

# Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Gurney's People: A Checklist</i>	xi
<i>Prologue</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix

## PART I: YOUTH

FROM THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF MUSIC TO THE ARMY, 1911–1916

1 ‘The Young Genius’	3
2 ‘A Waste of Spirit in an Expense of Shame’	32

## PART II: WAR

FLANDERS, 1916

3 ‘First Time In’	63
-------------------	----

FROM FLANDERS TO THE SOMME, 1916

4 ‘Most Grand to Die?’	91
------------------------	----

THE SOMME, ROUEN AND BACK TO FLANDERS, 1917

5 ‘The Fool at Arms’	110
6 ‘Even Such Is Time’	133

CONVALESCENCE IN EDINBURGH, 1917

7 ‘A Touch of Gas’	154
--------------------	-----

## PART III: CIVILIAN

SEATON DELAVAL, WARRINGTON AND ST ALBANS, 1917–1918

8	‘To His Love’	173
9	‘Rather Dead Than Mad’	195

THE ROYAL COLLEGE AND GLOUCESTER, 1919–1922

10	‘A Revenge of Joy’	212
11	‘Despairing Work Is the Noblest Refuge’	235
12	‘Below the Horizon’	261

## PART IV: ASYLUM

BARNWOOD TO DARTFORD, 1922–1924

13	‘Praying for Death’	281
14	‘Asylum-Made Lunatics’	294
15	‘Dark Fire’	316

DARTFORD TO TWIGWORTH, 1925–1937

16	‘The Patient Believes He Is Shakespeare’	335
17	‘A Fear of Obscurity (My Own)’	357
18	Afterword	381

### *Appendices*

#### *Appendix A—*

<i>A Chronological Catalogue of Gurney’s Musical Works</i>	387
--	-----

#### *Appendix B—*

<i>A Chronological Catalogue of Gurney’s Literary Works</i>	415
---	-----

<i>Notes</i>	423
--------------	-----

<i>Index</i>	461
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## CHAPTER ONE

# ‘The Young Genius’



In Room 53 of the Royal College of Music, with oil paintings of composers lining its walls and a view of the Royal Albert Hall through its large windows, sits the great Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, frowning through his pince nez as he marks a composition with ‘his gold propelling pencil’. He shakes his head, shakes it again, hums a little, then, with a flourish, holds up the altered song. ‘There, m’boy’, he exclaims to one of the two students eagerly watching him. ‘That’ll be half a crown’. An unkempt, dark-haired student in a rather shapeless blue coat takes one look at the corrections and leaps to his feet. ‘But Sir—you’ve jiggered the whole thing!’

Stanford looks at him in silence, slowly rises from his seat, takes his student firmly by the ear, and expels him from the room. The other observer, the young composer Herbert Howells, looks on aghast. With his back to the door, Stanford smiles. ‘I love Gurney more and more. He’s the greatest among you all, but the least teachable.’<sup>1</sup> He returns to look at some of Howells’s immaculately presented musical offerings as the sound of footsteps stamping on the stone stairs rings down the corridor.



By the time the twenty-year-old ‘young genius’, as Gurney referred to himself (with only partial irony), reached the imposing marble entrance hall of the Royal College of Music on 8 May 1911, he was hardly a child prodigy. His compositions showed promise and flair, but they were a long way from remarkable. Gurney knew he had hardly begun to investigate the depth of his gift, and he had a deep conviction that he possessed the capability to write something extraordinary, if only he could discipline and train himself. These were early days, and his education was just beginning. For now, with the real possibility of future greatness, and a capital city full of world-class music-making to explore, optimism outweighed anxiety.

One year before, Gurney had been sitting in the draughty pews of Gloucester Cathedral. He had watched the many colours the stained glass cast across the great



FIG. 1.1: Ivor Gurney at the Royal College of Music, from Herbert Howells's personal collection. © Gurney Trust.

building as the sun set, as he listened with rapt attention to a piece that was unlike anything he had ever heard. Both he and Howells were organ scholars, and Gurney had practically grown up in the cathedral, having been a chorister there from the age of ten. Howells sat by Gurney's side, the two overawed by the importance of what they were hearing. Dr Herbert Brewer, the cathedral's music director, had announced to the choir that there would be a premiere of a 'queer mad work' by an 'odd fellow from Chelsea'.<sup>2</sup> His curmudgeonly description had hardly prepared them for the sheer magnitude of what they were now experiencing, with string writing that sounded simultaneously new and ancient, the sound appearing to rise from the very building as if it had been hewn from its stone. This was the premiere of Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*.

After the final applause had ended, and a starstruck seventeen-year-old Howells had obtained Vaughan Williams's autograph, the two young organists walked out of the cathedral, unable to speak. The cathedral was only a stone's throw from Gurney's home on Barton Street, above the family's tailoring business. From his glass-fronted shop, with counters piled high with rolls of plaid and corduroy, Gurney's father David served customers, cut cloth and took measurements for the gentlemen of Gloucester who required suits; he was assisted by his rather truculent wife, Florence. Their son Ivor jostled for space in the handful of gloomy rooms upstairs,

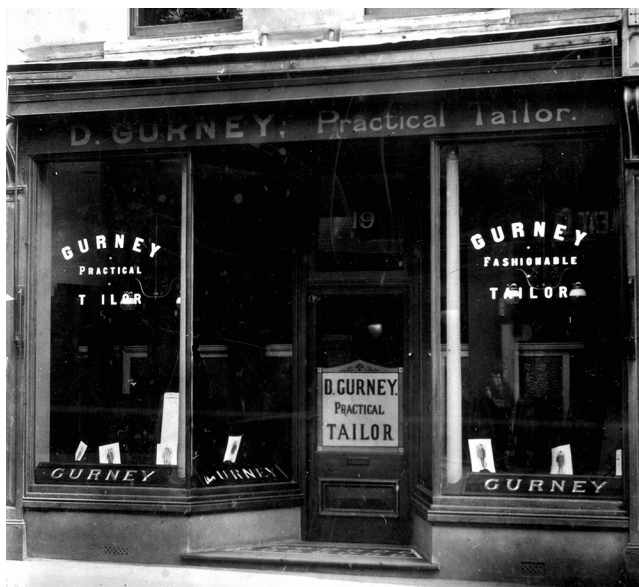


FIG. 1.2: Gurney's father's tailor shop in Barton Street, Gloucester. © Gurney Trust.

alongside his sister Winifred, who was his senior by three years; Ronald, who was four years younger than Ivor; and Dorothy, the baby of the family, who was born when Ivor was ten.<sup>3</sup>

That night Ivor Gurney did not go straight home. Instead he and Howells walked, for hour after hour. They strode through the cobbled streets around the cathedral cloister where during the day Gurney often perused the secondhand books that were piled high on wooden barrows. They passed the crossroads where the straight Roman roads of Westgate and Eastgate meet at the city's centre, past the darkened windows of the tailor's shop at 19 Barton Street, past the ancient sign of the grocers—a great brass grasshopper which stretched the length of the shop front—and the battered façade of a disused eighteenth-century theatre that had once hosted the royalty of the acting profession. A few hours earlier the streets had been bustling with horses and drays, ambling farmers in leggings with corduroy coats and bowler hats, clergymen on bicycles and red-faced women in from the countryside with gossiping voices and bulging shopping baskets. Now the only sound was the boys' footfall as they walked on. Little Howells, immaculately dressed, was obliged almost to run to keep up with the typically furious pace set by his friend. After a while the initial shock of the *Tallis Fantasia* wore off, and as they walked, they talked animatedly about what they had just heard. They knew that

these new sounds meant something momentous for British music, and they were equally determined to have a role in shaping its future.

For the past decade, Vaughan Williams had been trying to establish a new English music through folk song and the amalgamation of ancient church music and modern harmonies.<sup>4</sup> Both Gurney and Howells felt the calling to be part of this 'New English Musical Renaissance', as it was to become known, and knew that the Royal College of Music in London was certainly the best place to begin preparing for the challenge. The College, far more than the Royal Academy, flourished as a centre of composition in the years before the war. A look through the generally adventurous Queen's Hall Promenade Concert programmes in the autumn of 1913 shows the Royal College to be impressively overrepresented: in one season audiences could hear works by Stanford, Walford Davies, Vaughan Williams, Landon Ronald, Thomas Dunhill, Frank Bridge, Harry Keyser, Eugene Goossens and Coleridge Taylor—all either teachers or alumni.

Three years after hearing Vaughan Williams's music ringing round the pillars of Gloucester Cathedral, both Gurney and Howells were enrolled at the College. The teachers there quickly found that Gurney was no ordinary student. He was enchanting and frustrating in equal measure.<sup>5</sup> Exceptionally talented, his ambitiousness could occasionally slip over into a naïve arrogance, which, coupled with his stubbornness, led to frequent clashes with his teachers. The compositions Gurney had brought with him from Gloucester showed great potential, but were really only charming, well-crafted Edwardian parlour pieces. How would an inexperienced, provincial boy with a general disregard for convention progress in the professional musical world?

He had written his juvenile piano and violin works for sisters Margaret and Emily Hunt, music teachers who lived close to the family's shop. They had practically adopted the lonely teenager, who was keen to escape from the frequent arguments at home, in search of music and inspiration. In turn, Gurney adored them. Imagining himself perhaps as a Brahms secretly serenading his Clara Schumann, he had written a piano waltz for Emily's birthday in 1918, with her initials as a musical monogram. There is no doubt that Emily meant a great deal to him, but it was always Margaret who inspired his most passionate devotion. The diminutive, dark-haired 'Madge' was his earliest muse, despite the sixteen years between their ages.<sup>6</sup> This was not a romantic relationship in the conventional sense. When Gurney visited Margaret during what was to be her final illness, he described her as a 'brave little woman', a phrase redolent of respect and deep affection, but not of a love affair. During the years in which he might have been considered to be in love with her, he did not feel it inappropriate to propose to two other girls and continue an almost daily correspondence with another older woman. If Margaret was indeed his 'love', then he loved her for providing him with an audience and beneficiary to whom he could direct his work, when his own family had neither time nor inclination to listen.



FIG. 1.3: Gurney at the piano, September 1905. © Gurney Trust.

The Gurney family home was not entirely devoid of music, however. There was a piano on which Gurney learnt, and both his father David and mother Florence sang in local choirs. Florence, always keen for social advancement, had insisted that all the Gurney children learn an instrument, but practising was a challenge; there was little opportunity for quiet in the parlour, and no music to study. The Hunt sisters provided both, and Gurney learnt a great deal from leafing through books of Schubert's Lieder at their Bechstein. Gurney soon aspired first to copy, then to rival Schubert.

On arrival in South Kensington, Gurney found the Royal College to be an elegant red brick affair, with a glass and iron portico and distinguished-looking miniature towers—a monument to proud Victorian prosperity. It nestles between Imperial College and the Royal School of Mines. Overlooking the Royal Albert Hall, it is surrounded everywhere by testaments to the Victorian penchant for the lavish and impressive. Behind the Albert Hall is Regent's Park, with the outrageously golden Prince Albert memorial. This was an area of London in which the very pavements



leaked confidence, and every new museum and academic establishment (largely funded by the triumph of the Great Exhibition) boasted artistic and intellectual achievement. It was, in short, the perfect destination for a young man with a clear sense of his own self-importance.

The College itself, whilst impressive, was then crammed into a site of only an acre. The limitations of the site necessitated building upwards, but there were no lifts. To get from lunch back to the organ room, Gurney had a climb of 186 steps. When he took up his scholarship, the College was still comparatively new, and proud of its illustrious beginnings (it had opened, in a flapping extravaganza of bunting, in 1894). In 1911 it was an exciting place to be. Moreover, it was dominated by two of the most influential men in musical Britain.

Sir Hubert Parry had long been established as the College principal, and was unanimously respected, and his colleague Sir Charles Villiers Stanford was the most eminent composition teacher in the institution. They were both to play a large part in Gurney's student life, and to take an interest in him far beyond that of an average undergraduate. Parry gave four lectures a term on music history, as an attempt to broaden the horizons of performers, who were often focused on their instrumental skills to the exclusion of all else. He was a farsighted and inspiring man, in favour of students 'talking wild', by which he meant the exuberant bandying about of big ideas, and thinking widely and ambitiously.<sup>7</sup> Gurney, who had wild talking down to a fine art, held an instant attraction for him, and the feeling was mutual. 'Sir Hubert is a great man.[...] He speaks with authority, not as one of the scribes', Gurney wrote.<sup>8</sup> The friendship was not simply deferential, but warmly affectionate: 'Sir Hubert, of course, was a darling.'<sup>9</sup> It was a popularly held view; Howells also revered him, and with good reason: Parry was to be generous enough to pay all Howells's substantial medical bills when he became dangerously ill with Graves' disease in 1916.

Two years younger than Gurney, Howells had also begun his life above a shop, although not in the cramped city centre. The Howells family lived in the Gloucestershire village of Lydney, surrounded by the Forest of Dean. Their home was larger than Gurney's, but Howells was obliged to share it with seven older siblings. His father's painting and decorating business had gone bankrupt, and like Gurney, Howells grew up impecunious. Howells's father played the organ in Lydney church at the weekends, and although he was not particularly proficient a musician, his enthusiasm led him to make regular musical expeditions with his son to churches and to Gloucester Cathedral. They would have seen Gurney, one of ten choristers, in his red cassock in evensong, or running at the flocks of overfed pigeons in the cathedral close, in Eton suit and mortarboard, black gown flapping behind him.

In 1909, at sixteen, Howells was to take his place as one of three teenage boys in the cathedral organ loft, where his friendship with Gurney began. With spectacular



incongruity, the third of their party was the young Ivor Novello. From their vantage point, Herbert and the two Ivors looked down on the choir and on Dr Brewer, a rather humourless man with a forbidding moustache, round spectacles and neatly swept back hair. As articulated pupils and later assistants, the three boys accompanied services and studied theory and harmony, and Howells quickly warmed to the gregarious, spontaneous Gurney. Whereas Ivor Novello (or David Ivor Davies as he was known then) was charming but prodigiously lazy, Gurney was positively bursting with ambition. He was also somewhat guileless, and his drive to better himself could sometimes brim over into boastful arrogance; a trait his friends forgave but which was guaranteed to challenge even the most amiable teacher. Brewer was not known for his amiability, and he did nothing to help Gurney with the next steps in his fledgling career. When Gurney decided against an organ scholarship to Durham University and announced instead that he wanted to try for the composition scholarship to the Royal College, Brewer chose not to use his personal friendship with Hubert Parry on his pupil's behalf, remarking grudgingly (and inaccurately), ‘why does he bother? He can get all he wants here.’<sup>10</sup>

Gurney was never going to be cut out for life in a provincial cathedral organ loft, and despite his outward appearance of a lack of faith in Gurney, Brewer knew that he was no ordinary pupil. He later admitted to Gurney's father that he would have been ‘proud if the music that Ivor had written was his.’<sup>11</sup> This was a generous admission, but Gurney's family was far from able to offer the financial and emotional support their son needed in order to nurture such a talent. Had he decided to help, Brewer could have been an influential and powerful supporter of his young student. It took Gurney's godfather, Alfred Cheesman, to step in with financial assistance to make it possible for Gurney to study in London. Canon Cheesman had become Gurney's godfather by default when David and Florence had brought baby Ivor to their local church to be baptised by him but had omitted to bring a sponsor. In lieu of any other options, Cheesman volunteered himself. It was a stroke of great serendipity for Gurney. Cheesman was a sensitive, educated man who lived alone among his poetry and botany books. He had travelled Europe and had the great distinction of an acquaintance with Rudyard Kipling. If Gurney's parents had tried, they could not have chosen a more suitable godfather than this genteel Victorian intellectual. As Gurney matured, he spent more and more time with Cheesman, listening in delight as he read to him from the great poets, and walking the country lanes together, pointing out the different species of flowers and birds. Gurney dearly loved his own quietly spoken father, with whom he shared his passion for the countryside, but through Cheesman he caught a tantalising glimpse of a world of education and culture that was alien to his own family.

As the teenage Gurney matured, so his relationship with Cheesman intensified. Despite the deep complexities and contradictions riven through his personality,



FIG. 1.4: Gurney's godfather, Canon Cheesman. © Gurney Trust.

Gurney had a great talent for friendship, and could be a hilarious and stimulating companion. He was eager to absorb what he could from those who would give him their time and wisdom, and was always sensible of the emotional and financial debts he was incurring. Cheesman procured the seventeen-year-old Gurney his very first paid job: as organist at nearby Whitminster church. Gurney was generous to a fault, when his limited means allowed, and in gratitude, he spent much of his first earnings on a book to give to his godfather: a copy of Ernest Rhys's *Fairy Gold: A Book of Old English Fairy Tales*. He inscribed it:

That he who loved Hans Andersen  
His trees and flowers, his sun and rain  
May remember tales from his childhood known  
And read with his childhood's heart again.  
Easter 1907.

A rather touching little rhyme, this is the first surviving evidence of Gurney's own inclination towards verse. It was an inscription aptly tailored for its recipient. Cheesman, like his young protégé, did indeed love trees and flowers, sun and rain;

and his reading reflected it. Cheesman’s library constituted Gurney’s first exposure to literature, and books on nature and botany far outweighed any other category. Gurney browsed titles such as *The Plant-Lore and Garden-Craft of Shakespeare, Our Woodlands, Heaths, and Hedges* and *The Rivers and Streams of England*. In his own copy of Helen Milman’s *In the Garden of Peace*, Cheesman had written:

How much more lovely & worthy of love flowers are than human beings . . . If I had been the Creator, I think I would have given the flowers immortal souls, rather than to men.<sup>12</sup>

Under Cheesman’s influence, Gurney was brought up on a diet of literary flowers.

Gurney shared his love ‘of natural things and simplicity’ with Cheesman, and when he had taken leave of him to move to London, it became a close bond between Gurney and Howells, two Gloucestershire scholarship boys a long way from the countryside of home.<sup>13</sup> Gurney and Howells also shared a fierce sense of ambition. They were both blessed with ability in abundance, but only Howells had a clear sense of how to make use of his gift. As soon as he reached South Kensington, he began to establish himself as a model student, building a reputation that would secure his place firmly within the establishment. In Howells, Gurney found both a lifelong rival and someone for whom he had sincere and deep affection. The origins of their relationship were bound up in his memory with the magisterial Gloucester Cathedral. The little dominion of the organ loft had been the setting for their burgeoning friendship; and the fabric of the cathedral, with its constantly changing light and shadows, formed the backdrop to their early years together.

Howells recalled an incident in which Gurney had been so inspired by the light filling up the east window of the cathedral that he had sprung down from the organ loft, exclaiming, ‘God, I must go to Framilode!’ (a picturesque little village on a bend of the River Severn), and subsequently vanished for three days. This was not even particularly remarkable. He would frequently disappear from home with no explanation, which, understandably, his family found somewhat disturbing. His sister Winifred recognised that

The truth was, he did not seem to belong to us and he had so many intellectual friends who recognised his gifts and who encouraged him in every way, that we really did not attain his standards or understand his genius. It was only when I learned from outsiders of the high opinion people had of him, did I realise that he was outstanding—and that was how we, as a family had to regard him. He had so many homes to spend his time with friends, that he simply called upon us briefly and left again without a word.<sup>14</sup>

Rather than being inspired by Howells’s example, the teenage Gurney in fact led the way in their fledgling compositional careers. He was the first of the two friends



FIG. 1.5: Gurney and Howells together. © Gurney Trust.

to begin to write, with two songs written in 1904 when he was fourteen, along with seven piano pieces, organ works and settings of Rudyard Kipling's poems 'Who Hath Desired the Sea' and 'Mandalay' already to his name.<sup>15</sup> In total, he had been writing for four years by the time Howells began to compose, and his example may well have helped to nudge Howells into attempting more than the odd hymn descant or psalm chant. Whilst Howells experimented with 'Four Romantic Piano Pieces' and a 'Marching Song', Gurney was writing violin pieces for the Hunt sisters: a 'Romance' for violin in 1909, along with a 'Folk Tale' for violin and piano—an unexceptional, pleasant little piece in compound time, beginning 'plaintively and simply', with a whispered, lilting quaver pattern in the violin, and a lightly textured piano accompaniment.

Howells made a tentative foray into song composition with a setting of Robert Louis Stevenson, but Gurney was already ahead of him, and developing a particular

affinity with song. He found inspiration in the Elizabethan poet Robert Herrick’s ‘Passing By’, and A. E. Housman’s ‘On Your Midnight Pallet Lying’ in 1907. He also set five poems by the recently deceased W. E. Henley (another Gloucester poet) in the spring of 1908, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘The Crown’ in May 1909. These songs are charming, textbook creations, relying on circles of fifths, and with little or no hint of the harmonic adventurousness of his later work. Chromaticism, when it is present, as in Henley’s ‘Gulls in an Aëry Morrice’, is decorative, rather than destabilising, although this is one of the first works in which he establishes what would become a penchant for juxtaposing remotely related keys. There are even hints of the stylistic world of Ivor Novello in the Henley setting ‘Dear Hands, So Many Times’, and it is fun (if rather fanciful) to imagine the two Ivors vamping away, swapping musical ideas in the organ loft or at the piano in the choir room.

From his earliest attempts at composition, Gurney knew he did not want to limit himself solely to songwriting. Between 1910 and 1911 he wrote what was probably his first orchestral piece: Coronation March in B flat. It was a competent, conservative work, owing a debt to Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance* marches. Despite the work being intended as a triumphant coronation piece, Gurney gave it a rather inappropriately subdued quotation from *The Merchant of Venice*: ‘Then, if he lose, he makes a swan-like end, Fading in music.’

King Edward VII had died on 6 May 1910, and the coronation of George V had taken place on 22 June 1911. The music for the coronation service in Westminster Abbey was chosen by the Abbey’s organist, Frederick Bridge. The service was a feast of English composers, from Orlando Gibbons and Thomas Tallis to Charles Stanford, Edward Elgar and Hubert Parry’s anthem *I Was Glad*, which he had written for Edward VII. The Worshipful Company of Musicians ran a competition for composers to write a march for inclusion in the celebrations. Despite some two hundred entries, they decided not to award a prize, much to Gurney’s disappointment. But the competition had given him the incentive to experiment with orchestral writing, and the opportunity, in fantasy at least, to picture his music being heard alongside the great names of English music. Beginning his studies at the Royal College in daily contact with the great Dr Parry meant that he was one significant step closer to realising his dream.

On the whole, Gurney was on better terms with his teachers at the Royal College than he had been with Dr Brewer at the cathedral. Sidney Waddington taught him harmony and counterpoint, and Walter Alcock oversaw his organ studies. Howells considered Alcock one of the greatest organists in the country, and as assistant organist at Westminster Abbey he was to have the unique privilege of playing for three coronations.<sup>16</sup> He was an endearing figure; when he left the College for the organ loft of Salisbury Cathedral in 1916, he built a model railway in his garden and let the choristers ride on it. Gurney also had lessons with the gentle and undemanding

Charles Wood, and the composer Sir Henry Walford Davies, who was at the height of his prolific career and held the post of director of music at the Temple Church on The Strand.<sup>17</sup> Gurney was scathing about Walford Davies's work, with a superiority that was the least likeable side of his character:

Could you possibly let me have a look at Walford Davies' Violin Sonatas next term, and early? I have fell designs on a V.S. and the pleasant consciousness of superiority which those Sonatas would probably give me, might be in the highest degree valuable.<sup>18</sup>

Gurney took classes in German as a second study alongside piano and organ, an obvious choice at that point as the College was steeped in the influence of Brahms and Beethoven, but not such a popular option by 1914. The formidable Stanford, Gurney's principal composition teacher, was to be his most formative influence. With his walrus moustache, Stanford was an eminent Victorian in a proud Victorian institution. He had a sense of inheritance and entitlement—he had been the organ scholar at Trinity College, Cambridge, and had come from a well-off Irish family. He gave the impression, with some justification, of owning the College, as at the age of twenty-nine he had helped to found the institution with Parry. He was sure of himself and not particularly inclined to be flexible, which made for some challenging encounters with his equally stubborn and opinionated pupil. He and Gurney fought from the start.

Stanford's pupils were divided about the benefits of his teaching; Sir Arthur Bliss later recalled Stanford having a 'devitalising effect' on him.<sup>19</sup> But there is no doubt that Stanford was a major figure in English music, and a great teacher, for those who responded to his methods. He insisted on 'sound craftsmanship, economy and clarity of thought and self-criticism.'<sup>20</sup> His rule was authoritarian, but he did allow pupils to write whatever they wanted, once they had cut their teeth on a year of Palestrinian counterpoint and modes.<sup>21</sup> Howells got on with him famously, which was perhaps rather predictable, whereas the more problematic Frank Bridge, who had studied with Stanford and now taught at the College himself, unflatteringly described his 'years in the nursery' with Stanford as like 'imbibing water through a straw instead of Glaxo and Bovril'.<sup>22</sup> Even the humble and amenable Vaughan Williams found that Stanford made him feel that he was 'unteachable'.<sup>23</sup> Both Bridge and Vaughan Williams were great technicians, and, like Gurney, recognised the importance of a sound musical grounding. It would be easy to assume from Gurney's battles with his teacher that he was ill disciplined or too truculent to be educated. This would not be entirely fair. It is more likely that Stanford had a somewhat 'devitalising effect' on many of the young composers who came under his tutelage in the last decades of his teaching career, particularly if they felt they wanted to establish a new musical voice that did not fit with his famously narrow views of what was musically acceptable, and what was beyond the harmonic pale.



Gurney respected him, despite their troubled relationship. He knew him to be a great man, and later wrote that Stanford was a ‘born poet.’<sup>24</sup> Both Stanford and Parry revered the great German Romantics, and all composition students were obliged to study Beethoven and Brahms. Gurney was perfectly capable of rejecting Stanford’s very considerable musical prejudices, but his own musical tastes were to remain largely within the idiom of his teacher’s, and he was to turn to Beethoven repeatedly in later years. However, Gurney’s music would later explore a chromaticism to which a horrified Stanford would have liberally applied his infamous red pencil. Benjamin recalled Stanford’s harmonic ‘bigotry’, as he termed it:

Those of us who, having indulged in a ‘spice’ of modern harmony, were not angrily ejected from his room, were considered by our fellows, after all, mere fogeys. Displeased, Stanford would foam with rage, stab viciously with his pencil at an offending chord, point to the door with a long arm and utter the command: ‘Leave the room, me bhoy, and don’t come back till ye can write something beautiful!’<sup>25</sup>

Despite Stanford’s best efforts, his young pupils’ harmonic explorations continued regardless, and Gurney, Bliss, Howells and Benjamin all explored new musical territory. As Gurney’s confidence grew, his work began to embrace both beauty and eccentricity in equal measure, and he built on the forms and textures he had learnt from Schubert, Brahms and Beethoven’s songs and chamber music, rather than considering his conservative training a hindrance.

Gurney began his studies with Stanford in May 1912. With the £40 scholarship that he had been awarded, and a further £40 from Cheesman, he was able to pay the rent on a modest flat in Fulham and have a very little to spare. The paint was peeling from the walls, and the light shades were dingy and torn, but Gurney, in true student style, pinned up pictures from magazines to brighten the rooms, and filled what little space he had with piles of books. London might have seemed a vast and potentially overwhelming place for a country boy who was more at home in the daffodil meadows and hills of Gloucestershire than suburban London. But he had Howells to remind him of his roots, and he spent much of his time in the company of his greatest friend, the Gloucestershire poet Will Harvey, with whom he could talk about the landscape he loved, in its absence.

Their friendship began in 1908, when, sitting on a tram in Gloucester one day, Gurney had recognised the stocky, thick-set young man in spectacles opposite him. It was Frederick William Harvey, who had overlapped with him at the Cathedral School for two years. Theirs was to become the closest and most intense friendship Gurney would ever experience. Although they had barely been acquainted at school, Gurney already knew Harvey’s younger brother Eric well, as they had been choristers together. It was enough common ground for him to strike up a conversation





FIG. 1.6: F. W. (Will) Harvey. Reproduced with kind permission of the Anthony Boden Private Collection, published in *F. W. Harvey: Soldier, Poet* (Phillimore & Co., 2016).

with Will. It did not take them long to find they shared a passion for music and literature, and so, quite by chance, each discovered a kindred spirit. At the time of the meeting, Gurney was serving out his rather torturous apprenticeship with Brewer in the organ loft, and Harvey was reluctantly studying to be a lawyer in an office overlooking the cathedral, so it was easy for them to fall into each other's company, and offer some mutual comfort. Harvey was more than happy to escape from his office into the countryside, and Gurney was delighted to have a walking companion, especially one who wrote poetry about the landscape he loved.

Will Harvey was full of charisma and charm: an eloquent and witty conversationalist, and a natural performer. But each saw in the other something darker that they tacitly understood. Harvey had a self-destructive streak, a carelessness regarding his own safety and well-being, and Gurney recognised like for like.<sup>26</sup> He was later to describe it as Harvey's only flaw, calling it introspection, or self-absorption; a curse he himself understood well, along with the misery it could cause. Both boys would grow into adulthood seeking the serenity and peace that continually eluded them. It was to be the bond that would elevate their friendship to something more than companions with shared interests. Both possessed a sensitive, artistic nature, but it was through their various struggles to write, or to stave off depression, that each truly understood the other.

Harvey lived in a Georgian farmhouse called The Redlands, in the village of Minsterworth. He came from a family of farmers and grew up surrounded by pigs, cattle and poultry. The Redlands was a beautiful spot, with large gardens and an orchard in which Gurney helped to pick apples. Will Harvey’s childhood was nothing short of idyllic, and friendship with Harvey offered the perfect rural home life that Gurney craved. Harvey was Gurney’s first real contact with a living poet, albeit a young, burgeoning one, and it was as a writer that he made the greatest impression on the adolescent Gurney. Gurney read Harvey’s work, discussed his poems with him, and began to gain confidence from the fact that even a humble boy from Gloucester might aspire to see his verse in print. If Harvey could do it, then so could he; and as his affection for Harvey grew, so he felt the first stirrings of a fruitfully competitive relationship with his new friend. Harvey’s poem ‘Ducks’ is one of his finest and frequently included in poetry anthologies. It begins:

From troubles of the world I turn to ducks,  
Beautiful comical things  
Sleeping or curled  
Their heads beneath white wings  
By water cool,  
Or finding curious things  
To eat in various mucks  
Beneath the pool,<sup>27</sup>

‘Ducks’ exemplifies Harvey’s whimsical light touch at its best. Much of the rest of his work was written for popular appeal. His verse is humorous, often touching, as might be expected from the pen of a sensitive, perceptive man. Over the course of the following years, Gurney realised that Harvey’s work, even in maturity, was limited. At the same time, he respected Harvey’s talent and maintained that at his best, his work could rival the best of his generation.<sup>28</sup> This pleasant, accessible poetry would exert a huge influence over Gurney at the start of his journey as a poet, before he had discovered the far greater possibilities that the work of Walt Whitman, Edward Thomas and Gerard Manley Hopkins offered him, and was able to take his own poetry into territory that left his friend far behind.

Many of the interests and poetic ideas that were to become trademarks of Gurney’s verse were encouraged and moulded by Harvey’s example. He passed on to Gurney his interest in all things Roman; a passion easy for Gurney to cultivate in the historic Gloucestershire landscape, peppered with Roman settlements. Harvey was a stickler for personal discipline, and Gurney also grew to find that order and routine were essential to his health and creativity, although he could rarely achieve the levels he required to function. In short, Harvey and Gurney were temperamentally a perfect match. Both felt themselves observers, watching from the shadows and turning what they saw into music and verse. Harvey later described himself as

A thick-set dark haired dreamy little man  
Uncouth to see  
Revolving ever this preposterous plan—  
Within a web of words spread cunningly  
To tangle life—no less.  
(Could he expect success?)

Of life he craves not much, except to watch.

Being forced to act,  
He walks behind himself, as if to catch  
The motive:—An accessory to the fact  
Faintly amused, it seems,  
Behind his dreams.<sup>29</sup>

When Harvey failed his law exams, which came as a surprise to no one, he moved to London to start a six-month crammer course at Lincoln's Inn Fields. For a brief while, Gurney was actually ahead of his sophisticated friend, and in the unusual position of being able to offer *him* support. Harvey was utterly despondent. Publisher after publisher had rejected his poetry. He hated studying law, and his exam results did nothing to encourage him, but so far his literary ambitions had come to nothing, and he was left with no alternative. Gurney, however, was finding himself surrounded by young, vivacious and prodigiously talented musicians, amongst whom it was difficult not to feel inspired.

The camp and cheeky 'Benjee', otherwise known as Arthur Benjamin, a brilliant young pianist and composer from Brisbane, Australia, had started at the College three months before Gurney (in February 1911), and quickly became a close companion. Three years Gurney's junior, he was a bright, attractive boy, with dark hair swept to one side and a wide smile. His warm and generous personality was coupled with the supreme confidence of the child prodigy (he had given his first recital at the age of six). The result of such a spectacular childhood was an easy air of sophistication at which Gurney, whom Benjee found endearingly gauche, marvelled. He also had the luxury of a generous private income. Benjamin's comfortable digs in upmarket Bayswater were a far cry from Gurney's shabby lodgings.

When Howells came to join the group a year later, Benjamin was smitten. Howells looked like a little boy, terribly young and slightly built, with, as Benjamin observed, a 'beautiful head'.<sup>30</sup> He immediately asked Howells out to lunch; and so a friendship began, which for Benjamin at least, was far more than platonic. Benjamin and Howells, the one flamboyant and charismatic, the other serious and conscientious, in their different ways fitted perfectly into undergraduate life at the College. Gurney, just as musically gifted, combined his talent with a nature that pulled always

towards the chaotic; in his dress, his behaviour and his music. His was a personality that was uncontained and lacked both the capacity and inclination to conform.

In November 1913 the group of friends was joined by Arthur Bliss. Gurney's year was a bumper crop of interesting composers, with ambitions to match his own. Howells wrote a five-movement orchestral suite which he called *The B's* as a celebration of their friendship. It was a deftly orchestrated, ambitious answer to Elgar's *Enigma Variations*; a tribute to an extraordinarily talented group of young men, rendered all the more poignant by the fact that only months later they would be separated by war. Howells gave the overture of *The B's* his own nickname: Bublum. Gurney's movement, a lament (in itself an interesting choice), was dubbed 'Bartholomew' as Gurney's middle name was Bertie. Arthur 'Blissy' had a brief scherzo; there was a mazurka alias minuet for 'Bunny'; and the final movement, an exuberant march, was 'Benjee', dedicated to the flamboyant Benjamin.

The dedicatee of the penultimate movement was a friend to whom Howells was particularly devoted. Francis Purcell Warren (affectionately known as 'Bunny') was a quiet boy, whose understated charm and modesty made him a great favourite. He was an exceptional violinist and violist and had just begun to compose. He had only a handful of songs to his name: a beautiful little suite of miniatures for cello, a piano caprice, the adagio of a cello sonata and a string quartet. When Bunny was killed on the Somme in 1916, Howells poured his grief into an elegy in his memory.<sup>31</sup> In the years preceding the war, however, there was little more to worry about than whether Stanford would approve of their latest compositional offerings. The friends shared their work and their leisure time, experiencing as much of London life as they could afford, visiting bookshops (a particular passion of Gurney's), accompanying each other to concerts, and vociferously sharing their opinions of the new works they were discovering.

Gurney's contemporaries found his combination of unpredictability, naivety and enthusiasm compelling, and many of the friendships he made at the College were to be lifelong. But the institution itself had not been designed to foster sociability. There were no communal spaces and no sports clubs. In 1905 the RCM Union had been founded as a central focus for students' social lives, and the *RCM Magazine* first appeared in the Christmas term of 1904, aimed at instilling a sense of identity and unity amongst the students. It would later be one of the first publications to print Gurney's poetry. Alongside negotiating lesson timetables and finding their way around the maze of stairs and corridors, signing up for the Union was one of the jobs for first years in Freshers' Week. Gurney duly did so, and was interviewed by a quietly spoken, genteel violinist in her thirties. Her name was Marion Scott.

Scott had first seen Gurney walking in the corridors, and, if not love, it was certainly fascination at first sight. He was a striking figure and instantly intrigued her.



FIG. 1.7: Marion Scott. © Gurney Trust.

The romantic terms in which she would later cast her first impressions of him are as revealing as the details she recalls:

The boy was wearing a thick, dark blue Severn pilot's coat, more suggestive of an out-door life than the composition lesson with Sir Charles Stanford for which (by the manuscript tucked under his arm) he was clearly bound. But what struck me more was the look of latent force in him, the fine head with its profusion of light brown hair (not too well brushed!) and the eyes, behind their spectacles, were of the mixed colouring—in Gurney's case hazel, grey, green and agate—which Erasmus once said was regarded by the English as denoting genius.<sup>32</sup>

Scott lived a quiet, single life with her parents in their respectable Kensington home. This unpredictable and exciting young composer was to become the centre of her world. Her devotion to him was unswerving, and her practicality and generosity were to prove invaluable to him in the coming years.

Straitlaced, and with her parents' zealous passion for causes (the family were advocates for abstention), Scott took life rather seriously. With intelligent dark eyes

and long hair wound in a bun, her appearance had something of a pre-Raphaelite quality. She was petite, dark and attractive, in many respects rather like the music teacher Margaret Hunt whom Gurney had left behind in Gloucester. Scott was intellectual and, like many academic women of her generation, had to create her own opportunities. She knew how to make things happen, how to work publicity for her own ends, and was driven by a strong sense of ambition and determination. She had studied composition alongside the violin at the College, and had been one of Stanford's first female pupils at a time when the College was so new it still smelt of fresh paint. She failed to make much impression as a professional violinist but became known as an editor and musicologist as well as an advocate for struggling female musicians. At the point at which she first met Gurney, Scott was becoming a well-known figure in the London musical world, and her musical journalism later became widely respected. Her true legacy, however, would lie in the work she did on behalf of Gurney as the curator and preserver of his manuscripts, and as his supporter and friend.

Her personal life was marked by disappointment. She devoted herself to the men she cared for, whether or not the relationship was physical, and found it hard to recover from her disappointment if they did not return her affections. Gurney was not the first scholarship composition student to whom she had become passionately attached. The composer Ernest Farrar, a reserved, gently spoken Yorkshireman, had until recently been her recital partner. It was a relationship based on practical music-making, but for her, it was a passion that went far beyond the love of music. When, in January 1911, Farrar told Scott the news of his engagement to another woman, he was bemused to find that she was mortified, and had resolved never to speak to him again. She succeeded, as after seven years of estrangement from Scott, he was killed almost as soon as he entered the trenches in 1918. It was in the spring of 1911, only a few months after Farrar's announcement of his engagement, that the lonely and embittered Scott encountered the new scholarship boy in the corridors of the College.

There were thirteen years between Gurney and Scott, but Gurney had already established his penchant for seeking out the friendship of older women with his devotion to the Hunt sisters, and Scott was an obvious successor to Margaret and Emily.<sup>33</sup> From his teenage years onwards Gurney was to crave sympathetic maternal figures, compensating perhaps for the inadequacies of his actual mother. The earliest surviving photographs of Gurney's mother Florence capture a young woman with an expression that suggests a sense of vision and optimism, despite the restrictions of artificial posed photographic portraiture. The mother Ivor knew bore little resemblance to these early images. As the years passed, Florence had grown into a severe and disillusioned woman, whose thin face was uncompromisingly unsmiling. Her husband David was far gentler in appearance, a genial Victorian





FIG. 1.8: Gurney's mother, Florence, c. 1915. Courtesy of Noel Hayward, from the photograph album belonging to Dorothy Gurney.

gentleman, 'properly' placed in the period's own social hierarchies, and with a slight resemblance to Edward Elgar. But Florence was not a woman who embraced life and all its challenges, and the larger her family grew, the more the demands overwhelmed her.

Florence thought of herself as superior to the Gurneys' working-class relatives, but the family had little money to show for it, and finances were a constant worry. The family was very isolated, but needlessly so. With a father who was one of seven, they were surrounded by local cousins, but Florence forbade Ivor and his siblings from fraternising with most of their relatives. Her intense sense of pride and snobbery made it unthinkable for her to associate with builders, who were further down the social ladder than tailors, and so the Gurney children were obliged to maintain a haughty distance. David was too dreamy and casual to be left in charge of money, so it was Florence who ran the business accounts. She managed to keep the family out of debt, but there was very little to spare. One Christmas, when finances were particularly critical, David tried to maintain some semblance of jollity by playing Father



Christmas and filling the children’s stockings with a penny, an orange, a Brussels sprout, and a potato—the full extent of their presents that year—only to be attacked by his wife for his extravagance.<sup>34</sup>

As a child, Gurney was already aware of his mother’s limitations, and her humourlessness and histrionics meant that she was a prime candidate for affectionate teasing. When at mealtimes he was about to be admonished for refusing to eat his food, he would anticipate her catchphrase in an exaggerated parody: ‘*Ah! There are lots of little boys in London who would only be too glad to eat it!*’ Winifred remembered that their mother would smile at this, in spite of herself. On other occasions, when Florence was too furious with the children to catch her breath to threaten and scold them, Gurney would pipe up on her behalf, slowly and deliberately and with the *h*’s well aspirated: ‘I shall *hit* you on the *head* with a *hammer*’, reducing his brothers and sisters to fits of laughter, and outraging his mother yet further.<sup>35</sup>

Gurney was a quick-witted, humorous and ebullient child, and he soon became conscious that he was a misfit in his emotionally restricted family. He loathed conflict and antagonism, and as he grew older he chose to absent himself at every opportunity rather than stay for an argument. He could not bear the tense atmosphere of repressed grievances that dominated the household. Whenever his father tried to intervene between Florence and her children, he exacerbated the situation, and Gurney realised that the only way for him to find any peace was to avoid the family as much as possible. When cornered, he would take up an armful of books and disappear, either into the hills or to the comforts of his godfather’s library and the Hunt sisters’ music room.<sup>36</sup>

His adult friends had been his refuge and support through his teenage years, and it was natural that when in London he would seek an equivalent to the Hunt sisters. He needed someone to lavish attention and adoration on him, and Scott was prepared to provide both in abundance. She made herself invaluable to Gurney, moulding her life around his. She became involved in his circle of friends at the College, and later befriended the Hunt sisters back in Gloucester. Her relationship with Howells was particularly intense, to the point of infatuation. She wrote to him pleading repeatedly for him to visit her, but her keenness was not reciprocated. However much she might have invested in her relationships with Howells and ‘Benjee’, it was Gurney who really needed her and to whom she would remain truly devoted.

She was less than impressed with the Fulham ‘slums’ where Gurney dwelt among the great unwashed.<sup>37</sup> But Gurney had grown up in dark, cramped rooms, and unlike Marion, he was no snob. He was able to find enough beauty in Fulham, taking evening walks around the neighbourhood when he needed a break from work. His flat was on a pleasant enough street; part of a row of Victorian terraced houses set in a tree-lined avenue. He was near the railway, but on the other side of the track were large fields, so even in the metropolis he had some sense of space. It reminded him

of home; and in some respects was much like the townhouse he had left back in Gloucester, which overlooked a busy street, but with fields only a short cycle ride beyond, visible on the horizon. He would sit at his London desk, looking out at the shadowy shapes of the plane trees outside his window, and work late into the night at harmony and counterpoint exercises. There were moments when both he and Howells missed Gloucester with an intensity that was almost physical pain. When things got really bleak, Howells would go to Paddington station, not to travel, but only to watch the trains departing for the southwest, imagining them passing through the landscape he loved. He did not have enough money for a ticket.

This was a brave new world for the two provincial scholarship boys, and they were certainly not pining all the time. The London cityscape inspired Gurney in new ways. Initially he found that the stalls on the North End Road were a good term-time substitute for the bustle of Gloucester's market, 'Flaring with many a coloured stall / Of apples and oranges decked-out.'<sup>38</sup> But as the weeks in London passed, he became increasingly jaded. Then he would long for the serenity of the Gloucestershire countryside and imagine himself tramping the hard winter roads in deep morning frost, or sailing his little boat down the River Severn as the waves lapped at the rushes on the banks. Once home, he used his walks to develop the musical ideas he had had in London, planning big projects for the next term, and discussing them in animated conversation with Cheesman and the Hunts. He still relied on them for their friendship, but as the terms progressed, the distance between their amateur music-making and the standards to which he was now accustomed became more apparent. He was conscious he had begun to outgrow them, and by the end of the holidays he was restless to return to the College again.

Gurney was full of excitement at the musical possibilities London had to offer, and secure in the sympathetic and stimulating friendships he had made in his first few terms as a student. He had soon written a handful of songs. One of his very first offerings for Stanford was a setting of a text by Ethna Carbery called 'Song of Ciabhan', written in June 1911. Perhaps he thought he might appeal to Stanford's fiercely patriotic feelings for Ireland. There is no record of Stanford's reaction to any specific piece by Gurney, but he would have been churlish not to be impressed—the song was good enough for publication by Oxford University Press (although Gurney did not see it in print in his lifetime).<sup>39</sup> For his next ventures Gurney turned to the poet Robert Bridges, whom he had already begun to set to music in 1908. Now he composed 'I Praise the Tender Flower' and 'I Love All Beauteous Things' in June, alongside 'Fate' by Francis Brett Harte (written in the summer term of 1911 and revised in 1912).

He also continued to develop his instrumental writing. Taking Brahms's sonatas as his model (he joked that Brahms was the one person he would want to take as his date to a dinner party), he tentatively had high hopes for his own violin sonata in G.

‘On second thoughts, perhaps my V.S. *won’t* be better than the Brahms. But who knows what the third thoughts may be?’<sup>40</sup>

By any standards, Gurney had made a promising start. He had even begun work on a string quartet (in A minor) in January, and managed to complete it in June, but by the summer of 1912 he had to admit that some kind of illness was starting to affect his work and make ‘all things gray.’<sup>41</sup> ‘The Young Genius does not feel very well and His brain won’t move as He wishes it to,’ he wrote to Scott.<sup>42</sup> It was to be the first manifestation of a lifelong pattern of moods that swung between crippling depression to periods of manic energy. Gurney assumed that his symptoms were due to a digestive problem or overwork. If he did suspect something more sinister, he did not voice his concerns in any correspondence, but these were in fact the first signs of a condition that would eventually claim his sanity entirely. For now, he knew only that something was very wrong, and he could do no more than follow his doctor’s orders and embark on a regime of exercise and recuperation. He affected a tongue-in-cheek, lighthearted tone when discussing his affliction. Although he must have been alarmed at his sudden incapacitation, a small part of him could also enjoy playing the role of the suffering genius and aligning himself with the tortured Romantic poets.

Gurney struggled on despite this first real taste of illness, and managed to finish his string quartet over the spring and summer terms of 1912.<sup>43</sup> Scott was keen to perform it with her all-female quartet that summer, but the premiere was not to happen until the winter of 1913, when it was played at a meeting of the Society of Women Musicians, as Scott was their chairwoman. Gurney’s depression tainted everything, even his feelings about the piece, which had initially been a source of great pride. ‘But oh, so sick of everything, and by no means looking forward to work. I will allow anyone to say anything against my Scherzo, my slow Movement even, which shows to what depths I have descended.’<sup>44</sup>

He might have been sick of work, but he was still as fiercely ambitious as ever. He had not yet written any vocal work larger than a song, but in 1912 he began to plan a cycle of operas, to be based on the short plays of W. B. Yeats. He was also entertaining the idea of a ‘Riders to the Sea’ opera based on J. M. Synge’s play. Ralph Vaughan Williams was to work on his own operatic version of the same text in 1925 (it may be that it was Gurney who had suggested the subject matter to him). Gurney never wrote his projected operas; he soon realised, as Stanford would doubtless have pointed out to him, that multiple operas were rather too ambitious an undertaking for an undergraduate still learning his craft, and he sensibly turned his attention to more realistic projects.

Gurney had already established his natural inclination towards poetry as a source of musical inspiration, but now, for the first time, he began to write his own poetry as well as music. It is not possible to know exactly when Gurney moved from

reading poetry to trying it himself, but in May 1912 he felt confident enough to send a poem, 'The Irish Sea,' to the popular political weekly the *Eye Witness*, in the hope of seeing his name in print. He also posted a copy of the poem to Harvey for approval. It was a daring first attempt; the *Eye Witness* sold over 100,000 copies a week. It was its editor, the 'Georgian' poet Hilaire Belloc, who had attracted Gurney. Both Gurney and Harvey were great admirers of Belloc's verse, and his 1902 memoir *The Path to Rome* was one of Gurney's favourite books.

Gurney longed to write the 'oldest kind of song' (as Belloc put it) about the River Severn and his native Gloucestershire. His abilities as a composer were developing fast, but he had by no means found the technique to achieve it in poetry, if 'The Irish Sea' was anything to go by.

The afterglow slid out of Heaven,  
Heavily arched the vault above,  
Then round my bows, and in my gleaming  
Wake, dim presences 'gan to move.

My boat sailed softly all the night,  
Through wraiths and shapes of mystery,  
But dawn brought once again to sight  
The friendly and familiar sea.<sup>45</sup>

It is an attractive, musical little poem, but there is little hint of the idiosyncratic, deeply personal tone that would resonate through his later work. The examples of Harvey and Belloc imprint themselves on this rather conventional verse, with a simple rhyme scheme that offers only a little hint of the experimental, Hopkins-influenced half-rhymes he would later use (here Gurney rhymes 'Heaven' and 'gleaming'). 'Squareness' and order were hallmarks of the Georgian poets, whose first, hugely successful collective anthology *Georgian Poetry* had been published in 1912, just as Gurney was beginning to think about writing his own verse. He devoured their work, and with the added influence of Thomas Hardy's short, orderly stanzas, it was inevitable that his early poems would be structured in a similar manner to his role models. As Gurney began to formulate his views on art, he drew repeatedly on the image of the four-square to describe symmetry and beauty in music, poetry and architecture (the square tower of Gloucester's St Peter's Cathedral, under whose shadow he grew up, was to be a recurring image). Gurney considered squareness as a metaphor for good structure and balance rather than a limitation, but he had yet to develop the skill to find a freedom and originality of tone within the restrictions of form.

The manuscript version of 'The Irish Sea' bears a hopeful if sycophantic annotation: 'Homage à Belloc' (Belloc was born in France). He paid a musical homage in

the form of an unpublished song setting of Belloc’s curious, swaggering poem ‘Heretics All’, written the same year (1912). It would have been a long shot for an unknown student poet to find immediate publication, and predictably perhaps, Belloc refused ‘The Irish Sea’ outright. It must have been expected, but still it was Gurney’s first, tentative attempt at making an impression on the poetry world, and he had failed. His fragile mental health was in no state to cope with a rejection from his hero, and the episode resulted in a ‘terrific attack of the blues.’<sup>46</sup> It was a major setback in Gurney’s efforts to include himself among contemporary poets. The first of a series of rejections which were to feed into a lowered sense of ‘faith’ in himself, it marked the beginning of a slow road of attrition of self-confidence and belief.

Gurney began to write and compose at a time in which British poetry and music were unequally matched. The ‘land without music’, which had only begun to rectify its reputation at the turn of the century, was beginning to find its musical identity with the help of only a handful of leading lights—Vaughan Williams, Parry, Stanford, Elgar and Holst. Whilst they forged ahead, building on scant foundations and fighting to emerge from the shadow cast by the musical achievements on the continent, British poetry had been enjoying a golden age. Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold and Tennyson had died just before Gurney was born, marking the end of the old school of Victorian poets. The new generation were free to reject or take what they chose from their work. Hardy and Yeats still reigned supreme, and the Edwardians Henry Newbolt and Alfred Austin provided a short-lived interlude in which Empire and poetry met and mingled with memorable but sometimes rather unsavoury results. Of the younger generation of poets, Rupert Brooke was just beginning to establish his reputation, Edward Thomas was still writing journalism rather than poetry by 1912, and Robert Frost was still waiting impatiently for recognition. It was an exciting time to be a poet. Gurney had already established that his creative impulse was the celebration and creation of beauty, with the contours of the hills of Gloucestershire etched into his soul. Now, in London, he had begun to cast around for models for his own embryonic poetry and found that the refreshingly simple imagery and direct syntax of the new Georgian poets offered a near-perfect match for the voice he wanted to develop.

There would be five volumes of *Georgian Poetry* anthologies published between 1912 and 1922, showcasing the work of Rupert Brooke, W. H. Davies, John Drinkwater, W. W. Gibson and John Masefield, among others. Gurney’s discovery of the Georgians was a moment of epiphany, his literary equivalent to hearing Vaughan Williams’s *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* back in 1910. Over the coming years, Gurney was to enjoy friendships with the poets themselves, and expand upon their work in his own poetry, sharing their interest in reflecting the pastoral and the urban in simple language and resonant, vivid verse. As a composer, Gurney could relate to language in a manner that was inaccessible to other poets. He

found the lyricism of the Georgians lent itself to song setting, and turned many of Gibson's, Masfield's and Brooke's poems into songs. This intense, creative engagement with others' work, interpreting it and inhabiting it from within, was perhaps the most fruitful way for Gurney to develop as a poet in his own right. He learnt to understand the rhythms of others' lines from within, developing and colouring them with musical nuance; augmenting and framing poems he admired by transmuting them into song.

To some writers and critics at the time, the Georgians were an anachronism, their style obsolete even as they wrote. But to Gurney they were gods. He had found his poetic soulmates, but by the winter of 1912, Gurney was still a long way from joining their ranks. His depression had entirely incapacitated him, and he was unable to write either poetry or music. Not even Scott's premiere of his quartet could revive him. There was one bright point in the wintry gloom, however; in February 1913 Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony* received its first London performance, and Gurney, Benjamin, Scott and Howells all had tickets.

I crawled out of bed to hear it, and afterwards went back for three days more—but it was worth it. A Third is Nonsense, but the other two thirds simply great.<sup>47</sup>

Three days at a time spent in bed was not sustainable during term time, and Gurney knew it could not continue. He managed to get himself out to Threadneedle Street in Piccadilly, to consult a Dr Harper. This was to be the first of a great many medical opinions on his condition, and it made a deep impression on him, largely because Dr Harper offered the advice he wanted to hear; he was to return to Gloucester to convalesce.

Recuperation above the shop with his impatient brother and neurotic mother was out of the question, so he arranged to stay as a self-catering guest in a cottage called The Lock House, by the junction of the Severn and the Stroudwater canal, at Framilode. It was owned by the lockkeeper, a marvellous old character called James Harris, whom Gurney adored.

That dark face lit with bright bird-eyes, his stride  
Manner most friendly courteous, stubborn pride,  
I shall not forget, not yet his patience  
With me, unapt, though many a far league hence  
I'll travel for many a year, [...] <sup>48</sup>

Gurney and Harvey had previously bought a leaky little boat from Harris for the princely sum of £5, and named it *The Dorothy*, after Gurney's sister.

this most treacherous and fine sailing  
Vessel of mine, so leaky—but never failing . . . <sup>49</sup>





FIG. 1.9: Gurney's sisters: Dorothy, the dedicatee of the boat, and Winifred (the older of the two). Courtesy of Noel Hayward, from the photograph album belonging to Dorothy Gurney.

The vigour of sailing, coupled with the serenity and simplicity of life with the lock-keeper, was the perfect restorative combination. Gurney's days were spent looking out at the constantly changing water, watching the wildlife and the passing boats during the day, and sailing when his health allowed it. In the evenings, he accompanied Harris to the pub and listened to the conversation that was so far removed from the world of books and music he had temporarily left behind. Life there could hardly have been more different from the daily grind of London studies.

Almost as soon as he had arrived, his mood had brightened. Writing from his bed, he was soon exhorting Scott to come sailing with him. Scott was herself frequently ill, and Gurney was evangelical on the delights of simple country life as a cure for almost any ailment: 'I have been here a week. And oh! What a difference. And oh! Framilode on good behaviour! What you want is sailing, I am sure. And if you came here I would give it you.'<sup>50</sup> Scott did not take him up on the offer, but he did manage to persuade Margaret and Emily Hunt to go out on a daring expedition with him. He took them from Framilode to Bollo Pool and back, and was delighted to see that, whatever secret anxieties they harboured about putting their lives in the hands of someone who prided himself on his dangerous sailing, they showed no outward signs of fear.



In the years to come, Gurney would often use poetry as a medium to reflect in meticulous detail on key events that had taken place years before, writing verse as a form of journaling. His time on the riverside was to be the inspiration for two poems, both entitled ‘The Lock Keeper’, written between 1918 and 1922.<sup>51</sup> Either would have been a highly respectable addition to any *Georgian Poetry* anthology. The 1922 version is a long, uneven ramble of a poem (only Gurney can get away with using the word ‘tentaculous’ twice), but its peculiar quality lies in its power of evocation, its honesty and earnestness. The poem cannot be rushed; it captures in its lengthy unfolding the slow progress of the convalescent student, as he relearns the unhurried pace of rural living. The natural rhythm of life by the river is built into the ebb and flow of the verse:

The lowering of the waters, the quick inflow,  
The trouble and the turmoil; characteristic row  
Of exits and of river entrances;

Finding beauty in the commonplace was a part of Gurney’s nature. By 1918, when this poem was published, he had learnt to translate his instincts into verse.

Gurney had left London with ambivalent emotions, however relieved he was to be escaping. He longed for the peace of the Gloucestershire countryside, but he felt his retreat to be a sign of weakness and berated himself for his inability to cope with cosmopolitan life. ‘Gloucester received me full of shame’, he later remembered. He was looking to regain not only his health but his self-confidence:

Boat sailing did save me I rushed life till self respect came, and the sweet  
air and blowing March tempest of Gloucester County  
gave me again first health;<sup>52</sup>

He resented the illness that had precipitated his stay, but quickly realised that the move to Gloucestershire was his salvation. He had pined for *The Dorothy*, and the exhilaration and freedom he felt when sailing her. He longed for ‘such joy as to see sails quiver’, ‘seeing the cleaving water before prow scatter, and the moving surface so wonderful like bright floors.’<sup>53</sup> This was a freedom forbidden to him when in London. He had even gone to the docks at Rotherhithe to try to replicate his Severn sailing, and petitioned a boat owner to sell him a craft, but without the £20 required to buy the cheapest one, a *Dorothy* equivalent for the Thames was out of the question.

It was not just the river that was significant in Gurney’s recovery. In his friendship with the lockkeeper James Harris, Gurney found an antidote to the rather negative influence of Stanford, the most dominant older man in his life at the time. Now Gurney could study the glorious secrets of ferret-keeping and the rhythms of the Severn instead of the rules of harmony and counterpoint. Both lockkeeper and composition teacher were experts in their respective fields, and Gurney admired their

compendious knowledge, but the two pedagogues represented a fundamental struggle between the opposite poles that tormented him. He had somehow to reconcile his craving for a simple, outdoors life with the torturous ‘book-poring’ of the intellectual. He was stuck in a double bind. His artistry stemmed from a desire to express his love of nature, but in order to be able to write well of rivers and hillsides in music and verse, he was obliged to spend years studying his craft. This sojourn by the river was quite literally a breath of fresh air, but it could not last. Gurney longed for the lockkeeper’s serenity and lifestyle, but he was always the observer, not the participant. For now at least, his place was back in London, under Stanford’s stern and unforgiving gaze.

His student years ought to have been the starting point from which the rest of his career would be launched. For the generation who were able-bodied students in 1914, a straightforward career was to be out of the question. But Gurney’s challenges were both personal and political. As he struggled to make relationships between two forms, and between his two identities as Gloucestershire lad and metropolitan intellectual, the war loomed as one of the most punishing obstacles ahead.

# Index

- Abercrombie, Catherine, xiv, 60  
 Abercrombie, Lascelles, xiv, 188, 447n69;  
     *Deborah*, 60  
 Ablaincourt Sector, 125  
 Adrian, Edgar, 212–14  
 ‘Ae Waukin O,’ 107  
 Aisne, 248  
 Albert: basilica and statue in, 103–5; basilica  
     and statue in (photograph), 104; I. G. at,  
     103–5, 107, 110, 259  
 Albert-Bapaume road, 103  
 Alcock, Walter, 13, 344  
 Aldington, Richard, *Death of a Hero*, 321  
 Allen, Hugh, 215, 227, 236  
 All Saints’ Church, Gloucester, 258  
 All Souls’ Day, 103  
 America, 119, 333  
 American Women’s Club of Baltimore,  
     Maryland, 332  
 Amiens, 122  
 Amiens Cathedral, 365, 366  
 Anderson, Edward William (Teddie), xv,  
     340–41, 347, 355, 456n12, 456n14  
 Anderson, Elizabeth Garrett, 283  
 Anderson, Louisa Garrett, 283  
 Anderson, Nicholas, 456n12  
 ‘Annie Laurie’ (Scottish tune), 128  
 Arkwright, Marion, ‘Through the Mist,’ 248  
 Armentières, 71  
 Armistice Day, 248  
 Armstrong, Herbert Rowse, 282–83  
 Armstrong, Mrs Katherine, 282–83  
 Arnold, Matthew, 27  
 ‘A-Roving,’ 145  
 Arras, 248, 370  
 Arras front, 141–42  
 Ashleworth, 188  
 Aubers Ridge, 85, 86, 431n75  
 Auden, W. H., ‘Roman Wall Blues,’ 103  
 Austin, Alfred, 27  
 Australian troops, 85, 86  
 Austria, 106  
 Bach, J. S., 60, 360; and Associateship Diploma  
     of the Royal College of Organists, 38; and  
     Buire au Bois camp, 144; as craftsman, 38;  
     and I. G. at Bangour General Hospital,  
     160, 167; and I. G. at Park House ‘A’ Camp,  
     57; and I. G. in trenches, 79–80; and I. G.’s  
     *Fantasy Quartett* in F minor, 333; I. G.’s  
     hallucination of, 193; as I. G.’s protection  
     against mental illness, 100; and I. G.’s  
     religious beliefs, 345; and F. W. Harvey,  
     60; influence of on I. G., 38; and Rouen  
     Cathedral, 136–37; works: A flat Prelude,  
     345; A major Prelude (book 2), 225;  
     cantatas of, 361; E minor Prelude, ‘The  
     Wedge,’ 225; G minor Prelude No. 16,  
     BWV 861 from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*,  
     75, 225; preludes and fugues of, 225; *The*  
     *Well-Tempered Clavier*, 225  
 Bailleul, 65, 71  
 Bainton, Edgar, 446n59  
 Bairstow, Edward, 344  
 Baltic, victory in, 370  
 Balzac, Honoré de, *Albert Savaron*, 451–52n17  
 Banfield, Stephen, 138  
 Bangour General Hospital (Edinburgh War  
     Hospital): I. G. at, 158–67, 352, 437n27;  
     Ragtime Ward at, 164; Ward 24 of, 159

- Bapaume, 107, 150  
 Barnett, T. Ratcliffe, 165, 166, 167; *Reminiscences of Old Scots Folk*, 165  
 Barnwood House Hospital, Gloucester, xv, 272, 281–82, 295, 302, 337, 338, 361, 370; defects of, 283; I. G. at, xv, 277, 281–93, 295, 297, 298; I. G. committed to, 278; I. G.'s diagnosis at, 284–86; I. G.'s escape from, 291–92, 301; photograph of, 282; site of, 281, 295; staff at, 286–88, 291  
 Bathurst, A. B. (Benny), 45  
 Bathurst family, 45  
 Bax, Arnold, 251  
 BBC, 336, 360  
 Beat Generation, 307  
 Beaumont, Francis and John Fletcher, 'Come You Whose Loves Are Dead,' 444n24  
 Beethoven, Ludwig van, 15, 190, 205, 306, 332, 335, 336, 358; I. G. and spirit of, xviii, xix, xx; I. G. as becoming, 316, 353, 354; I. G. as rewriting, 352, 457n32; and I. G. at Bangour Hospital, 163, 166, 167; and I. G. at Park House 'A' Camp, 57; and I. G.'s 'A Bit from My "Gloucestershire Rhapsody,"' 221; I. G.'s hallucinations of, 193, 203; and Royal College of Music, 14, 15; works: C major Razumovsky Quartet, 57; D major Piano Sonata, 166, 352; Piano Sonata no. 2, op. 2, in A major, 361; Piano Sonata no. 7, op. 10, no. 3 in D major, 352, 457n32; streichquartetten of, 210; three quartets written for Prince Rasumovsky, 332  
 Bellay, Joachim du, 'France, Mère des Arts, des Armes et des Lois,' 316  
 Belloc, Hilaire, xiv, 26–27, 94; *On*, 365; I. G. as becoming, 353, 354; and I. G.'s 'A Bit from My "Gloucestershire Rhapsody,"' 221; 'Heretics All,' 27; *The Path to Rome*, 26, 123; 'West Sussex Drinking Song,' 32  
 Benjamin, Arthur (Benjee), xiv, 335; in army, 50; and *The B's*, 19; character of, 18; enlistment by, 42; and I. G. on leave from army, 169; greatcoat of donated to I. G. by, 363; and I. G.'s admission to Stone House Hospital, 294, 296; and I. G.'s sexuality, 273–74, 286, 368; homo-sexuality of, 162–63; as prisoner of war, 152; and Marion Scott, 23; and Stanford, 15; and trip to Switzerland with Howells, 34; and R. Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony*, 28  
 Bennett, Arnold, 70  
 Berkshire Regiment, 85  
 Besançon, 451n17  
 Bethlem Hospital, 339  
 Bethune, 431n69  
 Bihecourt, 129  
 Bing Boys, 106  
 Binyon, Laurence, 77, 112; 'For the Fallen,' 113  
 Birdlip, 34, 119, 208  
 Blackfriars, 293  
 Black Watch, 83, 84, 161  
 Blevins, Pamela, *Ivor Gurney and Marion Scott*, 384  
 Bliss, Arthur, xiv, 14, 15, 78, 81, 175, 215, 321, 324, 342, 446n59; and *The B's*, 19; and Carnegie Trust, 251; *A Colour Symphony*, 270–71; enlistment by, 42; I. G. as contemporary of, 219; *Madame Noy*, 234; on outbreak of war, 41; at Royal College of Music, 19; and Marion Scott's 'Gloucestershire Evening,' 233; success of, 235  
 Bliss, Kennard, 81, 215  
 Bloomsbury intellectuals, 284  
 Blunden, Edmund, 83–84, 314, 327; and Cobden Sanderson, 266; and collection of I. G.'s poetry, 383, 384; on I. G.'s death, 381; I. G.'s meeting with, 245; and Hawthornden prize, 266; introduction to *An Anthology of War Poems*, 366; and *The Mercury Book of Verse*, 366; 'The Preservation of England,' 352; *Under-tones of War*, 321; 'When the Statue Fell,' 105  
 Board of Discharge, 208  
 Boar's Head, Battle of, 431n71  
 Bollo Pool, 29  
 'The Bonny Earl of Murray,' 199  
 Boosey and Hawkes, 426n22  
 Boswell, James, 305; *Life of Samuel Johnson*, 189–90

- Bottomley, Gordon, 457n33; *King Lear's Wife*, 353
- Boult, Adrian, 215
- Brahms, Johannes, 39, 192, 216, 367; and Allen, 215; I. G. as becoming, xx, 316, 367; I. G. as imagining self as, 6; I. G.'s essays on, 361; and I. G.'s *Five Elizabethan Songs*, 40; and I. G.'s preludes, 225; and I. G.'s violin sonata in E flat major, 218; and I. G.'s violin sonatas, 251; and Royal College of Music, 14, 15; works: Cello Sonata in E minor, 251; Fourth Symphony, 367; G major Sonata, 249; *Handel Variations*, 361; sonatas of, 24–25; violin sonatas of, 360
- Brancepeth, village of, 190
- Brancepeth Castle: I. G. at, 190–94, 246; photograph of, 191
- Brandhoek, 156
- Bredon Hill, 41
- Brereton, Frederick, *An Anthology of War Poems*, 366
- Brewer, Sir Herbert, xiv, 4, 13, 34, 227; appearance of, 9; and Bathurst family, 45; I. G.'s apprenticeship with, 16; and I. G.'s composition scholarship to Royal College of Music, 9; and Three Choirs Festival, 270, 271
- Bridge, Frank, 6, 14, 176, 446n59
- Bridge, Frederick, 13
- Bridges, Robert, 454n16; and I. G. at lunch with Masfield, 229; and *The Mercury Book of Verse*, 366; and Poetry Bookshop, 245; works: 'The Hill Pines Were Sighing,' 342; 'If Death to Either Shall Come,' 443n8; 'I Love All Beauteous Things,' 24; 'I Praise the Tender Flower,' 24; 'A Love Lyric,' 342; 'My Spirit Kisseth Thine,' 342; 'The Sea Poppy,' 443n8; 'Since I Believe in God,' 344–45; *The Spirit of Man*, 94–95, 97, 123, 128, 243, 342, 358, 444n25; translation of Virgil, 342
- Bristol Times*, 175
- British Legion, 378
- Brontë, Charlotte, *Villette*, 159
- Brooke, Rupert, 27, 113, 175, 177, 307, 447n69, 454n14; death of, 52, 147; and Elizabethan era, 241; I. G.'s imagined negotiation with, 121; I. G.'s settings of, 28; and I. G.'s *Severn and Somme*, 146; and I. G.'s 'To Certain Comrades,' 77; and I. G.'s 'To the Poet before Battle,' 175; mannerism of, 147; and Marsh, 257; and *The Mercury Book of Verse*, 366; and Steuart Wilson, 233; works: 'Clouds,' 257, 447n83; 'The Dead,' 427n61; 'Heart's Pain,' 257, 258; 'One Day,' 257, 258, 447n83; 'Peace,' 51–52; 'Safety,' 143; 'The Soldier,' 143, 427n61; 'Song,' 257, 258, 447n83; *Sonnets 1914*, 119, 142–43; 'There's Wisdom in Women,' 257, 258, 447n83; 'III The Dead,' 143; 'The Treasure,' 257, 258, 447n83
- Browcher, Captain, 238
- Browne, William Denis, 177
- Browning, Elizabeth Barrett, 'The Crown,' 13
- Browning, Robert, 27, 94, 128
- Brzeska, Henri Gaudier, 283
- Brzeska, Sophie, 283
- Bubb, William, 258
- Bude, I. G. as cinema pianist in, 257, 309
- Buire au Bois: I. G. as leaving, 150; I. G. at, 142–45, 250
- Buire au Bois camp, 143
- Bullen, A. H., *Lyrics from Elizabethan Song-Books*, 241, 244
- Burns, Robert: 'Tam O'Shanter,' 107; 'To the Haggis,' 107; 'To the Mountain Daisy,' 107
- Butterworth, George, 215, 228, 259–60, 375
- Butterworth, Sir Alexander Kaye, 259–60
- Byrd, William, 241, 265
- Byron, Lord, 83
- Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, 451–52n17
- Cagny, 141
- Calais, 70
- Cambrai, 248
- Campbell, Joseph, 446n55
- Campion, Thomas, xvii, 241; 'Come, O Come, My Life's Delight,' 240; 'Silent Music' ('Rose-Cheeked Laura'), 240; 'Thou Art Not Fair,' 240; 'Thrice Toss These Oaken Ashes Up in Air,' 240
- Canadian soldiers, 107

- Cannon Street Railway Bridge, 255  
 Carbery, Ethna, 'Song of Ciabhan,' 24  
 Cardiff, 293  
 Carey, Clive, 258, 445n46  
 Carman, Bliss, 226  
 Carnegie, Andrew, 446n59  
 Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, 137, 150, 251, 336, 446n59  
 Carn Naun, 213  
 Carrington, Charles, 78, 105  
 Caulaincourt, I. G. at, 128–29  
*The Chapbook*, 230, 245  
 Chapman, Arthur, xiv, 43, 177  
 Chapman, Catherine (Kitty), xiv, 43, 162, 177; I. G.'s proposal of marriage to, 43, 161–62, 177; photograph of, 178  
 Chapman, Edward, xiv, 43, 209–10, 240  
 Chapman, George, 265  
 Chapman, Marjorie (Micky), xiv, 43  
 Chapman, Matilda (La Comtesse), xiv, 43, 169, 178, 226, 235  
 Chapman, Winifred (Winnie), xiv, 43, 177, 215  
 Chapman family, xiv, 161–62, 177; and Freeman's 'Last Hours,' 245; I. G.'s friendship with, 252; and I. G.'s funeral, 378; I. G.'s visits with, 168–69, 226, 233, 240, 254; happiness and stable domesticity of, 236; at High Wycombe, 168–69; offer of adoption of I. G. by, 209–10, 240  
 Chappin, James, 434n47  
 'Charlie Chaplin's Walk,' 145  
 Chatto and Windus, 384  
 Cheesman, Alfred, xiii, 165, 192, 250, 359, 424n15, 444n13; financial assistance from, 9; I. G.'s early relationship with, 9–11; and I. G.'s finances, 15; and I. G.'s funeral, 376–77, 379; and I. G.'s life, 378; I. G.'s visits with, 24; photograph of, 10  
 Chelmsford (Danbury) training camp, 42, 45, 46–49, 50, 53, 54–55  
 Cheltenham, 221  
 Chesterton, G. K., 247; 'Wife of Flanders,' 113  
 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, 302  
 Chiswick, 301  
 Chopin, Frédéric, 166, 167, 225, 228; 'Funeral March,' 223  
 Christ Church, High Wycombe, 43, 226, 238, 254  
 Christ Church, Oxford, 344  
 Christian Science, 357, 358  
*Christian Science Monitor*, 313, 361  
 Churchdown, 83  
 Churchill, Winston, xiv, 257  
 City of London Mental Hospital. *See* Stone House Hospital, Dartford (City of London Mental Hospital)  
 Clare, John, 116, 204, 217, 327, 355, 449n8  
 Clark, Leonard, 384  
 Claudel, Paul, 99  
 Clifton Hill, St John's Wood, 223  
 Cluett, Frances, 133  
 Cobden Sanderson, 266  
 Cold Slad: I. G.'s cottage at, 237–40; I. G.'s cottage at (photograph), 237  
 Colvin Craters, German raid on, 81  
 Cooper's Hill, 188  
 Cornwall, 245  
 Cotswolds, 41, 221, 253, 347  
 Couch, Quiller, *Oxford Book of English Verse*, 241  
 County of Middlesex Lunatic Asylum. *See* Napsbury War Hospital  
 Courcellette, 107  
 Craiglockhart Hospital, 159, 437n27  
 Crickley, 34, 119, 208, 255, 329  
 Crickley Hill, 218  
 Curtis, Victor, 258  
 Cyriax, Dr, 326  
 Daily Chronicle, 52–53  
*Daily Mail*, 130, 368  
*Daily Mail* yearbook, 370  
*Daily Mirror*, 248  
*Daily Telegraph*, 41, 175  
 Darwin, Lady Florence, *Cotswold Plays*, 256  
 Davie, Donald, 452n18  
 Davies, Osmond, 336  
 Davies, Sir Henry Walford, 6; I. G.'s studies with, 14; Violin Sonatas, 14  
 Davies, W. H., 27, 64, 113, 174, 213; eccentric habits of, 235–36, 426n29; and *The Mercury Book of Verse*, 366; works: 'Cuckoo, he cries, and fills my soul With all that's rich and beautiful', 40;

- 'Dreams of the Sea,' 41, 426n29; *Foliage*, 426n25; 'The Moon,' 426n29; *Nature Poems*, 426n29; 'O Happy Wind,' 426n29; 'The Sea,' 82, 427n36, 428n5; 'The Wonder Maker,' 426n25
- Davis, Randolph, xv, 336–40, 341, 358
- Davis, Sergeant, 130
- Dawe, Dorothy, 137–39, 169, 194
- Day, Charlie, 309–10
- Dead Horse Copse, 86
- Debussy, Claude, *La Mer*, 225
- de la Mare, Walter, xiv, 246; and Goossens, 271; I. G.'s meetings with, 247, 254; introduction of for I. G.'s poems, 374; and Marsh, 257–58; and *The Mercury Book of Verse*, 366; and Poetry Bookshop, 245; works: 'Alexander,' 247, 445n47; 'All That's Past,' 445n47; 'Beware! (Exile),' 445n47; 'Bread and Cherries,' 445n47; 'An Epitaph,' 246–47; 'Farewell,' 445n47; 'The Ghost,' 445n47; 'Poor Henry,' 445n47; 'The Ruin,' 445n47; 'The Scribe,' 228, 246–47, 258; tribute of to I. G., 375; 'Winter,' 247
- Delaval family, 173
- Dickens, Charles, *Bleak House*, 449n6
- Dixon, Alfred Capel, 335
- Dolben, Digby Mackworth, 327
- Dover, 363, 364
- Dowland, John, xvii, 241; 'Fine Knacks for Ladies,' 240; 'I Saw My Lady Weep,' 240
- Drinkwater, John, 27, 245, 447n69
- Drummond, Annie Nelson, xiv, 161–64, 165, 167, 169, 176, 177, 186, 348, 448n15; and E. W. Anderson, 340; I. G. as transformed by, 185; and I. G. at Brancepeth, 191, 192, 194; and I. G. at Lord Derby's War Hospital, 196, 198; and I. G. at Napsbury War Hospital, 205–6; and I. G. at Stone House, 327; I. G. rejected by, 203; I. G.'s anxiety over loss of, 179–80; I. G.'s breakdown seen as caused by, 206; I. G.'s break with, 192, 194; I. G.'s fantasies around, 236; and I. G.'s flowers, 379; I. G.'s memory of, 239; I. G.'s *On Wenlock Edge* manuscript dedicated to, 239; and I. G.'s return to Seaton Delaval station, 188; and I. G.'s sexuality, 274; and F. W. Harvey, 217, 274; and Hawthornden prize, 266; infrequency of letters from, 178; marriage of and move to Massachusetts, 205–6; photograph of, 161; and 'Red Roses,' 246; and Marion Scott, 168; and *To Hawthornden*, 327
- Drummond, William (Drummond of Hawthornden), 327, 448n15
- Dryhill farm, Shurdington, I. G. at, 221–22, 235, 237
- Dumas, Alexandre, *The Last Cavalier*, 451–52n17
- Dunhill, Thomas, 6, 169, 233, 360
- Dunwich, 34
- Durham cathedral, 190
- Durham University, 9
- Dvořák, Antonín, 367
- Dymock poets, 255, 256, 447n69
- Dyson, George, Rhapsody No. 1 for quartet, 234
- Eaton, Gertrude, 317
- Edinburgh, 157, 158
- Edinburgh War Hospital, 159
- Edric, Robert, 310
- Edward VII, 13
- 11th Yorkshire regiment, 86
- Elgar, Edward, 13, 248; and British music, 27; and I. G.'s *Five Elizabethan Songs*, 40; and I. G.'s *Gloucestershire Rhapsody*, 220; and David Gurney, 22; and Three Choirs Festival, 270; works: 'Angel's Farewell,' 379; *Enigma Variations*, 19; *Pomp and Circumstance* marches, 13; *The Dream of Gerontius*, 79, 379
- Eliot, T. S., xix, 246, 267, 305, 452n18; *The Waste Land*, 264, 325
- Elizabethans, 13, 240–41, 249, 259, 304, 347, 348, 367
- Eltham, 366–67
- Elwes, Gervase, 176
- England, 88, 130, 351, 352
- Epping Forest, 49–51
- Erasmus, Desiderius, 20
- Estaires, 82
- Evans, T., 165, 166
- 'Everybody's Happy in the Old French Trench,' 145



- Ewell, 275; pensions hospital in, 274–75  
*Eye Witness*, 26
- Fane, Valentine, 457n15
- Farmer, John, ‘Who Would Have Thought That Face of Thine,’ 241
- Farrar, Ernest, 21, 215, 234
- Fauquissart: Moated Grange Sector of, 94, 96
- Fauquissart Sector, 69
- Ferguson, Samuel: ‘Cashel of Munster,’ 446n55; ‘The Darling Black Head,’ 446n55
- Ferris, Noel, 367
- Fifth Gloster Gazette*, 53, 117, 424n29, 428n69, 428n72
- 51st Scots Division, 107, 108, 110
- Finzi, Gerald, 96, 355–56, 374, 381–82, 383, 384, 443n42, 451n14
- Finzi, Joy, 384, 443n42, 447n67, 451n14
- 1/5th Battalion, Gloucestershire Regiment, xiii, 43, 46; casualties of, 57; and F. W. Harvey, xiii, 38, 42, 43, 183; and Seaton Delaval, 173
- Flanders, 63, 151, 290
- Flecker, Elroy, ‘Riouperoux,’ 101–2
- Ford, Ford Madox, 68
- Forest of Dean, 188
- 14th Yorkshire regiment, 86
- 4th Reserve Battalion, Gloucesters, 173
- Fox, Douglas, 50
- Framerville, 123, 124–25
- Framilode, xiii, 11, 28–29, 41
- Freeman, John, ‘Last Hours,’ 245
- French, Sir John, 58
- Fromelles, Battle of, 86
- Frost, Robert, 27, 256, 373, 447n69
- Fry, Elizabeth (née Gurney), 35
- Fry, Roger, 283
- Fulham, I. G.’s residence in, 15, 23–24, 32, 69
- Galley Wood, 49
- Gapennes, I. G. at, 113–14
- George V, 13
- Georgian Poetry* series, xiv, 26, 27, 30, 45, 46, 185, 240, 257, 261, 353, 457n33
- Georgian poets, xix, 26, 27, 28, 60, 112, 229, 243, 263, 264, 307, 347; and Blunden and Hutchinson collection of I. G.’s poems, 384; I. G.’s aspirations to join, 366; I. G.’s settings of, 245; and Shakespeare, 353; simplicity of verse of, 246
- Germans, 131, 152; and Albert basilica, 104, 105; and America, 119; and Aubers Ridge attack, 85; and Battle of Fromelles, 86; and Bihecourt attack, 129; at Colvin Craters, 74; destruction by, 127, 128; and gas attacks, 124–25, 153, 155; I. G.’s report of torture by, 286; F. W. Harvey as prisoner of, 97–98, 100, 139, 145, 152, 162, 163, 182, 184, 185, 209, 218, 229, 335, 359; and Hill 35, 152–53; raids by, 74; retreat of, 125–26, 129–30; and Rhodes, 114–15, 116; and Rouen, 140; and 2/5th Gloucesters’s stunts, 81–82; and Somme, 106; and Third Battle of Ypres, 152; threatened invasion by, 49–50, 63; trenches of, 69; and Ypres, 70
- Gibbons, Orlando, 13
- Gibson, Wilfrid Wilson, xiv, 27, 60, 113, 175, 263, 447n69; I. G.’s meeting with, 245–46; I. G.’s settings of, 28; works: ‘All Night Under the Moon,’ 246; ‘Black Stichel,’ 445n45; ‘Blawear,’ 445n45; ‘The Crowder,’ 246; *Friends*, 123, 177; ‘The Mugger’s Song,’ 445n45; ‘Old Meg,’ 445n45; ‘Otterburn,’ 246; ‘Pedlar Jack,’ 445n45; ‘Pity Me,’ 445n45; ‘Roses’ (setting by I. G. as ‘Red Roses’), 177, 246; ‘Sam Spraggon,’ 445n45; *Whin*, 246
- Glanville, Dr, 301
- Glazunov, Alexander, 360
- Gloster Gazette*, 98, 108, 139, 142, 321
- Gloucester, 4, 294, 331, 367; elver fishing in, 254; and I. G. at Napsbury War Hospital, 203, 205; I. G. in, 257; and I. G.’s ‘A Bit from My “Gloucestershire Rhapsody,”’ 221; I. G.’s friends living in, 255; and I. G.’s funeral, 379; and I. G.’s *Gloucester Play*, 350; as I. G.’s inspiration, 210; and I. G.’s Longford residence, 253; I. G.’s photograph shrine to, 91–92; in I. G.’s poems, 324; I. G.’s residence in, 24; I. G.’s return to after leaving Royal College of Music, 252; I. G.’s return

- to for convalescence, 28–29; I. G.'s string quartet inspired by, 233; I. G.'s writing about, 228; market of, 24; and Masfield, 87; pianist for silent cinema in, 238, 240; return of soldiers to from Agincourt, 351; streets of, 5; summer in, 142; and Three Choirs Festival, 33–34, 270, 383
- Gloucester Cathedral, xiv, 11, 92, 147, 210, 227, 270, 444n23
- Gloucester Cathedral School, 208; football team (photograph), 93; I. G. at, 3–4, 6, 8–9, 15–16, 92, 208; F. W. Harvey at, 15
- Gloucester Journal*, 175, 210, 264
- Gloucester Office of the Civil Service, 267–70, 271
- Gloucester Prison, 283
- Gloucestershire, 158, 327; birdsong of, 366; countryside of, xviii, 24, 33, 41, 121, 249–50, 253, 268, 290, 292, 294, 313, 314, 334, 366, 439n29; damage of war on landscape of, 59–60; and French landscape, 65; and I. G. at Lord Derby's War Hospital, 199, 200; and I. G.'s creative impulse, 27; I. G.'s final leave in, 58, 59–60; I. G.'s longing for in wartime France, 91–92, 93–94; I. G.'s love of, 238; I. G.'s memories of, 290; as I. G.'s mental talisman, 126; in I. G.'s poems, 327; I. G.'s projected writing about, 26; and I. G.'s return to Seaton Delaval station, 188; and I. G.'s settings, 249–50; and I. G.'s violin sonata in E flat major, 218; and history, 17; as inspiration, 89; landscape of, xviii, xix, 15, 17, 121; as lost to I. G., 208; and Napsbury War Hospital, 201; peace of, 30; and setting of Masfield's 'By a Bierside,' 97; wild strawberries of, 142
- Glover, James, 302
- Goossens, Eugene, xiv, 6, 270, 271; *Silence*, 271
- Grainger, Percy, 335
- Grandcourt, 105–6
- Grant-Smith, Rachel, *The Experiences of an Asylum Patient*, 307
- Graves, Robert, 324, 355, 454n14; and I. G. at lunch with Masfield, 229; I. G.'s meetings with, 245, 254; I. G.'s settings of, 239, 256; on sound of war, 68; works: 'Brittle Bones,' 443n8; *Country Sentiment*, 239; *Goodbye to All That*, 321; 'Good-night to the Meadow,' 443n8; 'Loving Henry,' 443n8; 'Nine of the Clock-O,' 443n8; 'Star Talk,' 359, 443n8
- Gravesend, I. G. and Marion Scott's trip to, 363
- Gray, Thomas, 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard,' 379
- Great Exhibition, 8
- Greeks, ancient, xx, 37
- Green, Topliss, 234
- Grenfell, Julian, 75, 113, 175, 454n14
- Grierson, Herbert, 241
- Guillancourt, I. G. at, 126
- Gurnard's Head, 213, 214
- Gurney, David (father), xiii, 328, 368; birth of, 35; brothers of, 35; character of, 21–22, 186–87; and Cheesman, 9; and children, 186, 187; and cricket, 92; death of, 222–23, 224, 271, 278; finances of, 22–23; and I. G. at Lord Derby's War Hospital, 201; and Gloucestershire landscape, 187; I. G.'s anxiety about, 187; and I. G.'s discharge from Napsbury War Hospital, 206–7; I. G.'s love for, 9, 92–93; and I. G.'s music ambitions, 207–8; illness of, 186, 207; and local choirs, 7; mother of, 35; music ambitions of, 208; and nature, 93; photograph of, 187; as tailor, 35; tailor shop of, 4, 5; working-class relatives of, 22
- Gurney, Dorothy (sister), xiii, 262, 424n36; at Barton Street home, 5; birth of, 423n3; and boat *The Dorothy*, 28; and I. G.'s discharge from Napsbury War Hospital, 207; and I. G.'s funeral, 378; and I. G.'s 'Waterloo,' 317; and Harvey family, 207; photograph of, 29
- Gurney, Ethel (sister-in-law), xiii, 275, 276–77, 383–84
- Gurney, Florence Lugg (mother), xiii; approval of, 121; authoritarian control by, 72; background of, 35; and beauty and environment, 89; character of, 21, 22; and Cheesman, 9; finances of, 22–23; and David Gurney's death, 223, 224; and David Gurney's mediation

- Gurney, Florence Lugg (mother) (*continued*)  
 with children, 186; and I. G. after leaving Royal College of Music, 252; and I. G. at Barnwood House, 292; and I. G. at Lord Derby's War Hospital, 201; and I. G. at Stone House, 313, 358, 372; and I. G.'s discharge from Napsbury War Hospital, 206–7; and I. G.'s 'England the Mother,' 121–22; and I. G.'s funeral, 378; and I. G.'s mental breakdown, 273; and I. G.'s music practise, 207; I. G.'s relationship with, 88–89; I. G.'s struggle to win approval of, 203; and I. G.'s teasing, 23; and I. G.'s wartime poetry, 88–89; and Ronald Gurney, 224; hostility of towards I. G., 259; as incapable of love, 59, 88; influence of on I. G., 58–59; innate musicality of, 59; and local choirs, 7; as mortified at state of I. G., 258; and nature, 59; and nature outings, 93; photograph of, 22; tailoring business of, 4; temperament of, 187; troubled personality of, 59, 93
- Gurney, Guy, 252
- Gurney, Ivor  
 ancestry of, 35–36  
 and Benjamin-Howells trip to Switzerland, 34  
 birth of, 423n3  
 and boat *The Dorothy*, 28–29, 30, 64, 182, 183, 198  
 character and identity of, xviii, xx, 18–19, 35, 42, 267, 288, 362; ambitions of, 9, 11, 25, 33, 82, 160, 199; appearance of, 20; as 'A Soldier and a Maker,' xx; and burden of autonomy, 42; and chaos, 19; as child, 23; clarity and honesty of, 52; as composer, 331; craftsmanship and discipline of, 38; empathy of, 336–37; and English music, 40; expansiveness of, 147; and friendship, xviii–ix, 88; as generous, 259; genius of, 11; grubbiness of, 101; humour of, 131; as impressed by dignitaries, 58; and manliness, 120, 121; and mother figures, 21, 274; mother's influence on (*see* Gurney, Florence Lugg [mother]); as non-conforming, 19; as observer, 91; and older women, 21; and order and routine, 17; and outdoors *vs.* intellectual life, 30–31; as outsider, 91; and people-watching, 217; as playing chess, 57; and practical experience, 46; as rebellious, 101, 118; relief and guilt of, 106; religious beliefs of, 345; and Schubert, 35–36; self-confidence of, 30; self-criticism of verse of, 175–76; self-focus of, 146; self-image of, 30; self-loathing of, 235; self-regard of, 52; self-respect of, 203; sense of failure of, 203; and sense of injustice, 284; sexuality of, xviii, 162–63, 182, 273–74, 286, 368; as shaping self, 89; as suffering genius, 25; and truth, xx, 320; as ungovernable, 38; as unsentimental, 264; as unsettled and impulsive, 43; and urge to roam, 99; as wanderer and adventurer, 46; as war poet, 234, 320, 321; and women, 107, 150–51, 161, 176–77, 274, 328–29  
 compared by *Gloucester Journal* to F. W. Harvey, 175  
 as conducting ensemble playing *The Western Playland*, 234  
 and Cornish coastline, 213  
 death of, 36, 376, 381, 383  
 disappearances of, 11  
 in Dover, 363, 364  
 in Edinburgh, 157, 158  
 education of: and Associateship Diploma of the Royal College of Organists, 38; and breaks from Royal College of Music, 24; and cathedral training, 149; at Gloucester Cathedral, 3–4, 6, 8–9, 11, 92, 208; at Gloucester Cathedral School, 3–4, 6, 8–9, 15–16, 92, 208; at King's School, Gloucester, 217, 286, 379; and organ scholarship to Durham University, 9; and RCM *Magazine* poems, 19; at Royal College of Music, xvii, xviii, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18, 74, 138, 296; at Royal College of Music after war, 213, 215, 219, 221, 222, 223, 224, 226, 234, 235–36, 238, 239, 249, 251–52; and Royal College of Music scholarship, 9, 15; and summer holidays of 1913, 32; and summer holidays of 1914, 41  
 in Eltham, 366–67

- finances of, 9, 15, 43, 235, 240, 257, 258, 259–60, 267, 275, 278, 283, 337, 338, 339, 450n11; disability pension for, 273; and poverty, 256; royalties of, 209; sale of songs of, 239; and war pension, 206, 209, 238, 255, 284
- funeral of, 376–77, 378
- and Gloucester (*see* Gloucester)
- and Gloucestershire (*see* Gloucestershire)
- and God, 125
- grandfather of, 35
- in Gravesend, 363
- great-grandfather of, 35
- and Howells's *The Bs*, 19
- and London (*see* London)
- manuscripts of, xviii, 381–85
- and maps, 365
- and marriage proposal to Kitty Chapman, 43, 161–62, 177
- and mental institutions: at Bangour General Hospital, 158–67, 352, 437n27; at Barnwood House, xv, 272, 277, 278, 281–93, 295, 297, 298, 301, 302, 337, 338, 361, 370; Barnwood House doctors' diagnosis of, 284–86; and Barnwood House to Stone House transfer as traumatic, 296–98; and King's Weston House, 201, 202, 208, 272, 273; medical notes on, 297, 299, 300, 309, 318–19, 341, 354, 367; at Napsbury War Hospital, St Albans, 165, 201–6, 212, 221, 249, 255, 293; and pensions hospital in Ewell, 274–75; private care proposed for, 337–40; at Stone House Hospital, Dartford, xvii, 277, 292, 293, 294–377
- mental state and problems of: and aggression, 357; at All Saints' Church, Gloucester, 258; and armistice celebrations, 319; and attrition of self-confidence and belief, 27; as becoming Beethoven, 316, 353, 354 (*see also* Beethoven, Ludwig van); as becoming Belloc, 353, 354; as becoming Brahms, xx, 6, 316, 367 (*see also* Brahms, Johannes); as becoming Haydn, 353, 354; as becoming other composers, 225–26; as becoming other persons, xviii, xx, 226, 316–17; as becoming Shakespeare, 316, 352, 353, 354–56, 359, 367; as becoming Thackeray, 354; and bipolar disorder, 196, 439–40n56; blindness of, 360; and certification of as insane, xiv, xv, xvii, 206, 272, 274, 275, 276–77, 278, 283, 286, 287; in childhood, 286; and creativity, 50, 88–89; and creativity and madness, xvii, xviii, 306–7, 324, 353; and delusional insanity, 318; delusions of, 203, 208, 273, 283, 307, 337, 350, 352–53, 368, 374; and delusions of electricity, 276, 284, 285, 296, 299, 300, 332, 365; and delusions of wireless interference, 271, 276, 284, 285, 290, 291, 312, 313, 326, 365; and dementia paranoides, 284; and dementia praecox diagnosis, 196; depression of, 25, 27, 28, 37, 38, 39, 72, 76, 85, 102, 160, 193–94, 197, 299, 300, 302, 337, 340, 358; and desire for death, 99, 198, 199, 285, 286, 287, 288, 290, 298, 299, 313, 314, 319; and dirty and obscene thoughts, 285–86, 299; disordered eating, starvation, and indigestion of, 25, 38, 72, 128–29, 136, 138, 158, 169, 192, 193, 208–9, 235, 271, 273, 274, 277, 284, 289, 296, 299, 300–301; and dysfunctional mother-child relationships, 121–22; in early years, 36–37; enema fixation of, 285–86; at Epping camp, 50; and exercise, 25, 37–38, 136, 188, 192, 196, 208, 235, 255, 256, 257, 336; feelings of persecution of, 285; and fragmented writings, 367–68; guilt of after gassed, 156, 157; heart condition of, 189, 192–93, 194, 196, 284; and humiliation, 277, 298; and incarceration, xviii, 297, 304, 307; and madness as diagnosis, xviii; and malaria treatment, xv, 317; and manic depression, 188–89; and marking books for police, 284–85; in military, 50, 82, 100, 102, 106, 107, 108–9, 123–24, 154, 158, 160, 165, 189, 192–94, 196, 197–99, 201–2; moods of euphoria of, 38; and mood swings, 25, 37; and neurasthenia, 160; and physical delusions, 274; as poet of St Julien à Vermand, 317; and police, 284–85, 286, 296, 299, 301, 302, 308; and psychiatric help, 275; and psychoanalysis,

Gurney, Ivor (*continued*)

273, 274; and reception of *Severn and Somme*, 139; at Royal College of Music, 25, 27, 28–29, 30, 36–37, 38, 39, 79; and sailing, 28–29, 30; and schizoaffective disorder, 194, 196, 203, 306, 307, 337, 439–40n56; and schizophrenia, 196, 285, 439–40n56; as sedated, 199, 277, 302, 451n13; self-recognition of instability, 74; and shell shock, xvii, 284, 379; and sleep deprivation, 273, 274; and solitary confinement, 302; and spirit possession, 274; stability of as precarious, 258; and stigma, 194, 275; as suicidal, 198–99, 200, 201, 203, 208, 209, 219, 237, 271, 277, 278, 284, 286, 287–88, 291–92, 298–99, 301, 312, 450n24; and systematised delusional insanity, 284; and transference, 91–92; as violent, 357; voices and auditory hallucinations of, xviii, xix, xx, 193, 194, 197–98, 199, 201, 202, 203, 208, 284, 285, 286, 291, 296, 299, 300, 368; and war memories, 365–66, 367, 370, 374; and word-salads, 367

military service of: at Albert, 103–5, 107, 110, 259; army authority questioned by, 74–75; and arrival at trenches, 65; on banality of commonplace duty and routine, 80; and baryton, 55, 56, 142; and battalion inspection, 116–17; and Battle of Fromelles, 86; in bayonet practise, 48; as billet warden, 99; and biscuit-rationing, 119; and black humour of trenches, 78–79; and bombardments, 68, 73–74, 78; at Bouquemaision, 103; at Brancepeth, 190–94, 246; at Buire au Bois, 142–45, 250; at casualty clearing station, 156; at Caulaincourt, 128–29; at Chelmsford (Danbury) training camp, 46–49, 50, 53, 54–55, 57, 225; complex response of to war, 75–76; and comradeship, xix, 72, 79, 80, 91–92, 114, 150, 157, 198, 228, 287, 364, 365–66; as crack-shot, 143, 145; at Crickley Hill, 218; at Crucifix Corner, 108; and cyclic rhythm of trench life, 83; and depression,

117, 129, 178; despair of, 125; as discharged from army, 202; and Distinguished Conduct Medal, 74; and downed German plane, 151–52; ennui of, 136; at Epping Forest camp, 49–51; and failure as soldier, 118; at Fauquissart Sector, 66; at 55th Infantry Base Depot, 135–36; and final leave in Gloucestershire, 58, 59–60; and first night in, 66; in Flanders, 63–65, 151; and food parcels, 72–73; at Framerville, 123, 124–25; at Framilode, xiii, 11; on French natives, 66; at Gapennes, 113–14; and gas, 124, 125, 153, 154–67, 188–89, 194, 375, 379; at Grandcourt, 105–6; at Guillancourt, 126; and hand-to-hand combat, 150; and hope for peace, 78; at hospital camp, 99, 100; as initially rejected from army, 42, 43, 224; and La Gorgue billets, 82; at Laventie, 68–69, 73–77, 78, 105, 374; on leave after Bangour Hospital stay, 167–69; on leave in Gloucestershire, 176, 186, 187–88; at Le Havre, 157; on length of war, 75; at L'Étoile, 118–19; at Lord Derby's War Hospital in Warrington, 194, 195–201, 202, 208, 212, 219, 271, 286, 293, 298; as manning water carts, 106, 110, 113, 116; and minor zeppelin raid, 54–55; and Moated Grange Sector, 86–87, 94, 96; at Montonvillers, 141; and Napsbury War Hospital discharge, 206; at No. 1 General Hospital, Newcastle, 189–90, 194, 202; at No. 2 Convalescent Depot, 134; at Omiécourt, 126, 127–28, 328; with 184th Machine Gun Corps, 145, 149, 150–53; ordered to Northumberland, 169; and parades and military exercises, 140; at Park House 'A' Camp, Salisbury Plain, 56–58; and personal appearance, 85; and physical labour, 109, 116–17; and premonition of being wounded, 132; and raid on enemy trenches, 74–77; at Raincourt, 125; as regular infantry soldier, 100; and rest periods, 69–72, 106; at Richebourg—St Vaast, 82, 83; at Riez Bailleul, 100, 101; and Robecq

- billets, 101, 102; in Rouen, 173; and Rouen hospital stay, 133–42, 151; at Seaton Delaval station, 173–75, 178, 183, 188–89, 190, 194, 438n5; and second attack (June 29, 1916), 78; and 2/5th Gloucester Regiment, 41–42, 43, 44, 45, 46–47, 113–14, 141; and send-off of troops from Epping, 51, 75; as sent back to Britain, 157–58; service seen as cure for, 50; as signaller, 49, 74, 78, 100, 174; and Somme region, 101, 103, 106, 107, 178, 366; as stretcher bearer, 78; and structure of army life, 42; as terrified of combat, 57; at Thiepval, 107–8, 178; and Third Battle of Ypres, 150–52; and Toussaints, 103; trench experiences of, 53, 66, 67–68, 73–77, 82, 83, 307; and typhoid inoculation, 50; at Vaux, 145, 150, 328; at Vermand, 129, 374; at Vermandovillers, 126; visit to Gloucester on leave, 169; at Wiencourt, 122; and women in France, 71–72; and work in canteen, 116, 117; as wounded, 131–32, 133, 379; at Ypres, 150
- musical approaches of: alleged ecstatic crises and untamed chords of, 36; and ballads, 250; and blurring and jarring of experiential boundaries, 68; chromaticism of, 15, 248, 250; as composer, 267; and death as theme, 89, 96–97, 141; and debt to Schubert, 36; defining characteristics of, 40; early orchestral writing of, 13; and Edwardian Elgarian style, 248; emotional experiences in, 51, 75; and English music, 228; and flow of phrase vs. form, 56; and folk songs, 59, 107, 108, 111, 227, 228, 250, 335; harmonic experimentation by, xviii, 13, 108, 246, 342–44; and internal monologue, 141; and juxtapositions, 67, 68; and landscape, trenchscape and cityscape, 217; and modernism, 248; and modulations and syncopations, 216; and music-drama, 247; and nature, 41, 51; and opera, 34–35; and originality of expression, 146; and poetry, 89, 267; and sea shanties, 250; and silence, 127; and society, 228; tempo-changing metre of, 264; and Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia*, 4, 5–6; and war, 67, 79–80, 89; and writing as cathartic, 249; as writing quickly, 53
- Music and Letters* symposium on work of, 374, 375–76
- and nature, 11, 41, 51, 217, 222, 267, 314–15, 327
- and Old Vic, 349–50, 365
- paternal grandmother of, 92, 94
- photographs of: in bayonet practise, 48; in convalescence at Rouen, 135; cottage of at Dryhill, 237; at Dover with Scott, 364; gravestone of, 377; with Howells, 12; with Kitty and Matilda Chapman, 178; at Knole Park, 369; manuscript of Prospero's speech rewrite, 297; medical notes on, 297; outside Aunt Marie's house, 253; at piano, 1905, 7; portrait, 1917, 179; portrait, 1920, 236; reading outdoors, late 1930s, 371; at Royal College of Music, 4; and 2/5th Gloucester Regiment, 44, 47; 'Snowflakes' manuscript of, 343; in uniform, 1915, 44
- physical health of, 30, 50, 99, 100, 258; at Epping camp, 50; final illness of, 375–76; and gonorrhoea, 318; and pain and suffering, 284, 285, 325–26, 361; pleurisy and tuberculosis of, 375; and syphilis, 317–18
- poetic approaches of, 331–32; allusions of, 264, 304, 306; and ancient military orders, 103; and army routine, 288; and audience, 102; and autobiographical, confessional works, 289–90; and beauty, 147, 148, 176, 247, 288; and blurring and jarring of experiential boundaries, 68; and changes of direction, 264; and comradeship, 288; and contemporary works, 41; and contradictory images, 122; and contrasts, 270; cross-fertilization between past and current work of, 325; and cultural clichés, 89; and death as theme, 80, 88, 89, 96–97, 99, 111, 115–16, 118, 127, 131, 141, 148, 175, 181, 185, 186, 198, 219, 231, 232, 285, 286, 287, 288, 290, 351; and England, 147; and essence



Gurney, Ivor (*continued*)

of neologisms, 216; experimental, 263;  
and fear, 288; as First War Poet, xx, 321,  
365; and framing, 70; and freedom as  
theme, 314; as Gloucestershire poet, 175;  
and grand dramatisations of conflict, 54;  
on heroism and soldiers, 111; and honour,  
147; and identity, 46; imagery of, 148,  
149; impressionistic brushstrokes of, 70;  
influences on, 17; and inner conflicts,  
120; and journaling, 30; and juxtaposi-  
tions, 67, 68, 122, 149, 216, 264; and  
landscapes, 88, 147, 185, 246, 247, 290;  
language of, 53, 116, 149, 242–43, 306,  
307, 314, 350, 352; and letters, 290; and  
literary role models, 45, 53; and love,  
192; and modernism, xix, 246, 452n18;  
and mortality, 46; and mother-child  
relationship, 88–89; and national and  
cultural code of allegiance, 89; and  
nature, 217, 267, 314–15, 327; and  
nuances in shadow and colour, 217;  
and oblique association of events and  
places, 307; and opposing and contrast-  
ing spheres, 247; and pain, 120–21;  
and patriotism, 175–76; and peacetime,  
119, 120; and quotidian details, 89; as  
recreating beauty, 89; revision by, 324;  
rhythms of, 216, 242–43; and Romance,  
146; and soldiers, 54; and transference, 88,  
182; uneasy and surprising elements in,  
147; and unexpected views of mundane,  
216; and *Vehews on the Setting of Poems*,  
101–2; voice of, 119, 122–23, 307; and  
war poetry, 147, 217, 246, 320–25; and  
wartime, 80, 147, 148; and wartime  
romance and misery, 135; on wartime  
uncertainties, 77; and Whitman's  
technique, 112; and words to shape  
visions and vistas, 102; and working  
man, 80; and works in newspapers,  
52–53; and world interpreted through  
sound, 68  
policeman's tribute to, 381  
politics of, 75  
poor eyesight of, 42  
and pseudonym Griffiths Davies, 250

and pseudonym Valentine Fane, 362  
and pseudonym Michael Raphoe Flood, 250  
and pseudonym John Winterton, 250  
and rabbit hunting, 143  
relationship of to England, 42  
relatives of, 22  
residences of: in Cold Slad cottage, 237–40;  
in Cornwall, 257; at Dryhill farm, Shurd-  
ington, 221–22, 235, 237; in Earl's Court,  
241, 252; at Five Alls, Studley Green,  
254; in Fulham, 15, 23–24, 32, 69; in  
Gloucester to convalesce from depres-  
sion at Royal College of Music, 28–29;  
with Ronald Gurney family, 275–76, 277;  
in Gurney family home, 19 Barton Street,  
Gloucester, 4–5, 24, 206–11; with Marie  
Gurney, 252–54, 255, 257, 258, 259, 267,  
271, 275–76; at High Wycombe with  
Chapman family, 168–69, 209, 226, 240;  
at The Lock House, Framilode, 28–29;  
with Mrs Poole in Southwark, 255; and  
small farm desired by, 236–37; and stays  
with Harvey family, 183, 217, 218, 225,  
226, 239; in Sterndale Road, West  
Kensington, London, 215, 219; with  
Maggie Taylor in Clifton Hill, St John's  
Wood, 223  
in Rochester, 363  
in Sheerness, 363–64  
in Southwold, 34  
and sports, 368–69  
work/employment of, 254, 255, 258, 259,  
260, 261, 264, 267, 275; as cinema pianist  
at Plumstead, 257, 309; as cinema pianist  
in Bude, 257, 309; at cold storage depot,  
255, 264; at docks, 255; and farming, 237;  
and Gloucester Civil Service, 267–70,  
271; and intent to join ship, 209, 240; in  
munitions factory, 209; as organist at  
Christ Church, High Wycombe, 43, 226,  
238, 254; as organist at Mariners' Chapel,  
46; and physical labour, 221–22, 237;  
and physical work on board ship, 364; as  
reviewer, 256; and school posts, 255; as  
unemployable, 257; as Whitminster  
church organist, 10  
in Zennor (Cornwall), 212–14

- works: 'Acquiescence,' 103; 'After Agincourt,' 351; 'After-glow,' 98–99, 121, 147; 'After Music,' 163–64; 'After the Ceremony,' 456n23; 'Afterwards,' 53, 148–49; 'À la Flandre,' 333; 'À la Raço Latino,' 333–34; 'Alexander,' 247, 445n47; 'All Night Under the Moon,' 246; 'All That's Past,' 445n47; 'Anthem of Earth,' 442n28; appeal poems, 316, 351; appeals for release from Stone House, 290, 302–3, 307–9, 313, 320, 354; 'The Apple Orchard' (piece for violin), 218; 'The Apple Orchard' (words: Sappho), 226; 'April Gale,' 263; 'Armistice Day,' 320; 'As I Lay in the Early Sun,' 442n39; 'The Aspens,' 336; asylum compositions, xviii, 306, 309–13, 330–31, 332, 343; asylum manuscripts, 330; 'At Reserve Depot,' 322; 'At the Jolly Blue Boar,' 250; 'Bach and the Sentry,' 102; 'Bach—Under Torment,' 38; 'A Ballad of the Cotswolds,' 53; 'Ballad of the Three Spectres,' 123–24; 'Beauty,' 121; 'Beauty' ('Winter Beauty'), 151; 'Beethoven, I Wronged Thee Undermoting Thus / Thy Dignity and Worth,' 359; *Best Poems*, 327; 'Beware! (Exile),' 445n47; 'A Bit from My "Gloucestershire Rhapsody,"' 220–21; 'Black Stichel,' 445n45; 'Blawearly,' 445n45; 'Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind,' 242; 'The Bonny Earl of Murray,' 199; *The Book of Five Makings*, 327–28; *The Book of Lives and Accusations*, 329; 'Bread and Cherries,' 445n47; 'Bright Clouds,' 240; 'Brittle Bones,' 443n8; 'Brown Is My Love,' 241; 'By a Bierside,' 39, 95, 96–97, 102, 108, 113, 122, 127, 137, 141, 167, 229, 266, 371, 385, 428n72, 431n79; 'By Ashleworth,' 447n67; 'By Dartford Once,' 451n2; 'Camps,' 151; 'Captain Stratton's Fancy,' 144–45, 229, 335; 'Carol,' 148–49; 'Cashel of Munster,' 446n55; 'Chance to Work,' 337; 'Charm Me Asleep,' 240; 'The Cherry Tree' ('Loveliest of Trees'), 186; chorale prelude on 'St Mary,' 38; 'Clouds,' 257, 447n83; 'Clown's Song,' 242; *Collected Poems*, 384; 'Collect for the Nativity of Our Lord,' 344; 'The Colonel,' 103; 'Come, O Come, My Life's Delight,' 240; 'Come, Sleep,' 426n22; 'Come Away, Death,' 242; 'Comedy Overture' (for William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*), 359; 'Come You Whose Loves Are Dead,' 444n24; 'Coming Dusk,' 263; 'Communion,' 111–12; 'The Companions,' 214; Coronation March in B flat, 13; 'Country Love Song,' 249, 250; 'The County Mayo,' 258, 446n55; 'Cowslip Time,' 250; 'The Crowder,' 246; 'The Crown,' 13; 'The Curses,' 323; 'Cut Flowers,' 314–15; 'Darest Thou Now O Soul,' 455n37; 'The Darling Black Head,' 446n55; 'The Day of Victory,' 210–11, 248; *Dayspaces and Takings*, 327; 'The Dead at Clonmacnois,' 446n55; 'Dear Hands, So Many Times,' 13; 'Desire in Spring' ('Twilight Song'), 214, 245; 'Dicky,' 115–16; 'Dinny Hill,' 249; 'Dover's Hill,' 442n39; 'Down Commercial Road,' 200; 'Dreams of the Sea,' 41, 426n29, 427n36; 'Edward, Edward,' 34, 427n36; 80 *Poems or So*, 262, 263, 328; 'Encounters,' 261, 366; 'England the Mother,' 88, 121, 147, 426n32; 'An Epitaph,' 246–47; 'Epitaph in Old Mode,' 443n40; 'The Examinet,' 71, 72; 'Ethiopia,' 333; 'Even Such Is Time,' 141; 'Everyone Sang,' 244; 'Fair Lady's Mantle,' 256; 'The Fair,' 250; *Fantasy Quartett* in F minor, 333; 'Farewell,' 445n47; 'Far in a Western Brookland,' 231; 'Fate,' 24; *Fatigues and Magnificences*, 327; 'The Fields Are Full,' 442–43n39; 'Fifth Avenue,' 446n56; 'Fine Knacks for Ladies,' 240; 'The Fire Kindled,' 100, 181; 'Firelight,' 114, 115–16; 'First Dawn,' 324, 325; 'The First of Lent,' 456n23; 'First Time In' poems, 67, 121, 244, 429n16, 429n18; *Five Elizabethan Songs*, 39–40, 43, 165, 239, 240, 371; five piano preludes, 225–26, 240; *Five Songs of Rupert Brooke*, 257, 258; 'Five Sonnets,' 119, 120; 'Folk Tale' for violin and piano, 12; 'The Folly

Gurney, Ivor (*continued*)

of Being Comforted,' 167, 169, 371;  
 'For the Fallen,' 113; *Forty Poems*, 263;  
 'Framilode the Queen,' 113; 'Funeral  
 March,' 247; 'The Ghost,' 445n47;  
 'The Glad Time,' 103; *Gloucester Play*,  
 350, 351; 'Gloucesters Depot Rouen.  
 1917,' 135; *A Gloucestershire Rhapsody*,  
 219–21, 248–49, 271; 'Goodnight to  
 the Meadow,' 443n8; 'Gulls in an Aëry  
 Morrice,' 13; 'Hail and Farewell,' 117–18;  
 'The Halt of the Legion,' 229; *To  
 Hawthornden*, 327; 'Heart's Pain,' 257,  
 258; 'Hedges,' 314; 'Heretics All,' 27;  
 'Hesperus,' 226; 'The High Road,' 256;  
 'The Hill Pines Were Sighing,' 342;  
 'Homesickness,' 175; 'Home Song,' 219;  
 'The Horses,' 218; 'Hospital Pictures,'  
 437n29, 437n31; 'I Am Not Now,' 338;  
 'If Death to Either Shall Come,' 443n8;  
 'If We Return,' 218; 'I Get Up Every  
 Morning,' 290; 'Iliad and Badminton,'  
 304–6; 'I Love All Beauteous Things,'  
 24; 'The Immortal Hour,' 151; 'In a Ward,'  
 197; 'In Cabin'd Ships at Sea,' 333; 'In  
 Flanders,' 54, 55, 108, 122, 128, 141, 218,  
 249, 428n69, 428n72; 'Influences,' 113;  
 inscription for Alfred Cheesman to  
 Ernest Rhys' *Fairy Gold*, 10; 'In Youth  
 Is Pleasure,' 249; 'I Praise the Tender  
 Flower,' 24, 50; 'The Irish Sea,' 26–27;  
 'I Saw My Lady Weep,' 240; 'I Shall  
 Be Ever Maiden,' 226; 'Kennst du das  
 Land,' 427n36; 'Ladies of Charity,'  
 164–65; *La Flandre, and By-Norton*,  
 327; 'Lament,' 348–49, 456n23; 'The  
 Land of Lost Content,' 186; 'Last Hours,'  
 245; 'The Late Rider,' 456n23; 'Latin  
 Motett,' 344; 'The Latman Shepherd,'  
 442–43n39; 'Laventie Dawn,' 324;  
 'The Lawlands o' Holland,' 186; 'The  
 Lent Lily,' 231, 232; letter to May Queen  
 of London, 367–68; 'Lights Out,' 219,  
 226, 346, 347; *Limestone*, 327; 'Lines (to  
 J. C. Squire),' 440n7; 'The Lock Keeper'  
 (1918 and 1922), 30, 425n51; 'London  
 Dawn,' 264; *A London Meditation* for

piano trio, 330, 333, 455n38; *A London  
 Meditation* for quartet, 330; *London  
 Seen Clear*, 327; 'London Song,' 456n23;  
 'Lonely Night,' 226; 'Longford Dawns,'  
 253–54; 'Lord, Thou Hast Been Our  
 Dwelling Place,' 344; 'A Love Lyric,' 342;  
 'Love Shakes My Soul,' 226; 'Love Song,'  
 456n23; 'Loving Henry,' 443n8; *Ludlow  
 and Teme*, 231–34, 236, 244, 251, 258,  
 329, 335, 336, 446n57; 'Ludlow Fair'  
 ('The Lads in Their Hundreds'), 231–32,  
 431n79; 'Lullaby,' 249; 'Maisemore,'  
 102–3; 'Mandalay,' 12, 424n15; 'Mangel-  
 Hoeing,' 203; 'The March Past,' 261;  
 'Masterpiece,' 331–32; 'May Carol,'  
 249; 'Meadow and Orchard,' 442n39;  
*Memories of Honour*, 328; 'Memory  
 Let All Slip,' 181; 'Midnight,' 238–39;  
 'Migrants,' 203–5; 'The Miner,' 165–66;  
 'Minsterworth Perry,' 218; 'Mirror of  
 Suzanne,' 328–29; 'The Moon,' 426n29;  
 'The Mother,' 88, 105, 434n25; 'Moving  
 Up to Ypres,' 151; 'The Mugger's Song,'  
 445n45; 'My heart makes songs on  
 lonely roads,' 176; 'My Life,' xix–xx,  
 289–90; 'My Spirit Kisseth Thine,' 342;  
 'New England' quartet in E minor, 332;  
 'New Year's Eve,' 433n39; 'The Night  
 of Trafalgar,' 33; 'Nine of the Clock-O,'  
 443n8; *Nursery Rhymes of New York  
 City*, 250–51; 'Of an Earth's Honour,'  
 41–42; 'O Happy Wind,' 426n29; 'The  
 Old City,' 142–43; 'Old Meg,' 445n45;  
 'On a Dictionary Quotation,' 361; 'On a  
 New Project,' 361; 'On Eastnor Knoll,'  
 442n38; 'One Day,' 257, 258, 447n83;  
 'On Rest,' 200; 'On the Downs,' 229; '  
 On the Idle Hill of Summer,' 231, 232;  
 'On Wenlock Edge,' 178; 'On Your  
 Midnight Pallet Lying,' 13; 'Open  
 Country,' 328; 'Orpheus with His Lute,'  
 242; 'Orpheus,' 39–40; 'Out There,' 70;  
 'Over the Ridge' ('Song'), 349, 456n23;  
 'Pain,' 120–21, 148; 'Passing By,' 13;  
 'Pedlar Jack,' 445n45; 'The Penny  
 Whistle,' 199, 226; 'Petersburg,' 222;  
 piano trio in C sharp minor, 251; piano

waltz for Emily Hunt's birthday, 6; *Pictures and Memories*, 327; 'Piper's Wood,' 218; 'Pity Me,' 445n45; plan for cycle of operas based on Yeats, 25; plans for mass, 219; plans for opera based on Synge's 'Riders to the Sea,' 25; plans for symphony, 219; *Play of Winter*, 350; *Poems of Gloucesters, Gloucester and of Virginia*, 328; 'Poor Henry,' 445n47; 'The Poplar' ('O Tall White Poplar'), 203, 456n23; 'Praise of Ale,' 218; preface to *Severn and Somme*, 112, 123; prelude in D flat, 225; 'Purple and Black,' 111, 112; quartet in A (unfinished), 215; Quartett in F, 235; quartet in G minor, 332; 'Question and Answer,' 151; 'The Quiet Mist,' 226; 'Ralph Roister Doister,' 250; 'Rappahan-nock,' 28; 'Reconciliation,' 112, 224–25; 'Red Roses,' 177, 246; reminiscence of C. V. Stanford (in 'Charles Villiers Stanford: By Some of his Pupils'), 327; 'Requiem' (three poems, same title), 103, 147–48; 'The Rest Farm,' 218; 'Resurrection,' 329; 'The Retreat,' 132; review of Lady Florence Darwin, *Cotswold Plays*, 256; revisions of Whitman, 359; *Rewards of Wonder*, 327, 429n18; 'Riddle cum Ruddle,' 249; *Ridge Clay*, 327; 'The Road,' 264; 'Robecq,' 101; 'Romance' for violin, 12; *Roman Gone East*, 327; 'The Ruin,' 445n47; 'Rumours of Wars,' 151; 'Sam Spraggon,' 445n45; 'Sappho' songs, 226; 'Satan above the Battle,' 53–54; 'Sawgint,' 102; 'Scents,' 228; scherzo, 1913–14, 251; scherzo for violin, 218; scherzo for violin and piano, 205; 'Scots,' 110–11; 'The Scribe,' 228, 246–47, 258; 'A Sea Dirge,' 242; 'The Sea Poppy,' 443n8; 'The Sea,' 82, 427n36, 428n5; 'Servitude,' 42; 'Sevenfold Amen,' 344; seven piano pieces, 12; *Severn and Somme*, 119, 123, 139–40, 141, 145–50, 156–57, 160, 165, 169, 174–76, 200, 209, 216, 228, 242, 322, 382, 426n32; and *Severn and Somme* reviews, 175; 'Severn Meadows,' 39, 113, 140, 348, 379, 456n23; 'The Ship,' 229; 'Sights,' 300;

'The Signaller's Vision,' 103, 454n16; 'Si J'étais Roi,' 359, 361; 'Silent Music' ('Rose-Cheeked Laura'), 240; 'The Silent One,' 130–31; 'Since I Believe in God,' 344–45; 'The Singer,' 229, 442–43n39; 'Sleep,' 39, 40, 176, 374, 379; 'Sleep, O Sleep Fond Fancy,' 241; 'Smudgy Dawn,' 325; 'Soft Was the Wind in the Beech Trees,' 226; sonata in D, 225; sonata in E flat, 249; sonata in E minor for cello, 251; sonata in G major, 249; 'Song' ('All Suddenly the Wind Comes Soft'), 447n83; 'Song' ('Heart's Pain'), 447n83; 'Song' ('If I call my lover high then where the pine forest clings and sighs'), 348; 'Song' (1925), 456n23; 'Song' (words: Rupert Brooke), 257, 258; 'Song and Pain,' 112; 'Song and Singer,' 36; song cycle from Will Harvey's *A Gloucestershire Lad and Gloucestershire Friends*, 217–18, 233; 'Song of Ciabhan,' 24; 'Song of Pain and Beauty,' 125, 242; 'Song of Silence,' 191, 456n23; 'Song of the Canadian Soldiers,' 456n23; 'Song of the Night at Morn,' 218; 'Song of Urgency,' 179–80; 'Song' ('Only the wanderer'), 103, 113, 140, 348; 'Songs from Exile' (as potential title of *Severn and Somme*), 123; 'Songs from the 2/5th' (as potential title of *Severn and Somme*), 123; 'Songs from the Second-Fifth' (projected book), 101, 102–3; 'Song in the Night,' 333, 343–44; 'Spring,' 39, 40; 'Spring Dawn,' 325; 'Spring, Rouen, May 1917,' 88, 146; 'The Springs of Music,' 266–67, 361; 'Star Talk,' 359, 443n8; 'The Stone-Breaker,' 200; 'Strafe,' 78–79; 'Strange Service,' 87–88, 89, 91, 105, 434n25; 'Strange Service' (as alternative title of *Severn and Somme*), 145–46; string quartet (1918), 233; string quartet (June 1927), 359; string quartet in A, 210; string quartet in A minor, 25, 28; string quartet in D minor, 330–31; string Quartett in F, 233; 'The Strong Thing,' 107; 'Summer and Frost,' 241; Symphony in C minor, 213; 'Take O

Gurney, Ivor (*continued*)

Take Those Lips Away,' 242; 'The Tax Office,' 269–70; 'Tears,' 39, 40; 'Tewkesbury,' 264–66; *The Tewkesbury Trial* (*Mary of Tewkesbury*), 350–51; 'There Is a Man,' 291; 'There Is No Need,' 286; 'There's Wisdom in Women,' 257, 258, 447n83; 'Thou Art Not Fair,' 240; 'Thou Didst Delight My Eyes,' 191–92; *Three French Songs*, 333; 'The Three Hills,' 443n40; 'Thrice Toss These Oaken Ashes Up in Air,' 240; 'Time, You Old Gipsy Man,' 240; 'Time and the Soldier,' 113; 'Tis Time, I Think, by Wenlock Town,' 231; 'To an Unknown Lady,' 107; 'Tobacco,' 366; 'To Certain Comrades' ('To the Fallen'), 76–77; and 'To Certain Comrades' and *Other Poems*, 139; 'To Do This If Not Old,' 456n23; 'To England—A Note,' 80; 'To France,' 316; 'To His Love,' 99, 111, 180–85, 186, 197, 224, 439n29; 'To Tewkesbury Abbey,' 351; 'To the City Besançon,' 303–4; 'To the Memory of Max Reger with Homage,' 456n23; 'To the Poet before Battle,' 51–52, 53, 73, 146, 175; 'To Violets,' 240; 'Transference,' 351; translation of Joachim du Bellay, 316; translation of Victor Hugo, 317; 'The Treasure' ('When Colour Goes Home'), 257, 258, 447n83; 'Trees,' 126–27, 147; 'The Trumpet,' 184; 'The Twa Corbies,' 50, 427n36; 'Twigworth Vicarage,' 378; 'Under the Greenwood Tree,' 39, 40; 'Upstairs Piano,' 166–67; *Vehews on the Setting of Poems*, 101–2; version of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, 353–56, 385; 'Victory Night,' 321; violin music, 218–19; violin pieces written for Hunt sisters, 12; violin sonata in A flat, 192; violin sonata in D major, 205, 206; violin sonata in E flat major, 218; violin sonata in G (1913), 24–25, 425n40; violin sonata in G major (1913–1914), 425n40; Violin Sonata in G major (1921–1922), 445–46n52; violin sonatas, 33, 192, 210, 218, 249, 251; violin sonatas in F, 218–19; violin works,

249; 'Voces Intimae,' 329; 'The Volunteer,' 216–17; 'Walking Song' ('A Song of Walking'), 218, 249, 258; 'Walt Whitman,' 329; 'War Books,' 243; *War Elegy*, 247, 248–49, 319; *War's Embers*, 200, 216, 217, 222, 229, 261, 322; 'Watching Music,' 311; 'Waterloo,' 317; and John Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi,' 249; *On Wenlock Edge*, 233, 239; 'Went sick for contrariety and gas symptoms,' 154; 'West Country,' 113; *The Western Playland*, 186, 206, 233–34, 235, 236, 239, 244, 333, 336; 'Western Sailors,' 349, 456n23; 'West Sussex Drinking Song,' 32; 'What Time Brings,' 105; 'When Daisies Pied,' 242; 'When from the Curve of the Wood's Edge,' 244; 'When Icicles Hang by the Wall,' 241–42; 'When I Was One and Twenty,' 231, 335; 'When Smoke Stood Up from Ludlow,' 231; 'When You Are Old and Grey,' 167; 'Who Hath Desired the Sea,' 12; 'Who Would Have Thought That Face of Thine,' 241; 'The Wind' (signed as Valentine Fane), 362–63; 'Winter,' 247; 'The Women Working,' 150–51; 'Woolworth Building,' 446n56; 'You Are My Sky,' 229; 'Ypres,' 71, 323; 'Ypres War,' 288–89

Gurney, Joseph, 222

Gurney, Marie (aunt), xiii, 252–53, 255, 257, 258, 259, 267, 271, 272, 275–76, 378

Gurney, Priscilla (great-grandmother), 35–36

Gurney, Ronald (brother), xiii, 223–24; at Barton Street home, 5; birth of, 423n3; character of, 276; death of, 384; and death of father, 223, 224; as escorting I. G. from tax office, 271–72; and family business, 223, 224, 271–72; finances of, 292–93, 382; and I. G. after leaving Royal College of Music, 252; I. G. as living with, 275–76, 277; and I. G. at Stone House, 317, 319; and I. G.'s discharge from Napsbury War Hospital, 207; and I. G.'s estate, 382–84; and I. G.'s family problems, 273; and I. G.'s funeral, 378; and I. G.'s mental illness, 271–72; and I. G.'s version of *The Tempest*, 353; and Winifred Gurney, 223, 224, 276, 278; letter of to Marion Scott about I. G.'s



- illness, 272–73; and malaria treatment, 317, 318–19; mental health problems of, 278, 384; photograph of, 207; plan of to institutionalise I. G., 275–78; and Marion Scott, 382; as tailor, 223; and Terry’s diagnosis of I. G., 274; triumphalism in control of I. G., 278; war service of, 223, 224
- Gurney, Winifred (sister), xiii, 424n36; at Barton Street home, 5; birth of, 423n3; and childhood in Gloucester, 92; on father, 186, 187; and father’s death, 223; on I. G. as schoolboy, 258–59; and I. G. as suicidal, 271; and I. G. at Stone House, 372; on I. G. in army, 42; and I. G.’s disappearances, 11; and I. G.’s estate, 383–84; and I. G.’s funeral, 378; and I. G.’s teasing of mother, 23; and Florence Gurney, 23, 58, 59, 224; and Marie Gurney, 252; and Ronald Gurney, 223, 224, 276; and Marie Gurney’s mental instability, 272; and I. G. with Ronald Gurney, 278; on Lord Derby’s War Hospital, 195; photograph of, 29; and policeman’s tribute, 381; and residential midwifery training, 278; on Saxty, 444n13; and Marion Scott, 382; on social views of I. G.’s shambolic appearance, 258
- Gurney Bros, 35
- Gurney family, 292; and appreciation of I. G.’s genius, 11; business of, 271–72; and Edward Chapman’s offer to adopt I. G., 209–10; and death of David Gurney, 223; as emotionally restricted, 23; finances of, 9, 22–23; and I. G. at Lord Derby’s War Hospital, 201; I. G.’s avoidance of, 23; and I. G.’s funeral, 378; I. G.’s return to live with after war, 206–11; and I. G.’s suicide note, 198; Ronald Gurney’s responsibility for, 278; and music, 7; tailoring business of, 4
- Gütersloh Camp, 145
- Guynemer, George, 151, 436n55
- Haig, Sir Douglas, 110
- Haines, J. W. (Jack), xiii, 138, 188; after I. G. leaving Royal College of Music, 252; essay on Edward Thomas, 256; ‘Fair Lady’s Mantle’, 256; and I. G. after discharge from Napsbury War Hospital, 208, 209; and I. G. and F. W. Harvey recital at Stroud, 218; and I. G. as certified insane, 275; and I. G. at Barnwood House, 292, 337; and I. G. at Lord Derby’s War Hospital, 199, 201; and I. G. in Cornwall, 213; and I. G. on exercise, 38; I. G.’s excursions with, 256; and I. G.’s funeral, 378; as I. G.’s lawyer, 257; and I. G.’s post-1922 poetry, 324; I. G.’s visits with, 255, 256; and I. G. with Ronald Gurney, 277–78; ‘The High Road,’ 256; and Hopkins, 243; *Poems*, 256; and Marion Scott, 382; and small farm desired by I. G., 236–37; as solicitor, 256, 267; and Squire, 261; wife of, 382
- Haines family, 378
- Hall, John, 76, 77, 80, 430n47
- Handel, George Frideric, *Messiah*, 270
- Hanslich, Eduard, 367
- Hardy, Thomas, 26, 27, 113, 327; ‘Channel Firing,’ 53; *The Dynasts*, 33, 34; *Jude the Obscure*, 33; ‘The Night of Trafalgar,’ 33; *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, 33
- Harper, Dr, 28, 313
- Harris, James, xiii, 28–29, 30–31
- Harte, Francis Brett, ‘Fate,’ 24
- Hartpur, 188
- Harvey, Eric, xiii, 15, 86, 183–84, 185
- Harvey, Frederick William (Will), xiii, xviii, 47, 86, 139, 160, 176, 424n28, 431n76, 454n14; army service of, 43; background of, 17; and boat *The Dorothy*, 28, 182, 183; and Bridges, 94; Catholic convictions of, 125; character of, 16, 17; childhood of, 17; and Clark, 384; and contemporary poetry, 41; depression of, 162; and Distinguished Conduct Medal, 54, 55; and A. Drummond, 163, 168, 179, 274; father of, 60; and 1/5th Gloucesters, xiii, 38, 42, 43, 46, 183; and I. G. as army signaller, 49; and I. G. as certified insane, 275; and I. G. as cinema organist in Bude, 257; and I. G. as cinema organist in Plumstead, 257; and I. G. at King’s Weston House, 273; and I. G. at lunch with Masfield, 229; and I. G. at Stone House, xviii, 345, 372; I. G. compared to, 145–46, 147, 175; and *Gloucester Journal*, 175; and Gloucestershire fields, 41; and I. G. on



- Harvey, Frederick William (Will) (*continued*)  
 despairing work, 249; and I. G. on exercise, 38; I. G.'s criticism of poetry of, 160, 163, 217–18; and I. G.'s depression, 39; and I. G.'s family problems, 273; I. G.'s first meeting with, 15–16; and I. G.'s *Five Elizabethan Songs*, 39; and I. G.'s flowers for Annie Drummond, 379; I. G.'s friendship with, 15–16, 17; and I. G.'s funeral, 379–80; and I. G.'s 'The Irish Sea,' 26; I. G.'s love for, 163; I. G.'s mourning for, 99, 100; and I. G.'s *Play of Winter*, 350; and I. G.'s prelude in D flat, 225; I. G.'s prewar visits with, 60; as I. G.'s rival, 54, 101, 112; I. G.'s sailing with, 32; and I. G.'s setting for Masfield's 'Captain Stratton's Fancy,' 144, 145, 229; I. G.'s setting of poems of, 32; and I. G.'s *Severn and Somme*, 175; and I. G.'s sexuality, 274; I. G.'s song cycle of poems of, 217–18, 233; and I. G.'s 'To His Love,' 182–85; and I. G.'s war poetry, 322; and I. G.'s withheld letters, 308; and Haines, 188; health of after war, 217, 218; and Hopkins, 95; and influenza, 217, 218, 219; and Sarah Anne Kane, 162, 163, 183, 252, 274; law studies of, 16, 18; Minsterworth family home of, 217; news of capture of, 100; photos of, 16, 184; poetry of, 17, 18, 99; as presumed dead, 98; as prisoner of war, 97–98, 100, 139, 145, 152, 162, 163, 182, 184, 185, 209, 218, 229, 335, 359; and rabbit hunting, 143; as reading at Stroud, 218; as reading I. G.'s poems at Marion Scott's musical soirée, 258; return of to Britain after war, 209, 217; and Marion Scott, 168; self-description of, 17–18; as self-destructive, 16; simplicity and easy lyricism of, 147; as soldier, 98–99; as solicitor, 256, 267; on *Somme* with 1/5ths, 54; and Terry's diagnosis, 273; as war poet, 321; works: 'Ballade of Beelzebub,' 53; 'Country Love Song,' 249, 250; 'Dinny Hill,' 249; 'Ducks,' 17; *Ducks and Other Verses*, 218; 'F. W. H. (A Portrait),' 18, 424n29; *Gloucestershire Friends*, 160, 163, 167, 217–18; *A Gloucestershire Lad at Home and Abroad*, 100, 101, 145, 156, 217–18, 233, 256, 424n29; 'The Horses,' 218; 'If We Return,' 218; 'In Flanders,' 54, 108, 218, 249, 428n69, 428n72, 429n10; 'Minsterworth Perry,' 218; 'My Father Bred Great Horses,' 163; 'Piper's Wood,' 218; 'Praise of Ale,' 218; 'The Rest Farm,' 218; 'Riddle cum Ruddle,' 249; 'A Song' (set by I. G. as 'Walking Song'), 218, 249; 'To Ivor Gurney,' 380; triplets of, 117, 433n15
- Harvey, Gwen, 183
- Harvey, Kate, 239
- Harvey, Matilda, xiii, 60, 183
- Harvey, Netta, 183
- Harvey, Roy, 183
- Harvey, William (dedicatee of Shakespeare's sonnets), xviii
- Harvey family, 60, 226; and Dorothy Gurney, 207; I. G.'s adoption of, 98; I. G.'s friendship with, 252; and I. G.'s funeral, 378; I. G.'s time with, 217, 239; happiness and stable domesticity of, 236; and The Redlands, 183
- Hastings, Battle of, 173
- Hawthornden prize, 266
- Hay, Mrs, 338
- Haydn, Joseph, 353, 354
- Hayward, Marjorie, 445–46n52
- Hazlitt, William, 361, 367
- Hebrew (Old Testament), 54
- Heine, Heinrich, 181
- Hell's Mouth, 213
- Henley, W. E.: 'Dear Hands, So Many Times,' 13; I. G.'s settings of, 13; 'Gulls in an Aëry Morrice,' 13
- Hereford Cathedral, 351
- Herrick, Robert: 'Charm Me Asleep,' 240; 'Lullaby,' 249; 'Passing By,' 13; 'To Violets,' 240
- Herringham, Lady Christiana, 283
- Higgs, Miss, 50
- High Wycombe, 168–69, 209, 226. *See also* Chapman family; Christ Church, High Wycombe
- Hill 35 (near St Julien), 152, 157
- Hindenburg line, 125
- HMS *Verdun*, 248

- HMT 861, 64  
Hodgson, Ralph, 240  
Holloway Sanatorium, Virginia Water, 292  
‘The Holly and the Ivy,’ 149  
Holst, Gustav, 27, 228  
Homer, 52, 304–5; *Iliad*, 305  
Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 17, 26, 94–95, 112, 242–44, 307, 322; and Bridges, 243, 444n25; and I. G.’s asylum poems, 306; and I. G.’s ‘The Tax Office,’ 270; works: ‘Felix Randal the Farmer,’ 80; *Poems 1918*, 243; ‘Tom’s Garland,’ 80; ‘To R. B.,’ 244; ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland,’ 243–44  
Horlicks, Private, 84  
Housman, A. E., 134, 135, 181, 244, 263, 349, 375; ‘The Cherry Tree’ (‘Loveliest of Trees’), 186; and I. G.’s *The Western Playland*, 206, 233, 234, 239; ‘The Lads in Their Hundreds,’ 431n79; ‘The Lent Lily,’ 329; ‘On Your Midnight Pallet Lying,’ 13; *A Shropshire Lad*, 176, 231–34, 373  
How, Louis, *Nursery Rhymes of New York City*, 250–51  
Howells, Herbert, xiii, 15, 226, 302; and Alcock, 13; ambition of, 11, 82; and Bathurst family, 45; and Benjamin, 18, 34; and Carnegie United Kingdom Trust annuity, 149; and Dorothy Dawe, 137–39, 169; and Director’s History Prize, 33; early compositions of, 11, 12; in England during war, 82; family of, 8; and folk song, 242; I. G. as contemporary of, 219; and I. G. as farmer, 237; on I. G. as loveable egotist, 384; I. G. as neglected by, 138; and I. G. at Napsbury War Hospital, 205; and I. G. at Stone House, 326, 345, 358, 360, 372; and Gloucester, 24; at Gloucester Cathedral, 4, 11; and I. G. on leave from army, 169; and Graves’ disease, 8, 82–83; I. G.’s alleged resentment of, 138, 139; I. G.’s childhood bond with, 138; I. G.’s competition with, 11–12, 33, 39, 169, 251; and I. G.’s ‘Edward, Edward,’ 34; and I. G.’s estate, 383; and I. G.’s *Five Elizabethan Songs*, 39; I. G.’s friendship with, 8–9, 11, 19, 163; and I. G.’s funeral, 378, 379; and I. G.’s letters from Park House ‘A’ Camp, 57; and I. G.’s love of nature, 11; and I. G.’s nervous breakdown, 194; I. G.’s postcard to, 63; and I. G.’s preoccupation with loss, 186; and I. G.’s relationship with Drummond, 168, 180, 194; and I. G.’s return to Seaton Delaval, 188; and I. G.’s setting of F. W. Harvey’s ‘In Flanders,’ 108, 122; and I. G.’s setting of Masfield’s ‘By a Bierside,’ 122; and I. G.’s *Severn and Somme*, 149–50; and I. G.’s sexuality, xviii, 274; I. G.’s songs performed by, 50; and I. G.’s violin sonata in D major, 205; I. G.’s work compared to, 37; I. G. with (photograph), 12; health of, 42, 137, 149, 169, 188; and myth of I. G.’s mental instability, 36–37; as one step ahead of I. G., 54; and Paddington station, 24; and Parry, 8, 215; and pentatonic scale, 242; prizes won by, 33, 34; at Royal College of Music, 3, 6, 11, 18, 33, 34, 138, 251; and Salisbury Cathedral, 137, 149; and Marion Scott, 23, 233; and Spanish flu, 209; and Stanford, 14, 138; and Tagore Gold Medal, 33; and Three Choirs Festival, 270, 271; tribute of to I. G., 375; and R. Vaughan Williams’s *A Sea Symphony*, 28; and R. Vaughan Williams’s *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, 4, 5–6; and women, 137; works: *The B’s*, 19; ‘Elegy’ for strings and viola, 19, 241; ‘Four Romantic Piano Pieces,’ 12; ‘Ivor Gurney the Musician,’ 36; ‘King David,’ 39; long works of, 39; ‘Marching Song,’ 12; Piano Quartet in A minor, 137; piano quartet of, 205; review of Fritz Hart poems, 33; setting of Robert Louis Stevenson, 12; *Sine Nomine*, 271; string quartet, 83; Tudor church music edited by, 150  
Howells, Michael, 379  
Hugo, Victor, ‘Les Feuilles d’Automne,’ 451–52n17  
Hunt, Emily, xiii, 424n33; and death of Margaret Hunt, 219, 252; and I. G. after discharge from Napsbury War Hospital, 208; and I. G. at Stone House, 372; I. G.’s compositions for, 12; I. G.’s devotion to, 21; and I. G.’s

- Hunt, Emily (*continued*)  
*Five Elizabethan Songs*, 39; and I. G.'s funeral, 378; and I. G.'s music studies, 7; I. G.'s piano waltz for, 6; and I. G.'s setting for A. E. Housman's 'The Cherry Tree,' 186; and I. G.'s violin and piano duos, 249; and I. G.'s violin compositions, 192; I. G.'s visits with, 24; and I. G.'s *War's Embers*, 222; and sailing, 29; and Marion Scott, 23
- Hunt, Margaret, xiii, 342, 424n33, 440n12; death of, 219, 222, 224, 249, 252; final illness of, 6; and I. G. after discharge from Napsbury War Hospital, 208; and I. G. at Lord Derby's War Hospital, 200; I. G.'s affection for, 6, 21, 123, 186; I. G.'s compositions for, 12; and I. G.'s *Five Elizabethan Songs*, 39; and I. G.'s music studies, 7; I. G.'s *Severn and Somme* dedicated to, 123; and I. G.'s violin and piano duos, 249; and I. G.'s violin compositions, 192; I. G.'s visits with, 24; and I. G.'s works for violin, 219; and influenza, 219; as mother figure, 274; and sailing, 29; and Marion Scott, 21, 23
- Hurd, Michael, 196, 276; *The Ordeal of Ivor Gurney*, 384
- Hurlstone, William, 375
- Hutchinson, 384
- I'Anson, Isobel, 360
- Imperial College, 7
- International Society of Nations, 285
- Ireland, John, 226
- Jem (Gloucestershire friend of I. G.), 114  
 'John Anderson,' 107
- Johnstone-Douglas, Walter, 226
- Jones, David, *In Parenthesis*, 103
- Jones, Edgar, 452n20
- Jonson, Ben, 241, 286, 448n15
- Journal of Mental Science*, 318
- Joyce, James, xix
- Kane, Sarah Anne, 162, 163, 183, 252, 274
- Kavanagh, P. J., 384
- Keats, John, 99, 117, 146; 'La Belle Dame sans Merci,' 101, 355
- Kerr, William Pat, xiii, 255, 256, 267, 273, 274–75
- Keyser, Harry, 6
- Kiddle, Frederick, 39
- King's School, Gloucester, 217, 286, 379
- King's Weston House, 201, 202, 208, 272, 273
- Kipling, Rudyard, 9, 327; 'Mandalay,' 12, 424n15; 'Who Hath Desired the Sea,' 12
- Kiplingesque ballads, 113
- Knight, Corporal, 55
- Knole Park (photograph), 369
- Krim, Seymour, *Views of a Nearsighted Cannoneer*, 307
- La Gorgue, 65, 82
- Lamb, Charles, 367
- Laventie: I. G. at, 68–69, 105, 374; Moated Grange Sector near, 94, 96; and 2/Sth Gloucestershire Regiment, 81, 85, 86
- Lawrence, D. H., 264
- League of Nations, 285
- Leavis, F. R. and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment*, 352
- Ledwidge, Francis, 'Twilight Song,' 214
- Le Havre, 64, 157
- Le Sart, village of, 65
- L'Étoile, 118–19
- Letts, Winifred Mary, 446n54; 'Cowslip Time,' 250; 'The Fair,' 250
- Levetus, Daisy, 34
- Levetus, Jill, 34
- Ley, Henry, 344
- Lidderdale, Mr, 357–58
- Life in a Madhouse* (pamphlet), 313
- Lijssenthoek Casualty Clearing Station (photograph), 156
- Lincoln's Inn Fields, 18
- The Lock House, Framilode, 28–29
- Lomax, Montagu, 294
- London, 113, 118, 120, 122, 136, 154, 217, 222, 226, 236, 294, 296, 314, 327, 331; children of East End of, 93; cityscape of as inspiration, 24; and Davis, 337–38; in first year of war, 42; I. G. as labourer in, 255; I. G. as leaving, 30; I. G. in, 15, 23, 24, 27, 31, 32, 237, 257, 312; I. G.'s boarding with Maggie Taylor in, 223; I. G.'s depression in, 37, 76, 154, 158; I. G.'s desire to escape from, 37, 235, 237; I. G.'s imagined postwar life in, 215; I. G.'s life in, 19; I. G.'s lodgings in, 240; I. G.'s

- loneliness in, 91; I. G.'s map of, 365; I. G.'s memories of, 290, 331; in I. G.'s poems, 324, 327; I. G.'s unsentimental appreciation of, 264; I. G.'s visit with Howells and Benjamin in, 169; I. G.'s visit with Marion Scott in, 167; I. G.'s writing about, 228; in *A London Meditation*, 330; and 'Longford Dawns,' 253, 254; and Masefield, 46; musical possibilities of, 24; and Napsbury War Hospital, 201; new music in, 39; North End Road stalls in, 24; orchestral performances in, 312; poems inspired by, 293; and Poetry Bookshop, 245; Royal College of Music in, 7–8; Marion Scott in musical world of, 21; Marion Scott in wartime, 190; trench system circling, 49–50; and Unknown Warrior processions, 247–48; and R. Vaughan Williams, 220, 229
- London Mercury*, xiv, 261–62, 300, 366, 372
- Longford, 252–54, 366
- Loos, victory of, 370
- Lord Derby's War Hospital, Warrington: common diagnoses at, 440n2; I. G. at, 194, 195–201, 202, 208, 212, 219, 271, 286, 293, 298; photograph of, 196
- Ludgate Hill, 293
- Lusitania*, 119
- MacBride, Winifred, 226
- Mackenzie, Muir, 201
- Mahler, Gustav, 248
- Maisemore, 34, 35, 92, 94, 142, 188
- Maitland, Fuller, 423n4
- Malverns, 41, 60
- Manchester Guardian*, 313
- Mariners' Chapel, Gloucester, 46
- Marlowe, Christopher, 367
- Marlow, 45
- Marne, 248
- Marsh, Edward (Eddie), xiv, 257–58, 261, 264, 265, 267, 353
- Martin, Oswald, 282–83
- Masefield, John, xiv, 27, 45–46, 87, 213, 375; Boars Hill house of, 229; I. G. and and F. W. Harvey at lunch with, 229; I. G.'s criticism of verse of, 175; and I. G.'s poems, 384; I. G.'s settings of, 28; and I. G.'s 'Tewkesbury,' 266; response of to I. G.'s settings, 229–30; and sea, 64; wife of, 229; works: 'Biography,' 46; 'By a Bierside,' 39, 96–97, 102, 108, 113, 167, 229, 266, 371, 385, 428n72, 431n79; 'Captain Stratton's Fancy' ('The Old Bold Mate'), 144, 229, 335; 'The Halt of the Legion,' 229; 'Of One Who Sang His Poems,' 230, 443n43; *Sonnets*, 140; 'Upon the Downs,' 229
- Maudsley Hospital, London, 341
- 'McGregor's Gathering,' 107
- Mendelssohn, Felix, *Elijah*, 270, 271
- Mendingham, 156
- The Mercury Book of Verse*, 366
- Meredith, George, 327
- Metropolitan and Gloucestershire Police, 284
- Meynell, Alice: 'In Early Spring,' 426n25; 'In Spring the cuckoo shall alter his interval,' 40; 'Song of the Night at Morn,' 218
- Miles, Philip Napier, 201, 208
- Milman, Helen, *In the Garden of Peace*, 11
- Milton, John, 265, 365; 'Lycidas,' 181; *Paradise Lost*, 54; *Samson Agonistes*, 105
- Ministry of Pensions, 206, 273
- Minsterworth, 17, 34, 188. *See also* The Redlands, Minsterworth
- Moated Grange Sector, Fauquissart, 86–87, 94, 96, 431nn75–76
- Modernists, 283
- Moncrieff, C. K. Scott, xiv, 247; 'Song of Roland,' 247
- Monro, Harold, xiv, 52, 230, 245
- Montfort, Simon de, Earl of Leicester, 34
- Montonvillers, I. G. at, 141
- Morley, Thomas, 'Sleep, O Sleep Fond Fancy,' 241
- Morning Post*, 175
- Morris, Sir Malcolm, 318
- Mozart, Wolfgang Amadeus, 55, 150, 166, 191, 335, 336, 360; Piano Concerto No. 23, 314
- Muller, J. P., *My System*, 37–38
- The Muse in Arms*, 320, 444n22
- Musical Quarterly*, 266, 361
- Music and Letters*, 327, 359, 374, 375
- Mussorgsky, Modest, 34
- Napsbury War Hospital, St Albans, 165, 212, 221; I. G. at, 201–6, 249, 255, 293; photograph of, 202
- Nash, Paul, 288

- National Song Book*, 128  
 Neuve Chapelle, 86, 431n69; photograph of, 87  
 Neuville, 102  
 Nevin, Ethelbert Woodbridge, 'The Rosary,' 160  
 Newbolt, Henry, 27  
 Newcastle hospital, 190  
*New Witness*, 247  
 Nichols, Robert, 175, 229, 321, 454n14  
 Nielsen, Carl, 248  
 No. 1 General Hospital, Newcastle, 189–90, 194, 202  
 Northcliffe, Lord, xiv, 247  
 Northumberland, I. G. ordered to, 169  
 Novello, Ivor (David Ivor Davies), 9, 13, 250  
 Noyes, Alfred: 'The Highwayman,' 72; 'The Passing of the Unknown Warrior,' 248  
 No. 8 General Hospital, 133, 435n1  
 No. 2 Convalescent Depot, 134  
 'Oh Susannah—A Farcical Comedy,' 312  
 Old County and City Lunatic Asylum, Wotton, 281  
 'Old Man Brown he had a little farm,' 145  
 Old Vic, I. G. and Marion Scott at, 349–50, 365  
 Omiécourt, I. G. at, 126, 127–28, 328  
 184th Machine Gunners, 145, 150–53  
 Osborne, E. B., 242, 444n22  
 O'Sullivan, Seumas, 'The Twilight People,' 446n55  
*Our Woodlands, Heaths, and Hedges*, 11  
 Owen, Wilfred, xiv, 120, 182, 327, 452n18, 454n14; and Barnett, 165; and Craiglockhart Hospital, 159, 167, 437n27; death of, 247; and experience of trenches, 307; and I. G.'s 'Pain,' 148; and Housman, 135; and mental illness, 123; and Moncrieff, 247; works: 'Anthem for Doomed Youth,' 116; 'The Chances,' 123; 'Strange Meeting,' 424n28  
*Oxford Book of English Verse*, 167, 249  
 Oxford University Press, 24, 383  
 Ozzy (Gloucestershire friend of I. G.), 114  
 Pakeman, Lieutenant, 130  
 Palestrina, 265  
 Palestrinian counterpoint, 14  
*Palgrave Golden Treasury*, 244, 373  
 Parish Church of St Matthew's, Twigworth, 376, 377–76  
 Parker (soldier), 144  
 Park House 'A' Camp, 56–58  
 Parry, Sir Hubert, xiv, 50, 236, 360, 426n15; background of, 14; and British music, 27; death of, 215; and I. G. and Schubert, 35; and I. G. at Lord Derby's War Hospital, 201; and I. G. at Royal College of Music, 9; and German Romantics, 15; and I. G. in army, 50; and I. G.'s setting of F. W. Harvey's 'In Flanders,' 54; and I. G.'s setting of Masfield's 'By a Bierside,' 137; I. G.'s studies with, 13; and I. G.'s suicide note, 198, 199, 201; and Howells's Graves' disease, 83; and Napsbury War Hospital, 201–2; at Royal College of Music, 8, 42–43; as teacher, 8; works: 'Elegy,' 379; *I Was Glad*, 13; 'Jerusalem,' 234; 'Lord, Let Me Know Mine End,' 345; *Te Deum*, 33  
 Passchendaele, Third Battle of, 150  
 Pears's *Cyclopaedia*, 365, 458n20  
 Pentland Hills, 159  
 Perceval, John, *A Narrative of the Treatment Experienced by a Gentleman*, 307  
 Perham Down, 56  
 Philharmonic Quartet, 233  
 Pitcher, Sydney, 'The Lighthouse of the Vale' (photograph), 92  
*The Plant-Lore and Garden-Craft of Shakespeare*, 11  
 Ploegsteert Wood (Plug Street Wood), 65, 108, 429n10  
 Plumstead, I. G. at, 257, 309  
 Plutarch, 327  
*Poems of Today* (Sidgwick and Jackson), 205, 206, 240  
 Poetry Bookshop, xiv, 230, 245  
 Pound, Ezra, xix, 243, 246, 283, 452n18; *The Cantos*, 305  
 Pozières, 259  
 Prince Albert memorial, Regent's Park, 7  
 Princip, Gavriolo, 40  
 Prior, Hester Stansfeld, 367  
 Prout, Ebenezer, *Harmony*, 165  
 Psalm 90, 344  
 Queen's Hall, 228  
 Queen's Hall Promenade Concerts, 6  
 Quennell, Peter, 454n14

- Rachmaninov, Sergei, 225, 360  
*Radio Times*, 312, 313  
 Raincourt, I. G. at, 125  
 Raleigh, Sir Walter, 'Even Such Is Time,' 141  
 Raphoe, 446n55  
 Ravel, Maurice, 360; Piano Trio, 83  
 Ray, Don, Fuller, 423n11  
*RCM Magazine*, 19, 33, 228, 236  
 The Redlands, Minsterworth, xiii, 17, 60, 225, 226, 239, 252. *See also* Harvey family  
 Regent's Park, 7  
 Reger, Max, 359, 360  
 Remembrance Sunday, 247–48, 370  
 Rhodes, Richard (Dicky), 114–15, 116  
 Rhys, Ernest, *Fairy Gold: A Book of Old English Fairy Tales*, 10  
 Richard, Earl of Warwick, 351  
 Richebourg, 83; church at, 83–84  
 Richebourg L'Avoue, 431n69  
 Richebourg—St Vaast, 82, 83, 431n69  
 Riez Bailleul, 65, 100, 101, 431n69  
 'Rio Grande,' 145  
 Ritchie, Sapper, 107, 110  
 River Dart, 295  
 Rivers, W.H.R., 159  
*The Rivers and Streams of England*, 11  
 River Severn, 11, 31, 100, 198, 201, 255; I. G. as sailing on, 28–29, 30; and Gloucester landscape, 253; and I. G.'s 'A Bit from My "Gloucestershire Rhapsody,"' 221; I. G.'s dreams of, 24; I. G.'s projected writing about, 26; meadows of, xviii; and Somme, 68  
 River Thames, 255, 363  
 Robecq, billets at, 101, 102  
 Robinson, Dr, xv, 336, 349–50, 373  
 Rochester, Scott and I. G.'s trip to, 363  
 'Rock of Ages,' 174  
 Rogers, Winthrop, 239–40, 250  
 Rolland, Romain, 191  
 Rolleston, Thomas W. H.: 'The Dead at Clonmacnois,' 446n55  
 'Rolling Home,' 145  
 Romans, ancient, xx, 17, 103, 327  
 Romans, George, 276  
 Romantics, 347  
 Ronald, Landon, 6  
 Rosenberg, Isaac, 182  
 Rosewall, 213  
 Rotherhithe, 30  
 Rouen: Allied hospitals at, 133; I. G. in convalescence at, 133–42, 151, 173; I. G.'s walks in, 136–37, 140  
 Rouen Cathedral, 136–37  
 Royal Academy of Music, 6  
 Royal Albert Hall, 3, 7  
 Royal Army Medical Corps, 99, 154–56  
 Royal College of Music, xiv, 122, 201; alumni of who died in World War I, 215; appearance of, 7–8; composition scholarship to, 9; concert hall of, 234; female-dominated student body of, 42; founding of, 14; I. G. as conducting at, 234, 245; I. G. at, xvii, xviii, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 74, 138; I. G. at after war, 215, 219, 221, 222, 223, 224, 226, 234, 235–36, 238, 239, 249, 251–52; and I. G. at Park House 'A' Camp, 57–58; and I. G. at Stone House, 310, 342, 361; and I. G. on leave from army, 169; I. G.'s depression at, 102; and I. G.'s electrical tricks delusions, 296; I. G.'s end of studentship at, 251–52; and I. G.'s funeral, 378; I. G.'s intention to return to, 209, 210, 213, 215; and I. G.'s *The Western Playland*, 234, 235, 236; and Howells, 83, 138; memorial concert at, 234; and opera, 34; performance of I. G.'s 'By a Bierside' at, 137; sociability at, 19; and R. Vaughan Williams, 6; wartime student population of, 42–43  
 Royal College of Music Union, 19, 252  
 Royal College of Organists, 165  
 Royal Institute of Public Health, 318  
 Royal School of Mines, 7  
 Rumania, 106  
 Ryton, village of, 60  
 Saintsbury, George, English Literature Manual, 188  
 Salisbury Cathedral, 13, 137  
 Salisbury Plain, I. G. as training on, 56–58  
 Salvation Army, 144  
 Sanderson, Wilfrid Ernest: 'Drake Goes West,' 160; 'Friend o' Mine,' 160  
 Sappho, 226  
 Sassoon, Siegfried, 120, 182, 327, 454n14; and Craiglockhart Hospital, 159; 'Everyone Sang,' 244; and experience of trenches,



Sassoon, Siegfried (*continued*)

307; Graves on, 254; and I. G.'s 'Ballad of the Three Spectres,' 123; and Housman, 135; immediacy and anger of verse of, 322; *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 321; as truth teller, 320; war memories of, 366

Satan, 53

Saunders, Kate, 439–40n56

Saxty, Frederick, 240, 250, 444n13

Scarlatti, Domenico, 150

Schoenberg, Arnold, xix

Schubert, Franz Peter, 15, 247, 360, 367, 368, 426n15; I. G. as becoming, xx; and I. G.'s ancestry, 35; I. G.'s identification with, 35–36; *Lieder*, 7

Schumann, Clara, 6

Schumann, Eugenie, 361

Schumann, Robert, 306, 368; I. G.'s essays on, 361; I. G.'s hallucination of, 193

Scott, Marion, xiii, 19–21, 75, 102–3, 169; as advocate for female musicians, 21; and air raids, 190; appearance of, 20–21; and Laurence Binyon's 'For the Fallen,' 113; and A. K. Butterworth, 259–60; and Carey singing I. G.'s songs, 258; character of, 20, 21; charity of, 260; and R. Davis, 337, 338–40; death of, 382; devotion of to I. G., 20, 23, 163; and A. Drummond, 164, 168, 180, 206; at Dryhill farm, 221; as editor and musicologist, 21; and Evans, 165; and expectations of I. G., 32; and experimental treatment with malaria, 317; family of, 20; and Farrar, 21; and G. Finzi, 374, 381–82; and first impressions of I. G., 19–20; and food parcels for I. G., 73; and Fulham, 23; 'Gloucestershire Evening' of, 233; and I. G. and Distinguished Conduct Medal, 74; and I. G. and Squire, 261–62; I. G. as composing for approval of, 102; and I. G. at Barnwood House, 289, 292; and I. G. at King's Weston House, 273; and I. G. at Lord Derby's War Hospital, 200–201; and I. G. at Napsbury War Hospital, 205; and I. G. at Seaton Delaval, 178; and I. G. at Stone House, 297–98, 299, 308, 313, 317, 319, 326, 327, 342, 345, 346–47, 349, 352, 357, 358, 361, 363, 370, 372–74; and I. G. at tax office, 268; I. G.

interviewed by at Royal College of Music Union, 19; and I. G. on bombardments, 78; and I. G. on Keats, 355; and I. G. on leave, 167–68; and I. G.'s affections, 123; and I. G.'s 'By a Bierside,' 385; and I. G.'s 'Camps,' 151; and I. G.'s composing in wartime France, 83; as I. G.'s confidante, 119; as I. G.'s critic, 119; and I. G.'s depression, 193–94; and I. G.'s digestive problems, 136; and I. G.'s 'England the Mother,' 121–22; and I. G.'s estate, 382, 383; and I. G.'s final illness, 375–76; and I. G.'s finances, 255; and I. G.'s 'Framilode the Queen,' 113; and I. G.'s funeral, 376–77, 378, 379; and I. G.'s *Gloucestershire Rhapsody*, 220; and I. G.'s heart condition, 192–93; and I. G.'s humour, 79; I. G.'s intellectual and practical support from, 177; and I. G.'s letters from Estaires, 82; and I. G.'s *Ludlow and Teme*, 251; as I. G.'s main correspondent, 119–20; and I. G.'s manuscripts, 21, 381–83; and I. G.'s mood swings, 25; and I. G.'s music composed in Stone House, 332; and I. G.'s newspapers, 52; and I. G.'s 'Pain,' 120, 121; and I. G.'s poems, 53; I. G.'s poems dedicated to, 123; and I. G.'s poetry in *RCM Magazine*, 236; and I. G.'s rejection by Sidgwick and Jackson, 262; and I. G.'s relationships with women in France, 71; I. G.'s relationship with, 167–68; and I. G.'s religious beliefs, 345; and I. G.'s requests for poetry, 128; and I. G.'s 'Robecq,' 101; and I. G.'s setting for Hardy's 'The Night of Trafalgar,' 33; and I. G.'s setting of F. W. Harvey's 'In Flanders,' 54, 108; and I. G.'s settings of Bridges, 342; and I. G.'s *Severn and Somme*, 123, 139–40, 141, 145–46, 156; as I. G.'s source of Royal College of Music news, 50; and I. G.'s 'Strange Service,' 87; and I. G.'s string quartet in D minor, 330; and I. G.'s 'The Strong Thing,' 107; and I. G.'s suicide note, 198, 199; and I. G.'s 'To an Unknown Lady,' 107; and I. G.'s 'To Certain Comrades' ('To the Fallen'), 76–77; and I. G.'s 'To His Love,' 180, 183; and I. G.'s 'To the Poet before Battle,' 51, 53; and I. G.'s *War Elegy*, 248; and I. G.'s war pension, 206; I. G.'s wartime news from,

- 85; on I. G.'s withheld letters, 308; and I. G.'s work in munitions factory, 209; and Ronald Gurney, 223, 272–73, 275, 277; and F. W. Harvey's *A Gloucestershire Lad at Home and Abroad*, 100; and Herbert Howells, 23, 138; and Hunt sisters, 21, 23; and Levetus sisters, 34; and Masfield's 'By a Bierside,' 96; as mother figure, 274; musical journalism of, 21; and *Music and Letters* symposium on work of, 375–76; as music critic, xix, 248; photograph of, 20; and premiere of I. G.'s *Ludlow and Teme*, 233, 258; and premiere of I. G.'s string quartet in A minor (1912), 25, 28; as president of Royal College of Music Union, 252; quartet of, 25, 233; recommended to F. W. Harvey by I. G., 168; as reviewer, 256; and sailing, 29; and Shelley's 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,' 363; and Sidgwick and Jackson, 145–46; and Society of Women Musicians, 25; soirées of, 120, 233, 258, 347; and Spanish flu, 209; and Steen, 300; studies at Royal College of Music, 21; in Switzerland, 317, 319; and Maggie Taylor, 223; and Terry's diagnosis of I. G., 274, 275; and Third Battle of Ypres, 150; and Helen Thomas, 346–47; and *Times Literary Supplement*, 160; and trips with I. G., 352, 372, 373; trips with I. G. to Old Vic, 349–50, 365; trip with I. G. to Dover, 363, 364; trip with I. G. to Eltham, 366–67; trip with I. G. to Gravesend and Rochester, 363; trip with I. G. to Sheerness, 363–64; and R. Vaughan Williams's *A Sea Symphony*, 28; and Voynich, 212; and Whitman, 112
- Scott, Mr, 168
- Scott, Sir Walter, 158, 159
- Scott, Stella, 168, 169
- Scottish soldiers, 83, 84, 108, 111, 113, 142, 160–61, 162, 340
- Scriabin, Alexander Nikolayevich, 218, 225, 228, 360
- Seaton, village of, 174
- Seaton Delaval station: I. G. at, 173–75, 178, 183, 188–89, 190, 194, 438n5
- 2/5th Gloucesters, 43, 45, 46–47, 98; A Company, 129, 427n37; and Arras front, 141–42; and arrival at trenches, 65; and attack near Aubers Ridge, 85; and attack on Bihecourt, 129; band of, 56; and Barnwood House asylum, 287; and Battle of Fromelles, 86; bayonet training of, 48, 322; B Company, 73, 91, 125, 129, 130, 427n37; bombardments of, 81, 82; at Bouquemaision, 103; at Buire au Bois, 142–45, 250; casualties of, 68, 78, 81, 82, 101, 124–25, 129, 131, 142; at Caulaincourt, 128–29; and Cheeryohs, 144, 250; at Chelmsford (Danbury) training camp, 53, 54–55; companies of, 427n38; D Company, 125, 129, 130, 427n37; at Epping Forest, 49–51; at Fauquissart Sector, 66; at Framerville, 123, 124–25; at Gapennes, 113–14; I. G. as speaking for, 260; and German raid on Colvin Craters, 81; at Grandcourt, 105–6; I. G.'s camaraderie with, 80; and I. G.'s enlistment, 41–42, 43; and I. G.'s funeral, 378–79; and I. G.'s *Severn and Somme*, 139; at Guillancourt, 126; I. G. with, 44, 141; and I. G. with 184th Machine Gunners, 150, 151; and Eric Harvey, 183; and Hill 35, 152, 157; inspection of, 116–17; and La Gorgue billets, 82; at Laventie, 68–69, 74–77, 78, 81, 85, 86, 101, 105; at L'Étoile, 118–19; and march to Albert, 103; and march to Ypres, 136; and Moated Grange Sector, 86, 94, 96; at Montonvillers, 141; at Neuville, 102; at Omiécourt, 126, 127–28; at Park House 'A' Camp, Salisbury Plain, 56–58; photos of, 44, 47, 48, 56, 322; pursuit of retreating Germans by, 126–32; raids by, 74–77, 101; at Raincourt, 125; relief of, 82; and Richebourg–St Vaast, 82, 83; at Riez Bailleul, 100, 101; and Robecq billets, 101, 102; role of, 43; and Seaton Delaval, 173; second attack of (June 29, 1916), 78; at Somme, 101, 103, 106, 107; and stunts to upset German morale, 81–82; and Third Battle of Ypres, 150–52, 157; and travel to Flanders, 63–65; at Varennes, 110; at Vermand, 129; at Vermandovillers, 126; R. White's inspection of, 101; at Wiencourt, 122
- 2/1st Bucks Regiment, 69, 85, 124

- 2/7th Worcesters, 82
- Shakespeare, William, 57, 286, 332, 367; I. G. as becoming, xviii, xx, 316, 352–53, 354–56, 359, 367; and Georgian poets, 353; I. G.'s love of, 255; and I. G.'s plays, 350, 352; history plays of, 319; language of, 52; setting of to music, 351; works: 'Blow, Blow, Thou Winter Wind,' 242; 'Clown's Song,' 242; 'Come Away, Death,' 242; *King Lear*, 353, 363; *Much Ado about Nothing*, 349; 'Orpheus with His Lute,' 242; 'A Sea Dirge,' 242; sonnets of, xviii; 'Take O Take Those Lips Away,' 242; *The Merchant of Venice*, 13; *The Tempest*, 353–56; *Twelfth Night*, 359; 'When Daisies Pied,' 242; 'When Icicles Hang by the Wall,' 241–42
- Shanks, Edward, 230, 261–62; 'As I Lay in the Early Sun,' 442n39; 'Dover's Hill,' 442n39; 'The Fields Are Full,' 442–43n39; 'The Latmian Shepherd,' 442–43n39; 'Meadow and Orchard,' 442n39; 'The Singer,' 229, 442–43n39
- Sheerness, I. G. and Marion Scott's trip to, 363–64
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 117, 373; 'Adonais,' 181; 'Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,' 363
- Shimmin, Sydney, xiii, 34, 42, 55, 100, 139, 210, 317, 378
- Shurdington. *See* Dryhill farm, Shurdington
- Sibelius, Jean, 248, 329
- Sidgwick, Frank, 262–63, 264
- Sidgwick and Jackson (publishers), 145–46, 147, 149, 216, 262–63, 328
- 61st Division, 86
- Skelton, John, 327
- Skilern, Ernest, 76, 77, 80, 430n47
- Smith, Adam, 165
- Society of Women Musicians, 25, 367, 426n22
- Somme, 81, 100, 105–6, 152; birdsong of, 366; I. G. on, 178; 2/5th Gloucesters move to, 101, 103; and Severn, 68; and Unknown Warrior, 248
- Somme, Battle of, 78, 85, 86, 125, 370
- Sorley, Charles Hamilton, 454n14; 'In Flanders Fields,' 429n10
- Soutar, Dr, xv, 278, 283, 284, 286
- Southampton, 64
- Spanish flu epidemic, 209
- 'Spanish Ladies,' 145
- Squire, John Collings, xiv, 261–62, 300; in Chiswick, 301; and I. G. at Stone House, 372; and I. G.'s escape from Stone House, 301; works: 'Epitaph in Old Mode,' 443n40; 'The Ship,' 229; 'The Three Hills,' 443n40; tribute of to I. G., 375; 'You Are My Sky,' 229; *Younger Poets of Today*, 366
- Stainer and Bell (publisher), 250, 359, 445n45
- St Albans, 205. *See also* Napsbury War Hospital, St Albans
- St Albans, abbey of, 205
- Stanford, Sir Charles Villiers, xiv, 6, 13; background of, 14; and British music, 27; death of, 327; and I. G. as ungovernable, 38; and German Romantics, 15; and I. G.'s chromaticism, 15; I. G.'s compositions for, 24; and I. G.'s early songs, 36; and I. G.'s *Five Elizabethan Songs*, 39; and I. G.'s intellectual life, 30–31; and I. G.'s projected operas, 25; and I. G.'s setting of F. W. Harvey's 'In Flanders,' 108, 122; and I. G.'s setting of Masfield's 'By a Bierside,' 122; as I. G.'s teacher, 14, 15, 227, 228; and Howells, 138; letters to I. G. from, 50, 122; musical views of, 14–15; at Royal College of Music, 8; and Marion Scott, 20, 21, 233; as teacher, 3, 14, 19, 424n23; and Verdi's *Falstaff*, 34; *Ye Holy Angels Bright*, 33
- Steen, Dr, xv, 292, 293, 296, 298, 299, 300, 301, 309, 312, 335
- Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle), *Le Rouge et le Noir*, 451–52n17
- Stephens, James, 'The County Mayo,' 258, 446n55
- Stevenson, Robert Louis, 12, 53, 94, 158, 159; 'Song and Singer,' 36
- St Julien, 153, 157
- Stone, village of, 294
- Stone House Hospital, Dartford (City of London Mental Hospital), xv, 277, 292, 293, 448n31, 449n33; and E. W. Anderson at, 340–41; Davis at, 336–40; decor of, 295; as destructive environment for I. G., 358; I. G. at, xvii, 294–377; grounds of, 295–96; I. G.'s admission to, 296–97; I. G.'s compositions at, 347–49, 358–59; I. G.'s escape from, 301–2; lack of dignity at, 298;

- library of, 313; life in, 309; malaria treatments at, xv, 317, 318–19; patients on outing from, 310; photograph of, 295, 298; records of, xvii; site of, 294–95; staffing at, 298, 337; suicides at, 298–99
- St Peter's Cathedral, Gloucester, 26, 137
- Strauss, Richard, 32, 359
- Stravinsky, Igor, xix; *The Firebird*, 360
- Strindberg, August, 341
- Stroud Journal*, 218
- Stroud valley, 66
- St Thomas's Hospital, London, 83
- St Vaast, 83
- Sumsion, Herbert, 378
- Swinburne, Charles, 155
- Syngé, J. M., 'Riders to the Sea,' 25
- Tallis, Thomas, 13
- Tasso, Torquato, 'Brown Is My Love,' 241
- Taylor, Coleridge, 6
- Taylor, Geoffrey, 212–14
- Taylor, Maggie, 223
- Taylor, Mr, 100
- Temple Church, 14
- Templeton, W. L., xv, 317, 318, 319
- Tennyson, Alfred Lord, 27, 190; 'Come into the Garden, Maud,' 439n46
- Terry, Dr, xiv, 273, 274–75, 278, 283
- Tewkesbury, 41, 205, 351
- Thackeray, William Makepeace, 354
- Thiepval, I. G. at, 107, 178
- Thiepval Memorial, 259
- 3/5th Gloucestershire Regiment, 86
- 13th London Welsh Regiment, 65, 66, 84
- Thomas, A., 173–74
- Thomas, Dylan, *Under Milk Wood*, 449n4
- Thomas, Edward, xiv, xix, 17, 27, 185, 216, 264, 303, 322, 349, 426n29, 447n69, 452n18; and *Daily Chronicle*, 52–53; death of, 346; and experience of trenches, 307; and I. G. at Lord Derby's War Hospital, 199; I. G.'s admiration of, 255, 256; and I. G.'s 'Migrants,' 204; I. G.'s settings of, 257; and Haines, xiii, 188, 243, 256; maps of Cotswolds of, 347; as nature poet, 217; and possibilities of verse, 224; and suicide, 199; works: 'Bright Clouds,' 240; 'Lights Out,' 219, 226, 346, 347; 'The Penny Whistle,' 199, 226, 440n10; 'Rain,' 315; 'Scents,' 228; 'Time, You Old Gipsy Man,' 240; 'The Trumpet,' 184
- Thomas, Helen, xiv, 345–47, 363
- Thoreau, Henry David, 359
- Thornton, Kelsey, *Collected Letters of Ivor Gurney*, 384
- Three Choirs Festival, 33–34, 270–71, 383
- Tidworth station, 56, 64
- The Times*, xiv, 247, 266
- Times Literary Supplement*, 52, 160, 256, 313
- Tolstoy, Leo, 94, 99, 134, 156; *War and Peace*, 57
- Tomlinson, Dr, 274
- Toussaints, 103
- Townsend, Dr, xv, 286, 289, 292
- Trafalgar, Battle of, 370
- Tregenna, 213
- Trethowan, W. H., 456n14
- Trinity College, Cambridge, 14
- Tudor Church Music*, 241
- Twigworth, 188
- Udall, Nicholas, 'Ralph Roister Doister,' 250
- Unknown Warrior, 248
- Vachell, Horace Annesley, *Quinney's Adventures*, 159
- Vanbrugh, Sir John, 173
- Vaughan Williams, Adeline, 302, 312, 357, 358
- Vaughan Williams, Ralph, xiv, 176, 446n59; in army, 50; and British music, 27; character of, 227; charity of, 260; and R. Davis, 338; death of, 383; and Debussy, 225; and English music, 228; and folk song, 227, 242; and I. G. as cinema organist in Bude, 257; and I. G. at Barnwood House, 292; and I. G. at King's Weston House, 273; and I. G. at Stone House, 302, 309–10, 311, 342, 345, 358, 359, 363, 372; I. G.'s continued support from, 252; and I. G.'s erratic behaviour, 235; and I. G.'s escape from Stone House, 302; and I. G.'s estate, 383; and I. G.'s finances, 255, 273, 302; and I. G.'s funeral, 378; and I. G.'s *Gloucestershire Rhapsody*, 220; on I. G.'s legacy, 381; and I. G.'s music

- Vaughan Williams, Ralph (*continued*)  
 composed in Stone House, 332; and I. G.'s 'New England' quartet in E minor, 332; and I. G.'s sonata in E flat, 249; and I. G.'s songs, 251; as I. G.'s teacher, 227–29, 230–31, 233, 236; and I. G.'s *War Elegy*, 247; and harmony and counterpoint, 227; on music as speaking for composer's generation, 228; and 'New English Musical Renaissance,' 6; and pentatonic scale, 242; photograph of, 227; and Queen's Hall Promenade Concert, 6; and Royal Army Medical Corps, 227; at Royal College of Music after war, 227; and Stanford, 14; tribute of to I. G., 375; and Whitman, 333; works: *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, 4, 5–6, 27, 227, 230, 312, 345, 423n4; 'Linden Lea,' 250; *A London Symphony*, 220, 225, 228–29, 312; 'A Musical Autobiography,' 424n23; *On Wenlock Edge*, 230; *Riders to the Sea* (opera), 25; *A Sea Symphony*, 28; songs for tenor, 234; *The Lark Ascending*, 220
- Vaux, I. G. at, 145, 150, 328
- Verdi, Giuseppe: *Falstaff*, 34; *Rigoletto*, 349; *Il Trovatore*, 349
- Vermand, 126; I. G. at, 129, 374
- Vermandovillers: I. G. at, 126
- Vimy Ridge, 142
- Voynich, Ethel, xiii, 206, 212, 213, 214; *The Gadfly*, 168
- Waddington, Sidney, 13
- Wagner, Richard, 228, 242
- Walberswick, 34
- Warren, Francis Purcell (Bunny), xiv, 19, 42, 215, 241; cello sonata of, 234
- Webster, John, 'The Duchess of Malfi,' 249
- Weelkes, Thomas, Summer and Frost,' 241
- Westgate Street, Gloucester (photograph), 268
- West Ham Weekly News*, 317
- Westminster Abbey, 13, 248
- Wever, Robert, 'In Youth Is Pleasure,' 249
- White, R., 101
- 'Whitewash on the Wall,' 145
- Whitman, Walt, xix, 17, 55–56, 80, 94, 146, 147, 200, 307, 322, 347; excesses of, 243; I. G.'s revisions of, 359; and I. G.'s Stone House compositions, 333; and possibilities of verse, 224; works: 'Anthem of Earth,' 442n28; 'Darest Thou Now O Soul,' 455n37; 'Reconciliation,' 112, 224–25; 'This Compost,' 97
- Whitminster church, I. G. as organist at, 10
- Wiencourt, I. G. at, 122
- Wigmore Hall, 226, 240, 347
- Wilby, John, 241
- William the Conqueror, 173
- Wilson, Steuart, 230, 233, 443n44
- Wilson, Woodrow, 119
- Wolf, Hugo, 228, 360
- Wood, Charles, 14
- Woolf, Virginia, *Mrs Dalloway*, 451n15
- Wooster, Frank, 144
- Worcester, 270
- Wordsworth, William, 52, 94, 256, 267, 373
- World War I, xvii, 31, 270, 379; and armistice declaration, 209, 210; declaration of, 41, 97; and I. G.'s circle, 19; I. G.'s memories of, 365–66, 367, 370
- The Worshipful Company of Musicians, 13
- Wynne, Kenniston H., 'At the Jolly Blue Boar,' 250
- Yeats, William Butler, 27, 140; I. G.'s plan for cycle of operas based on, 25; and Poetry Bookshop, 245; works: 'Fiddler of Dooney,' 94; 'The Folly of Being Comforted,' 167, 169, 371; 'Kathleen ni Houlihan,' 94; 'Song in the Night,' 333, 343–44; 'When You Are Old and Grey,' 167
- York Minster, 344
- Young, Brett, 321, 454n14
- Ypres, 63, 65, 150, 151; and bombardments, 78; Cloth Hall in, 71; countryside around, 69; destruction of, 70–71; I. G. at, 151; 2/5th Gloucesters march to, 136; and Unknown Warrior, 248
- Ypres, First Battle of, 63
- Ypres, Third Battle of, 150–53, 157
- Zennor, I. G. at, 212–14