

**The Reverend James Armitage Rhodes**  
**'Clerk Without Cure of Souls'**  
**A Remarkable Man**  
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**The Reverend James Armitage Rhodes**

The Reverend James Armitage Rhodes (hereon abbreviated to JAR for convenience) was a well-liked and respected member of the influential families of Roundhay and north Leeds. He was also a man of substance in local affairs and throughout the West Riding during the middle years of the nineteenth century. For about twenty years he and his wife lived in Roundhay at Wood End, now Sabourn Court, a BUPA residential home for the elderly, off Oakwood Lane.

JAR was an executor for the wills of Thomas Nicholson and his wife Elizabeth, Quaker founders of Roundhay Park. Elizabeth, singled out JAR for a unique mention in her will. She left £200 for a piece of silver plate to be engraved with his coat of arms and the words 'Elizabeth Nicholson, to her highly valued Friend James Armitage Rhodes' which she hoped he would accept 'as a token of her grateful remembrance of his unwearied attention and kindness to her'.<sup>1</sup> JAR's influence on Elizabeth may have been instrumental in securing the funds which she provided for the building of St John's Church, the school and almshouses and other buildings on the Wetherby Road then in the corner of the Roundhay Park Estate.<sup>2</sup> JAR was a trustee for the administration of the almshouses right from the outset.

With the Rhodes surname, I expected to find that JAR was a close relative of Matthew Rhodes, Leeds merchant of Campfield House, whose daughter Sarah married Stephen Nicholson, Thomas's half brother. Stephen and Sarah went to live at Roundhay Park Mansion after Thomas and Elizabeth Nicholson died and Stephen inherited the Roundhay estate.

Matthew's brother, Abraham Rhodes, another merchant, lived at Roundhay Lodge (where Elmete Hall was later built) during his final years and he had two daughters, who married into families who came to live in Roundhay. Amelia married William Cadman, a tobacco manufacturer, who bought Wood End after Abraham's death. Abraham's younger daughter, Martha Rhodes, married William Nicholson Phillips, the nephew of Thomas and Stephen Nicholson, who changed his surname to Nicholson to allow him to inherit their Roundhay and Chapel Allerton estates (see Figure 1).

However, it appears there was no obvious blood relationship between JAR and this Rhodes family. The best I could do was to find a rather tenuous connection by marriage through JAR's brother William (see Figure 2).

JAR was born on 9 February 1785, the son of Peter Rhodes of the Bank, Leeds, a partner in the firm of Peter and James Rhodes, leather dressers and fellmongers of Nether Mills near



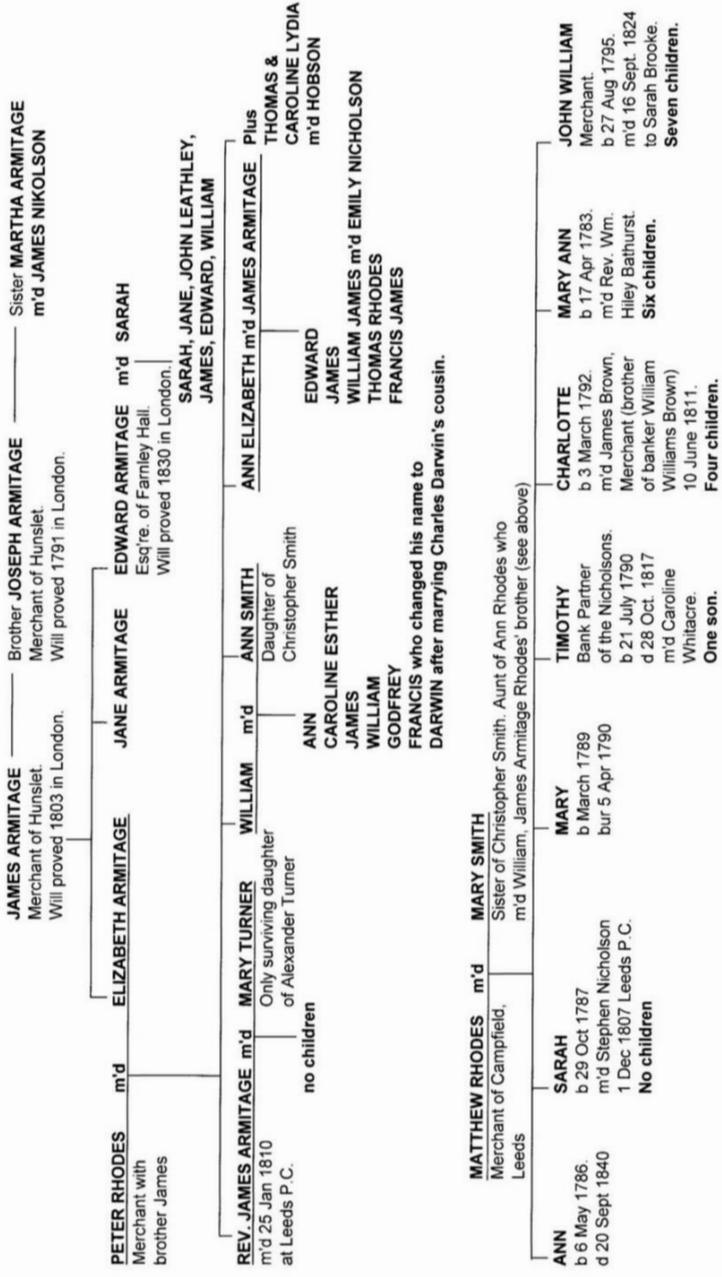


Figure 2. Family Tree of the Reverend James Armitage Rhodes

Marsh Lane. Peter married Elizabeth Armitage, daughter of James Armitage, a very wealthy merchant of Hunslet. When James died in 1803, he left £10,000 to each of four granddaughters and seven grandsons, including JAR. James Armitage also held the manor of Farnley (which he had bought in 1799 from the Danby family in whose possession it had been for six centuries) and part of the manor of Hunslet. The Armitage ironmasters of Farnley Hall were descended from him.

Peter Rhodes decided his eldest son, JAR, would be raised as a gentleman's son so in 1802 he was sent to Queens' College Cambridge where he graduated BA in 1806, and MA in 1809. In 1812 he was ordained at Holy Trinity Church in Leeds on Boar Lane. However, the Reverend James Armitage Rhodes AM, as he was now known, never sought a benefice where he could take spiritual charge of his parishioners, so he was known as a 'clerk with no cure of souls' and his participation in the church services was limited.

In 1794 the Mayor of Leeds, Alexander Turner, responding to the threat of invasion from France, supported the creation of militia units to defend the town. Peter and James Rhodes, JAR's father and uncle, joined the Troop of Volunteer Cavalry, James as a Captain. In November 1797, the Troop was presented with their standard by JAR's mother, Mrs Peter Rhodes, on Chapeltown Moor (an area of about 100 acres which roughly followed the line of Stainbeck Lane, Chapel Allerton, and to the south of it, to Potternewton Lane) <sup>3</sup> In 1810 Alexander Turner served again as Mayor of Leeds; that same year JAR married his only daughter Mary Turner at St Peter's, Leeds Parish Church.

There is no doubt JAR was a deeply religious man. He was sometimes moved to tears as he read the lessons in church, much to the amusement of some of the children in the congregation. One of these was Emily Nicholson, the eldest daughter of William Nicholson Nicholson who later married JAR's nephew William James Armitage. Emily called these occasions 'weeping Sundays'. Right up to a few weeks before he died in his 87<sup>th</sup> year JAR was still actively participating in the services at his local church.

Mary was quite a catch. Her father, Alexander Turner was a wealthy Leeds merchant with land and property and banking interests. On her mother's side, Mary was descended from the King and the Cockcroft families, who had been landed gentry in the Calderdale area for centuries. The Cockcrofts had connections by marriage with another long-established family of property and influence, the Stanhopes, and in due course by some genealogical good fortune, Mary profited by legacies from all these three families on her mother's side. In particular, she owned much land in the Hebden Bridge area. Alexander Turner moved from Leeds to Mytholm Hall not long before he died and this soon became Mary Rhodes' property.

Mary was a strong-willed woman, accustomed to having her own way. She gave land for Hebden Bridge Parish Church to be built at Mytholm. It is said the vicar had to seek her approval for the hymns and if she disliked some part of his sermon she showed her disapproval by tapping her cane loudly on the floor during the service!

In the early 1800s, JAR's father, Peter Rhodes, rented Horsforth Hall from Walter Stanhope of Cannon Hall and not long after JAR's marriage, JAR and Mary went to live there. Peter returned to Leeds to a house in Park Place where he died in 1836.

Letters have survived which show another example of Mary Rhodes' wilful reputation. The gardener at Horsforth Hall suddenly announced to JAR that he wished to leave his employment. Not wanting to lose him if at all possible, JAR pressed the man for an explanation but could only get out of him that 'there were things in the family he could not be comfortable with'. Not satisfied with this, JAR continued to ask around and was eventually told 'Mrs Rhodes' behaviour was one principal objection'. JAR's reply was significant. 'I am sorry', he said rather sadly, but 'that, I cannot alter'.<sup>5</sup>

A friend of the Bronte's, the Reverend Mr Sowden was also a special friend of JAR and his wife Mary. It seems that her reputation was not localised, as research currently underway by Mr Hunter of

Bacup, a Bronte expert, suggests that Mrs Mary Rhodes could have been the real life model for the wild child Cathy in Wuthering Heights.<sup>6</sup>

JAR and his brother William Rhodes, served the community as local magistrates, for several years dispensing justice in the public house, now called 'The Seventh Earl', close to Horsforth Park gates but Horsforth Hall in the Park was largely demolished in the 1950s.

Like many men of his social standing, JAR became a Deputy Lieutenant for the West Riding and served on the bench. In due course he became a very able Chairman of the Quarter Sessions, a position he occupied for many years. In this role he was senior to dozens of his local peers and other influential men including members of the Lascelles family of Harewood House.

There are many accounts in the newspapers of court proceedings which reveal JAR's sense of fairness and humanity. Of considerable local interest is the account of his handling of the inquiry into what happened when William Nicholson Nicholson shot and killed his gamekeeper after mistaking him for a burglar.<sup>7</sup>

He was really impressive though in his address to the Grand Jury in 1833 as Chairman of the Quarter Sessions where he was dismayed to find ninety prisoners arraigned in front of him facing possible deportation, a greater number than at any of the preceding sessions. The Government was pressing for even larger numbers to be deported and more severe punishments to be introduced but JAR was appalled at this trend and totally against it. In his years on the bench he had seen drunkenness as a major cause of crime. This needed to be restrained, he said, and he went on to argue the case for religious instruction and more general education especially for young offenders.<sup>8</sup>

In 1840, JAR wrote to William Williams Brown about his intention to leave Horsforth. He had heard that 'Beechwood', Mr Goodman's house in Roundhay (off Elmete Lane, which can still be seen from Wetherby Road), was to be sold but he later declared the asking price of £20,000 was too much for him and he decided he would rather have 'a little quiet place'.<sup>9</sup>

A few years later JAR and Mary Rhodes moved to Wood End in Roundhay which they shared with William Cadman and leased from him. The Rhodes stayed at Wood End from about 1845 for some twenty years. They had no children.

For years JAR had a large financial stake in the Aire and Calder Navigation much of which had been given to him by his father. From the 1820s, JAR took an increasing part in managing the affairs of the Company and by 1830 he was firmly established as the most influential director. In 1847 he became Chairman of the Company, a position he held until his death in 1871. Over the years he worked tirelessly, always present at the meetings, and he kept himself informed of every aspect of the company's affairs. He was continually commuting to London to Parliament to oppose further expansion of the railways, especially when he felt the interests of the Aire and Calder Navigation were being compromised.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout all this time, the Rhodes kept Mytholm Hall and each month they would spend a week there. It is interesting that JAR used his influence to prevent the railway station at Hebden Bridge from being built within a mile of Mytholm Hall. In spite of his opposition to the railways, JAR and his wife travelled between Leeds and Mytholm by train.

In the mid 1860s, JAR moved from Roundhay to Carleton, near Pontefract, to a house, Westhaugh, which he inherited from his sister, Caroline Lydia Hobson. Not long afterwards Mary Rhodes died. JAR lived on there for a few more years until he died in 1871.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to Milford Stocks for his very helpful comments, for the photograph of JAR and for copies of his research papers on JAR which helped to add more colour to this article and filled in several gaps. Also I would like to thank June Underwood for notes on the Rhodes and Armitage families and for copies of Ann Mellor's transcription of Emily Armitage's book '*The Story of My Life*'.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> PRO reference PROB/11/1813. Will proved in London 16 March 1833.
- <sup>2</sup> See N R Hurworth, *Thomas and Elizabeth Nicholson, The Quaker Founders of Roundhay Park*, (2005) Appendix 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Leeds Intelligencer 20 November 1797.
- <sup>4</sup> Emily Armitage, *The Story of My Life* (1907), published by William Blackwood, Edinburgh.
- <sup>5</sup> James Hardy at Horsforth to Walter Spencer Stanhope MP in Grosvenor Square, London, Letter dated 29 April 1812.
- <sup>6</sup> Private communication with Milford Stocks.
- <sup>7</sup> Leeds Intelligencer, 23 May 1840 and Leeds Mercury 23 May 1840.
- <sup>8</sup> JAR The Halifax Guardian 19 October 1833.
- <sup>9</sup> JAR to William Williams Brown, Letter dated 17 May 1840. From a private Archive in possession of William Williams Brown's descendant Dunn family.
- <sup>10</sup> R G Wilson *The Aire and Calder Navigation. Part IV: The Navigation in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* The Bradford Antiquary (1976) Vol 9 pg 365.

## Other Sources

Various Parish Registers from the large collection on microfiche and microfilm in the Local Studies Section at Leeds Central Library, and Wills, copies of which I obtained via the National Archives website.