

Robert Metcalfe (b. 1804, d. 1887)

Elizabeth Barker

Robert Metcalfe was baptised on 7 August 1804 in the parish of Topcliffe by Thirsk. The parish records show that his father was also named Robert Metcalfe, a labourer, and his mother was Rachael Clarke (1).

The family home was in the village of Rainton, in the township of Rainton with Newby, which is close to the estate of Newby Park, owned by the Robinson family, the Lords Grantham, and later the Earls de Grey (2).

Robert never actually married, but the Topcliffe by Thirsk parish records reveal that he nearly did marry in the year 1834. There is an entry in the register of an intended marriage between Robert Metcalfe and Jane Fenwick, whose family also lived in Rainton. However, the entry is crossed out, which suggests that the marriage did not take place (3).

There is no trace of Robert in Rainton in the census of 1841. However, the 1851 census for Rainton shows that Robert was living there, and that he describes himself as unmarried, aged 46, and gives his occupation as a master gardener (4). It is possible that by then he may have been working at Newby Park, as the entrance to the park and mansion house is only about half a mile away from the village. The OS map for 1853 shows that a road runs eastwards from the village to a crossroads, and the entrance to the park is at this point. There is a lodge, and behind it is a large walled kitchen garden (5).

If he was working at Newby Park by 1851, his employer would have been George Hudson, the "Railway King". His biographer Robert Beaumont notes that by the 1840s George Hudson had become "a very rich man indeed"(6). He not only purchased the Newby Park estate in 1845(7), but in 1844 he had also bought a large tract of land in Baldersby for £100,000 from the Duke of Devonshire (8). He made Newby Park his permanent Yorkshire home in 1847(9). Robert Beaumont also states that George Hudson frequently entertained at home on a lavish scale, which would create the need for a substantial and well stocked kitchen garden (10).

Unfortunately for George Hudson, the extent of his rather dubious business transactions began to come to light in 1849, and he had to sell Newby Park in 1854 in order to pay off debts (11). The estate was sold to Viscount Downe for £190,000 (12).

The 1861 census for Rainton shows Robert Metcalfe as unmarried, aged 56, and for his occupation he states he is a gardener and teacher of music (13). This seems to suggest that he may not have been fully employed as a gardener by then and had to find other ways of earning money. The Viscount Downe who had purchased Newby Park in 1854 died in 1857, and was succeeded by his son, a child of 13(14). As a result, the mansion house may have only been occupied for brief periods at this time, so the need for a large kitchen garden would have been greatly reduced.

The 1871 census reveals that Robert is still living in Rainton. He is aged 66, and gives his occupation as a jobbing gardener (15). It seems likely that he remained in Rainton until he was admitted to the Ripon Workhouse on 7 December 1876(16). He was still in the workhouse at the date of the census in 1881(17), and died in 1887, probably at the workhouse, aged 83(18).

References:

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