

THOMAS STANLEY, 1st Earl of Derby, was the stepfather of Henry VII, having married as his second wife Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond, in 1482. He famously switched allegiance on Bosworth Field in 1485, swaying the outcome of the battle and handing the throne to Henry Tudor. His reward was commensurate. He was created Earl of Derby two months later, on October 27, 1485, and laden with royal offices and confiscated Yorkist lands to augment his already substantial revenues and holdings. His elevation to an earldom and the close association to the new dynasty anointed the rise of the Stanleys, by origin a knightly family from the Staffordshire-Cheshire border and Lords of Man from 1405. The 1st Earl was referred to as 'King of Man' in his lifetime.

‘Lathom is the most completely forgotten of English palaces’

The key moment in the family's ascent was the marriage of Sir John Stanley 100 years earlier in 1385 to Isabel de Lathom of Lathom. This brought them the contiguous estates of Knowsley (discussed in last week's issue) and Lathom in between Liverpool (with its small port), the prosperous market towns of Wigan and Ormskirk, and Burscough, where an Augustinian priory was founded in about 1190 by Robert Fitz-Henry, ancestor of the Lathom family. Burscough became the family burial place and the 1st Earl himself was initially interred there (at the Reformation, the family tombs were removed to Ormskirk). Lathom and Knowsley were seven miles apart and the 1st Earl developed them as the twin capitals of his northern fief.

Knowsley, before its early-18th-century reconstruction, was a rambling hunting lodge set in an enclosed deer park of 2,500 acres. Lathom had two neighbouring parks, but, by contrast, was stone built and described by William Camden in 1607 as 'a stately house, which they [the Earls of Derby] have enlarged continually ever since King Henry IV's days'. Camden also comments on another Derby castle at Greenhalgh—now a ruin—about 20 miles north of Lathom that was built by the Earl because 'he stood in fear of certain outlawed gentlemen of this shire, whose possessions King Henry VII had freely given unto him. For many an assault they gave him, and...in hostile manner made inroads into his lands, until the moderate carriage →

Fig 1: An English School view of Knowsley of 1700, showing the chapel in the centre

Nine towers on high

The Northern Court

Lathom House and Knowsley Hall, Lancashire

The exceptional power enjoyed by Earls of Derby under the Tudors and Stewarts was reflected in their great northern houses, as John Martin Robinson explains

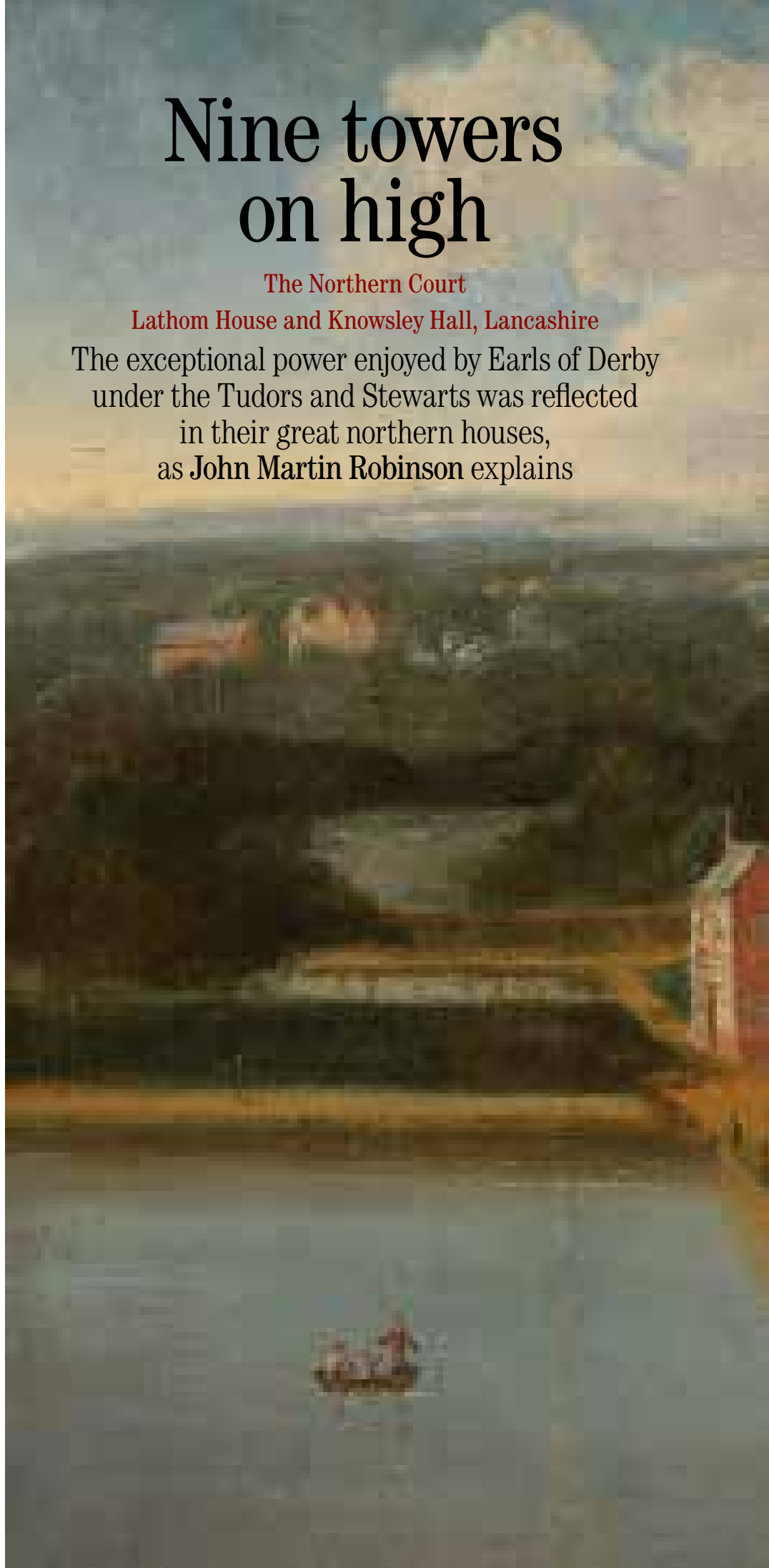






Fig 2 left: The entrance to the royal lodgings created for Henry VII at Knowsley. The turrets were originally surmounted by spires.
Fig 3 right: Heraldic panels of the Legs of Man (top) and an eagle's talons from Derby Place, replicated after the Great Fire of London

of the good and worthy man and process of time pacified these quarrels’.

The pre-Georgian appearance of Knowsley is known from an English School painting of the house from the east, completed in about 1700 (*Fig 1*). It shows a layout that can be seen to underpin the present plan. The paired turrets and spires locate the entrance to the Royal Lodgings built for Henry VII’s visit in 1495 (*Fig 2*). In the centre is a large chapel, which was overbuilt by the 10th Earl in the 1720s, but remained until the mid 19th century. To the north of the chapel was a three-storey brick block of apartments crowned with gables that may survive in the structure of the classical Hesketh Wing; the latter has the same scale and fenestration pattern (*Fig 4*). This range was decorated with inset stone heraldic panels that recall those on the College of Arms in London, on the site of Derby Place, the 1st Earl’s former townhouse. Derby Place was given to the

heralds by Mary I and Philip in 1555. When the college was rebuilt after the Great Fire in 1666, the plaques were repeated and depict the Stanley eagle-claw badge and the three-legs badge of the Isle of Man (*Fig 3*). It is likely that the carved stone tablets at Knowsley depicted the same devices.

Although celebrated by Tudor poets and writers during the 15th century, Lathom is the most completely forgotten of English palaces, a victim of the Civil Wars and two sieges in the 1640s. Until recent archaeological excavations, even its exact site was disputed, the ruins having been levelled in the mid 17th century and replaced by a new Palladian house. This was, in turn, demolished and, today, Pilkington’s 1960s research laboratories are the most prominent structures on the site. It’s now clear, however, that the Tudor house was on the same site as its successor and stretched eastwards under the Georgian pleasure grounds as far as the kitchen garden.

Excavations and geophysical soundings have uncovered footings of remarkably strong walls, cobbling in the kitchen court, myriad evocative stone fragments and parts of the masonry revetment of the lake-like moat nearly 30ft wide. The house faced west towards Ormskirk and the gatehouse was on that side.

These discoveries are the work of Oxford Archaeology North, in association with the Lathom Park Trust, founded in 1998 as a registered charity by a group of local enthusiasts and volunteers. The stonework fragments revealed by half a dozen successive digs on the site between 1996 and 2017, published with the support of the Castle Studies Trust, flesh out 16th- and 17th-century descriptions. The earliest reference to the house is a ballad of 1513, which proclaimed: ‘Nyne towers thou bearest on hye.’ John Leland in about 1540 gave a brief factual mention and described it as the ‘chiefest house of the Earl of Derby’, noting that it was mostly built of stone. In 1562, the



Fig 4: Knowsley Hall today, seen from roughly the same viewpoint as shown in Fig 1. The section of the façade seen centre left, inset with panels, corresponds to the multi-gabled block in the earlier image. The Tudor chapel has completely disappeared

Bishop of Sodor and Man wrote that the place was rebuilt ‘out of the ground’ by the 1st Earl of Derby and was ‘so spacious that it can receive two Kings their trains and all’.

More details were given by Samuel Rutter, the family chaplain who was resident in the house during the Parliamentary siege in 1644. He said that the house was ‘on a flat’ and the surrounding ground ‘moorish’ and marshy, although the hills rose to the north-east, where the local millstone grit was quarried for the walls. Rutter gives the clearest idea of what the house actually looked like. It was ‘encompassed with a strong wall of two yards thick; upon the walls were raised towers... without the wall was a mote eight yards wide... a high strong tower called the Eagle Tower [rose] in the middle of the house’. There was a crenellated gatehouse ornamented with heraldic carvings and oak leaves, leading to two, possibly three, ‘wards’ or court yards, all dominated by the central Eagle Tower.

An inventory of 1594 mentions the ‘Chamber in the Middle Ward’ and other chambers. The Cromwellian Sequestration Accounts of 1650 listed building materials for sale after the capturing and slighting of the place. The lead from the roofs was taken to Wigan and the floorboards and paving stones of his house were measured for sale, giving an idea of the dimensions of the rooms. From these, it is clear that the Eagle Tower was four storeys high with timber-boarded floors over a stone cellar. There are references to the ‘Tower of Madness’, the ‘Tower at the kitchen bridge’ (suggesting that the service yard had its own entrance from across the moat), the ‘Little Tower next to it’, the ‘next tower’, the ‘Chapel tower’ and ‘the Poste Tower’. With the Eagle Tower and the two symmetrical gatehouse towers, this accounted for nine towers.

The principal rooms were around the Middle Ward, including chambers, the chapel and, presumably, the Great Hall. Lady Derby’s

apartments were in the Eagle Tower at the time of the siege, when she had to evacuate them because of mortar fire. Historic chattels included trophies from Bosworth, such as Richard III’s tent, and the elaborately carved oak bed occupied by Henry VII on his visit to his mother and stepson at Lathom and Knowsley in 1495. Lady Margaret’s strong Catholic faith (the martyr-bishop of Rochester, St John Fisher, was her confessor) may also explain the ambitious private chapels at the 1st Earl’s Knowsley and Lathom. The polygonal form of the Eagle Tower at Lathom suggests a possible connection with its namesake at Caernarvon Castle, begun in the 1280s (**Fig 7**).

More certainly, the name of the tower presumably refers to the Stanley crest of an eagle and child, derived from the legend that an heir-baby had been protected by an eagle in Lathom Park. A stylised impression of Lathom is shown as part of a depiction of this scene carved on the Dean’s stall of the collegiate →



church (now cathedral) at Manchester (**Fig 6**), which was patronised by the 1st Earl. The Stanley family otherwise had a demonstrable penchant for polygonal towers. Sir Edward Stanley, 1st Lord Monteagle (younger son of the 1st Earl of Derby), who commanded the Lancashire archers and the rearguard at Flodden in 1513, built polygonal towers on both the castle and the church at Hornby in north Lancashire (**Fig 5**), and they may give some indication of the appearance of the lost Eagle Tower at Lathom.

By 1510, the 2nd Earl had established an almshouse and chantry at Lathom, an addition typical of other great seats of the period, such as Tattershall, Lincolnshire. The much-altered chapel and almshouse survive. The excavations at Lathom have shown that the house was altered by the 6th Earl, probably in preparation for the visit of James I in 1617. As part of this work, the plain Gothic windows of the original Tudor build were replaced in some of the more important interiors, with elaborate mullion and transom openings. The surviving fragments of the later windows bear technical comparison to the work of the Smythsons at Wollaton, Nottinghamshire, and Gawthorpe, Lancashire.



Fig 5 above: A view of Hornby Castle in Lancashire, with its central, polygonal tower built by the soldier Sir Edward Stanley, 1st Baron Monteagle, a son of Thomas, 1st Earl of Derby. In 1514, Sir Edward also added a polygonal tower to Hornby parish church.

Fig 6 left: A panel from the choir stalls of Manchester Cathedral, dating to about 1500, depicting the Lathom legend of the defence of an infant heir by an eagle and showing the gatehouse on the right



In the light of the two Civil War sieges, much ink has been spilt on the subject of whether Lathom was a castle or a house. As a medieval nobleman's seat, however, the distinction is impossible to draw; the Earl belonged to a knightly class that fought by vocation and his residence, therefore, was necessarily martial in character. Certainly, it was battlemented, towered and moated. During the two Civil War sieges, guns were mounted on the mural towers and earth banks were raised to protect the walls from bombardment.

The best documented event in the history of Lathom is the double siege in 1644 and 1645, when Charlotte de La Trémoille, wife of the 7th Earl, held out for a year against Gen Fairfax and 2,000 Parliamentarian troops, treating demands to surrender with splendid disdain. She was a Huguenot, daughter of Claude, Duke of Thouars, and showed the same determination as her relations during the Fronde in France. After the relief of Lathom by Prince Rupert at the end of 1644, she moved to the Isle of Man, which she defended with equal spirit, but the Royalist garrison at Lathom without her, and possibly without the chivalrous Fairfax, eventually surrendered in 1646, an event celebrated by



Fig 7: The Eagle Tower at Caernarvon, with sculptures of eagles set on the battlements

special prayers in the House of Commons. The house was looted and its more valuable materials, as has been seen, sold.

Part of the Eagle Tower seems to have survived and the 8th and 9th Earls started to reconstruct it as a classical house in the late 17th century. Although roofed in and described as 'tall and sumptuous', it was never finished and the property was sold in 1718 via a City speculator, Furnese, to Sir Thomas Bootle, Chancellor to Frederick, Prince of Wales. Meanwhile, Knowsley was reconstructed as the principal family seat by the 10th Earl of Derby.

Bootle rebuilt Lathom to the design of Giacomo Leoni as the finest Palladian house

in Lancashire. The reconstructed Eagle Tower was incorporated into the new main block and joined by Ionic colonnades to two large pavilions housing the kitchen and stables. Only the latter survives. The Leoni main block was demolished in 1926, its interiors rich in stucco by Vassalli and Quadri barely recorded. Repton's re-landscaped park was cleared, rich fittings scavenged and even the Bootle family archives fed into the furnace of the local colliery at Skelmersdale. As time recedes, it is the memories of the 1st Earl's castellated palace and its heroic defence during the Civil War siege that linger and leave the strongest stamp. 🐅