

The Roydens of Frankby

History of a famous Wirral family

Mike Royden

ROYDEN, a familiar name to many Wirral folk not least those of Frankby, where the tiny village is dominated by two halls and their contrasting surroundings. Many visitors to Royden Park and Frankby Hall must have pondered at their origins, how they came into public hands and what became of the families who once resided there.

Their histories are closely linked and begins with an ordinary working class family who, taking advantage of Liverpool's growth as a port at the beginnings of industrialisation at the turn of the eighteenth century, became successful in trade, enterprise and subsequently, public office.

The family's roots begin in Chester in the early 1700's. Mary Royden was left with a child of two when her husband Joseph, a bricklayer, died there in 1721. Joseph's father, Alexander, had died only two weeks earlier — possibly of the same illness, and Mary returned with her young son, John, to her family in Heswall. John grew up and became a carpenter and lived at Caldy House. He married twice and had nine children, his eldest being a son, Joseph, who was apprenticed to him to learn the carpenter's trade. In 1770 Joseph married Martha Hankinson of Chester at St Bridget's of West Kirby, the family church. (The tombstone of John, Joseph and Martha can still be seen adjacent to the footpath on the east side of the church). Joseph had five sons and the youngest, Thomas, carried on the tradition of apprenticeship to learn his father's trade. Evidence of father and son's work can be found in St Bridget's Churchwarden's accounts for 1790 —

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This was for the new seating plan (or 'table') for the parishioners, commissioned in 1789. Thomas was called in again for help in 1855, when the west gallery was under scrutiny, and was asked to make an estimate and plan for repair.

Thomas stayed in Frankby until his father retired, whereupon he made a decision which would change the fortune of his family.

Liverpool was a tempting place for tradesmen at the turn of the eighteenth century with the port developing at an astonishing rate; dreams of wealth and prosperity beckoned many to seek their



Frankby Hall

fortune. In 1808 Thomas moved to Liverpool and secured employment as a master carpenter with Charles Grayson, a prominent shipbuilding firm. There was a brief lull in the port's growth and subsequently, shipbuilding, during the period of his employment, mainly due to trade restrictions resulting from the wars with France and America, but by 1818 Thomas was confident enough to set up his own yard to capitalise on the consequent resurgence. The site was Baffin Street on the west side of Queens Dock and Thomas lived nearby in Harrington Street. The business grew steadily and despite a devastating fire in 1825, success continued while several other shipyards folded around him. 1825 also saw his marriage to Ann Dean, step-daughter of Thomas Bland of Bland, Chaloner Co, another established Liverpool shipbuilder.

Although his brothers and cousins had also come to live and work in Liverpool, Thomas' roots were still firmly in Frankby, and as it was fashionable in his day for entrepreneurs of his standing to reside (and of course, invest) in an impressive family seat, where better to build it but on the unspoilt land tenanted by his family and farming relatives. The land had been purchased by his father Joseph in 1801 from Gwynn Lloyd Wardle and was formerly of the Rathbone Estate. On this land Frankby Hall was erected in 1847, a sandstone structure, turreted and castle-like in appearance and of unique design of which it is hard to be of indifferent opinion.

Thomas and Ann had six children (of which two died in infancy); daughter Martha married John Hays Wilson of Lee Hall, Gateacre, Head of Liverpool Water Office and a local politician (his monument — the 'Dovecot' — stands at Gateacre village



Hill Bark,
Royden Park

crossroads), daughter Ann Dean remained unmarried and lived at Forton Hey adjacent to Frankby Hall. His two sons, Thomas Bland and Joseph, were taken into partnership into the now 'Thomas Royden and Sons'. In 1863, Thomas Bland, not wanting to be left behind in the revolutionary changes taking place in the industry, struck a deal to build the yard's first iron ships. Thomas Snr, unable to come to terms with the prospect of a new era, warned that he would leave the yard if the offer was accepted. It was, and Thomas never returned. He died at Frankby Hall in 1868.

Thomas Bland was encouraged to enter politics, following in his father's footsteps, who was a Town Councillor and member of the Dock Committee. He became Tory MP for Toxteth in 1873 and JP in 1874 and Lord Mayor of Liverpool 1878-79.

The shipyard was eventually closed down in 1893 as the partnership's interests turn to ship owning which continued as a family concern until the 1950's.

Sir Thomas Bland Royden died in 1917 and was succeeded by his son Thomas, a director of Cunard, Midland Bank and Shell Transport and a High Sheriff. He was awarded the Companion of Honour in 1919 and the Barony of Frankby in 1944 which became extinct when he died in 1950 having no children. He was succeeded by his brother Sir Ernest Bland Royden, 3rd Baronet, High Sheriff of Anglesey. Sir Ernest married Rachel, daughter of Jerome Smith of Hillbark in 1901 and lived at Bidston Court in Noctorum, Birkenhead, a black and white, half timbered, mock Elizabethan mansion, heavily influenced by Little Moreton Hall in design and erected by Robert Hudson, the soap manufacturer, in 1891. The site did not afford good views from the house once Birkenhead was developed, and when Hillbark came into the possession of Lady Royden on the death of her mother it was decided to move there. They also decided to take the house with them. Every brick and every piece of wood was numbered and the complete house was dismantled, roaded to Hillbark and re-

erected on its present site in Royden Park (the original Hillbark having been demolished to make way). The operation took two years to complete. A visit to the house and its surroundings will dispel any doubts of Lord Royden's sanity as its site is surely unrivalled by any other in Wirral.

When Sir Thomas, 2nd Baronet left Frankby in the mid 1930's to retire in Hampshire, his wife's home, Frankby Hall and land was sold to Wallasey Corporation and the cemetery for which it was intended was completed in 1940, the Hall becoming a chapel.

Sir Ernest Bland Royden died in 1960; his son and heir John Ledward having a business in London and a home in Battle, Sussex and no further interests in Frankby, sold Hillbark and land to Hoylake UDC who reopened the house as a home for the elderly and the grounds as a public park.

Forton Hey saw the passing of the last remaining member of Thomas Royden's illustrious family in Wirral when Mary Royden, sister of Sir Ernest died in 1960. She was buried in the family vault at Frankby Church, another building owing its origins to the family.

Thomas' family were typical of the entrepreneurs in the time of industrial revolution, local tradesmen made good elevated to new social standing, investment in stately home and estate, the conference of a baronetcy and the isolation of the immediate family from the rest of the lower class relations. Indeed such contrasts as between Sir Ernest Bland Royden and his 3rd cousin, John Royden, both men great-grandsons of John the Carpenter. Sir Ernest died at Hillbark, John in the workhouse.