WEALTHY SQUIRE OF STATELY OLD HALL GAMBLED AWAY HIS FORTUNE

Some of the intriguing men who have been masters of Lartington Hall in the past and are described here by Robin Rackham, the present owner, who has been researching the history of the building.

To many people, Lartington Hall is associated with the Field family who purchased it and its estates in 1917. But it was the seat for nearly 300 years of one of the north's most colourful Catholic families.

The Maires, Silvertops and Withams were really one family. The name was to change as there were no male heirs, and much wealth was brought into the family by marriage settlements.

In 1635 Thomas Maire of Hardwick married Margaret Appleby, heiress to Lartington and the estate remained in that name for two generations.

In 1772 John Maire, who had no son, left it to his nephew, Henry Lawson of Brough. The Lawsons were, and still are, a well known Catholic family and their house, Brough Hall near Catterick, was only recently sold to a private developer.

It was a condition that should Henry Lawson succeed to the Brough estates, Lartington and Hardwick should pass to his sister Catherine Lawson. This happened and in 1772 she married John Silvertop of Ministeracres and changed her name to Mrs Silvertop Maire.

The silvertops were one of the north's most wealthy families having developed large coal deposits on land they owned between Blaydon and Ryton. The family seat, Ministeracres, is south of Hexham and is today a retreat for the Passionists.

Mrs Silvertop Maire had five children but the most interesting was her second eldest son Henry Thomas Silvertop who was to change his name to Witham. His memorial is the Witham Hall.

Harry, as he was known, was born in 1779 and changed his name by royal licence to Witham when in 1800 at the age of 23 he married Eliza Witham of Headlam, heiress to the estates of William Witham of Cliffe, Piercebridge.

Harry's brother George, heir to the Ministeracres estate, was a man of prudence and ability. He never married, but devoted his life to travel, Catholic emancipation and running his vast estate. He was the first Roman Catholic to become High Sheriff of Northumberland and was appointed representative to the Holy See in Rome.

Harry, by contrast, was the black sheep of the family although he enjoyed immense popularity with the public. It was said that he was distinguished for his kind and generous spirit and active benevolence to the working classes.

He founded the Mechanics Institute in Barnard Castle, now in the Witham Hall and actively supported the Dispensary Society for those too poor to pay doctor's bills. His main passion was the study of geology and he achieved some fame in this field in later life.

He was, however, a man of great extravagance and lost much of his inherited wealth on gambling.

Harry took up residence at Lartington on his marriage to Eliza Witham and from 1802 until 1813 she bore him 11 children, six sons and five daughters. All his life he was plagued with financial difficulties.

His grandson, the Rev. George Silvertop, wrote: "That Harry Witham did not keep racehorses seems not to have prevented him from losing large sums on the turf. I have heard from a person who was living at the time, that a great dance or ball was prepared by him at Lartington to celebrate the event of Doctor Syntax (a well known racehorse) winning for him a large sum which was to re-establish his shattered fortunes.

"In the midst of this, news arrived that Doctor Syntax had lost the race. The ball was abandoned and Harry Witham made a bolt for John-o'-Groats to escape his creditors."

In 1823 he ran into greater financial difficulties and was fortunate that his mother was prepared to sell the Hardwick and Hutton Henry estates managed by his elder brother George. There was alarm in Hardwick when it was learned the Catholic Mission was to be sold with all lands to the Earl of Darlington.

The priest, the Rev. Slater, wrote a pleading letter to George Silvertop but received no reply. He later was to comment: "The mission at Hardwick has been from time to time immemorial and Harry Witham's extravagances forced him to sell it to Lord Darlington.

"George Silvertop, Harry's brother, had the management but made no provision to continue the Mission. Lord Darlington was to sell me the moiety at the same price he gave for it, 11 acres more or less. Thus proving that Harry Witham and George Silvertop had even less feeling than the heretic Lord Darlington.

"Give me such as Lord Darlington before a 10,000 of your Withams and Silvertops although they professed themselves Catholics and Darlington was what we called a Heretic."

Slater was eventually able to buy some land and build the church that is there today. There was a lifelong intimacy between Harry Witham and Lord Darlington, later Duke of Cleveland. The Duke was obviously more shrewd in business than Harry.

Within a year of buying the land the Duke cut down enough timber to cover the purchase price.

Harry's son, the Rev. Thomas Witham, once remarked that had it not been for the extravagance of his father, he would have been the richest commoner in England. That was doubtless the case as the amount of coal out of pits on the Hardwick estates by the Duke was fabulous.

In 1826 Harry had to leave Lartington and spent the next six years in Edinburgh pursuing his interests in fossils and geology. He wrote Observation on Fossil Vegetabels and Cockfield Dike. He became a member of the Royal Society and Geological Society. He was the first geologist to study fossils under a microscope and his vast collection is now housed in the Natural History Museum.

In 1832 his fortunes changed when his mother died and he inherited what was left of her estates including Lartington. His return to the Hall was that of the prodigal son.

The Durham Chronicle wrote: "On Saturday last, the family of Henry Witham, Esq., who had been, for some years, absent from his seat at Lartington, returned to their residence. This event had long been looked forward to with anxiety by the inhabitants of Barnard Castle and neighbourhood, by whom the family had been held in great esteem and regard. Their reception, their 'Welcome Home' on this occasion, must have been highly gratifying to themselves."

Bells rang a merry peal and banners were hung from windows of houses in Barnard Castle.

A band led a procession from the town to Lartington. On reaching the park gate, the carriage halted and a large banner was displayed, bearng the inscription, 'God Bless the House of Lartington'—Welcome Home.'

Harry commissioned the architect Ignatius Bonomi, to build a museum to house his geollogical specimens and what is now the ballroom was completed in 1836. He filled it with over 3,000 books as well as fine paintings and his collection of fossils.

In 1844 he died and it was decided that a building would be a fitting memorial to him. The result, raised ten year later by public subscription, was the front part of the present Witham Hall.

Lartington passed to his eldest son George and on his death in 1847 to Thomas Witham, later the Right Rev. Monsignor Witham, who was born in 1806 and educated at Stoneyhurst and Ushaw College before entering the priesthood.

He took up residence at Lartington in 1847, but before that was a parish priest at Stella and Gainford. At Gainford in 1954 he built the Catholic Church and Presbytery. Like his father, he devoted himself to serving others regardless of religion.

Conditions in Barnard Castle were terrible with Bridgegate housing 1,500 people in squalor. Overcrowding was appalling. Deaths in two years ending 1849 totalled 414, including 145 cholera, 20 consumption, 13 T.B., 12 scarlet fever and 17 typhus fever.

Over a third of the population lived in 77 yards: nearly 1,500 in 360 tenements sharing 33 privies. In some cases cellars were used as cesspits. Witham provided timber to burn the effluvia in Thorngate and Bridgegate.

He was a good landlord to many tenants, draining the land and building houses and walls. Not a bigot, he employed many Protestant servants. But he insist they attend some form of worship on Sunday.

Like his father, he enjoyed a good life style. He had a well stocked cellar and entertained often, including priest parties.

Mrs Gertie Richardson of Cotherstone, whose grandfather Thomas Boddy was butler and valet, recalls that many children had watches from him. Any child who asked the time was sent off to Young's to receive a silver watch.

In harsh winters he organised skating on Low and High Pond. But he closed the only pub in the village—now the Thatch, home of Mr and Mrs G. Lowe. He was a railway pioneer, cutting the first sod at Shaw Bank for the opening of the Darlington to Barnard Castle line in 1854.

The Furness hematite iron field was being developed and it became necessary to link it with the south Durham coalfields. He also laid the foundation stone for Deepdale Viaduct, now demolished. This was followed by the Tees Valley Railway, later absorbed into the L.N.E.R.

In 1867 he commissioned the architect Joseph Hansom, to add the Priests' Hall (servants' quarters) and grand entrance and corridor. Hansom, inventor of the cab, received a number of commissions from the Silvertops including the chapel at Ministeracres.

When asked by Hansom what sort of church he would like, Silvertop replied, "Something nice." It was to cost £11,000 , a fortune. No record exists of the cost of building at Lartington, but it must have been considerable.

Witham was a close personal friend of John Bowes and often mixed with the aristocracy. He died in 1897, two days short of his 91st birthday, and was buried in the Catholic cemetery at Lartington. He asked not to be buried in the family crypt but next to the gate so people might remember him.

His funeral was a grand affair and special trains were laid on for the many mourners. He was generous to his loyal servants. Thomas Boddy was left his clothes and £2,000, quite a sum in 1897.

Lartington passed to Francis S. Silvertop and was let to the Berekley-Smiths. Because of death duties, Silvertop decided to sell the estate and hall. It was purchased for £86,000 by David Magnus Spence of Shotley Bridge.

The Spences were staunch Methodists and made themselves most unpopular with village residents who were Catholics. They closed the cemetery and forced many village tenants to leave. Many went to Ministeracres. All the brew houses were demolished and the well stocked cellar locked.

Death duties and the devastation of World War I took its toll on the upper classes and the Silvertops suffered tragically. In 1917 Francis Silvertop, who was serving in France, returned home to wed Geraldine Foster-Harter. He and two brothers were killed in the war.

Spence was in financial difficulties and in 1917 put the hall and its land up for sale. The hall and many farms and moorlands failed to reach reserves.

But on 5th April, 1918, Lartington Hall and 5,000 acres were sold for £66,580 to 38 year old Norman Field and his wife Olive. So began a new era that was to last 55 years.

WOMEN'S INSTITUTES

COTHERSTONE

Our 67th birthday was celebrated when 47 members and guests had a most enjoyable evening. Before the festivities there was a short business meeting.

It was announced that Mrs Bessie Rhodes was to be the delegate for Cotherstone and Eggleston at the A.G.M. in London. Members were pleased to learn that the parish council had voted to be instrumental in entering the tidy village competition next year.

The drama group was congratulated on their performance at the festival at Spennymoor, and further arrangements were made for the outing, mystery trip, farm walk and money making effort, and also for the group meeting to be held at Cotherstone.

The supper of home-made meat pies and peas with trifle to follow was next on the agenda, and after all the good food everyone managed to enjoy the programme of games which followed.

Mrs Nan Hamilton won the competition for a baby's knitted garment. The next meeting will be on 26th May when Mrs S. Tock will be talking about crafts.

LANDS

The monthly meeting was held in the village hall, presided over by Miss I. Parr. Mrs D. Alderson, secretary, read the county letter and business was discussed.

One new member, Mrs R. Johnson, was welcomed. Miss Parr introduced Mrs M. Winley, of Startforth, who showed some colourful slides of a touring holiday spent in Norway.

Winners of the competition for prettiest jam dish were: 1, Mrs R. Johnson; 2, Mrs F. Watson; 3, Mrs E. Gibbon. Other prize-winners were Mrs J. Hodgson and Mrs C. Sanderson.

Miss Parr read a report of the spring council meeting at Spennymoor. The report had been written by Mrs M. Graham, who had represented Toft Hill and Etherley as Lands had no delegate at the meeting.

COPLEY

We celebrated our 59th birthday and invited the senior citizens of the village to join in the celebration.

The president, Mrs Thompson, welcomed the visitors. After an excellent supper we were entertained by Mr Arnold Grieves and his party with some delightful singing of popular songs and monologues.

Mr R. Armstrong proposed a vote of thanks on behalf of the senior citizens to members of the institute and Mr Grieves and his party for a very enjoyable evening.

MICKLETON

Mrs Watson welcomed members and guests to the April meeting. Mrs Winter read the minutes, correspondence and county letter. Arrangements were made for people wanting to attend the group meeting.

Our summer outing was also finalised, an outing to Forge Mill, calling for supper at the Rancho Del Rio on 20th June. All members are looking forward to the trip.

Mr Brookes was welcomed. His theme was pottery he makes in Mickleton. He talked on styles and techniques, showing his working tools and their uses. Among exhibits were animals and figures he made. Thanks was extended for a most enjoyable talk.

Hostesses were Mrs Walsh and Mrs Foster. Mrs Winter won the competition, an unusual dish. Mrs P. Harle won the surprise box. The monthly stall was once again a great success, helping our W.I. funds.

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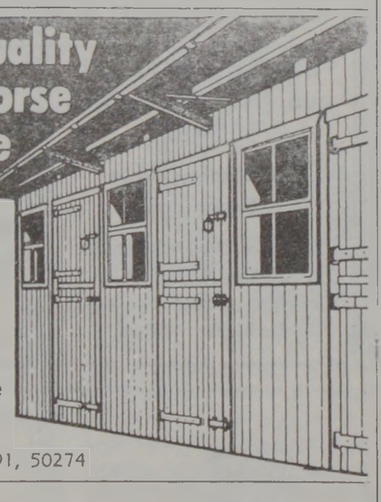
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