

Mary Anne Rawson

At our March meeting our speaker, Penny Rea, described how she and her team of volunteers (now known as the "Friends of Zion Graveyard") discovered the graves of Mary Anne Rawson and her family in an overgrown and largely forgotten graveyard in Attercliffe, hidden from view amongst industrial buildings and derelict land. Her story was of a long detective hunt which uncovered a valuable part of Sheffield's historic heritage, and resuscitated the memory of a woman who contributed to the anti-slavery campaign of the early nineteenth century. This was all the more remarkable since the Zion graveyard was originally the burial ground for the old Zion Congregational Chapel built in 1805, but demolished approximately 50 years later when the larger Zion Church was built over part of it. But how did Mary Anne Rawson have this unpromising spot as her final resting place?



Mary was the eldest daughter in a politically active family. Her parents, Joseph and Elizabeth Read both came from strong non-conformist families that founded dissenting chapels and schools. At the same time they were steeped in the local industrial life. Her father ran The Sheffield Smelting Company, in Green Lane Attercliffe, which his father before him had built up by collecting and refining the dust from the floors of the silver and goldsmiths of Sheffield. The wealth generated allowed Joseph Read to purchase Wincobank Hall in 1816 which he extended and around which he added orchards and flower gardens. A non-conformist chapel was established in the coach house and the laundry became a Sunday school which his daughters ran. Many influential speakers of the time, especially those involved in the anti-slavery movement, were invited to Wincobank Hall, including William Wilberforce, the parliamentary spokesman for the anti-slavery movement, and the writer, orator and former slave, Frederick Douglass.

Mary Anne became an ardent campaigner for many humanitarian causes arguing for the improvement of conditions for the poor and disadvantaged around the

world. With newspaper editor and family friend James Montgomery, she and her sister worked to improve the lot of children employed, often under coercion, to climb and clean the narrow winding chimneys of the big houses. But in particular she campaigned for the universal abolition of slavery.

Her father was a major shareholder in his father-in-law's company, the Smith Ironworks Of Chesterfield, and when it failed he was forced to sell Wincobank Hall and move the family back to their previous much smaller home near the works at Royds Mills in Attercliffe. He died soon afterwards aged 72. Mary Anne, who had married William Rawson, a Nottingham solicitor in 1827 sadly became widowed after he contracted tuberculosis just two years later.

However her husband had left her enough money to clear her father's debts and buy back Wincobank Hall where she, her mother and siblings were able to return. She never remarried but threw her energy and resources into to establishing educational facilities at home and abroad, by means of relentless letter-writing and fund-raising. She was also an accomplished artist and poet.

The British Slave Trade was abolished in 1807 but this did not stop Mary Anne, mother and sister from campaigning for the freedom for those slaves (and their children) born into captivity. They started petitions to boycott West Indian goods and raised funds by knitting. They were instrumental in forming the Sheffield Ladies Anti-Slavery Society in 1825 and even though the Government finally abolished slavery in the colonies in 1833, she continued protesting about a seven-year 'apprenticeship' for slaves which forced them to continue working for the same people who may have cruelly mistreated them.

In 1840 she attended the first meeting of the International Convention for the Universal Abolition of Slavery, an organisation better known today as Anti-Slavery International. In 1875, at the age of 74, she was still vociferously objecting to the British Navy returning runaway slaves to their home countries.

Mary Anne died in 1887, by which time she had used or given away all her wealth and allowed Wincobank Hall to deteriorate to a point at which no buyer could be found. Between 1899 and 1915, the house served as a 'rescue home' for the Salvation Army. But by 1921 Wincobank Hall was said to be in 'a state of desolation' and was demolished to make way for the Flowers Estate.

The Scope of the Ranmoor Archive

The term "Ranmoor Archive" suggests an organised collection of historical data but as it has been accumulated over time it has not been easy to compile a convenient index. Its contents come from many different sources; maps, letters, photos and random contributions from individuals connected now or in the past with the Ranmoor. It has also benefited from the various research efforts of our members. To help members appreciate what it comprises we will summarise its main components in this and future issues of Ranmoor Notes.

Street Directories

These are of course available to anyone who is able to visit the Local Studies section of Sheffield's Central Library which is exactly where we started our research. We found that each directory for a given year provided the names of the occupiers of each property and were arranged street by street. The various trades were listed in a separate section.

It is worth remembering that these were essentially trade directories, the "Yellow Pages" of their day, and commercial ventures that reflected the business and interests of their compilers. The White's Directories of the 1830s were compiled as a result of door to door canvassing whilst Kelly's Post Office directories are so called because information was collected on slips delivered by postmen. The first Sheffield Directory appears in 1774 listing specialised trades (such as Cutlers, Silversmiths etc.) the second appears in 1787 listing the professional classes, local gentry, trades people and manufacturers. The earliest one pertaining to Ranmoor is that of 1825 although, until the 1870s the lack of a house numbering system prevents us from precisely matching occupants to houses!

In order to build up a useful picture of the social make-up of the Ranmoor area over time we decided that a separate template for each individual road or street would be needed. Although not all directories are currently available for every year between 1870s and 1970s, with over 40 streets this still posed a considerable task. The information for each street was photo-copied and then mounted in chronological order on a standard template using old-fashioned cut-and-paste methods. Several members gave a great deal of their time to complete this onerous task. But consequently our archive can provide the most comprehensive picture of who lived where and when in our area.

It should be remembered that these directories only include the name of the head of the household while other family members are not mentioned. But checking street by street index can be useful to gain access to more detailed census returns. There are other potential pitfalls to be aware of. For example if

your interest was Storth Lane you would need to know that before 1886 it was known as Water Lane; Marr Terrace was previously Market Street and Deakin's Walk only became known as such c.1926 having previously been referred to as Cliffe Terrace!

Ranmoor in the Newspapers

This item entitled "Peculiar Burglary at Ranmoor" appeared in the Sheffield Daily Telegraph August 1904.

A burglar, a peculiar character, has penetrated the residence of Mr. A. E. Bingham, Ranmoor Grange, Ranmoor Road. The house was left locked up securely, but when the occupants were astir in the morning it was discovered the house had been entered during the night. Ingress had apparently been effected through a cellar grate at the side of the residence, between the front drive and the stable yard.

The thief or thieves then seem have made their way to the dining room and the morning-room, on either hand of the entrance. Four valuable cups were taken from the dining-room, and the safe in the morning room was opened. From the latter some sixteen £5 notes were abstracted, and several gold coins. The thieves were evidently surprised in their work, for the strange part about the affair was that out of the sixteen £5 notes nine were subsequently found wrapped up in an overcoat which had been deposited in a refuse tip at the rear the premises. The remaining seven have yet to be accounted for.

That there had been something in the nature of an alarm before the culprits could decamp with their booty is also evident from the fact that the stolen cups enclosed in the overcoat were found in the refuse tip and also that a sovereign was afterwards found on a pathway leading to the house. Another feature in the affair tending to show that there was a very hasty departure, or that the delinquents were mere novices at the game, is that some gold and silver coins were left in the cash-box found in the refuse tip, and also that a valuable diamond necklace, which was in the safe, had been handled and replaced in the safe. Another remarkable incident in connection the robbery is the fact that about three quarters of a bottle of brandy, kept in the dining room, had been drunk by the person or persons who had entered the house.

The cellar grate, which is the only spot through which it is surmised that entrance can have been effected, is ordinarily securely fastened. On the morning of the discovery of the robbery there were no indications of this grate having been forced open. The burglary has been reported to the police, who are conducting inquiries.

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