

# **Two Oxford Alumni : AD 1450 and 1950**

**by Edward Gelles**

## **Introduction**

In recent years I have studied my family ancestry in the context of the history of millennial migrations across Europe. My methodology has been based on traditional as well as genetic genealogy and has also drawn on other fields such as onomastics and references to European literature. My paternal Gelles rabbinic line flourished in central and eastern Europe in recent centuries, but had interesting connections to western and southern Europe in earlier times.

As a former scholar of Balliol College, Oxford, I was intrigued to come across eponymous Oxford scholars half a millennium before my time. They appeared to be immigrants from the Low Countries when commercial and political links with England were of great importance. King Edward III Plantagenet who married Philippa of Hainault, their son John of Gaunt (born in Ghent), and members of their entourage are part of a story that takes in a saint famed across much of Europe, a writer regarded by many as “the father of English literature”, and medieval Oxford scholars with links to Yorkshire and the West Country.

Before I begin my story I must digress to make it clear that bearing the same family name does not imply having significant genealogical links : this is where DNA tests may provide valuable pointers.

A family name can sometimes have more than one origin and meaning, while variations in the spelling of a name from one particular origin can also be quite perplexing. Surnames may have started as patronymics or matronymics, occupational epithets, or nicknames based on some physical characteristic; they can be

topographic indicating a place of origin, and so on. In reverse, towns have sometimes been named after notable individuals.

The Normans brought the names Giles and Gelys to England, but names like the Scottish Gillie and Gillies (meaning follower or adherent) were of earlier Viking origin. Gelles may also have come later to Scotland from central or eastern Europe via the Baltic trade.

### **My family name**

My father David and his younger brother Max wrote their second name as Gelles and Gellis respectively. Our vital records for preceding generations render the family name as Gelles, Gellis, Gelis, Guelis, etc. It is not an uncommon name in Germany and Holland and among Ashkenazi Jews. The latter generally believed it to be derived from the medieval German girl's name Geyle (fair / fair-haired). The name would thus be a matronymic, meaning child of Geyle. I know of one ancient Gelles family who trace their lineage from an ancestress called Geyle and there are undoubtedly others.

### **Common name origins**

However, my wider family history goes back to earlier times, to the Kalonymos family and other Jewish rabbis in Septimania, the ancient province in southern France, spanning the modern Languedoc and part of Provence (see my book, *The Jewish Journey*, chapter 1).

This was the area to which Aegidius, the 7<sup>th</sup> century Greek hermit from Athens made his way. His name is usually translated as “wearer of a goat-skin”. The French called him Gilles and the town of Saint-Gilles du Gard is named after him. In due course he was made a saint and his fame spread to other parts of Europe – abbeys and towns were named after Gilles, Giles, or Gelys, as the name was rendered in different languages.

The Belgian town of St Gilles is not far from Lessines and Le Roeulx in the province of Hainault. From Lessines came the priestly scholar Aegidius or Giles (1230-1304), also referred to as Master Gelys. He wrote works on theology and other subjects including economics. References to this scholar occur in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. One wonders whether there are connections to 14<sup>th</sup> century immigrants such as John Gelys of Exeter College, Oxford.

John Gelys (fl. 1390) was rector of a hall linked to this college. He might perhaps be identical with John Giles recorded as a fellow of New College (1386-1394). It is possible that there is a link to a Devon family whose names included Egidius, Gelys, and Giles and who had a connection with Exeter College in later times. This family may have come from the Low Countries at a time when leading families of Hainault, Brabant, and Louvain had formed links with England that included marriages with the ruling Plantagenet line and led to their acquisition of landed property in various parts of the country (A.R. Wagner, *English Ancestry*, O.U.P. 1961, pp 21-22).

Henry Gelles or Gellys had connections in Yorkshire. He matriculated at Oxford in 1450, was ordained in 1452 and received a B.A. degree followed by the M.A. He was Keeper of the Four Keys Chest in 1457 and Principal of Staple Hall (attached to Lincoln College) from 1458. In 1464 he succeeded his uncle Sir Dionysius Gelles or Gellys as Vicar of Bradford, where he remained until his death in 1476.

Henry and I are Oxford alumni separated by 500 years of European history, by religion, and country of birth, but millennial migrations across the continent, with expulsions, conversions, and inter-marriages, might conceivably have given rise to divergent paths from an early common name or ancestral connection.

In a preceding essay on “Sephardic-Ashkenazi family connections” I wrote about the migration of Sephardic Jews before and following the

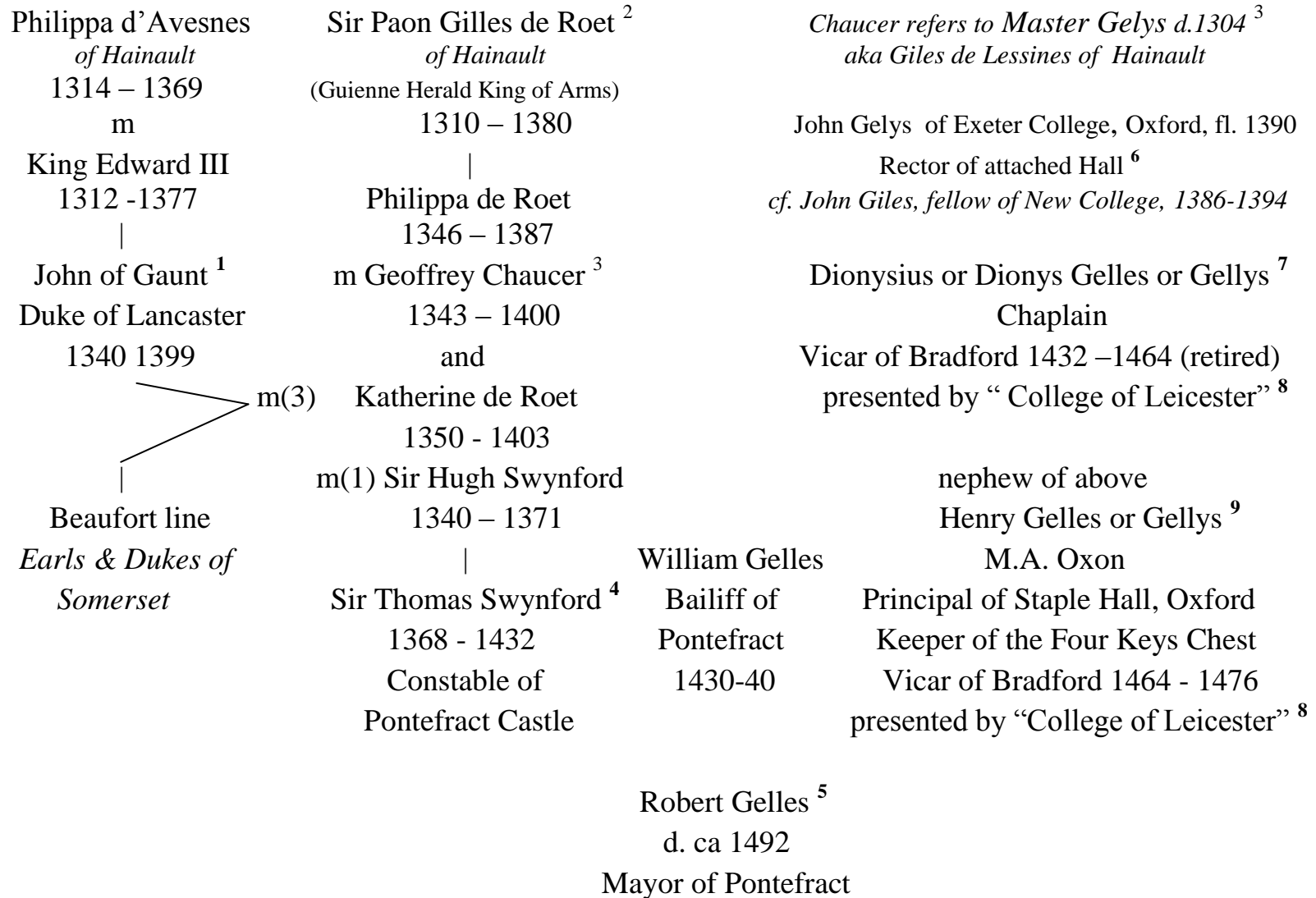
Inquisitions in Spain and Portugal, that were clearly among the most important events in the history of European Jewry. I focused particularly on Marrano families and their journeys from Portugal to Gascony, the Netherlands, and subsequently westward to the British Isles and to the West Indies or eastward to Germany, Denmark, and further into central and eastern Europe. Some of these Catholic converts openly reverted to their Jewish faith when they reached a more liberal climate, such as Protestant Holland.

Partially overlapping in time with these migrations, English kings were engaged in a generational struggle to secure their continental interests, largely acquired through the marriage of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

The appended chart shows some of John of Gaunt's family during a period of the Hundred Years War, during which they fought in France and made historic connections with Portugal and Spain.

Sir Paon Gilles de Roet of Hainault is shown as "Guienne Herald King of Arms" and was "of the king's chamber". His epithet "Paon" (from *Paganus*) has been interpreted by several writers as indicative of some Jewish descent, but the herald's origins remain an open question, as does that of the priestly Gelles line that came close to this Lancastrian entourage.

## 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century connections from the Low Countries to the House of Lancaster



## Footnotes

- References in Edward Gelles, *The Jewish Journey : A Passage through European History*, pp 247-251. including A.B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford to AD 1500* (Oxford 1957), records of civil court actions, records in the archives of York, Pontefract and Ackworth, numerous local records such as the “History and Topography of Bradford” in the “Continuations and Additions” of which
- 1 it is recorded that the manor of Bradford was held by John of Gaunt from the estate of his first wife Blanche of Lancaster and was subsequently held briefly by Beaufort descendants from his third marriage to Katharine de Roet (see appended extract).
  - 2 Sir Gilles de Roet (after Le Roeulx in Hainault) may have had some Jewish ancestry on his father’s side, as suggested by his epithet Paon (Paganus), as well as a d’Avesnes connection.
  - 3 Geoffrey Chaucer refers in his work to the scholar Master Gelys (aka Giles de Lessines in Hainault).
  - 4 King Henry IV was a son of John of Gaunt by his first wife, Blanche of Lancaster. Thomas Swynford was a son of Katherine de Roet, who became step-mother of King Henry through her later marriage to John of Gaunt.
  - 5 Robert Gelles helped to defeat an insurrection at Ackworth in 1492, recognised in the grant made to his widow Elizabeth (see Ackworth web site).
  - 6 John Gelys might have had some connection with Master Gelys of Lessines in Hainault.
  - 7 Will in the York Registry, 26 June 1466, of Sir Dionysius Gelles, chaplain (Adm 4 252)
  - 8 The Collegiate church of St Mary, Leicester and Bradford church were once linked in the Lancaster estate  
The dean and chapter of the former church nominated Dionys and Henry Gelles in turn
  - 9 Henry Gelles (nephew of Dionys Gelles) Keeper of the Four Keys Chest at Oxford 1457, Principal of Staple Hall, attached to Lincoln College 1458, Vicar of Bradford 1464-1476. His Will in the York Registry, 2 April 1476 (Adm 4 106) – an extract from the will dated 27 May 1475 “ to John Thornton son-in-law of my brother William Gelles which John I constitute my executor, and Thomas Gelles, son of my afore-said brother”

Henry of Grosmont was 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Leicester and Lancaster, and later Duke of Lancaster. His daughters by Isabella Beaumont were Blanche of Lancaster and Maud, Countess of Leicester, who married a Count of Hainault with links to the Bavarian house of Wittelsbach.

“Blanche, the daughter of Henry, Duke of Lancaster, married the celebrated John of Gaunt, (so called from being born at Ghent, in Flanders,) 4th son of Edward 3rd. The marriage pair were third cousins, and were therefore united by a dispensation from the Pope. A partition was made between the two co-heiresses of their father's lands and possessions, when the Honour of **Pontefract** was allotted to Blanche as her share. After Blanche had issue to her husband, he had, by the laws of England, livery of her lands.....The manor of **Bradford** is mentioned first in the Record, and afterwards, Leeds, Almondbury, and a great number of other places. Maud (Blanche's sister) .... died in 1362 without issue, upon which John of Gaunt, in right of his wife, became possessed of the remainder of the inheritance of the late Duke, and was advanced by the King to the dignity of Duke of Lancaster”

The chart indicates common geographical origins in the Plantagenet line with some of their entourage. Contacts of de Roet and Gelles in Pontefract and Bradford, with connections to Leicester, are consonant with a status of service, favour, and allegiance to the House of Lancaster.

Note on the Giles family of Totnes in Devon whose recorded names included Egidius, Giles and Gelys.

John Giles, Gelys, or Jelys (1487-1553) sat as M.P. for Totnes in 1529. His grandson John Giles (died 1606) was also M.P for Totnes, the latter's son Sir Edward Giles (1566-1637) studied at Exeter College, Oxford, was elected M.P. for Totnes several times, and was High Sheriff of Devon. Another member of the family, John Giles son of Richard Giles matriculated at Exeter College in 1641.

I am indebted to Oxford University, Exeter College, and New College archivists for helpful information on Oxford alumni of this family.



VICARS of BRADFORD