NOTES.

John Wilbye, 1574—1638.

By Sir John Wood, bart.

This year being the tercentenary of the death of the great Madrigal
composer, John Wilbye, perhaps the most perfect of all the great
school of English Madrigalists of the end of the sixteenth and beginning
of the seventeenth centuries, the B.B.C. has taken the opportunity
of broadcasting his works to the world throughout the third week of
February last, and many people in East Anglia no doubt listened with
great pleasure to the reproduction without realising that Wilbye was
born and spent nearly all his life in this part of England. So it may be
of interest to members of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology to learn
a few details of his life and history, particularly as a large portion of
that life was passed in this ancient Tudor Mansion of Hengrave, so full
of memories of yore, in which I live.

Owing to the invaluable researches of Dr. E. H. Fellowes of Windsor
we owe not only the modern printed edition of the madrigals, but also
most of our information of Wilbye’s life.

John Wilbye, third son of a tanner of some position at Diss in
Norfolk, was born in 1574. His father was the possessor of a lute we
are told, thus showing the musical tendency of the family, and in his
will, proved at Norwich in 1605, bequeathed this lute to his third son
John.

At the age of nineteen, probably through the influence of Elizabeth
Cornwallis of Brome Hall, near Diss, who married the second Sir
Thomas Kytson of Hengrave, Wilbye was appointed Household
Musician in this house, and remained in that position for very many
years. He had a special chamber assigned to him closely adjoining
the musicians’ gallery in the great hall, and a tablet in this chamber
now marks the fact. An inventory taken in 1602 of the furniture
in the room is still in existence here. The Kytsons were great patrons
of music, and a large collection of instruments were kept in the min-
strels’ gallery. Wilbye remained in the service of the Kytson family
until the death of Lady Kytson in 1628, and during this time his two
sets of madrigals were published. The first set is dated from the
Kytson’s London house in the Austin Friars in 1598, and the second
set, probably from Hengrave, in 1609. Doubtless many of these
madrigals were first tried out in the great hall here.

After the death of his patroness Lady Kytson, when the establish-
ment here was broken up, Wilbye moved in 1628 to Colchester, where
he lived till his death in 1638 in the “great brick house” of Lady
Kytson’s daughter, the Countess Rivers. It is said that Lady Kytson
granted him at a favourable rental an excellent sheep farm named Sextons, near Bury St. Edmunds, and from that time he ceased to write madrigals. But there is no doubt that he began to buy land and at his death was comparatively rich, and in his will dated 10th September, 1638, from Colchester, he is styled no longer "yeoman" but "gentleman." He died unmarried.

I feel sure that in concluding this short account of the life of John Wilbye my readers will be interested to know that two concerts of Wilbye's madrigals have been performed by Madrigal Societies here, one from Norwich in 1927, and the other from Cambridge in 1932, and an additional thrill was experienced by the audience and performers alike in the thought that these madrigals were being sung in the very hall where Wilbye probably first tried them out.

Hengrave Hall.

JOHN WOOD.