

Ravensknowle Hall

For almost 140 years, several parcels of land in Dalton have made up a small estate which is now the Ravensknowle Park and recreation grounds of Kirklees. Set in the middle of this estate stands Ravensknowle Hall, a mansion built about 1860 by John Beaumont a woollen manufacturer and which has been, since, 1919 the home of the Tolson Memorial Museum.

Among the middle class, family ties were important in both business and social life and from 1827 to 1919, the estate (apart from one brief period), remained within the same family connection, passing from uncle to nephew, from father to daughter and from cousin to cousin. However, the casualties and the social disruption caused by the First World War gave a terrible shock to middle class life and in 1919 Legh Tolson made a gift of the hall and part of the grounds to what was then called Huddersfield Corporation as a memorial to his nephews Robert Huntriss Tolson and James Martin Tolson, both killed during the fighting.

John Beaumont of Dalton J.P-1808-1889

Until the middle of the last century, Ravensknowle was farmland on the edges of Dalton in the parish of Kirkheaton, and a handful of cottages and homesteads stood along the occupation road which has since become Ravensknowle Road. The original Ravensknowle was a farmhouse on the southeast side of this road near the junction with Crest Avenue.

In 1832, part of the Ravensknowle estate including the area of the present public grounds and farmhouse, were bought by a Huddersfield banker called Thomas Wilson, following a successful expansion of his business. Wilson may have had ideas of building a mansion there himself for the Lodge of the Ravensknowle Road entrance to the park was built by him. However, he relinquished control and the land was bought by his nephew John Beaumont in 1850.

John Beaumont was a native of Honley but spent much of his life in Dalton where he had family and business connections. He belonged to the lesser local gentry, many of whom, like him, improved their fortunes by energetic investments in manufacturing and other commercial activities during the industrial boom of the early 19th century.

Ravensknowle Hall, erected between 1859 and 1862 reputedly at the cost of £20,000 was built with the profits of the fancy waistcoat manufacturing business, which Beaumont carried on in partnership with his brother in law, George Senior. He also made successful investments in Scottish railways and was one of the senior directors of the North British Railway Company, whose new bridge over the river Tay was opened in 1887 after the disaster, which overtook the first one.

The hall was designed by Richard Trees, a busy but unoriginal London architect and is very much a textbook piece of work. It does however show very well the plan of a Victorian mansion, with its separate stable block and the spacious interiors of the reception rooms in the main building which contrast with the pokiness and severity of the servants' quarters. The visitor can still see much of the arrangement of the rooms in the public parts of the museum.

John Beaumont evidently relished the social responsibilities which his wealth and position imposed for he sat on the Huddersfield magistrates' bench up to within 6 months of his death from "natural decay" at the age of 81 in 1889. He left the sum of £520,000.

Mrs Sarah Martha Grove Grady

Sarah Martha, John Beaumont's only child married a London barrister and does not seem to have lived at Ravensknowle after inheriting it from her father. However one significant monument to her early years here and to her interests, survives in the form of a commemorative inscribed pedestal (now in the patio next to the transport gallery). It is a memorial to Rosie aged 13 and Dickey aged 15, both of whom died in 1875. These are presumably dogs purchased by the Beaumonts' around the time when they were preparing to take up occupation at Ravensknowle and they point to an enduring concern for animal welfare on her part.

Widowed at an early age, Mrs Grove Grady lived at Ilkley for a time and at various addresses in the fashionable watering places and coastal towns of the southeast of England. Under the terms of her will in 1925, the residue of her estate, approaching £400,000, was given for the formation of an animal wildlife sanctuary. Although the will was set aside as invalid, a sum was devoted to part of the new Royal Veterinary College being built in the 1930s, called the Beaumont Hospital for Sick Animals. Other beneficiaries included vegetarian, anti-vivisectionists, and the London Association for the Prevention of Premature Burial, one of whose doctors was requested to examine her body to prevent the chance of accidental burial.

Legh Tolson

Never very interested in Ravensknowle, Mrs Grove Grady leased the house to Mr Robert Holiday of Turnbridge Mills but after his death in 1901, she decided to dispose of the property altogether and sold it for £6,000 to her cousin, Legh Tolson also the son of a Dalton Manufacturer. Legh Tolson altered the building at the southwest end, converting it into a separate dwelling house, which he named Ravenshill. Up to the First World War, Mr C.F Sykes occupied the hall itself; Mr G.F Rhodes lived at Ravenshill. Tolson, an antiquarian by inclination and historian of Kirkheaton, resumed residence during the war. It was the deaths of the two young sons of his brother Whiteley during the fighting, which inspired him to present the hall and part of the grounds to the Huddersfield Corporation, provided that they remained recreational areas. Having moved to the Lake District, Legh Tolson still retained a lasting interest in the museum until his death in 1932. The museum opened in 1922, the museum's original collections came from three main sources. The first was the museum development at Huddersfield Technical College by Dr Woodhead; secondly, Roman material excavated from Slack was provided by Leeds University; thirdly, a private museum of ornithology belonging to Seth L Mosley was incorporated into the new Corporation museum. Seth Mosley became the first Curator under Dr Woodhouse as Director. Historical items too large to go into the museum were placed in the park, although not according to any special order, the most striking being the east entrance to the old Cloth Hall, which stands in front of the museum.

(Text provided by Steven Hill)