

## PARCMONT

© By Joan Newiss.

### **The Story of a Mansion, a Mayor, and a White Elephant.**

This historic mansion on Park Avenue, sited on rising land overlooking Waterloo Lake and now 120 years old, is about to enter a new phase of life. Built in 1883 for John Barran, one -time Mayor of Leeds, a notable Baptist, Liberal M.P., and Tee- Totaller, it ceased to be a private residence in 1940 when it was acquired for government use during the War. Subsequently occupied by the Ministry of Pensions, it became a hotel by the 1970's - popular for wedding receptions still fondly remembered - and was enlarged at this time to the side and rear by flat-roofed extensions, masking the original elevations. It subsequently became flats.

In 1999, a proposal was made by a firm of developers to demolish the building wholesale, and replace it with a modern block of flats whose proposed height, mass, and large areas of glazing were deemed by the City Council and other interested parties to be unsympathetic, visually detrimental to period buildings in the Roundhay Conservation Area, and additionally an obtrusive development on the skyline of the Park landscape. After a hard-fought Public Inquiry lasting five days, the Planning Inspector agreed with the objectors, and the proposed scheme for demolition and redevelopment was rejected in December 2000. ❶

A new proposal in 2002 by a different company Magellan Residential to restore the mansion as flats incorporating original features, with additional accommodation in complementary style, was accepted by the Council. Reconstruction is well under way this year. The historic title 'Parcmont' is to be retained, with parts appropriately called 'Barran's Court and 'Ambler Lodge', honouring the names of the original owner and his architect, Thomas Ambler.

John Barran was the archetypal self-made man who in the 1850's diversified from pawnbroking to clothing manufacturer. He spotted the possibility of adapting a bandsaw blade to cut multiple layers of cloth at one go, and thereby introduced ready-made suits in competition with bespoke tailoring. These cheaper 'ready-mades' were a boon for the working man, and Barran's fortune was established. He also rose quickly in public affairs, being elected Mayor of Leeds in 1870 and 1871, just at the momentous time when the Roundhay Park Estate was placed on the market. This followed the death in 1868 of William Nicholson, nephew of Thomas Nicholson for whom the superb park had been created from agricultural land between 1812-1820.

Barran realised the advantages of this beautifully landscaped estate, comprising lakes, mature tree plantations, rolling grassland, and tumbling falls of water. He had a dream of a People's Park, primarily for the benefit of the working classes, where they might recover from the drudgery of work and breathe fresh air into their lungs, away from the densely-packed cottages and open sewers of the town centre.

Many problems had to be faced: the local gentry objected strongly to the intrusion on their rural retreats in Roundhay, and fought the proposals through Parliament; there was no adequate public transport, as the tram service was not inaugurated until 1891; and there was also a serious legal problem. Roundhay was outside the Leeds boundary, marked today by the Oakwood Boundary Road along the verge of Gipton Wood, and the Council had no legal right to spend Leeds taxpayers' money on property beyond the City limits. A determined man is not easily deterred. At the tense public auction, 4th October 1871, in the Great Northern Hotel, Barran bought the Park with his own money, staking £139,000 on his conviction of the importance of the purchase. Fortunately Parliament then passed the appropriate enabling Act, and the Council refunded the sale price to the Mayor. But for his action, the likelihood is that the whole fine parkland would eventually have been covered by suburban housing, with the tree cover felled, the streams culverted, and the lakes filled in.

However, as the years passed and little progress was made to recoup costs and improve access, local satirists, thirsting as usual for juicy targets, lampooned Barran as leading a sad-faced white elephant, representative of a useless Park and waste of money. The problems of public transport, the lack of toilets and drinking fountains for the thousands who trudged all the way on foot from the town centre, also aroused much criticism. At this time, the only refreshment available was supplied by the public house on Roundhay Road - then called the 'Gipton Wood Inn' since rebuilt and re-named 'The Roundhay'. This was established in the 1830's largely to serve the quarrymen in the adjacent Ravenscars, or such travellers who passed by along the Roundhay Turnpike, itself only completed in 1810. Barran finally solved the difficulty in 1882 by erecting a drinking fountain of some style, standing high above the Lake in the Park.

The major problem facing the Council was the need to recoup the purchase price of the Park, and so mitigate the 'white elephant'

image. In 1876 certain areas around the boundaries were therefore designated for building purposes ,but excluding the Soldiers' Field which was deemed a valuable asset as a training ground for the men from the Cavalry Barracks. They made a fine show, harness jingling, as they rode up to Oakwood from Barrack Road, to practice their manoeuvres. Along the sides of the Field, Princes Avenue and Park Avenue were cut in 1878 to provide access to the outskirts of the retained parkland, with a view to building along the boundaries. However, transport problems for the middle classes lacking private carriages discouraged purchase of building plots. It was only in 1879 that the first sod was cut on the high peninsular of land between Park and West Avenues, overlooking Waterloo Lake. Here was built a large stone mansion for Dr. T.R. Jessop, a famous Leeds surgeon of his day. Originally called 'Roundhay Mount', later 'Carr Head', and finally 'Woodlands' as it is still known, it set a high and expensive standard which was never matched.



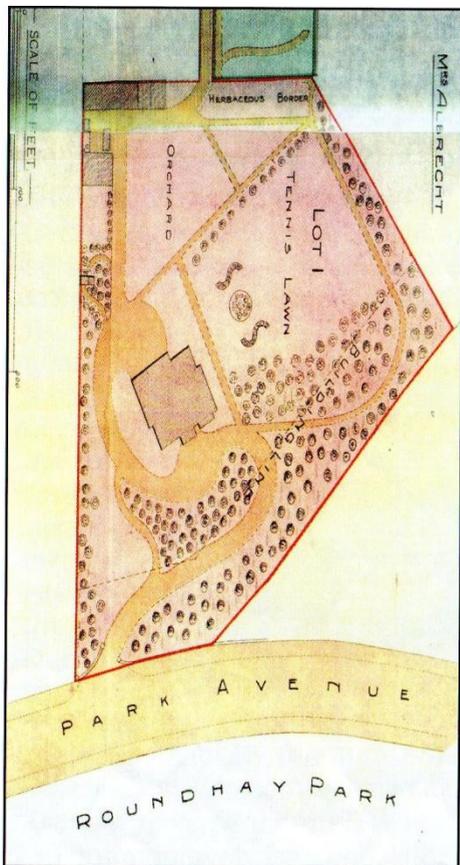
In some desperation four years later, Barran himself engaged Thomas Ambler, a fellow leading member of the Leeds and County Liberal Club, to design a less lavish but striking villa in Victorian Tudor style. This was intended to set the standard for future building. Gabled back and front, with a black-and-white fascia contrasting with stone from local quarries, and fronted by a 2-storey portico constructed from huge black-and white timbers, elaborately

carved, it made a powerful statement of a man's determination to overcome the odds. There was unfortunately a greater setback than envisaged. 'Parcmont' was built for Barran's son, John junior, married with two children. The young man died unexpectedly in 1886, and his widow and family moved away immediately.

A photograph of the attractive rear elevation of the mansion shortly after it was built, shows newly planted trees. The gardener bowler-hatted, poses proudly in the midst of his handwork, spade to hand. Behind him, a footman leans nonchalantly on a child's see-saw, and staff peep from every window - a manservant in the gable, the housekeeper from a bedroom, and maids in crisp white aprons and caps, upstairs and down. Only three years later, a new owner began creating more formal gardens of immaculate lawns and flower beds. He was William Thomas Crampton, one of Barran's business partners who died in 1911. The subsequent Sale Plan depicts broad plantations of rhododendrons, hollies and laurels along the boundaries, a tennis lawn to the right of the house, an orchard to the rear, and beyond that a long rectangle of land extending to West Avenue, which served as a productive kitchen garden.

The next owner, Edgar Smith, was a wallpaper manufacturer with Barran's son Alfred and grandson Claude. Their factory was sited in Berkeley Road (opposite the new mosque in Harehills Lane), and was later acquired by Crown Wallpapers, a name that many will still remember. Smith died in 1928, his widow in 1937, after which the house ceased to be a private residence. The Cramptons and Smiths are buried in St.John's churchyard.②

At the time of the 1911 Sale, Parcmont is accurately described as occupying "one of the most charming positions in this favourite suburb, overlooking the best wooded part of Roundhay Park and the Waterloo Lake, with the Mansion, and the grounds of Elmete Hall in the distance". This outlook is exactly as depicted in a painting of 1838, the artist's standpoint being very close to the future location of Parcmont. This painting was commissioned by Stephen Nicholson



**1911 Sale Plan**

from the artist John Wilson Carmichael. It is now in the store of Leeds City Art Gallery. Other features of the house described in 1911, include a staircase lighted from the roof through coloured glass, dining room, music room formerly a billiard room (indicating a change in owner's taste), library and morning room on the ground floor, and a very beautiful drawing room on the first floor extending into the large bay built over the porch "from which is obtained one of the loveliest views in the neighbourhood of Leeds". The same is still true today as new occupants of Parcmont will undoubtedly discover.

It is probably the partnership with John Barran that gives Thomas Ambler more public notice today than he might have otherwise enjoyed, though his work has yet to be thoroughly researched. Barran was his most important known client, and fortunately their known joint ventures still survive, a distinct quartet. Parcmont was his last enterprise, being preceded c.1866-1870 by the Trevelyan Temperance Hotel on the prime corner site of Boar Lane and Lower Briggate, latterly occupied by the Leeds Marriott Hotel. As a tee-

totaller, Barran would regret the loss of temperance status. By 1878, Barran needed a new warehouse for his business, so Ambler designed a minaretted eye-catching terracotta extravaganza in the Moorish style. Worth a visit, it happily still stands and attracts attention in Park Square, having luckily escaped demolition in the 1970's. Best known of all is Barran's fountain, already referred to, that he erected in the Park in 1882 in the style of a Greek Temple. Despite vandalism and neglect, it still stands tall on its' prime site above Waterloo Lake, visible from Parcmont.



It is hard to imagine a more disparate group of architectural styles, yet together they represent a harmony of imagination and enterprise between two senior businessmen of Victorian Leeds. Though it took time to achieve, Barran's flagship mansion, Parcmont, eventually encouraged the development of a prestigious estate of Victorian-Tudor villas on the opposite boundary of the Park. Like Parcmont, these too have come under threat, though vigilance has kept the danger at bay.

## At the moment therefore, we celebrate **PARCMONT RESURGENT**

### Notes.

1 The Public Inquiry was attended and addressed by two members of the Oakwood and District Historical Society.

2- "Memorial Inscriptions. St. John's Church Roundhay" compiled by members of the Society. A copy of which can be seen at Sheepscar Records Library.

NB. John Barran (d. 1905) being a Nonconformist was buried in Burmantofts Cemetery. He was a Life Member of the Leeds and County Liberal club, latterly Vice President. A Councillor from 1865, and Mayor 1870-71. M.P. for Leeds 1876-1885; and for Otley 1886-1895. Knighted 1896. President of Leeds Chamber of Commerce. A member of South Parade Baptist Chapel for 63 years. Resident at Chapel Allerton Hall from 1869. Employed over 2,000 men by the 1890's.