

## **The Closure of St John's Church, Roundhay. Some Final Thoughts.**

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Last November, St John's Church Roundhay opened the doors for its last public service. I was there, not as a worshipper, but because of my interest in the history of Roundhay. After all, it was the end of an era, - in this case, an era of more than a hundred and eighty years.

The service started and as I was listening to what Bishop John was saying I also had thoughts and reflections prompted by the surroundings and the occasion ....

St John's has many lovely stained glass windows. I found myself looking at the impressive stained glass window dedicated to the Ives family's sacrifice in the service of their country. In Part One of Oak Leaves (2001), Valerie Ives MBE, wrote about her family's war service including the loss of two uncles during World War One . She described how one uncle, a young officer, sailed off on patrol in a submarine and both were never seen again. What happened no one knows.

I have always looked upon St John's Church as the ecclesiastical part of Roundhay Park. For many years, members of the Nicholson family, who owned the Park from 1803 to 1871, worshipped there. It is often said that the Mansion is the jewel in the crown of Roundhay Park. If this is so, then surely St John's Church is at least another valuable gem. Thinking along these lines it seemed to me more than a little ironic and sad that when the Park was undergoing an upgrade and refit costing millions of pounds, I was witnessing the closure of the Park's beautiful church, another building of great importance in the history of Roundhay, especially in the days of the Nicholsons when one might say They were Roundhay'.

I noticed I was quite close to the memorial plaque to Thomas Nicholson, which claims the Church was 'built and endowed in furtherance of his benevolent intentions'. I smiled a little, as I feel these words were carefully chosen.

It was left to Thomas's half brother, Stephen Nicholson, to build the church after Thomas's death and the money came from Thomas's widow, Elizabeth Nicholson. Thomas's extensive will does not mention anything at all about provision for the building of a church. Sometimes I even think Thomas may not have been too pleased that some of the

£6000 he willed to his wife 'absolutely' was spent in this way. Thomas and Elizabeth were Quakers and at this time when the church was built, Quakers still held strong views on themselves vis a vis the Church of England. Also, poignantly, Thomas's father was never a Quaker, and Thomas's mother was exiled from membership of the Society of Friends for 'marrying out' in a Church of England by a paid priest. It was a cornerstone principle for Quakers that religious instruction and worship should be free. For decades Thomas's maternal grandparents travelled the length and breadth of England and Ireland preaching the gospels while living off the good-will of other Quaker families, as Quaker Ministers did in those days. In earlier years too, many Quakers were persecuted, sometimes resulting in death, for their refusal to pay Church of England tithes and Thomas Nicholson's mother's family was in the thick of this. Remember too, Thomas's half brother, Stephen, was totally C. of E. as were Stephen's father and mother.

Stephen was much younger than Thomas and I believe he revered his brother and deferred to him and his wife on most matters. Soon after



**View of St John's Church, Roundhay, the School and Almshouses built by Stephen Nicholson with money left to Elizabeth Nicholson by his brother Thomas.**

Thomas's death, Stephen and his wife left London, where the two brothers had conducted their main businesses. He retired and settled in Roundhay, spending much of his remaining years constructing buildings, including St John's Church, the school (see articles in Oak Leaves Books Five and Seven; 2005 and 2007) and the almshouses on the Wetherby Road.

Somewhat surprisingly, Elizabeth Nicholson was buried in the crypt at St John's. For a Quaker to be buried in a C. of E. church or churchyard was very unusual in those days. Quakers preached unity even in death and Thomas appears to have reserved a place for her next to him where he was buried in the Quaker burial ground in Camp Lane south of Leeds town centre. The fact she was interred in the crypt at St John's at Roundhay, I find a little hard to understand. It may be that her attitude to the Church was influenced by her regard for her "highly valued friend" the Reverend James Armitage Rhodes which she expressed in the one surviving letter she wrote, and again in her will. He was a man of means and connections, by birth and education. Certainly he was a cool operator. I must refer readers to my article in Oak Leaves Book Six for further details of this very influential man. My book on Thomas and Elizabeth Nicholson considers in more detail Elizabeth Nicholson's friendship with Reverend Rhodes.

I also smiled as I was thinking of the Reverend James Armitage Rhodes. He was a gentleman cleric and with no parish benefice of his own, he was rather limited in his church activities. Occasionally he was allowed to read the lessons at St John's. William Nicholson Nicholson's children found these occasions a source of some amusement and called them "weeping Sundays", for this devout man and his wife could both be relied upon to shed tears by the bucket-full! He also coughed loudly when Mr Davis, the forward-thinking Vicar, preached something he did not agree with!

William Nicholson Nicholson is also buried in the crypt. He was Stephen Nicholson's nephew and heir. William Nicholson Nicholson's main contribution to the history of Roundhay seems to me, to be (1) that he inherited the Roundhay Estate, (2) he had a large family (compared to Thomas and Stephen, his uncles, who had no children), (3) he accidentally shot his uncle's gamekeeper mistaking him for a burglar after which event, he was never the same, for he was a kind gentle

person, and (4) he died leaving a flawed will. He and his wife Martha were one of the first couples to be married at St John's, and Martha, too, is interred in St. John's crypt.

Martha became fed up with delays in settling her husband's will so she took the Executors, close members of her extended family, to the Court of Chancery, with the historic result that in the ensuing sale of the estate, land for a public Park was sold to John Barran and his associates.

Stephen Nicholson and his wife are also interred in the crypt, as are many other people who were prominent in the development of Roundhay over the years.

Time was running out now and I found myself wondering about these worthies of Roundhay who were quietly entombed below me in the crypt. With the future of the Church uncertain, for how much longer would they be allowed to stay there undisturbed?

The service was coming to the end. Soon everyone was making their way out. The big wooden doors closed behind us. Nearly two hundred years of worship at Roundhay St John The Evangelist Church was over.



**Nicholson tombs in the crypt at St John's Church.**

## **Further Reading.**

My essay here is not intended to have any sequence of events or logical pattern. Rather it contains some favourite pieces of mine (hopefully) relevant to St John's and the occasion.

For a comprehensive account of the history of St John's Church, I refer the reader to the work of J. Dickinson and G.D. Webster 'A History of St John's Church Roundhay' (1967), which is still the authoritative record on the subject. There is a shorter version of this in Oak Leaves Book Four (2003).

Of course, Steven Burt's Book 'An Illustrated History of Roundhay Park' (2000) is the very first work to go to for information on the history of the Park.

About the Nicholson family, I must say that Thomas and Elizabeth Nicholson have fascinated me for years and I have researched them extensively. My book 'Thomas and Elizabeth Nicholson, the Quaker Founders of Roundhay Park' (2005) is the end product of this work.

My friend, Peter Oldfield, a great servant of St John's Church, is the source of the original Church's Website:

More information can now be found at:

<http://www.oakwoodchurch.info/roundhaystjohn.html>