The television series Gunpowder was a powerful recreation of the suffering experienced by English Catholics in penal times. Nohere suffered more than the sacred county – Lancashire – recognised by enemies of the Church as the greatest stronghold of Catholicism.

Nothing better illustrates the horror of these days than the trial of two Lancastrians, beatified in 1987. John Thades, ordained at the age of 24, ministered for over 20 years. Arrested by the authorities, taken to Lancaster Castle, he was imprisoned with a Catholic weaver, Roger Wrenno, who had aided priests. Both were sentenced to death.

Following the execution of Fr Thades, by drawing and quartering, to begin his execution, Roger Wrenno had the noose placed around his neck. But, the rope broke, sending him tumbling to the ground, still alive. He knelt and prayed with his hands and eyes lifted towards heaven.

The sheriff offered him the chance to live. All he had to do was to deny his faith. In response, Roger Wrenno ran back to the scaffold ladder and eagerly scaled it, telling the sheriff: “If you had saved my life, I would have used it to save others; you would be as much in haste to die as I am now.”

Roger Wrenno became one of at least 15 Catholics executed for their faith at Lancaster between 1584–1646. Another was Fr Thomas Whitaker, from Burnley, who ministered in St Michael’s-on-Wyre, Gnosallough and Kirkham. Forced to watch the execution of his companions, Edward Bamber, of Michael’s-on-Wyre, and John Woodcock, a Franciscan from Clayton-le-Woods, like Roger Wrenno, Fr Whitaker was also told he could save his life by denying his Roman Catholic faith.

With phenomenal courage, he responded: “Use your pleasure with me. A reprieve or a pardon upon your condition I utterly refuse.”

Many of these stories are preserved in the three volumes Old Catholic Lancashire (published in 1925, 1938, and 1941) compiled by the Benevolent historian, and true son of Lancashire, Dom Odo Blundell OSB, who died in 1943 – and are part of the collection that will be available in the Hardwick Library at Theodore House, at the Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst, due to open in June 2018.

Like Lactantius, who wrote of the heroic sanctity of the martyrs of the early Church, Dom Odo Blundell believed that gathering up the fragments of a too easily forgotten past, and by understanding the virtues of saints and lesser tolerant times, their stories would inspire future generations. The 21st century mission of Theodore House is to follow where Dom Odo led.

In giving modern scholars access to artefacts and writings that illuminate those penal times, especially disfigured by persecution and intolerance, the Christian Heritage Centre will facilitate study, engagement and dialogue. Another part of its mandate is to highlight and to better understand the reasons for the phenomenal levels of persecution of Christians throughout the world today.

One of the Centre’s trustees is Graham Hutton, who chairs the Catholic charity, Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), which does such crucial work for persecuted Christians.

Last month, on Red Wednesday, in collaboration with ACN, the Christian Heritage Centre placed on its website the names of some of the regions who have died for their beliefs – acting as a tinker-tape to remind us of the price that others have paid for the privileges and freedoms we enjoy.

To underline its determination to hand on the stories, to heal history, and to build different relationships for the future, the Centre has, among its patrons, the Rt Rev. Nicholas Brutale, former Anglican Bishop of Blackburn, Professor David Khalil, an Orthodox lev, Bys Khan, born into a Muslim family, and the leading Christian campaigner for the persecuted Church, Baroness Caroline Cox.

Theodore House will be the perfect base from which to explore the stories of the Sacred County. Accommodation bookings are now being taken. Email: info@christianheritagecentre.com or telephone: Antoine de Piro on 01254 827 147