

A Short History of Roundhay to the Twentieth Century *By Neville Hurworth*

Originally Roundhay belonged to the de Lacy family, a gift to Ilbert de Lacy from William the Conqueror after the invasion in 1066.

By medieval times the whole of Roundhay was a hunting park. Amazingly it was surrounded by about six miles of high fencing with a ditch twenty feet wide and ten feet deep, to keep the deer in, and unwanted intruders, out.

Through the centuries, Roundhay had many owners, including royalty, who hunted in the park, but as time passed, it was used less and less for this purpose and maintenance of the park fence became a problem. Trees were cut down and sold for timber and fuel. A process of gradual deforestation took place and more and more of the park became fields worked by tenant farmers.

By the 19th century, Roundhay was owned by the Duke of Norfolk, and on the death of the 9th Duke, it passed to Lord Stourton from whom two Quaker businessmen, Thomas Nicholson and Samuel Elam bought it in 1803. Not much later, Samuel ran into financial difficulties and died, bankrupt, in 1811 while still a young man. The same year, Thomas Nicholson purchased the manor of Roundhay.

Samuel's land and property in Roundhay were sold piecemeal to various buyers including Samuel's cousin Robert Elam, friends from the Goodman, and other families in the local woollen merchant community. Thomas Nicholson also bought land from Samuel Elam's estate and these purchases enabled him fill in gaps in his own Roundhay estate which was located mainly on the north side of today's Wetherby Road. From then on, for the next sixty years or so, the history of Roundhay and the Nicholson family was almost synonymous.

Thomas Nicholson died in 1821 less than 20 years after he acquired the main part of his Roundhay Estate but in that time he spent money lavishly, developing the main features of Roundhay Park into the familiar landscape we see today. He built Roundhay Park Mansion which was completed in 1816 and the two lakes in the Park.

Legend has it that the Waterloo Lake (the lower and larger lake of the two) was built to provide work for ex-soldiers back from the Napoleonic Wars and that Thomas lived just long enough to see it filling up with water. Also at about the time of Thomas's death, local master builder, George Nettleton, was believed to have completed the Castle folly in the Park, built mainly from cobbles quarried from deposits in the ground nearby. However, I have recently found information in the Leeds Mercury of 1811 proving that the castle was there then, about a decade earlier than was thought previously.

We are lead to believe that Thomas did not live long enough to complete all his dreams for his Roundhay Estate. It was left to his half-brother, Stephen Nicholson, to build Roundhay St John's church with money Thomas left to his widow, Elizabeth. This was consecrated in 1826.

In 1837 with money from the same source, Stephen completed the building of six alms-houses, St John's school and house for the schoolmaster and mistress. These can still be seen on the Wetherby Road.

Thomas and Stephen Nicholson were born in Chapel Allerton. In their adult years they went to London and became very successful merchants with interests in banking and insurance. For a while they were underwriters for Lloyds.

Thomas and his wife Elizabeth seem to have shared their time between London and Roundhay from 1803 onwards, until Roundhay Park Mansion was completed in 1816, when they finally left their house in London and settled in Roundhay.

Both Nicholson brothers married but they had no children and when Stephen died in 1858, the Roundhay Estate and an estate in Chapel Allerton, which Thomas had bought in 1799, were willed to Stephen's nephew, William Nicholson Nicholson, his sister's son who had earlier changed his surname from Phillips to Nicholson, to conform with a condition of his inheritance.

William Nicholson Nicholson had no problem in producing heirs to his fortune. He and his wife Martha married in the newly built St John's church and in due course thirteen children were born to them. With such a large family, when William died in 1868, he had little option but to leave instructions in his will to sell off his estates and to divide the proceeds between his wife and children. His executors were slow to carry out his wishes, and his widow, Martha appealed to the Court of Chancery to take over administration of the will. The Court agreed, and in 1871 the Nicholson lands and property were to be sold without further delay.

The resulting sale was one of the most important events in the history of Roundhay. It gave future developers the opportunity to buy land on a large scale, and in time, the whole of Roundhay may have become built over. However, there was one man however, who had a more ambitious agenda. John Barran, the Mayor of Leeds, wanted a park for the people. Barran was also interested in developing the area but his idea was to act as broker on behalf of the people of Leeds to buy more than enough land for the park. The surplus land would be sold for quality housing at a profit he hoped would be sufficient to recoup the cost of the whole enterprise. To this end, Barran mortgaged his house and with help from some friends on the council, he bought two major lots in the sale for £139,000.

There were several problems though, for Barran and his friends. Roundhay was not part of Leeds and due to the size of the expense involved, Leeds city council could not immediately reimburse Barran and his associates. An Act of Parliament was needed and there was considerable opposition. However, the Act was passed and in 1872 the park was opened by Prince Arthur.

The next problem was to get people to the park. At the time Roundhay was poorly served by public transport. Also there was a lack of amenities such as poor sanitation and no source of drinking water. John Barran took it upon himself to provide the latter by building 'Barran's Fountain' in 1882. It no longer dispenses water but, recently restored, it now stands out as a magnificent granite memorial to

this courageous and resourceful man to whom the people of Leeds owe such a large debt of gratitude.

As for transport, some ambitious schemes (such as a railway on stilts) were considered and abandoned. Several years passed, until, in the 1890s, an electric tramway system, apparently the first in Europe, was installed and became the most popular and viable way of getting people from Sheepscar to the Park.

So far as development of the area was considered, electricity for housing came to Roundhay in the early 1900s. The Oakwood parade of shops was built about this time and Roundhay came into its own as a desirable area for well-to-do residents. By 1912 when Roundhay was incorporated into the city of Leeds, it was much as we know it today.

The days of the hunting park, and the country squire-style estate of the Nicholsons, were over, a fading memory but still manifest today in surviving elements such as John Barran's 'People's Park', and the Nicholson legacy of Roundhay St John's church, school and associated buildings on Wetherby Road.

Sadly, in recent years the church became increasingly difficult to maintain due to falling support and the ever-increasing modern problems of graveyard safety, theft and vandalism. Leading was stolen from the roof and so the inside of the church became exposed to the weather. It closed in November 2007.

Sources

The reader can find more information in the following:

Steven Burt's book, *An Illustrated History of Roundhay Park*, published by the author in 2000

N.R. Hurworth, *Thomas and Elizabeth Nicholson, The Quaker Founders of Roundhay Park*, published by the author in 2005

J.W. Morkill, *The Manor Of Roundhay*, Thoresby Society (Leeds, 1893)

J. Dickinson and G.D. Webster, *A History of St John's Church Roundhay*, (Leeds, 1967)