

"THE LIFE AND FAMILY OF THOMAS NICHOLSON OF ROUNDHAY PARK" © by Neville Hurworth

Many thousands of visitors come to Roundhay Park each year to attend the several major events hosted annually by Leeds City Council such as music festivals and the November bonfire and fireworks display, or to enjoy the delights of the Tropical World and Canal Gardens. Others are simply content to stroll through the trees and round the Lakes, or to sit and admire the view in such pleasant surroundings as the Park offers in full measure all the year round. Some of these visitors may know that the Park was for many years part of the Roundhay estate of the Nicholson family. I suspect that very few of them though, will have heard of Thomas Nicholson (1764 -1821), who in the early 19th century, acquired this estate and created the main features of Roundhay Park as we know it today.

Thomas Nicholson was a Quaker, born into a comfortable but none too wealthy clothier's family in Chapel Allerton. Although he died in Roundhay, he left Chapel Allerton in his early adult years for London where he married and lived for most of his life. Somehow, he found the means to set up as an insurance broker and merchant and acquired great wealth. In 1799 he bought an estate in Chapel Allerton which included Chapel Allerton Hall, and in 1803, along with another Quaker, Samuel Elam, he purchased the Roundhay Estate from Lord Stourton. By the time he died in 1821 he had landscaped the Park and completed the building of the Mansion and the Waterloo Lake.

Fig. 1 shows a summary of Thomas Nicholson's family tree. Thomas' grandfather, Stephen Nicholson, married at least twice. His son, William, was the sole issue of his first marriage, which lasted less than two years. It seems that Stephen's first wife died in giving birth to William, or soon afterwards. There is evidence of at least three children from Stephen's second marriage. The last of these, Grace Nicholson, married Benjamin Holroyd in 1773. In his will, Thomas refers to Grace Holroyd as his "aunt of the half blood".

This is a vital piece of information as it enables us to deduce she was a half sister to Thomas' father, William Nicholson, and to piece together another generation of Thomas' ancestry as shown in Fig. 1.

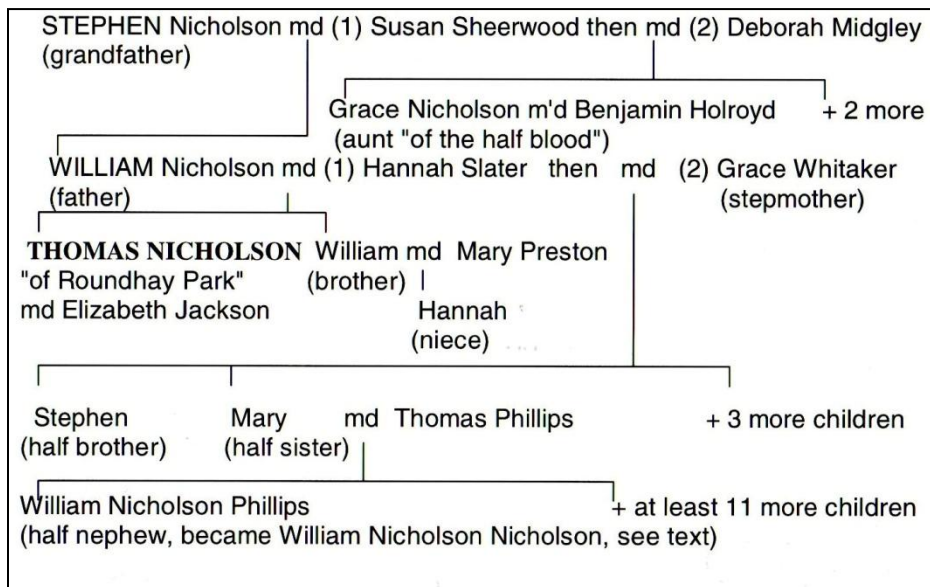


Fig. 1. Outline of Thomas Nicholson's Family Tree.

Thomas' father, William Nicholson (about 1740 -1812), married twice and the only surviving son of his second marriage, Stephen, Thomas' half brother, became Thomas' business companion and friend. After Thomas died, Stephen built St. John's Church on the south eastern side of the Estate, apparently in accordance with Thomas' wishes¹ and later he added the schoolhouse and almshouses on Wetherby Road thereby putting the finishing touches to what must have been a beautiful rural landscape in those days.

¹ A plaque in St. John's Church says that the Church was "built and endowed in furtherance of his (i.e. Thomas Nicholson's) benevolent intention" but there is no mention of this in his will.

Stephen and Thomas had no children and when Stephen died, the Roundhay Estate passed to their sister Mary Phillips' son, William Nicholson Phillips on condition that he legally adopted the Nicholson family name, which he did by Royal Licence. Unlike his uncles, William Nicholson Nicholson had a large family and when he died, the Roundhay Estate was sold so that his wealth could be more easily and fairly distributed among his many children. It was then that a small consortium headed by John Barran bought Roundhay Park for the people of Leeds in 1871.

The Nicholson family graves are dispersed among several graveyards. Thomas' father and grandfather, William and Stephen Nicholson, are buried in Chapel Allerton Cemetery in adjacent graves. Grace, Thomas' stepmother, is buried with her husband, William (see Photo 1) and several of her Whitaker relatives are buried nearby along with Thomas' half sister, Mary Phillips, her husband Thomas, and some of their children (see Photo 2). Thomas' half brother, Stephen, and his wife are interred in the crypt at St. John's church and so is Elizabeth Nicholson, Thomas' wife (this is perhaps a little strange as she was known to have been a devout Quaker).

Thomas, his brother William Nicholson, and their mother Hannah, were buried in the Leeds Quaker burial ground in Meadow Lane and Camp Court (currently the site of the ASDA headquarters in Leeds²). This was the Quaker side of the Nicholson family. Thomas' father was never a Quaker, although he must have been sympathetic to Quaker principles and lifestyle.

There is no doubt that Hannah, Thomas' mother, was the main Quaker influence in Thomas' childhood (Thomas was barely thirteen and his brother, William, was only seven when she died). As Quaker records show abundantly³,

²I am indebted to R.S. Mortimer for this information.

³Special Collections in the Brotherton Library at Leeds University has extensive Quaker records for the Yorkshire area. Reference Class "Carlton Hill" and the "Friends Digest of Births, Marriages and Burials" show many references to Hannah and her family and several books and personal records containing further information are housed in these Archives.

Hannah came from a very devout Quaker family in Lothersdale near Skipton. Her parents, William and Mary Slater, were both Quaker Ministers who spent much of their time preaching, travelling the length and breadth of the country. John Slater, William's brother, was also for many years a teacher among the Society of Friends, as was Tabitha Gott, Hannah's sister. Hannah's maternal grandfather, Christopher Shackleton, suffered greatly for refusing to pay Church tithes and Hannah had a niece whose husband, John Stansfield, was imprisoned for two and a half years in Skipton Castle along with several other Quakers, also for refusing to pay tithes. Devotion to Quaker principles ran deep in this family, so it must have been a great shock to them when Hannah married William Nicholson, a non-Quaker.

In those days, for a Quaker to marry a non-member of the Society of Friends was a serious breach of Quaker rules⁴ and in Hannah's devout family, it was without precedent. The shock may have been too much for Hannah's mother, Mary Slater, the revered Quaker Minister. She died during the difficult few months which followed between Hannah's wedding and the time when Hannah was formally disowned by the Brighouse Meeting⁵. The minutes of the Brighouse Meeting show that Hannah tried to effect a formal reconciliation with the Friends especially in the last few years of her life, but when she died relatively young at the age of 41, she still had not been readmitted to Quaker membership.

⁴ To be more correct, it was the marriage by a priest which was contrary to Quaker principles.

⁵ In addition to its more obvious meaning, the name "Meeting" was used to denote an area of Quaker jurisdiction. Chapel Allerton was part of the Brighouse Meeting in those days, as was Leeds.

Thomas and his younger brother William, Hannah's only children, were almost certainly brought up as Quakers and attended Quaker meetings. We know this was the case with William and his name also appears in a list of pupils who attended the Quaker School at Gildersome⁶. In time, William suffered the same fate as his mother. He was disowned for marrying a non-Quaker. Like his mother, he also died young, - in fact, much younger, at the age of 27. He was a clothier like his father and Nicholson grandfather. Presumably, together they were a family business of three generations.



Photo 1. Nicholson and Whitaker graves in Chapel Allerton Cemetery.

Very little is known about Thomas Nicholson's early life but perhaps we can assume his schooling days were similar to that of his younger brother. He was probably educated at a Quaker school, maybe the one at Gildersome, and he would surely have attended Quaker Meetings. This would probably account for his time into his early adult years. The next information we have about him was when he was 21, when he married.

⁶ Ackworth School Magazine "Cupola" 1935, Fothergill Supplement, Names of Pupils 1772 - 1791, reference Carlton Hill Z4/103-4, Special Collections, Brotherton Library, Leeds University.

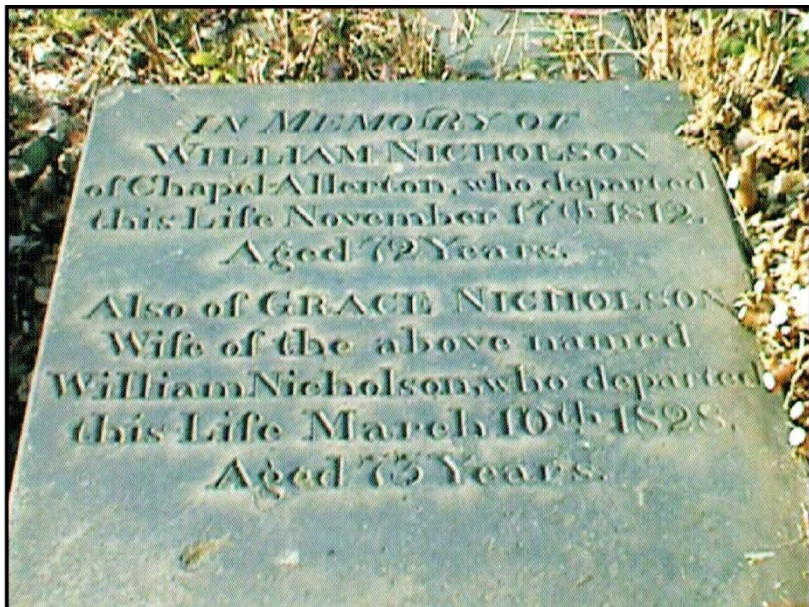


Photo 2. Grave of Thomas Nicholson's father, William, and stepmother, Grace, in Chapel Allerton Cemetery.

Quaker records show that Thomas was living in London in the parish of St. Helens, Bishopgate in the Gracechurch St. Meeting when he married Elizabeth Jackson at Wandsworth in 1786⁷. In those days when a Quaker moved from one Meeting to another it was usual for a certificate of recommendation to be provided from the Meeting which was being left, to the Meeting into which the Quaker was going to settle. Unfortunately there is no such record of his moving from the Brighthouse Meeting to the Gracechurch St. Meeting so we do not know when Thomas left Chapel Allerton for the City.

Thomas' father-in-law, William Jackson, was a leather factor (an agent for a leather merchant) but sadly there is no mention of Thomas' occupation at the time of his wedding. It is interesting to note from Quaker records of William Jackson's wedding in London in 1765 that William's mother and father were living in "Hansleet in Yorkshire", - presumably Hunslet. In those days there were many prosperous clothiers in Hunslet and it may be that the Nicholsons and the Jacksons knew each other.

⁷ Minutes of London Two Weeks Meetings 1672 - 1789, page 198.

Just two years after he married, Thomas Nicholson's name first appeared in the London Trade Directories in 1788, where he was an "insurance broker, 17 Gt. St. Helens". Later Directories sometimes said he was "merchant and insurance broker" and it is clear that the Nicholsons lived in the banking and stockbroker business area of the City. After 1813 their names disappeared but there are some few references to Nicholson & Young, "merchants" or "insurance brokers" at 32 Abchurch Lane. It is about this time that the two Nicholson brothers opened banks in the City and in Leeds. Amongst their interests were Nicholson, Brown and Co. in Leeds and Nicholson, Janson and Co. in Abchurch Lane, London.

It seems that Thomas was also an underwriter for Lloyds⁸ and it has been suggested that his fortune was founded on a single ship⁹, but it is a mystery where the initial capital came from to invest in this early profitable shipping venture. Maybe it came from a legacy. His wife Elizabeth was the only surviving child of William and Sarah Jackson (her sister Sarah died in infancy) so she may have inherited funds from her father, especially as William Jackson died later in the same year as her marriage to Thomas Nicholson, but there is no indication that William left a Will. In any case, Elizabeth's mother lived on for many years afterwards, and incidentally, by the time Thomas' father and grandfather died, Thomas was already a wealthy man, so it seems unlikely that a legacy was the means for Thomas to begin his highly successful business career in the City.

⁸R.S. Mortimer. Private communication. Letter from Robert Armitage of Farnley Hall, Leeds to Hugh Lupton, The Acacias, Roundhay, Leeds, 5 August 1927. Also Thomas and Stephen Nicholson's names are in "A List of Subscribers to Lloyds from the Foundation in 1771 to the 1st of June 1810" Printed by Wm. Phillips, George Yard, Lombard St., 1810. Copy in the Guildhall Library, London. Ref A.7.7. no. 12.

⁹J. Newiss. Private communication. "Recollections : Sixty Years Ago and Onwards", H. & J. & B.M.Walker. Privately published, 1934.

When he died, Thomas left money to his relatives and friends, his bank clerks, his house servants and labourers. He also left money to Leeds General Infirmary, to Ackworth (Quaker) School and to the poor of London and Chapel Allerton. His wife Elizabeth was particularly well cared for. Thomas' Will refers to his real estate in Roundhay, Roundhay Grange, Shadwell, Seacroft, Chapel Allerton, Potter Newton, Barwick in Elmet, Thorner, Whitkirk and Leeds. It is quite clear he was a very wealthy man when he died.

Thomas Nicholson was lucky, and not just in his business ventures. He came from a solid family background where he inherited beliefs and principles which would have served him well in his business dealings. Thanks to similarly prosperous and far-sighted men who followed him, Roundhay Park remains as a lasting testimony to his achievements and is available for the enjoyment of us all. Long may this continue.

Acknowledgements

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