

ART. XIV – *The life of a South Cumbrian Squire: John Lewthwaite (1792-1863)*

By TIMOTHY COCKERILL

**B**y the end of the eighteenth century the Millom district was gradually emerging from the feudal dominance of the Hudlestons.<sup>1</sup> They had ruled their lands for almost five hundred years but in 1748 the heiress, Elizabeth Hudleston, married Sir Hedworth Williamson, a baronet from Co. Durham, who promptly sold the estate to Sir James Lowther<sup>2</sup> for £120,000, the equivalent of about eight million pounds in today's money.

The succeeding years left the leadership of the Millom district in a state of limbo because the new owner was non-resident: Millom Castle, the old seat of the Hudlestons, had become a ruin and local gentry were almost non-existent. It is significant that when Frank Warriner<sup>3</sup> was writing about the history of the Millom district in the 1930s he was only able to single out two families for special mention, following the departure of the Hudlestons almost two centuries previously. Of these the Myers of Dunningwell and Po House do not seem to have exercised much lasting influence so that it fell to the Lewthwaites of Broadgate to fill the gap.

The Lewthwaites were well fitted for their new role as local leaders. Although a yeoman family in origin, they had bought the freehold of Broadgate in 1642, and had become upwardly mobile during the following century by the judicious purchase of additional land and also through trade and commerce. They had been active participants in the rapid expansion of Whitehaven, had also acquired plantations in the West Indies, and had been fortunate enough to win a long running Chancery action against the powerful Lawson family of Isel and Brayton, in consequence of which they earned themselves a large sum of money and much property besides.

The Chancery suit ended in 1795, four years after William Lewthwaite (1766-1845), of Broadgate, married Eleanor, daughter of Thomas Cragg of Lowscales, Millom, yeoman. A year later, in 1792, their eldest son John Lewthwaite, the subject of this paper, was born.<sup>4</sup> He was the sixth generation to be born at Broadgate. At the time the farmhouse was a modest one surrounded by its own land, which was farmed by the family. Their lifestyle reflected the popular image of the prosperous North Country yeoman or statesman, but the Lewthwaites were not yet gentry.

John Lewthwaite's father and two of his uncles were educated at Hawkshead Grammar School, where they were contemporaries of William Wordsworth. However young John was sent to King Edward the Sixth Grammar School at Macclesfield, perhaps because other local families of similar standing, such as the Postlethwaites of Broughton House, Broughton-in-Furness and the Fells of Flan How, Ulverston, also sent their sons to the school.

John's school holidays were divided between his parents at Broadgate, his grandparents (who lived at the Cupola, now the Town Hall, Whitehaven) and his favourite uncle and aunt, George and Agnes Ashburner of Holmbank, Urswick. Family letters show him as a high spirited lad, fond of country pursuits and at the centre of a web of loving family relationships. It is not unlikely, however, that from



PLATE 1. John Lewthwaite of Broadgate (1792-1863).

an early age it was instilled into him that the family's new found wealth brought with it not only prestige but would also lead to local duties and responsibilities as the Lewthwaites moved up the social scale.

The first twenty years of the nineteenth century, during which John grew up, were important ones for his family. John's father was appointed a local magistrate, he inherited considerable property on his own father's death in 1809<sup>5</sup>, and in 1816 he was granted Arms by the College of Arms thus, in effect, transforming the Lewthwaite family into gentry.<sup>6</sup> In 1819 they built themselves New Broadgate, a much larger house, as if to confirm their new found status.

John Lewthwaite now in his late twenties, must have come under some family pressure, as the only son and heir, to find a bride and produce children to carry on the line. There do not seem to have been many suitable local families from which to choose, especially if financial considerations had to be taken into account. In the end John Lewthwaite must have made a love-match, although an eminently suitable one. Nancy Kirkbank was six years younger than John, the only daughter of William Kirkbank (1754-1824), of Beckside, Whicham, but she had three brothers to inherit their father's property. Despite her lack of prospects Nancy came from a long

established family of Whicham yeomen of the upper sort: her father being a magistrate and a Deputy-Lieutenant for Cumberland, whilst one of her brothers was Coroner of the Lordship of Millom and another was Vicar of Dalton-in-Furness.

The happy couple were married at Whicham on the 18 May 1820, John being described in the parish register as "Yeoman". Over the next eighteen years they produced eleven children, three of whom died in infancy. Of their three surviving sons the eldest William, born in 1826, was sent to his father's old school at Macclesfield; Joseph, a sickly child, born in 1834, was educated by a private tutor and George, born in 1839, went to Rugby. All three of them subsequently attended Cambridge University and took their degrees.<sup>7</sup> The education of their five sisters remains a mystery but they may well have been taught at home by a governess. In any event at the time of the 1851 Census all the girls were living at home with their parents, looked after by eight resident servants.

It was not until 1845 that John's father died and he succeeded him at Broadgate, although previously they had all been living together under the same roof. He inherited the bulk of his father's personal estate, valued for probate purposes at £18,000 (about £700,000 in today's money), excluding freehold or leasehold property. By this time Broadgate had become an estate rather than a farm, that is to say it comprised a number of farms let to tenants, although John Lewthwaite himself continued to look after several hundred acres. He was also kept busy with his public duties as a magistrate and Deputy Lieutenant. He had been appointed a J.P. in 1830, when he was thirty-eight and between 1837 and 1845 was Overseer for the Poor for Thwaites. For many years he was also Chairman of the Bootle Poor Law Guardians. All these public appointments were unpaid and each was the subject of it's own property qualification.

In politics Lewthwaite was a Tory, as one might expect, and in church matters he was an Anglican, serving as a churchwarden. In addition he was a joint patron of the living of Thwaites<sup>8</sup> and was one of the leading lights responsible for the rebuilding and enlargement of St Anne's Church, Thwaites, in the early 1850s. The land for this purpose was given by John's brother-law Robert Postlethwaite of the Oaks, Millom, but both men served on the Rebuilding Committee and made generous donations. It all came to fruition on the 16 June 1854 when the Bishop of Chester came to consecrate the new church, John Lewthwaite reading the petition asking the Bishop to perform the ceremony. Afterwards, as the local paper reported,<sup>9</sup> "Mr Lewthwaite of Broadgate was honoured by the Bishop's company at dinner, to which a large portion of the neighbouring clergy and gentry were invited".

As the owner of an estate of about 1,500 acres Lewthwaite had become the local squire, that is the largest landowner in the immediate vicinity. Over the years he added to his inheritance, for example purchasing a neighbouring farm called Langthwaite in 1837 for £5,360, and he was fortunate enough to succeed to the land and property of his childless uncle, Anthony Cragg of Lowscales when he died in 1849. Nevertheless, although the Broadgate household was clearly a comfortable one, there is no evidence of the ostentatious affluence of the greater gentry or the *nouveau riche*, but rather of the modest and traditional way of life enjoyed by the prosperous North Country yeoman or "statesman", so close to the heart of William Wordsworth.

The 1850s were not happy ones for John Lewthwaite for during this decade his

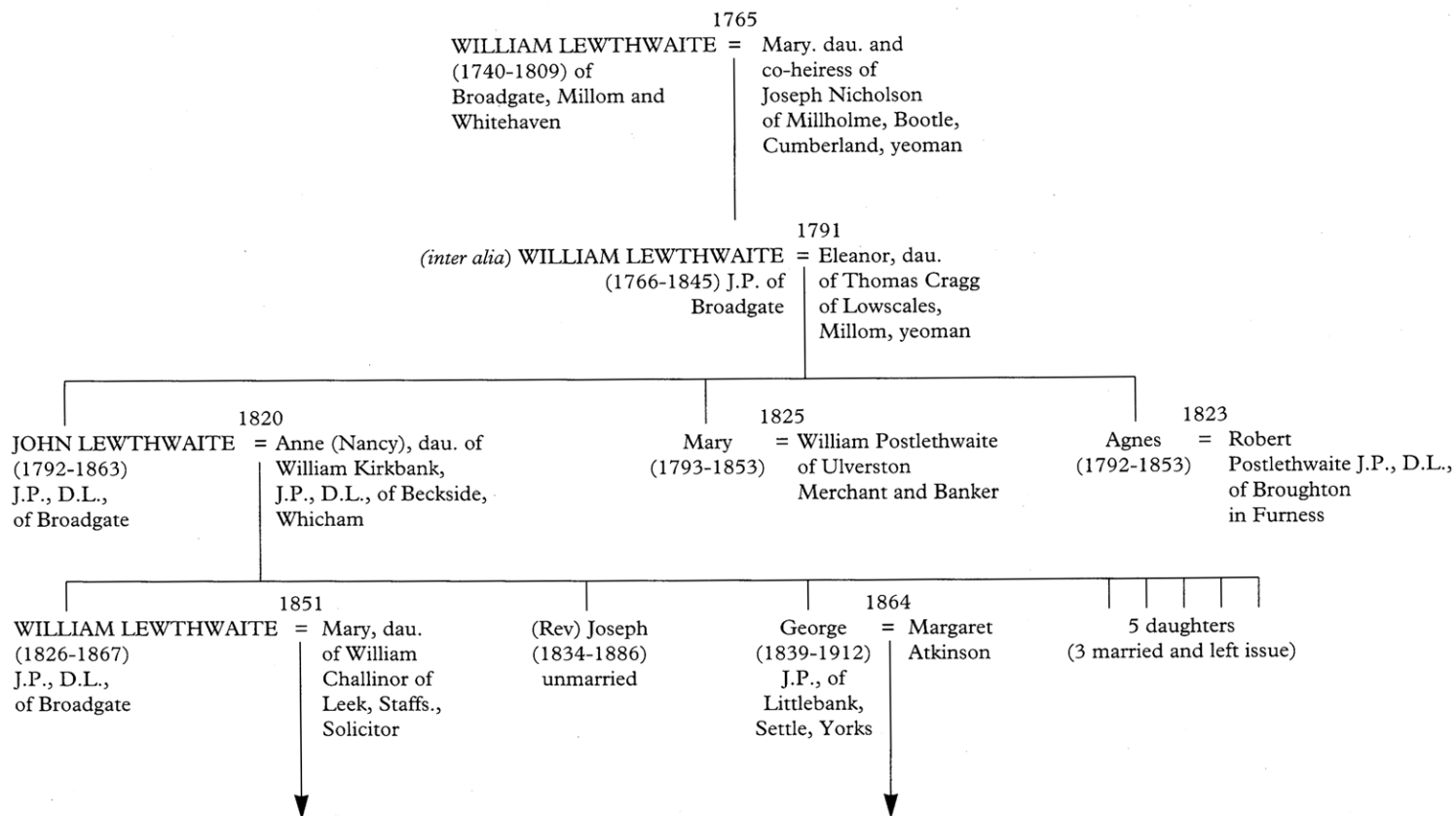
wife's health was the cause of increasing anxiety as the deterioration in her mental powers gradually led to her insanity. In 1859 she died "of a disease of the brain", aged fifty-nine, after three years of suffering. In addition to his domestic problems John fell out with his fellow magistrates because, for reasons now unclear, he insisted upon dispensing local justice by himself in his own home, whereupon they reported him to the Lord Chancellor. As he remained a magistrate until his death the outcome of this dispute was presumably no worse than a reprimand.

The Census for 1861 gives us the next glimpse of the household at Broadgate. John Lewthwaite remains at its head, now a widower, and described as an Esquire, J.P. and landowner "occupying upwards of 300 acres", whilst his eldest son William, now thirty-five, is also described as an Esquire, technically one up in the social scale from "Gentleman". The third member of the family living at home was Anne, John's unmarried daughter, aged thirty-two. They had five indoor servants to look after them.

Two years later, on the 11 April 1863, John Lewthwaite died suddenly at Broadgate of apoplexy, aged seventy-one. Both the *Cumberland Pacquet* and the *Ulverston Advertiser* carried brief, formal notices of his death but no obituary. This is not particularly surprising since he was only well known within the Millom district. He was buried in the old churchyard at Thwaites beneath a large structure, surrounded by iron railings, which remains there to this day.

John Lewthwaite had made his Will in 1851,<sup>10</sup> during the lifetime of his wife. He made careful provision for her needs by giving her a lump sum of £2,000, granting her an annuity of £300 per annum, a horse and two cows with sufficient corn, grass and other sustenance for them, and sufficient room in the coachhouse for her carriage. His two younger sons were given small pieces of land, his five daughters were given £1,600 each, whilst the most important object of the whole exercise was to preserve and pass on to his eldest son William the Broadgate estate. His personal estate, excluding real and leasehold property, was sworn for probate purposes at £16,000, about £640,000 in to-day's money.

John Lewthwaite's life reflects the typical existence of a Victorian country gentleman in almost any part of rural England at the time. Within his own boundaries and sphere of influence he reigned supreme, or almost so. Now, well over a century after his death we know him only through his letters, brief diary entries, a drawing and a later photograph. He leaves one with the impression of a breezy, forceful, confident man, but also one who cared deeply for his family, tenants and those less fortunate than himself. He was devoted to the still largely rural Millom district, trying hard to uphold its traditional values in a rapidly changing world. From the high Georgian windows of Broadgate he looked down towards not only the Duddon estuary but also towards the mines and urbanisation of Millom town. Perhaps it was fortunate that John Lewthwaite did not survive into this increasingly unsympathetic world or to experience the impending agricultural depression of the 1870s.



PEDIGREE OF JOHN LEWTHWAITE (1792-1863)

## APPENDIX

## Abstract of the Will of John Lewthwaite.

1. To dear wife Anne the sum of £2,000 to be paid within three months of his death, all his household goods, plate; linen, china, glass, trinkets, liquors and housekeeping provisions at Broadgate, together with the house itself, its out-offices, garden, orchard, lawn and pleasure ground for life and sufficient corn, grass and other sustenance for a horse and two cows and sufficient room in the coach-house for keeping a carriage and horse and two cows. Also an annuity of £300 charged upon his freehold estate.
  2. To each of his five daughters Mary, Elizabeth, Eleanor, Anne and Agnes a legacy of £1,600.
  3. To his son George the sum of £2,500 at twenty-one and land at Arnaby Marsh and Millom Marsh and £500 charged on his estate at Hall Green, Kirksanton, Millom.
  4. To his son Joseph his land at Hall Green, Kirksanton and his land recently purchased from Christopher Hobson and in the occupation of Richard Mellon and his son Dennis Mellon as tenants.
  5. To his eldest son William the residue of his estate including the Broadgate estate.
  6. He appoints his wife and son William to be his executors and trustees.
  7. Will dated 13 May 1851
- PROBATE dated 6 November 1863 – effects sworn at under £16,000.

## Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> See C. R. Hudleston's, "Millom Families: Part II", *CW2*, xciii, 89.
- <sup>2</sup> Sir James Lowther (1673-1755), of Whitehaven, the fourth Baronet, was reckoned to be the richest commoner in Great Britain at this time – see Hugh Owen, *The Lowther Family* (1990), 248-252.
- <sup>3</sup> His *The Millom District* was published in 1932 and *Millom People and Places* in 1937. (Both reprinted by Michael Moon of Whitehaven in the 1970s.)
- <sup>4</sup> He was baptised at Thwaites on 24 March 1792.
- <sup>5</sup> William Lewthwaite (1740-1809) of The Cupola (now the Town Hall), Whitehaven, left sums varying from £5,000 to £8,000 to each of his nine children.
- <sup>6</sup> The Grant of Arms is dated the 27 April 1816.
- <sup>7</sup> William and George attended Trinity College and Joseph was at Christ's College.
- <sup>8</sup> The patronage of the living of Thwaites was vested in the owners of the estates of Broadgate, Beckbank, The Oaks and Greystone House: the Earl of Lonsdale, as Lord of the Manor, having the casting vote.
- <sup>9</sup> *Cumberland Pacquet* 27 June 1854.
- <sup>10</sup> Will dated 13 May 1851.