

A Very Public Row between Colonel Campbell and Thomas Nicholson. Important Historical Information in the *Leeds Mercury* of 1811.

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As an eager researcher of many years for anything about Thomas and Elizabeth Nicholson, the founders of Roundhay Park, I was very pleased recently to find accounts and letters in the *Leeds Mercury* which provided me with some unique personal information about Thomas Nicholson, and also about the Park in 1811. At last here was some 'flesh on the bones' as family historians call it, for Thomas. There was also more about his wife Elizabeth to add to the relative abundance of personal information on her that shows her to have been a remarkable strong woman, adding to the feeling I have that she may have been at least an equal partner in the business affairs of this very successful couple.

In 1811, the Nicholsons were living partly in London where Thomas's main business was conducted, and at Roundhay, where he was producing a picturesque estate for his retirement. In September and October of that year, the *Leeds Mercury* reported on events which caused a row between Thomas Nicholson and a neighbour, Colonel Campbell, who lived at Shadwell.

Firstly, the Nicholson's gamekeeper caught the Colonel's eldest son passing through the Park with a loaded gun. Believing the young man was intent on poaching, he was promptly marched before Mr Nicholson, from whom he apparently received a mild rebuke and was sent on his way.

Colonel Campbell, was ignorant of this until a few days later when his son was picked up for the second time. He had a bag of nuts which the gamekeeper thought had been gathered on Mr Nicholson's property. The boy denied this. He said he was merely returning home using a short cut across Mr Nicholson's

land with his brother and two maids. His brother had escaped the gamekeeper but the rest of the party was taken before Mr and Mrs Nicholson who were in the grounds nearby, where Mr Nicholson was fishing.

The Nicholsons were Quakers. They had no children of their own but Thomas's niece, Hannah Nicholson, who was a little older than Colonel Campbell's eldest son, lived with them. Mrs Nicholson remonstrated forcefully with the Colonel's son before letting them go.

The following day Colonel Campbell sent a note of complaint to Mr Nicholson and immediately received a curt reply from him stating merely that what had happened the previous evening was between Mrs Nicholson and the Colonel's son who had been getting nuts on his premises, which he did not permit. However, the Colonel was not satisfied with this explanation and asked for a meeting with Mr Nicholson face to face. Indeed he went much further. He wanted witnesses to be present for both sides so that 'there may not happen any misinterpretation of what may pass.'

By now, Thomas could see that the Colonel meant business and he moved quickly to defuse the situation. He met the Colonel in town the following afternoon and it seems he attempted some sort of apology but the Colonel still insisted on the meeting he had asked for, and it took place a few days later 'in Roundhay'. A couple of army friends were there as witnesses for the Colonel, and Colonel Dixon and Mr. Gott were present for Mr Nicholson.

Thomas must have thought this was the end of the matter. We can imagine his disappointment and how Mrs Nicholson would have felt when the next edition of the *Leeds Mercury* printed an account, which Thomas attributed to Colonel Campbell, of what was supposed to have happened when they had met in town.

The Leeds Mercury reported

Mr. Nicholson introduced himself to Colonel Campbell ... and expressed his concern at the indignity offered to his son, which he imputed to the improper conduct of his gamekeeper, and the irritability and weakness of female nerves, which frequently harried ladies beyond the line of propriety without calmly considering the consequences to which such conduct exposed their husbands.

Possibly under pressure from his wife, Thomas recorded his version of the events in which the Colonel's son had been caught trespassing, in the next edition of the *Leeds Mercury*, the following Saturday. The following transcription of this has been slightly edited in the formatting...

On Tuesday evening, the 27th ult. Mr. Nicholson's gamekeeper brought up to the house a boy who had been found trespassing in Mr. Nicholson's wood with a loaded gun. He said he was Colonel Campbell's son, and had been to Chapeltown to fetch his father's gun. Mr. Nicholson desired him not to trespass again, when he promised he would not.

On the Thursday evening following, whilst Mrs. Nicholson was walking in a sunk fence within the grounds, the gamekeeper came up with a boy and two women, whom he had found on Mr. Nicholson's premises, with nuts in a pillowcase, or something like it, which he held in his hand. They proved to be Colonel Campbell's son, and two of his maid servants. Mr. Nicholson was fishing on the opposite side of a pond, and was not induced from anything he heard to come forward.

Mr. Nicholson believes he called out "Who have you got there?" On being informed, he replied, "Send them about their business, and let them take care that they do not come any more".

Mrs. Nicholson admonished the boy ... telling him how ungentle it was to come again, after promising only two nights before, that he would not, - adding that he should at all times consider his word as his bond, and if he was seen there again, he would put Mr. Nicholson under the disagreeable necessity of informing his father.

If Mrs. Nicholson appears warm in expressing the above, it was called forth by his persisting in a right of road, which she informed him was stopped by act of parliament [N.B. certain public rights of way in the area had indeed been rescinded a few years earlier with the building of the turnpike road from Sheepscar to Roundhay]. Part of the nuts were restored on their going away.

Mrs. Nicholson said, "Now remember you are put upon your honour not to come again".

When the game-keeper found the boy, he had secreted himself in the wood. The girls were then gathering nuts. Mrs. Nicholson was on the one side of the fence, and they on the other during the whole of the conversation.

What law could justify, or what motives could induce Colonel Campbell to publish his own view of this affair, are best known to himself.

So far from Mr. Nicholson's admitting that Mrs. Nicholson's warmth led her beyond the bounds of propriety, he positively denied it at the meeting, where it was also mutually agreed that the papers relative to the affair should be destroyed, and the whole buried in oblivion, for the truth of which as well as correctness of this statement, Mr. Nicholson appeals to the four gentlemen, to whom this matter was submitted, some of them are now unfortunately from home, or it would probably have rendered it unnecessary for him to have intruded upon the candour of the public.

Colonel Campbell now believed that this publication gave him leave to publish his version of events and he gave a very detailed account in the next edition of the *Leeds Mercury*.

It is interesting that Campbell mentions the castle in the Park, which until now was considered to have been built about ten years later. Below the castle he talks of the pond where Mr. Nicholson was fishing. This and an even smaller pond between the Upper Lake and the Waterloo Lake can be seen in Joshua Thorp's map of Roundhay of 1819-1821 and in Jonathan Taylor's map of Roundhay of 1825 (for the latter map, a section is shown in Oak Leaves, Part 9, Autumn 2009, page 17). All trace of the larger of these two ponds disappeared before the Ordnance Survey map of 1847 but the stone surrounds of a small pond which may have been the upstream of these, can still be seen today in the Ravine (see picture in Oak Leaves, Part 9, Autumn 2009, page 18).

Almost a month later, the *Leeds Mercury* published a letter from Colonel Campbell's army friends who represented him at the meeting when the events were fully discussed. They wished to put Colonel Campbell "in that superiority of position in the transaction, to which he was entitled by the previous award of the arbitrating parties" and so far as Mr Nicholson's appeal to them was concerned to back up his version of events, they could not "yield their concurrence in several points therein asserted".

No further letters or references appeared in the *Leeds Mercury* about these events. The lack of any published response from Thomas's arbitrators, Colonel Dixon and Mr. Gott, is especially disappointing.

There was an important sequel to all this. The *Leeds Mercury* for the 2nd November 1811, shows the following advertisement...

MR NICHOLSON, having suffered great Inconvenience in Consequence of his Wish to oblige; he now feels himself under the Necessity of giving this Public Caution to ALL Persons, not to enter his Fields, Woods, Plantations, or

Walks, without Leave, in order to prevent the obligation of Prosecuting.

In the same column immediately below, there is also an advertisement signed by his neighbours, who called themselves 'PROPRIETORS of LAND in the TOWNSHIP of ROUNDHAY'. It ended

ANY Person or Persons trespassing upon said Grounds in future, will be prosecuted as the Law directs.

The land owners of Roundhay had closed ranks in excluding the general public from their property.

This concerted action may have been based on the belief that the Act allowing the turnpike road from Sheepscar to Roundhay to be built, gave them the right to close public footpaths through their lands.

It is interesting to learn from the newspaper accounts, that Mrs. Nicholson was sufficiently well - informed (rightly or wrongly) to believe that the public rights of way through the Nicholson lands in Roundhay had been suspended. The public rights of way through the Park became an important issue in this very public dispute with Colonel Campbell.