

## **TOMBSTONE TALES**

### **One of a series of articles by Colin Clifford**

If my regular visits to Sunderland Cemetery I found if they had taken place some hundred and fifty years ago the scene would have been very different. Then there was only a very small private cemetery for the rich and famous known as Chesterstones Cemetery -by – the-Sea. Following the cholera epidemics which struck Sunderland in 1831 and again in 1849 the Town Elders decided better municipal burial facilities were needed and took over the cemetery purchasing an initial forty acres of farm land and thus Sunderland Cemetery was created. It was later expanded in the 1950s with land from Tom Clarks farm.

Following a recent letter in the Sunderland Echo about Leechmere Hall and seeing the headstone of its previous owner, I was reminded of my youth and time spent on and around the farm

I was very friendly with Tom junior and we spent many hours in the stack yard and around the duck pond. Many's the time I went home covered in "clarts" (a lovely word that!) from getting to near the edge and falling in.

When I was about twelve Tom senior asked me to go and help on the farm on a weekend as he was short of labour. This entailed milking cows (and cleaning them out) bottling milk (after cleaning the bottles by hand) and delivering it on a horse and cart around Grangetown. The pigs also had to be fed and "mucked out" all for the princely sum of ten shillings (50p) for the weekend.

There was a lighter side to this however. At regular intervals the constable from Ryhope police station came to check on the number of pigs on the farm owing to meat restrictions. We used to chase the piglets round their pens to make them difficult to count. He always managed to count one short; this one being raised illicitly in the stables for the "Store" butcher to slaughter when fully grown. The constable also never knew how many times he counted the same dead piglet which he duly recorded as still born!

At the top of the farm known as the backfield, behind the army camp, paper mill allotments and pumping house (recently demolished) was a narrow track in an area approximately where the entrance to the trading estate is now. This track led from the narrow rough road that was to become Leechmere Road when Hillview estate was built

The track known as Tom Halls Walk led towards Hollycarrside past a small lake on the left where we used to sail on old doors etc. On the right was Mordecais market garden and also on the left was the rear entry to the army camp. Further along the track on the left was a large white house known as Leechmere Hall. This had been the home of Tom Hall a former manager at Ryhope Colliery who died in 1930 and was buried in Sunderland Cemetery. After the death of his wife in 1939 it became a home for retired miners later to become derelict and was destroyed by fire in the 1950s. The walls to the entrance of Tom Halls walk still remain off Hewitt Avenue.

Ryhope Colliery opened in 1857 was originally owned by Lord Londonderry but later became the Ryhope Coal Company. The original manager was Joseph Routledge but Tom Hall was to follow him. At the height of production in 1930 it employed 2681 men and boys.

There is a plaque in St. Pauls Church to the memory of over 100 men and boys who died at the pit during its working life of 109 years. It finally closed in November 1966.

Tom Hall obtained his managers certificate in South Wales in 1889 and became manager of the South and West Pits in 1896 having earlier being under manager at Haswell Colliery. He later became Colliery Agent a position he held until 1930, a year before his death.

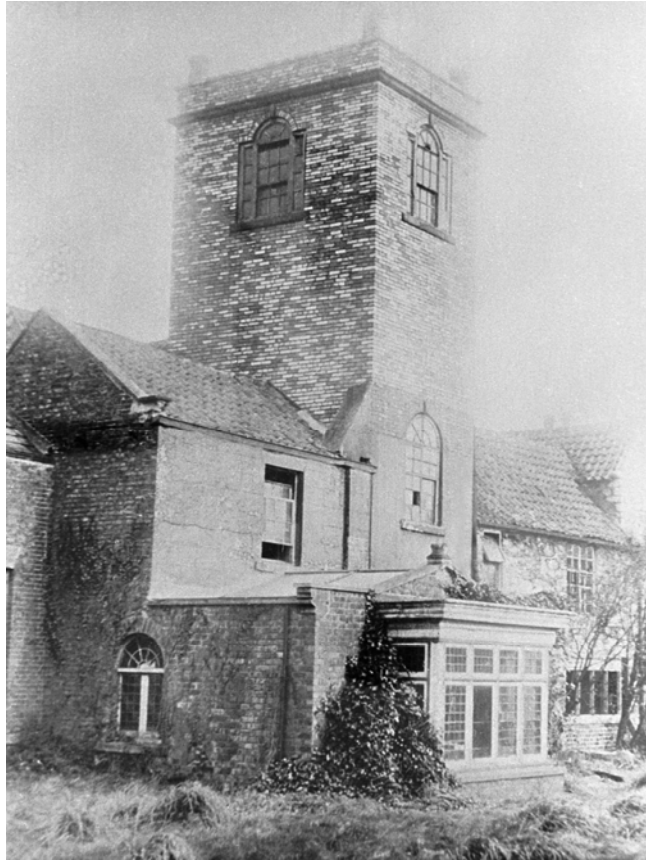


Ryhope Colliery

At this time the General Manager was Major Hugh Stanley Streatfield originally from Streatham, London who had qualified as a Mechanical Engineer in 1888. He was also Managing Director of Backworth and a number of other collieries. He lived for a time in Ryhope Hall on the Green.

Ryhope Hall had a chequered history long before this time. The picture below shows an odd shaped tower which was said to have been built by a previous owner following a dispute with her friend who lived in the Manor House (now Coquida Hall). The neighbour was said to have built a high wall between the properties and in a pique the hall owner was said to have built the tower to overlook the wall.

Major Streatfield is said to have used the tower as an observatory whilst living there.



Ryhope Hall

The Rear of Ryhope Hall shortly before its destruction. (Note the dilapidated state).

The Hall was built around 1675 and had a varied history both as a posting inn for stagecoaches with ample stabling and also a private residence. It was known as the Boars head and also “The Three Boars Inn” However opinions vary as to its true title and dating.

One theory is that a gentleman called John Robson who purchased the Hall in 1825 carved into the lintel above door the depiction of boars heads being the Armorial Bearing of the family.

However another theory is that it was known as the “Three Boars Head Inn” at a much earlier date. The actual truth is buried in time. I do remember however in my youth seeing the boars’ heads above the front door.

This theory coupled with data from a different research source provides a much more interesting story probably based on local folklore and factual data, the truth probably lying somewhere in between.

It is a known fact the inn was used for the rich gentry who came for the sea bathing at Ryhope. Local folklore believed that Dick Turpin stayed there on his way to York but this is only a partial truth. There was a highwayman but not Dick Turpin, the gentleman in question was called Robert Drummond who originally came from Scotland

Robert Drummond was born in 1680 of wealthy Scottish aristocracy but having got himself into trouble as a young man he was forced to travel from his home town of Perth and found himself in the East End of Sunderland. He set up a business locally selling knives, razors and other essential home items and quickly built up a thriving business with plenty of money to spend in the local hostelrys.

His favourite “watering hole” was on the edge of the Town Moor owned by a lady known as “Lady Lowther” and was a centre for all types of skulduggery and owing to the ravine that ran from the rear of the pub to the seas was popular with smugglers.

Drummond had a mistress who lived in Ryhope in the “Three Bears Head Inn” this was later to become the Ryhope Hall already mentioned, where he stabled a horse. However, for even when Drummond’s business started to decline, he always seemed to have plenty of money to spend in the local hostelrys drinking with his cronies.

At that time a number of burglaries were taking place around the area but of greater concern was the number of stagecoach hold ups by a masked man on horseback who roamed the Stockton Road.

The local lawman became suspicious when it was noted that Drummond left his lodgings late at night and returned each morning and a watch was kept. This coupled with the fact he was of limited means further raised his suspicions as to Drummond’s nocturnal activities.

The constabulary although unable to prove the highwayman was Drummond later caught him burgling a house near his lodgings. He was convicted and sent to the penal plantations of North America to serve a life sentence.

The resourceful Drummond however escaped and managed to find a passage back to England where he landed in London and again became a “gentleman of the road”. He teamed up with another villain Ferinado Shrimpton and Shrimptons cousin and together they became a feared team.

On one particular night at Hounslow Heath they shot a coachman in the head killing him when he refused their command to stop.

The constabulary quickly arrested the trio and Shrimptons cousin turned Kings Evidence linking the gang to a string of robberies and the Hounslow murder.

On 17 February 1730 Drummond and Shrimpton were hung on the gallows at Tyburn Heath neither of them showing signs of remorse nor appealing for clemency, accepting their fate for their crimes.

Shortly after this the attention paid by the Sunderland Constabulary to the Lady Lowthers pub resulted in an exodus of the rogues who inhabited it and the pub closed. It later became derelict and was destroyed in a storm.

Ryhope hall however continued with its chequered history and was donated to the Boys Club Association around 1935 By Sir Frank Nicholson of Vaux Brewery.

During the 1950s Fred Simm a local boxing promoter and a friend of my fathers, held professional contests in the grounds of the hall. It was at this time I frequently wandered the tower and the hall which was slowly becoming dilapidated. The grounds are now the site of the Cranston Place retired persons bungalows.

The Hall was finally destroyed by fire in the 1950s and a youth was found guilty of its arson.

So we have a simple tale of life in the recent and historic life in Ryhope revolving around a visit to Sunderland Cemetery and childhood memories many within the lifetime of older readers, mixed with a little mystery and maybe just a pinch of local fantasy.

I am indebted to the following for there assistance. Mr Bobby Hedley for the history of Sunderland Cemetery. Mr Dave Angus for the pictures. Mel Robson and his Ryhope archives and finally wearsideonline for permission to use the details of Robert Drummond. Finally I hold up my hands to admit that any errors are my own.

Colin Clifford March 2009