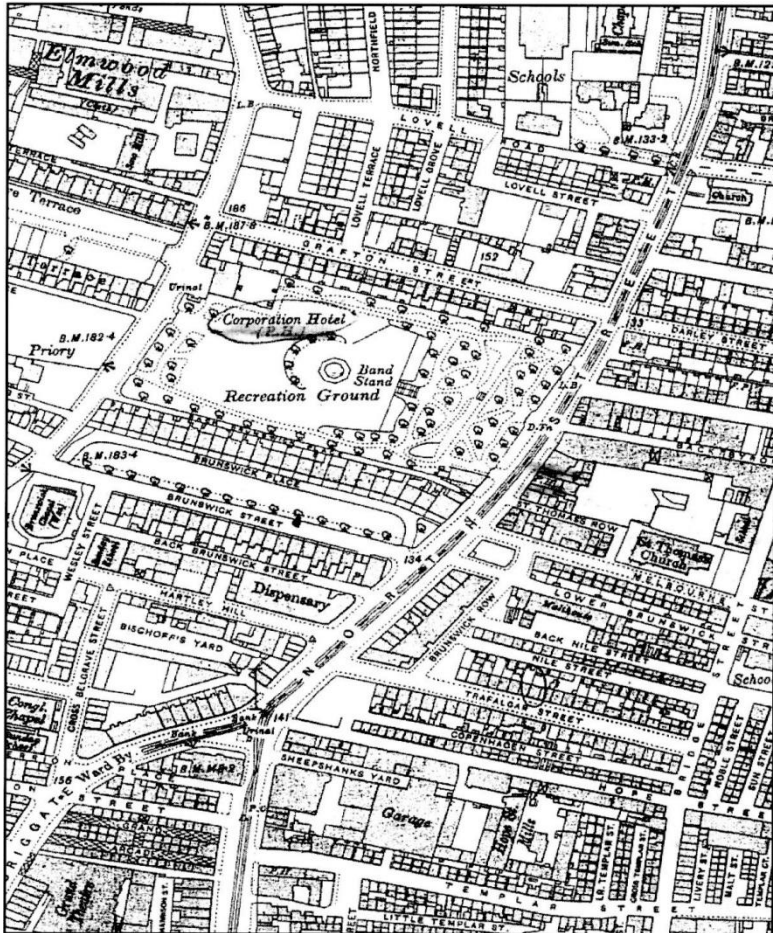


## **WILLIAM PENROSE-GREEN:** **Alderman, Industrialist and Sportsman.** © By Dr Raymond Dalton.



The occasional passer-by at the junction of Springwood Road and Oakwood Lane may notice the gateposts of the grounds of "Towerhurst"; and if a long time resident of Oakwood, may recollect the large and impressive detached house of that name demolished in the late 1960's. Now almost forgotten, its' first owner, William Penrose-Green, was one of the most prominent of the small group of wealthy business men who dominated Oakwood a century ago.

Into the commercial world of the mid-nineteenth century Leeds, where the increasing diversity of the industrial basis of the city was turning skilled artisans into industrialists, Penrose- Green was born in 1859, being then named William Penrose. His father and namesake was described in White's 1853 Directory of Leeds as "plumber, glazier, coppersmith, gas, and steam apparatus" manufacturer, resident in the industrial suburb of Mabgate. ① The early death of William Penrose, senior, and his widow's re-marriage to Thomas Green, the proprietor of the Smithfield Ironworks in North Street, was to link the future of young William Penrose with that of the firm established by his stepfather.

Thomas Green had emigrated to Leeds from Carlton-on-Trent in 1835 and commenced business as a wire manufacturer, first in premises in the Lower Headrow, and after 1839 in North Street. The firm he established flourished through meeting an increasingly diversified demand for the products of its iron foundry. Starting with the production of wire, the firm extended its range to include bells, lawn mowers, steam locomotives, road rollers, food preparing machinery, garden rollers, and steam trams. The growth of the firm coincided With the rapid adaption of the technology of cloth shearing to the mowing of garden lawns. In 1815, John Lewis had patented an improved shearing frame for the finishing of woollen cloth. After his own firm was acquired by Ferrabee and Budding, a series of modifications led to their patenting by 1830, a machine

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that cut grass close, the prototype of the lawn mower. Thomas Green's firm was to enter into competition by the 1850s with both Ferrabee and Buddings and Ransome, Green and Shanks the latter firm famous for it's enlarged lawn mowers used at Kew gardens and Regents Park.

By the time the firm was turned into a limited company in 1879, it had, besides its main factory in North Street, premises in London and Dublin, with a world reputation as a manufacturer of lawn mowers: **"Think of Mowers, Think of Green's"** being the firm's motto. ❷ By then, Thomas Green was wealthy enough to acquire a large detached house on Asket Hill near Elmete Lane, having previously resided in Moortown and Harrogate. ❸

Thomas Green initially ran the firm with the help of his son Willoughby, whose relatively early death led to the rise of William Penrose-Green within the business.

Educated at Harrogate College, he began his business career as an apprentice at his stepfather's Smithfield Ironworks in North Street; and steadily advanced his position and influence until he became Chairman of the Board of Guardians in 1897. His marriage to Martha, daughter of Willoughby Green and granddaughter of Thomas, led him to take the additional name of Green, forging a second link with his stepfather. ❹

The Penrose-Greens were to reside for the rest of their lives in the Oakwood district, firstly at the villa of "Rosenheim" on Ladywood Road (now a children's nursery) and from the late 1890's at "Towerhurst". As one of the small group of wealthy residents, William Penrose-Green served their interests in his role as a member of Roundhay District Council, a body that existed largely to provide the necessary services for the villas and large estates and their wealthy owners ❺



During much of the existence of the Roundhay District Council which lasted from 1889 until 1912, Penrose-Green was to dominate its activities with his neighbour Arthur Greenhow Lupton of Springwood, one of the well-known family of woollen merchants and manufacturers. Along with Lupton, William Penrose-Green was to use his business expertise in promoting the establishment of the Roundhay and District Electric Lighting Company Ltd. which started operation in 1902, and was to serve as one of its directors up to its final acquisition by Leeds City Council in 1914. As long as possible Penrose-Green and his neighbours attempted to preserve the existence of the District Council as an alternative to incorporation into the City of Leeds, with the prospect of paying the higher rates. (They had not paid before).

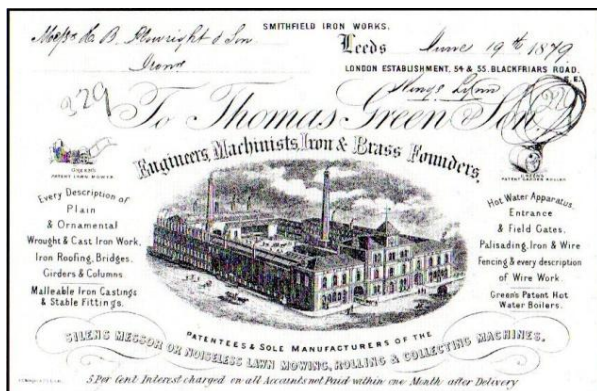
Besides serving on the District Council he also served his own church of St. John as churchwarden, enhancing his standing as a local benefactor and a pillar of society.

In character was his donation in 1935 of a field adjacent to his grounds for the use of his church (St. Johns) on Oakwood Lane. This continued to be used as a sports ground until the outbreak of the war. To day it is used by the Air Training and Army Cadets as their local headquarters. He was a staunch supporter of the development of the Territorials as a citizen's army, he took part in 1908 in the transport of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion of Leeds Rifles in motor cars to Scarborough, on large scale military manoeuvres. He was one of the earliest members of the Yorkshire Automobile Club. ⑥

Besides his wealth and business acumen, it was Penrose-Green reputation as a keen sportsman that was to distinguish him in Oakwood and Roundhay districts. An enthusiastic participant in local sporting activities, having played with the Roundhay and North Leeds Cricket Clubs he was to carry this interest into golfing, motoring and marksmanship. In the 1890's he played a major part in the establishment of the Leeds Golf Club and was responsible for much of its earliest development. Prior to the formal establishment of Leeds Golf Club in 1896, there had been some golf played at a few holes on Soldiers Field, and another small

band of players had a short course opposite St. John's Church on Wetherby Road. Penrose-Green took a major role in locating the infant club in the grounds of Cobble Hall providing its first makeshift club house, and after its destruction by fire in 1902 contributing to its replacement by a stone building. His aptitude as a councillor and persuader was shown in his role in bringing about the amalgamation of the clubs located on Soldiers Field and Wetherby Road, in 1900; and in 1902 and subsequent years he was elected Club President. At the same time as the club was being established he financed the creation of a Leeds Challenge Cup for professional golfers, and in 1912 a Cup for amateur golfers. He was reputed to play a good game and twice won the Forbes Cup, one of the Club's trophies.

In 1909 Penrose-Green was invited by the city's Conservative Party to become Lord Mayor of Leeds for the period November 1909 to November 1910. Previously he had been little known in public life except for his membership of the Leeds Board of Guardians and service as a West Riding Justice of the Peace. He had however, taken an active part in politics being a staunch Conservative and advocate of higher tariffs to protect British industry. At the time of his call to the Lord Mayoral office he held the important positions of President of Central Leeds Conservative Association and he was also Chairman of the Central Ward Conservative Association.



Since 1902, the choice of Lord Mayor had been shared between the Conservative and Liberal Parties, and in November 1909 fell due to the Conservatives. The Conservatives who dominated the City Council were soon to arrange for Penrose-Green's elevation to the aldermanic bench in 1910 for a six year term. He was

subsequently to be twice re-elected an alderman of the city, being a member of the senior branch of the City Council. His period as Lord Mayor was considered a successful one, a genial personality and an aptitude for conciliation assisted him in his role as Chairman of the City Council's monthly meetings. His social functions as Lord Mayor were considered to be well supported by his wife Martha, who had long been a popular hostess, and shared her husband's zeal for motoring and was often seen driving her own car. In addition, she was a clever botanist, and designer of what a local newspaper described as "a beautiful garden at Towerhurst". Following on from her role as a society hostess was her support for such local charities as the prestigious Leeds Ladies Association for Friendless Girls.

Unlike some of his predecessors, Penrose-Green was well travelled and had visited most countries in Europe as well as Egypt and the United States. During his year in office occurred the death of Edward VII and the proclamation of his successor George V. ⑦

Also in 1910, a General Election took place, and a major constitutional conflict ensued between the Liberal dominated House of Commons and the mainly Conservative House of Lords. Reflecting the impact of the social reforms of the ruling Liberal government, Penrose-Green in his Lord Mayor capacity attended the opening of the Leeds Labour Exchange at Meadow Lane on 1 st February 1910, and was given a claimants card as a souvenir by the Exchange's manager.

On the expiry of his Lord Mayoralty, Penrose-Green was appointed Chairman of the City Council's Gas Committee, with oversight of the municipal supply of gas - still the main source of light and heating. His position as an employer of some 600-700 men in his firm's two factories may well have recommended him to the City Corporation, eager to import business-like methods into the delivery of its services. In 1913-14 he deputised for Sir Edward Brotherton, the chemical magnate and Lord Mayor for that year, whose residence at "Roundhay Hall" was only a relative stone's throw from "Towerhurst". A businessman rather than a municipal politician, he took a relatively back seat role in the city's politics.

Having no pretence of being an eloquent speaker, he said what he had to say in the fewest possible words. During the 1913-14 strike of Leeds Corporation workers, in which the gas workers took a prominent part, Penrose-Green took a passive role in the Corporation's defeat of the strike. Although chairing the Gas Committee that oversaw one of the city's oldest and largest utility, he was not appointed to the Special Committee set up by the Conservative-Liberal Council majority to coordinate measures to defeat the strike. More interested in philanthropic activities, he became Chairman of the Leeds Public Dispensary in 1911. His social standing as a prominent industrialist in a major industrial and commercial city seemed to be confirmed with the presentation of his daughter Vera as a debutante in 1911, to the King and Queen at Buckingham Palace. During The First World War, Penrose-Green was chosen to sit on the military tribunals set up in 1916 after the introduction of conscription. Sitting on a tribunal with representatives drawn from the Liberal and Labour parties, he had the sensitive task of deciding who were exempt from the military service because of their usefulness as war workers or because of their religious beliefs. In the circumstances many of the decisions were of life and death. ⑧

Re-elected twice as a city alderman, he seemed to become a permanent fixture on the City Council as long as it remained Conservative-controlled. But in 1923, all this was to end abruptly when a court action for penalties was brought under a Municipal Corporation Act of 1882. James Lapish, a veteran leader of the Independent interest in the city, cited Alderman Albert Braithwaite and Penrose-Green as having disqualified themselves from being members of the City Council by reason of their having a share or interest in a contract with it. The matter arose from the business activities of Albert Braithwaite, who had become the largest quarry owner in the district. An old friend and neighbour of Penrose-Green, living in "Springwood" off Oakwood Lane, he joined with him in acquiring control of B. Whitaker & Son Ltd, forming a syndicate which controlled several Leeds Brickyards. Through control of Leeds Sand and Gravel Company Ltd, B. Whitaker & Son, and

Direct Coal and Lime Company, they had benefited from contracts with the City Council for the delivery of gravel, sand and coal. Braithwaite denied there was anything improper, arguing that he had not used his influence as an alderman to obtain the contracts which were accepted in open tender. He maintained that until the action was brought against him and Penrose-Green he was under the impression it was quite legal to be a director or managing director of a company having contracts with the City Council. Penrose-Green through his directorships on these companies was also involved as a defendant in the court action brought against Braithwaite. ⑨

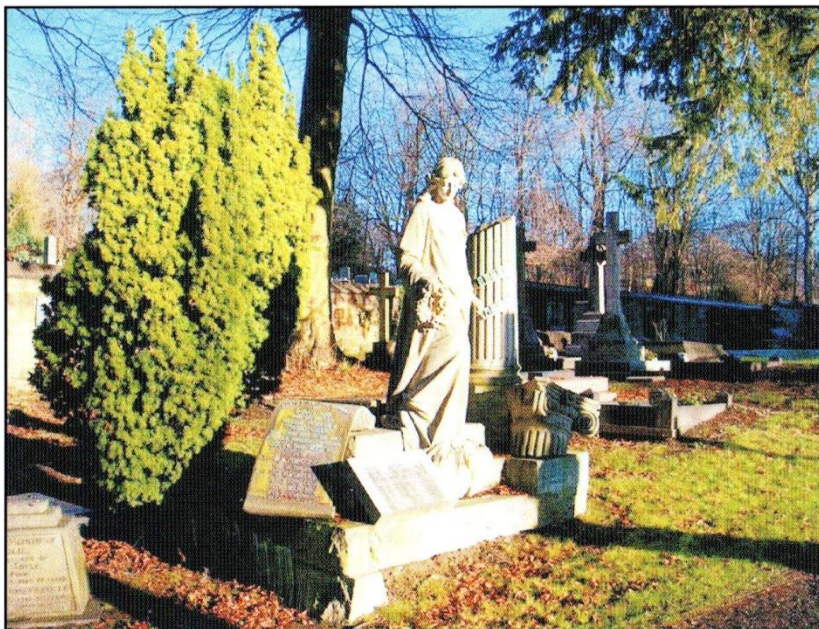
After a year of litigation and appeals to the High Court, it was found by the Court that, under the terms of the 1882 Act, membership of the City Council was incompatible with having any benefit from any contracts made with it. On the judgment being made both aldermen resigned from the City Council in September 1924, protesting their good faith in their dealings with the City Council. The absence of penalties exacted in judgment indicated that the court action was more to establish a principle rather than to recover any money received from the contracts with the City Council. ⑩

This marked the end of Penrose-Green's public career. He lived on to November 1941 aged 82 years, survived by his widow who died in 1949. The firm with which he had so long been associated continued under various managements until 1975, when Smithfield Ironworks was finally closed. The frontage with the clock can still be seen on North Street and is commemorated with a Civic Trust Blue Plaque. After Mrs Penrose-Green's death in 1949 "Towerhurst" passed into the hands of the Ministry of Defence, being used by the Territorials until the 1960's when it fell into dereliction and was finally demolished. Now the Whitechapel Estate stands largely on its site and grounds.



In the St. John's churchyard there is a very eye catching memorial in the form of two broken pillars and an "angel" commemorating Penrose-Green, his mother, wife, and daughter Vera Penrose-May (who lived until 1977) along with his infant son Leonard (who died in 1887 aged three months). It carries the inscription:

Life's work well done; Life's race well run;  
Life's crown well worn - now cometh rest.



### ***Acknowledgements.***

- ① Leeds Directory 1839 Charltons Directory of 1847 and White's Leeds and the Clothing Districts of Yorkshire 1853.
- ② Thomas Green & Son Ltd. The firm and its locomotives in Locomotive Society Journal Vol. 30 No 345. pp.39 -43.
- ③ Mc Corquodales Leeds Directory of 1875 and the Leeds Post Office Directory of 1882
- ④ Yorkshire Evening Post, 16 September 1909.
- ⑤ Morrison's Leeds Year Books 1903- 1912.
- ⑥ Yorkshire Post 22/11/1941, 29/11/1941, and 5/12/1941.
- ⑦ Ibid 18/11/1909
- ⑧ Leeds Mercury 2/2/1910.
- ⑨ Yorkshire Post 3/9/1924.
- ⑩ Ibid 4/9/1924. -  
Our Love affair with the lawn. By Tom Fort.