

*History of the Fylde of Lancashire by John Porter*

WESTBY OF MOWBRECK HALL AND BURN HALL.\*

The family of this name, so long associated with the township of Medlar-with-Wesham, in the parish of Kirkham, is descended from the Westbys of Westby, in the county of York.

William Westby, who was under-sheriff of Lancashire in 1345, is the first of the name, we can find, residing at Mowbreck ; and a great-grandson of his, named William Westby, is recorded as inheriting the Mowbreck and Westby property in the reign of Henry VI., 1422-61. John Westby, the son of the latter William, succeeded to the estates, residing, like his ancestors, at Mowbreck Hall, and was twice married, the offspring of the first union, with Mabill, daughter of Richard Botiler, being two daughters ; and of the second, with Eleanor Kirkby, of Rawcliffe, a son and heir, named William, who succeeded him at his death in 1512. William Westby, although the lawful holder of the estates, did not obtain control over them until after 1517, being a minor at that date. He married Elizabeth Rigmayden, of Wedacer, and had issue John, Elizabeth, and Helen. John Westby, the heir, had possession of Mowbreck, and Burn in Thornton township, about the year 1556, after the decease of his father; his places of residence were Mowbreck and Burn Halls. He was thrice married, and by his last wife, Ann, daughter of Sir Richard Molyneux, of Sefton and Larbrick, and widow of Thomas Dalton, of Thurnham, had issue John, Thomas, William, Ellen, and Mary. John Westby succeeded his father in 1591, and dying unmarried in 1604, was in his turn succeeded by his brother, Thomas Westby, who was twice married, and purchased the estate of Whitehall, where the children of his second union established themselves. The offspring of his first wife, Perpetya, daughter of Edward Norris, of Speke, were John, Thomas, Edward, William, Francis, Margaret, Perpetua, and Anne. John Westby, the heir, came into the Mowbreck estate and Burn Hall some time after 1622, but dying without issue in 1661, was succeeded by his nephew, Thomas, the eldest son of his fourth brother, Francis Westby, Thomas Westby, M.D., slain in the civil wars, and his two other brothers, Edward and William, having died childless. Thomas Westby, the inheritor of Westby, Mowbreck, and Burn, was born in 1641, and espoused Bridget, daughter of Thomas Clifton, of Lytham Hall, his issue being John, Thomas, William, Cuthbert, Robert, Francis, Bridget, Anne, and Dorothy. John

Westby, the eldest son, inherited Westby, Mowbreck, and Burn Hall, on the demise of his father in 1700. Thomas Tyldesley, of Fox Hall, was intimate with this gentleman, as observed from the following entry in his diary in the year 1715 :

*Mowbreck Hall and the Willows a History of the Catholic Community in the Kirkham District of Lancashire* by F.J. Singelton

## The Westby Family of Mowbreck

JOHN WESTBY (1530-91), who succeeded his father at Mowbreck, was one of the staunchest of the Lancashire squires and according to a kinsman he was "willing to lose his blood" in defence of the faith. The Reformation had placed Lancashire in the new diocese of Chester, and in 1567 the Privy Council, angered by the slow progress of the reformed doctrines in these parts, ordered the Protestant Bishop Downham to visit all parts of his diocese and report to them. About the same time the Lord Lieutenant, Lord Derby, was required to arrest "all such persons as under the cloak of religion seduced people from allegiance to the throne. John Westby was one of those arrested and brought before the Ecclesiastical Commissioners at Derby's house at Lathom. Westby confessed that he had not resorted to the Established Church as required by law nor received communion there. He also admitted that William Allen (the future Cardinal) had "divers times been at his house" but he thought it no offence as Allen was his kinsman. After being ordered to attend the State Church and forbidden to harbour Allen, he was released with the others on a surety of 300 marks, but in his report to the Privy Council Bishop Downham singled out John Westby as being the most intractable of all the accused. In 1562 William Allen had returned from Louvain to the family home at Rossall Grange for health reasons.

He had been a professor at Oxford but because of the religious changes he had moved, along with other Oxford dons, to the University of Louvain. After returning to Lancashire, although not as yet ordained, he visited many Catholic squires in the Fylde and adjacent areas, strengthening them in their faith and laying down the Council of Trent's verdict that attendance at these reformed services was not allowed (non licet). Allen headed the Government list of wanted recusants and in 1565 when his presence in England became too dangerous, he made his way via Oxford and Norfolk to the Continent whence he never returned. Soon afterwards he was ordained priest at Malines and in 1568 he founded the seminary at Douai in Flanders which supplied so many priests to the English mission. Meanwhile John Westby refused to conform. He is said to have been instrumental in bringing to Lancashire the Papal Bull of 1570 by which Pius V excommunicated Elizabeth and in any case his connections with Allen made him a marked man. Mowbreck was closely watched and a note in the Douai Diaries informs us that "John Westby of Mowbreck Esq. was glad to stand for a whole winter's day in a pit of water up to the ears and often forced to duck under the water lest he should be espied of the persecutors." But he did not always escape them. In the 1570s the Privy Council described Lancashire as a "sink of popery"

called Bishop Downham up to London and ordered Bishop Barnes of Carlisle to visit the Chester diocese, as a result of which fourteen Lancashire gentlemen were called before the High Commissioners at York. They included John Westby, his neighbour Cuthbert Clifton and his cousin John Rigmaiden. John Westby was imprisoned at York in 1571 and again in 1573, after which he was forced in heavy bonds into the custody of the archdeacons of Chester on condition that he did not visit his house for more than two weeks in any half-year. How long this lasted is not known but in the 1580s the oppression of the Catholics became worse.

Hitherto it had been expected that the Catholic faith would die out owing to the lack of priests but the arrival in England in 1580 of the Jesuits Campion and Parsons, together with increasing numbers of seminary priests from Douai and Rome, caused alarm in Government circles. There were plots and rumours of plots to depose Elizabeth in favour of Mary Stuart which eventually led to the execution of the Scottish Queen in 1587: there was rebellion in Ireland supported by the Pope: and above all, increasingly bad relations with Spain culminating in the Armada which Allen supported, caused the English Catholics to be identified, in most cases unjustly, with the national enemy. Not surprisingly by Acts of 1581 and 1585 the penal laws were tightened and extended. Priests were now guilty of high treason by their very presence in England, Catholic landowners were liable to forfeit two-thirds of their estates and their recusancy fines were increased to £20 a month for non-attendance at the State Church.

In 1588 John Westby had two-thirds of his lands seized and his household goods distrained. He was helped out by his brother-in-law Richard Mollineux who redeemed his goods and paid the crown £77, had nevertheless had his lands and goods seized. In addition he had paid £25 for furnishing a light horseman and "divers other duties and gaulds" for the Queen's service. He had but ancient rent and revenues to the sum of £42 and he offered to pay £10 or 20 marks a year or whatever the Privy Council thought meet and convenient and trusted they would have an honourable consideration of the state of him, his wife and four infants. Nothing seems to have come of this appeal, and worn out by imprisonment, fines and worry John Westby died in the following year (1591) at the age of sixty-one.

His death removed from the scene one of the staunchest and most uncompromising of the Lancashire recusants, but his resistance was not in vain for Mowbreck remained the centre of the Catholic faith in the Kirkham area until the establishment of the Willows.

About 1630 John Westby's son Thomas compounded for two-thirds of his estates liable to seizure by paying a composition rent of £100 a year but in spite of this he was able to buy Upper Rawcliffe Hall, later known as White Hall, which became the residence of the descendants of his second wife, Elizabeth Preston of Holker. During the Civil Wars the Westbys, like most of the Fylde gentry, were very staunch supporters of Charles I and six of them are said to have fought on the Royalist side. Being both recusants and royalists they forfeited their estates during the Cromwellian period but regained them at the restoration of Charles II in 1660.