Thomas Nicholson (1830-1860) and how Roundhay Park was nearly lost before Leeds Corporation could buy it.

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Introduction

Thomas Nicholson was William Nicholson Nicholson's eldest son. William's uncles were the half brothers, Thomas Nicholson and Stephen Nicholson, who created the main attractive features of today's Roundhay Park, as well as several of the historic buildings of the Roundhay area. To distinguish Thomas Nicholson from his great uncle of the same name, he is referred to as Thomas Nicholson junr. from hereon in this essay.

In the earlier years of their marriage, William and his wife Martha, lived at Heaviside in Devon. Thomas was the first of three children, all boys, to be born there before the family moved to Roundhay where another ten children were born to them. No doubt Thomas junr. was named after their great benefactor, William's uncle Thomas, who had made a fortune in London.

It is important to understand that when Thomas Nicholson died his real estate was entailed. Thomas willed it to pass down to William Nicholson Nicholson and Thomas Nicholson junr. in their turn. His wishes were that it would stay intact belonging to a member of the Nicholson family who would have the benefit of income from it but without absolute ownership. This situation was further enforced by the stipulation in his will that any timber cut down from his lands was to be sold and the money was to be used to buy more land to add to the family estates. In time, subsequent changes in the law affected the ownership of entailed estates enabling the Nicholson estates to be sold off.

To date there is little information about Thomas's younger years. In particular, it would be interesting to know about his education and how good a scholar he was. The eldest son in a wealthy family was usually raised as a gentleman with a good education to fit him for

his future. In general the younger sons went into professions in such as the church, the law, the civil service or the army.

William Nicholson Nicholson's second and third sons were educated at Cambridge, like their father before them. Indeed William's second son, the Reverend Rhodes Nicholson (who officiated at the marriage of his sister Emily in St John's Church Roundhay in 1860) was even schooled at Rugby before going on to Cambridge. It seems, however, that Thomas was more suited to a military career than a higher education and university.

Thomas's Army Career.

When Thomas was only twelve years old, in October 1841, Stephen Nicholson wrote to the Earl of Harewood for his help to buy his great nephew 'into the infantry'. This was the first step and the Earl received a reply from Lord Hill saying that Thomas Nicholson had been 'noted for a Commission by purchase.'

Years went by and in January 1845 William Nicholson Nicholson wrote to Lt. General Fitzroy Somerset asking to purchase his son's commission. In June 1845, a few months earlier than Thomas's sixteenth birthday, William paid £500 and by the end of the month Thomas became a second lieutenant in the 1st Battalion of the 60th Regiment of Foot, the regiment his father had requested, which was at that time serving in India.

Thomas's military career can be followed in some detail from the Regimental Muster Rolls which are at the National Archives at Kew. After a period at Chatham he was sent out to India arriving by the end of 1847.

For the next few years Thomas was mostly 'sick in [his] quarters' in India or 'on sick leave in Europe', or simply 'on leave', but after he rejoined his battalion in January 1851, it seems he was at last fit for service. The Muster Rolls record in mildly complimentary terms that he was 'effective and belonging to [the] corps'. In June he was transferred to the Depot 2nd Battalion of his regiment and his father paid £200 for his promotion to 1 st Lieutenant.

For the next few months, he was again on leave. Soon after, a note records that he had been 'absent without leave from the date

of [his] appointment' but this could be a mistake because other records show he was in India with his old battalion, the 1st, for the first half of 1852.

From hereon until his retirement from the army in the following year, he served in Ireland with the Depot 2nd Battalion of the 60th Regiment of Foot mostly at Castlecomer and later in Banagher.

Thomas's Life after his Army Service.

Once Thomas left the army, things went downhill for him. Unknown to his father, he began to live beyond his means, borrowing money using insurance and the estates he was willed to inherit as security for loans. During the next few years, he accumulated nearly £10,000 of debts - more than £500,000 in today's money.

Things finally came to a head in 1857 when Thomas defaulted on a payment to the Family Endowment Society with whom he had taken out a life insurance policy for £3,000 in 1854. In accordance with the terms of his borrowing with them, the Society put up for sale Thomas's life interest in the Nicholson estates at Roundhay Park, Chapel Allerton and elsewhere. In excess of 1,100 acres, these were advertised as being worth £100,000.

At some stage, Thomas's father William Nicholson Nicholson became aware of what was going on. The auction took place at the Scarborough Hotel in Leeds on the 19th September 1857 and his agent's bid of £10,000 was sufficient to resecure William's family's hold on the Nicholson estates.

By all accounts, the Roundhay Nicholsons lived very simple and somewhat devout lives. William himself was very hard working and disciplined and he must have been very disappointed at his son and heir's behaviour. It seems unlikely these circumstances could have been kept from William's uncle Stephen. We do not know how much these affected Stephen but perhaps it was more than just a coincidence that he died less than six months later in February 1858 in his eightieth year.

Over the next few years Thomas and William worked together to settle Thomas's debts. There are several legal documents covering this and their future actions. William ensured that his son would not receive his former inheritance and compelled Thomas to own up to all his debts. The deal was, that if he carried this out to his father's satisfaction, he would receive an annual allowance and a cash lump sum.

William did not stop there, though. He banished Thomas abroad for not less than five years and he was to have no contact at all with his family during this period. But tragedy struck. Thomas went to Canada and soon died, in January 1860 at Quebec.

I know nothing more of the circumstances of Thomas's death or of its impact on his family. One can only imagine that his parents, William and Martha, would have been devastated. They had lost their eldest son and he had been a great disappointment to them.

Concluding Comments

Thanks to William Nicholson Nicholson, the Roundhay Park Estate was available to be acquired by Leeds Corporation a few years after his death. Had he not been successful at the auction in September 1859, who can say how this would have left the future of Roundhay Park? When one also remembers the fight John Barran had on his hands to secure the Park for Leeds Corporation in the months after the auction of 1871, it is a wonder we are able to set foot in it today, let alone enjoy to the full this great amenity.

Main Sources (in addition to those mentioned in the text) Leeds Mercury.

Hepper's Sale Literature 4 October 1871. Conditions of Sale. Yorkshire Archaeological Society, MD279/A7, 'Abstract of Title of William Nicholson Nicholson to the Roundhay and Other Estates.'

Thanks

I would like to thank Kirsty McHugh and Robert Frost at the Yorkshire Archaeological Society for their help with the Nicholson family records in MD279.