacrist under the new arrangement was a certain Alexander de Sonde.

About 250 years after the death of Henry, Vicar of Ringmer, Richard Allmyn, twelfth Vicar in succession (of whom there is any record), drew up his last will and testament. Compared with that which we have been considering, it is a document of extreme brevity, and indicates also that this particular parish priest was a man of few possessions. Although usually written “Almayn,” it is apparent from this will that the Vicar’s name was “Allmyn”—“Sir Richard Allmyn,” as the usual pre-Reformation custom puts it, a vernacular rendering of “Dominus”; a preferable word being the “Dan” of Chaucer.

This Richard Allmyn, or Almayn, succeeded Thomas Gybbys in the Vicarage of Ringmer in 1525, and died in 1531. Any sepulchral stone or brass which may have commemorated his name, or recorded the spot in the chancel where he was laid to rest, has long ago disappeared, less care being bestowed on such things in modern restorations than on raising the altar-steps, to which purpose, indeed, the tombstones of the long-forgotten dead may even be subservient. Who “Sir Willyam” may have been to whom the bedding and the gown were bequeathed we know not. Probably he was some neighbouring cleric, possibly the Sir William Wyllys who witnessed this will. He may have been a relative of Thomas Welles, who in 1511 was Rector of Ringmer. “Master Deane of South Malling” may have been a person of that name; more probably he was the Dean of the neighbouring Collegiate Church of that place, John Pers, or Piers, by name. The Vicar’s will reads as follows:

“In dei noīe amen I sr Richard Allmyn clerk vicar of Ringmer the last day off December the xxii yere of the reign of King Henry the Eight do make my testament in this man’ of forme following First I bequeath my soul to God Almighty to our lady saynt Marye and to all the holly company of hevin and my bodye to be buried in the chauncell of the church of Ringmer Item, I bequeath to the church of

Ringmer xx^s Item, I bequeath to Master Dorint my best bedd and the bolster Item, I bequethe to Mawde my woman vⁱ and her chambr hole and iiiⁱ paier of sheets Item, I bequethe to the said Mawde vi silver spones Item, I bequeth to Richard Pullyn xl^s and a fetherbed and a paier of sheets Item, I bequethe to Robert Walker xiii^s iiii^d and my worsted Jacquet Item, I bequethe to Thomsyn Croydon xl^s and a bedd It., I bequeath to Henry Pryor xx^s and a gowne Item, I bequeth to Sr Willyam a fetherbedd a gowne and a pair of sheets Item, I bequeth to Richard Tyney a gowne Item, I bequeth to John Yong my horse and my saddle Item, I will have at my buryeing xxx masses and at my monethes mynd other thirtye masses and ev'y preest to have vi^d for ev'y tyme Also I woll have at my yeres mynd xxx masses and ev'y preest to have for his labor vi^d Item, I woll that William Corneforth shalbe my sole executor and he to have for his labor xx^s Also I woll that Master Deane of Malling shalbe myn ov'sear and to have for his labor xx^s The Resideu of my goods moveable and unmoveable I put to the discreetion of my executor only and he to dispoase yt for the welthe of my soule as he thingketh best Thes witnes Sr Willyam Wyllys John Yong and Mawde (a blank) his s'vint."

The picture which this will presents to us, slender as it is, conveys the idea of a rural cleric who ran his course remote from man, having but little worldly property, personal or real, with no relatives sufficiently near or dear to require remembrance in his will; whose only indulgence seems to have been in his saddle-horse, on which we may imagine him ambling about his parish, or into Lewes, or to visit some neighbouring fellow-priest; and, after all, sufficiently solvent to help on the salvation of his soul by the provision of three "trentals": one at his burial, and two others—one at his monthly commemoration, the other at his "yeres mynd," a similar service.

We now pass on to the eighteenth century, to the vicariate of a certain Henry Snooke, a period remote enough from the ancient Vicar Henry, yet scarcely less divided from our modern times, so accelerated is the current of the rapid river of time, than the last pre-Reformation parson of Ringmer was from the first. Henry Snooke, whose will is dated 1715, was a son of John Snooke, who died in 1702 at the age of seventy years, and was buried in the north chapel of Ringmer Church. He was the first of that cacophoniously-named family who appears in the records of the parish, and with his grandson Henry (son of the Vicar), who died in 1763, the stock as completely died out of the history of the county as it had

mysteriously come in. From the bequest to the poor of Brighthelmston (then a little fishing village, now Babylon-by-the-Sea, or Brighton) it is permissible to conclude that the testator had some ties of family there. His kinswoman, Mary Whalley, was probably daughter of Sir Herbert Whalley and Lucy his wife, who out of her affection raised a monument to his memory, on which, among other things, it is quaintly observed that "he gave the commandments"—that is, caused two tablets inscribed with them to be placed at the east end of the church. A more memorable connection was formed by the younger Henry by his marriage with Rebecca, daughter of the Rev. Gilbert White, grandfather of the naturalist of the same name. A long-lived lady, she died at the age of eighty-six, seventeen years after her husband's death, which occurred in 1763—"post vitam difficilem," as his epitaph tells us. His name appears in the parish registers on more than one occasion, by which it is evident he was of an unquiet disposition. In 1759 Henry Snooke the younger was publicly rebuked for his supercilious scoffs at the minister and for his indecent behaviour in sermon time. Again, finding in the registers, under date 1641, an entry of "the Protestation" of that year (a declaration to uphold the Protestant religion required by Parliament to be taken in every parish), with the names of the signatories, he appended thereto: "May the memory of such rebellious Rogues perish and their names be forgotten. So wishes Henry Snooke, Ringmer, 1737."

I have found another reference to this uncle of Gilbert White, in the MS. tithe-books of Michael Baynes, who succeeded Snooke's father in the vicarage. In a marginal note the parson writes: "I take Snooke's tythe to be worth one year with another £3 . 3 . 0 for which he paid but fourteen shillings. . . . What a rogue was Snooke to pretend he paid enough for his tythe at fourteen shillings a year!" Though Gilbert White, in the letters he wrote from Ringmer, where he was wont to stay at various times during thirty years, has much to say about his aunt Rebecca, he does not once refer to her husband, Henry Snooke—on the principle, perhaps, of *nil nisi bonum*.

The will of Henry Snooke the elder is as follows:

"In the name of God amen. I Henry Snooke clerk vicar of Ringmer in the county of Sussex do make and ordaine this my last will and testament viz. First I recomēd my Soul to God hoping for mercy through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ my body to be buried in the same grave with my former wife if conveniently it may be, and as to the temporal estate God hath vouchsafed me I give and dispose the same as followeth

Imprimis I give and bequeath to the poor of the parish of Ringmer fifty shillings to the poor of Brighthelmstone four pounds Item I give to my wife Mary all that linen and household stuff she was possessed of before our marriage. I give also to my said wife ten pounds Item I give to my manservant and maidservant dwelling with me at the time of my decease twenty shillings each and their wages till the next quarter-day Item I give to my kinswomen Mary Whalley Judith Bushbridge Mary Pleydel and Dorothy Gillam two guineas to each Item I give to Mr. John Hunt to his wife Mrs. Margaret to James Purse clerk to his wife Mrs. Anne one guinea each to be paid within one month after my decease Item I give and bequeath to the charity school at Ringmer thirty shillings to buy such books for the poor children there taught as my successor shall think meet. What remaineth from my worldly estate (my debts and legacies being first paid) viz. my lands ready money debts chattels books plate household goods and all my other substance whatsoever I bequeath to my only son Henry Snooke whom by these presents I make and ordaine full and sole executor of this my last will and testament and hereby I do revoke and cancel all other wills by me formerly made. In witness whereof I the said Henry Snooke to this my last will and testament have set my hand and affixed my seal the day and year above written." (Witnesses: William Payn, Mary Whalley, Hannah Chatfield.) Dated March 26, 1715.

There is not much to be gathered from this will beyond matters concerning his family only. His wife, who, indeed, appears the second spouse, he generously endows with ten pounds and the goods she already possessed before her marriage. In the registers I can find no entry of the burial of his first wife or any record of her name. Perhaps her body was conveyed for burial to the home of her childhood, wherever that may have been.

Such are the wills of the three quondam Vicars of Ringmer, so separated in time, though their lot was cast in the same rural spot. How different it would appear to them could they revisit the scene of their sublunary lives can only be guessed. But it is easy to imagine that the later Henry would be hardly more surprised at the changes in merely mundane matters than Richard Allmyn, the pre-Reformation parson, at the vicissitudes in ecclesiastical affairs.

W. HENEAGE LEGGE.

