

THE HOLTS OF GRISTLEHURST A CHAPTER OF LOCAL FAMILY HISTORY

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Lancashire history is, almost necessarily, strewn with the names of individuals and families once important now forgotten, or made much of for a generation and suffered to drop out of sight. Here and there, too in the plentiful annals of our county we meet with the names of men who decidedly influenced the districts in which they lived, and whose brief chronicles and records have either been unaccountably neglected or unwantingly destroyed by their would be greater successors, anxious for an exclusive position as founders of communities or historic houses. For some years past I have been searching every historical nook and cranny, and picking in the marrow hole of every antiquarian drybone available, to string together some succinct account of the Holt of Gristlehurst, or Grizzlehurst near Bury, a family or house which in its long generations must, consciously impetus to the development of Bury, Heywood, Radcliffe and Rochdale. Members of this family are mentioned in local history and local tradition, in the knightly lore of the county and in the military annals of the nation; but nowhere do we find anything like a history or an attempt to estimate their characters and labours. The Holts have run in a direct line, and have lived in this neighbourhood from the thirteenth century to the present time; nothing is more certain than that, at some time or other, but probably during the latter half of the seventeenth century, some considerable records relating to them was destroyed, and not records alone, but more enduring memorials of brass and marble.

Doubtless the founder or first settler hereabouts of this remarkable numerous family was the father of John del Holte, of

whom we know nothing except that he acquired land in the old manor of Ashworth. John, however, had a son Hugh Holte, who was married in the year 1349 to Matilda, daughter and coheirress of Robert de Assheworth, and documents are extant to establish the fact that to Hugh and his descendants passed the manor of Ashworth. At the time of Hugh Holt, Gristle Hurst would hardly be laid out or named but it seems reasonable to suppose that they formed part of the ancient manor of Ashworth, which continued in the Holt family without break in the male descent" until it had the misfortune to fall into the hands of Richard Holt; Esq. , an improvident and wasteful man, who by repeated mortgages encumbered his estate." Ashworth Chapel, returned as having been founded in the reign of Henry VIII, is supposed to have been built by Sir (Rev.) Thomas Holt), whose name frequently occurs in the Holt papers of that reign. He was the younger son of Richard Holt and his wife Margaret , daughter of James Cheetham, of Nutherst. "Notitis Cestriensis", reprinting an item from Warden Wroe's account says the Holts always allowed £4 per annum to this chapel, but the payment was either contested or the chapel claimed by a Mr Hallows, of Lincoln's Inn who purchased the manor from the impecunious Richard Holt for £3,960 and an annuity to him for life. Hallows contended that it was a domestic chapel only, and belonged to the estate. This gentleman, who married a Miss Rothwell, of Bury, subsequently gave £200 to the chapel, and Queen Anne's governors a similar benefaction, when it ceased to be a donative. In John Starky's quaint manuscript diary is the entry: "1740, January 21st – This day dies Mr Sam Hallows of Ashworth, to the great joy of all his neighbours."

Gristlehurst is returned in the historical notices of the diocese of Chester as being in the parish of Middleton and that portion of the district remains attached to Middleton at the present time. According to the Canon Raines, it was a large

irregularly built mansion of wood and plaster, erected in the fifteenth century. A portion of the ancient structure was evidently extant in 1848, and it seems therefore somewhat unfortunate, from an antiquarian point of view, that the site was not more specifically noted. The estate was obtained before the year 1449 by Ralph Holt who, according to a curious Parliamentary roll (in the possession of the learned Canon) of the time of Henry VII; married Ellen, widow of James Bellairs (who died in France), and daughter and coheir of John Sumpter, of Colchester, by his wife Marjery, daughter and coheir of Sir Geoffrey Brockholes, Knight. It appears that Sir Geoffrey had married Eleanor, the heiress of Sir John Roos, Knight, who inherited large estates in Essex from his mother, Alice the sole heiress of Sir Robert Asheldam. The property of Sir Geoffrey which descended to him from his mother, also came to the Holts of Gristlehurst" which gave them" says canon Raines " a position and rank not enjoyed by the elder branches of the house."

In the 22nd of Edward IV, Roger; one of the younger sons of one of the Holts of Gristlehurst, occupied Bridge Hall, at that period an important residence on the banks of the Roach between Bury and Rochdale and about a mile or a mile and a half from Gristlehurst, This residence continued in the occupation of this branch of the Holt family until 1664 when Roger Holt recorded a short pedigree. His son married a daughter of the incumbent of Ince, whose descendants became allied to the father of the first Lord Clive and the eleventh Lord Semphill. Bridge Hall was subsequently purchased by the Semphills and Clives, who sold it to Bury Merchant.

Thomas Holt of Gristlehurst was knighted in Scotland by Edward, Earl of Hertford. Clearly this knight was a soldier, and had gone (probably with a small following of Bury and Rochdale churls) with Hertford to the release of the beautiful and unfortunate Queen Mary. There is a brief biographical reference to Sir Thomas Holt

in the "Inventories of Church goods" issued by the Cheetham Society (vol cvii) . The pecuniary difficulties of the Government of Edward IV. Led it to sweep up what remained of church property from the spoliators of former years. In 1552 commissions were issued ordering complete inventories to be taken of the plate, jewels, ornament, or other valuables belonging to the churches and other places of worship in the Salford Hundred, and the return had to include " the names of persons who had been known to have acquired any property since the date of former inventories". The inquisition for the Salford hundred was " entrusted to some of the foremost men in it" -- viz, Sir Edmund Trafford , Sir John Atherton, Sir John Holcroft, and Sir Thomas Holt, Knights. The biographical reference included the following:- " Sir Thomas Holt of Gristlehurst near Bury, Knight was the son of Ralph Holt by Anne, daughter of John Langley of Agecroft, He married Dorothy, daughter of Sir Ralph Langford of Langford, in the county of Derby and had issue Francis, aged thirty eight at the time of his father's death in 1563; which son married Helen Holcroft, daughter of the commissioner already mentioned. Sir Thomas Holt was in 1544 knighted by Edward, Earl of Hertford, in Scotland. In the previous year (12 July) , as Thomas Holt Esq. he petitioned for some of the lands of Whalley and other Lancashire abbeys, and acquired extensive property out of those estates. Bearing on this fact it is noticeable that Sir Thomas was one of the commissioners when the Blackburn Church goods were inventoried (15 October 1552).

The annual return of the British Museum for 1881 reported the acquisition amongst the prints and drawings of a scarce portrait of "John Holt of Gristlehurst, engraved by David Loggan." This seems to be the plate prefixed to a sermon preached on the occasion of the funeral of Sir Thomas's only son and heir. This

Son is mentioned only in Dugdale's pedigrees as "John Goodhand Holt died in his youth, unmarried." It is a quarto

pamphlet , dedicated to “the much honoured Thomas Holt Esq and Mrs Ann Holt the mournful parents of the deceased heire” Sir Thomas soon afterwards sold his estates and left the district where however many relative remained. Probably he was twice married. He and his brothers were in content personal communication with and related to the Greenhalghes of Brandlesholme, the Assehtons of Middleton and probably to James, Lord Strange , afterwards “ the great” Earl of Derby. That he was a man of parts, a good man and devoted to knightly duty needs no urging. He was interred at the Bury Parish Church.

Fiction or tradition , in which may possibly be some spice of fact, describes Gristlehurst as being situated in a woody glen, admired for its picturesque scenery , said to have been the retreat of one of the Earls of Tyrone in the reign of Elizabeth “The craggy rocks on the one side of this lovely valley, and the steep wooded slopes on the other” are declared to mean the locality known to thousands of Lancashire pedestrians as Ashworth Valley. And likely enough. The legendary contribution is by Mr Roby and it has been summarised by Harland and Wilkinson. Although the historical names given in the story make a considerable draw upon our credulity as associated with such a place, we can imagine that the old highway between Bury and Rochdale might possibly be formed and known to the olden day travellers. The Earl of Tyrone claimed to be a king in Ireland, and by his rebellions harassed Queen Elizabeth and her armies for years during the later times of her reign. Tyrone’s earldom had been granted by the Queen herself, but the concession proved but another weapon in his hands. His ingratitude took the form of an intrigue with Spain, the object being to break the link which bound Ireland to England. Arms and ammunition came in abundance, not from America but Spain; the Irish chiefs were united in a bond of dependence upon himself. Tyrone’s forces and the English got to war, Tyrone having an extraordinary run of success , aided by

some four thousand Spaniards. Subsequently the England soldiery triumphed and Tyrone and other chiefs fled. The outlawed Earl then took up a residence among the people he had fought against. Grizlehurst was the rendezvous. At the present time the site of a few cottages near the course of the river Roach is called “Tyrone’s Bed” and upon a story told by a Mr Ralph Holt (steward to one of the Bamfords of Bamford) Mr Roby has based an interesting piece of fiction. “Tyrone is made to save from drowning Constance, the daughter of Holt of Gristlehurst. They love; she conceals him from pursuit by the sheriff and posse in a hidden chamber, the entrance to which is from her own bedroom. He escapes and she wastes away and dies.”

In subsequent documents the Holts were spoken as residing in Ashworth. Sir Richard Assheton, born in 1557, and who was three times sheriff of Lancashire, married for his second wife Mary, daughter of Robert Holt, and relict of Thomas Greenhalgh, of Brandlesholme. The latter left at his death, in 1598, a son, John Greenhalgh, one of the executors of his step-father, “a prudent and sagacious though at this time a young man.” John Greenhalgh was one of the executors under the will of Sir Nicholas Assheton, and was also present at his death, which took place in 1617. There was some display of feeling at the death of the knight, “some likeness of those present falling out.” As Nicholas Assheton says in his records; but John Greenhalgh interposed with kindly counsel, and peace ensued. This genial man was afterwards appointed by the deceased knight’s successor as his executor, along with Richard Assheton’s grandfather, Robert Holt. On the application of Thomas Holt, a dispensation was granted John Greenhalgh, by the Court of Chester, for, his marriage with Alice, daughter of the Rev. William Massie, of Wilmslow, and is dated January 30th, 1608 9. Greenhalgh then had a residence at Middleton. This lady was buried at the Bury Parish Church on January 4th 1620, her infant son having

been buried there in May of the same year. John Greenhalgh was married again in the same year at Ashworth Chapel, the date being December 8th, his new spouse being Mary daughter of Wm. Assheton, of Clegg and widow of Richard Holt.

The Holts of Ashworth were also in some way related to John Walton, who was warden of Manchester 1575-79, , and afterwards Bishop of Exeter.

In the steward's account's of the Shuttleworths there is the following entry (p42):- "December, 1587. Mr Houlte, of Gristlehurst, being the collector for the first pte. of the subsidie granted to hur magistie, xxxvs. vijd."

In the year 1626 "Theophilus Holt of Gristlehurst, in the parish of Bury, held four tenements called Cop Rood in Spotland."

One of the daughter of Edmund Hoult, Katherine married the Rev. Richard Mather, September 20th, 1624, a noted clergyman at the time, located at Toxteth.

The original estate of Gristlehurst was conveyed in Marriage by Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of William Holt, Esq., to Richard Beaumont, of Whitley Beaumont, near Huddersfield, by whom it

was sold in the year 1758 to a Mr. Milne, of Flockton Manor House, evidently a friend and neighbour of Mr. Beaumont. In 1850 it was merged into the estate of Mr. Fenton, The of Banford Hall. When Gristlehurst was in the pos and session of Mr. Beaumont it comprised 127 acres declared to pasture land and 42 acres of timber, described as " old Lancashire timber." No succeeding generation in the direct line of this family attained the eminence of "Sir Thomas, though several immediately succeeding male members became by marriage connected with the great houses of Whalley, Middleton, and Manchester. Two of the Holts became firm adherents of Charles II, and lost largely of their wealth in his service; their names are placed in the lists of Knights of the Royal Oak, which Charles was unsuccessfully importuned to institute. A century later we find the Holts tillers of the soil, quietly pursuing the arts of peace; and at the present time the Holts of Ashworth, Birtle, Birch, Middleton, Rochdale, Bury, Radcliffe, and Ramsbottom are as numerous as the Smiths and Robinsons of the story books. One claiming descent in line direct from the famous knight died recently at Wood Road, Holcombe; and the late Willoughby Holt never tired of pleasantly declaring be would some day oust Lord Derby as owner of the soil.