

History

The Rowntree birthplace in York – rediscovered

Bridget Morris, executive secretary of The Rowntree Society, goes up some stairs and back in time...

Deborah Cadbury's recent book, *Chocolate Wars*, mentions the shop owned by Joseph Rowntree Senior, 'Grocer and Tea Dealer'. It became a convergence point for the junior members of three confectionery dynasties – Frys of Bristol, Cadburys of Birmingham and Rowntrees of York. The Rowntree home in 28 Pavement, in the heart of the city, was where George Cadbury served an apprenticeship, and other eminent Quakers, including John Bright, met to talk over the politics and business of the day.

All the Rowntree children were born in the premises – including John Stephenson, author of some influential works on the state of Quakerism, Joseph Junior, confectionery manufacturer and philanthropist, and Henry Isaac, who founded the chocolate empire before his untimely death in 1883.

In a touching letter written by Joseph Rowntree Junior in 1867 to his little four-year-old daughter Lilly (who sadly died in the following year), he describes life in the Pavement shop, and gives a rare glimpse of a more intimate side of an otherwise very private family.

He remembers 'the cheerful Sunday evenings in winter when we gathered round the table or sat by the fire in the old drawing-room in Pavement, and repeated the hymns we had learned.

'I think that a stranger, coming into the family, would probably have been struck with the freedom which we boys enjoyed in many ways, along with the prompt and implicit obedience that was expected from us. We had the reputation of being very wild children. My brother John swung down the banisters in a way that excited the terror of his nurses. At another time he burnt off his eyebrows when playing with some gas, which he had collected in a large jar.

'...We were accustomed to hear the most important questions of the day discussed with interest and intelligence... This was the time, too, of the rapid extension of the railway system, and of the introduction of the electric telegraph; and these subjects naturally came under review. Whoever the

company might be, the conversation never sank into gossip, and on no occasion do I remember a word being said injurious to the character of others.'

Today the Pavement shop has become the premises of a well-known pizza restaurant chain, and the shop frontage looks much like any other in a typical high street. Externally, the building has all the appearance of Victorian red-brick drabness.

So, when I paid a visit to the restaurant and was kindly invited to look upstairs, it was a shock to discover that the empty upper floors inside the building are little changed since their Rowntree days. It felt like entering a time warp. I wondered whether the wrought-iron banister of the central hallway was the very same one that the Rowntree boys had swung so dangerously upon. On the second floor it was possible to imagine the spacious shop managers' flats after the family had moved out. And the fourteen or so rooms on the third floor, with small fires and washing facilities, all had the impression of being purpose-built for live-in apprentices.

Now a question has emerged: the original Georgian building as shown in early pictures has a different floor level from the present Victorian building. The whole building was clearly taken down at some point and rebuilt. Why? When? And which Rowntree was responsible? The detective hunt is now on to trace the full history of this historic building – the birthplace of the Rowntree story in York.

To build up a picture of this historic building the Rowntree Society is collecting memories of the building right down to the present day.

If you would like to know more, please contact info@rowntreesociety.org.uk or The Rowntree Society, Tanner's Yard, Huntington Road, York YO 32 9PX. For more information about the Rowntree Society see www.rowntreesociety.org.uk