People connected with the Hall

- Humphrey Pakington and his family
- Lady Mary Yate
- Nicholas Owen
- Father John Wall
Humphrey Pakington and his family

Humphrey Pakington is, without doubt, the most important person to have lived at Harvington Hall.

He was born around 1555 and had three sisters and one brother. In 1565 he went to Shrewsbury School and later lived in the London area. He inherited Harvington Hall in 1578 and was living there by the early 1580s when he began altering the medieval building into a Tudor manor house. Wooden floors were inserted, walls were panelled or covered with paintings and tapestries and glass windows were added to add light and warmth to the rooms. Finally, the building was encased in sandstone and red brick. However, Humphrey was also responsible for installing the priest hides, which became necessary after Queen Elizabeth’s law of 1585, banning Catholic priests who had been trained abroad from entering the country. Humphrey was a devout Catholic and by 1588 he was already known as a recusant, that is, a person who refused to attend the Church of England. He had to pay enormous fines, which rose from a shilling a week to £20 a month, and, after 1593, along with other Catholics, Humphrey was forbidden by law from travelling more than five miles from Harvington without special permission. A great friend of his, Thomas Habington, was also suffering from these fines and restrictions. He was the Catholic owner of nearby Hindlip House and it was probably as a result of this friendship that, in the early 1600s, Nicholas Owen, the master carpenter, priest hide builder and Jesuit lay brother came to Harvington and added a set of ingenious hides to the existing, earlier stack hides.

Humphrey was married twice. He married his first wife, Lady Bridget Norris, in 1601, but when Bridget died five years later in 1606, he married Abigail Sacheverell from Derbyshire. Humphrey and Abigail had at least four children, but the only ones to reach adulthood were two girls, Mary, born in 1610 and Anne, who was born three years later. Both daughters married into the lower levels of the aristocracy. Anne married Sir Henry Audley from Essex in 1628 when she was 15 years old. She had five children and died at Harvington in 1543 at the young age of 29. She had returned to the family home the year before when her own home was burnt down by a Puritan mob. Mary married Sir John Yate from Berkshire in 1630 at the age of 20. Mary also had five children but lived to the great age of 85, dying in 1696.

When able to do so, Humphrey seems to have enjoyed travelling and his letters mention London fashions, politics, and lamprey (a kind of fish) pies. They also reveal his interest in gardening and his friendship with John Tradescant, the royal gardener to James I and Charles I. Humphrey was also known to John Parkinson, the writer, to whom he gave a new plant, the double blush anemone, to plant in his garden.

Humphrey died in 1631 and the Hall was inherited by his elder daughter, Lady Mary Yate, although Abigail continued to live there until her death in 1657.
Lady Mary Yate

Mary was the eldest surviving daughter of Humphrey and Abigail Pakington, born at Harvington in November 1610. She and her younger sister Anne spent their childhood at Harvington and a great deal of this time would be spent in the nursery on the second floor in the care of a nurse. Here they would have played with dolls, known as rag babies, and an assortment of wooden toys. They would have learnt how to read, write, calculate, sew, embroider, dance and make music. As Mary and Anne grew up, they must have been aware of the mysterious people who sometimes lived on that floor whilst pretending to be visitors, tutors or servants. They would also have been aware that at least one of those rooms was being used as a secret chapel for celebrating the illegal Catholic mass.

Mary married Sir John Yate from Berkshire, a Catholic, when she was 20 years old and they had five children. Mary and her family often visited Harvington and two of her children were christened at Chaddesley. When her father died, Mary inherited the Worcestershire estates and Anne inherited the estates in Shropshire. When her husband died in 1659, Mary returned to Harvington and lived there as a widow for 40 years.

During her time at the Hall, priests were always welcome. One of these priests may well have been Father, now Saint, John Wall, a Franciscan who was well known in the area and who has been associated with her. A stained glass window in the nursery depicts her having communion from Father John Wall. In 1678, following the Titus Oates plot, Father Wall was arrested in the area and eventually executed at Red Hill in Worcester on 22 August 1679.

Lady Mary continued to help priests until her death, setting up at least four charitable trusts: one was set up to fund £50 a year to support priests at Harvington and Buckland, one was to support the professors of Divinity at Douai, where priests were trained, one was for apprenticing local children and one provided the almshouses.

From 1663, her mentally ill nephew, Thomas Audley, was sheltered by Lady Mary at Harvington, but in 1668 she was sued for allegedly trying to cheat him out of money and jewels said to be worth £3,000. An inventory of the contents of the Hall at the time of her death listed no less than 11 sets of priests’ vestments, various altar cloths and a collection of plates which included a thurible, used for burning incense.

Lady Mary Yate died on 20 June 1696 and is buried in the Church of St. Cassian in Chaddesley Corbett.
Nicholas Owen was the hide builder who created some of Harvington's unique priests hiding places.

He was born to a Catholic family in Oxford around 1562 and had three brothers, all of whom became priests. One brother died whilst training to be a priest, another became a priest and was imprisoned and a third brother ran an illegal printing press for Catholic material while in prison. Nicholas was apprenticed as a boy to a friend of his father who was a joiner. In 1588 he became a servant to Father Henry Garnet, the Jesuit superior, whose job was to travel the country to establish a series of 'safe' houses where priests could be hidden. It was during these travels that Nicholas Owen began using his skills as a carpenter to build his ingenious hides into these houses.

In 1594 he was arrested with Father John Gerard who was put into the Tower of London. Nicholas was released because his captors did not know who he was, but three years later he helped mastermind Father Gerard’s daring escape.

In 1600 he was thrown from his horse and broke his leg. The bone was so badly reset that he was left with a permanent limp. It was around this time that he came to Harvington Hall and agreed to build new, better hiding places. His excuse for working there was building a new main staircase. His three new hides were situated in Dr. Dodd's library, at the top of the main staircase, and in the roof, reached via the false fireplace in the Marble Room. To build his hides, Nicholas worked alone, with no plans or diagrams which might give him away or lead to the capture of the priests.

Nicholas continued to build until, in 1606, following the Gunpowder Plot, he was caught during a search at Hindlip House. Nicholas and another Jesuit, Ralph Ashley, took refuge in one of his own hides behind some panelling on the gallery. After four days with only an apple to share between them, they emerged from the hide only to be recognised and captured. Nicholas was taken to the Tower of London where he was tortured on the rack in the hope that he would reveal the whereabouts of his other hides and the families he had worked for. He maintained his silence and died under torture taking his secrets with him. His hides were so successful that the hide in Dr. Dodd’s library remained undiscovered for almost 300 years!

It is said that no other man contributed more to the safety of priests during the persecution in England than Nicholas Owen.
Father John Wall

Of all the priests who have been associated with Harvington Hall, probably the most famous is father John Wall.

He was born in Lancashire in 1620 and brought up as a Catholic. When he was 11 years old, he was sent to be educated at the Catholic College at Douai in Belgium. Ten years later, John Wall was 21 years old and heir to a large estate in Norfolk. He could have returned to England and lived comfortably but instead he went to university in Rome. If he had stayed in England he could not have gone to university because he was a Catholic. In 1641 he entered the English College at Rome to train to become a priest; he called himself Marsh, (the married name of his sister Dorothy) to disguise his identity.  He was ordained as a priest on 3 December 1645 but, he stayed on for more studies and finally left to return to England in May 1648, during the second Civil War. (A few months later, King Charles I was beheaded at Whitehall at the direction of Parliament.) He stayed in England for about a year and a half, possibly visiting his family. At the end of 1650, he returned to Douai and joined the Franciscan Order.

In 1656, when John Wall was 36 old, he returned to England where he worked in the Worcestershire and Warwickshire areas for the next 20, using many false names to hide his true identity. These aliases included Francis Johnson, Dormer and Webb. At this time it was still high treason for priests who had been trained abroad to enter the country so he was always in danger.

By this time, Harvington Hall was owned by Lady Mary Yate and, with its series of hiding places, it was probably one of the places where he would have felt most secure. A stained glass window in the nursery shows him giving communion to Lady Yate. We think that Father John Wall said Mass at Harvington and, if there had been a search while he was there, he would have used the hiding places.

In the summer of 1678 there was something that we call the Titus Oates plot. This was a rumour started by Oates (who was known as a liar), that there was a Catholic plot to murder the Protestant King Charles II and replace him with his Catholic brother James. Although the King did not believe it, a wave of panic swept London and on November 1, the King was forced to order all Catholics to leave the city. Father Wall was in London at the time for a chapter meeting with the Franciscans and he immediately travelled to Rushock Court which was three miles from Harvington. Someone there betrayed him and he was arrested on 9 December 1678. He was put in the gaol at Worcester Castle. Then he was put on trial in London under suspicion of being involved in the Titus Oates plot, but having been cleared of that, he was found guilty of priesthood and sentenced to death. He was returned to Worcester and executed at Red Hill on 22 August 1679, the last English priest to be executed. However, on 25 October 1970, both Father Wall and Nicholas Owen were proclaimed Saints of the Catholic Church by Pope Paul VI.