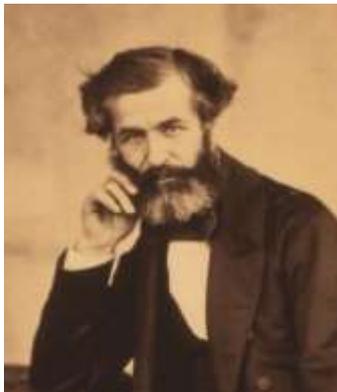


Florence Nightingale: The Chorley Connection

12 May 2020 has been more widely celebrated this year as Nurse's Day because of the current coronavirus pandemic., and rightly so! It was always going to have a higher profile this year because the date was originally chosen as it was the 200th birth day of Florence Nightingale who is universally recognised as the founder of modern nursing, along with Mary Seacole.

I have always had an interest in Florence, as, like me, she grew up in Derbyshire. Her parents' home was at Lea Hurst in the Derwent Valley, just a few miles from Cromford, where Richard Arkwright established his mill, and in doing so moved the Industrial Revolution into a higher gear. Arkwright, of course, has a Chorley connection having had an earlier mill at Birkacre which was destroyed by a riotous mob.

Florence never came to Chorley as far as is known, but knew a man who did. That man was Robert Rawlinson (1810-1898) one of the most important civil engineers of the nineteenth century. Robert was born in Bristol but his father Thomas was from Chorley which probably explains why in a busy and high profile life, Robert was prepared to devote much time to projects in Chorley and in Lancashire.



In 1848 Robert Rawlinson was appointed a government public health inspector under the Public Health Act and later became head of that department.

Between 1848 and 1857 Rawlinson and other inspectors wrote 398 reports on 296 localities identifying the sanitary and other issues which were damaging the health of the residents. These reports covered 23% of the population and two were in our area, Rawlinson on Chorley and Ranger, a fellow inspector, on Croston.

Rawlinson's enquiry in Chorley took place in 1852 and his report describes in great detail the public health issues in Chorley at that time. This report and a later one in 1857 highlighted the poor state of sewerage, drainage, water supply, burial grounds, lighting and lodging houses. It was as a direct result of Rawlinson's enquiry and report that the Chorley Improvement Act was passed, establishing the Chorley Improvement Commission which was the equivalent of our local council and took on the responsibility of addressing the sanitary deficiencies. A very strong case can be made for arguing that Rawlinson was the most important person in the history of nineteenth century Chorley as his work benefitted the health of the whole population. Not satisfied with reporting, Rawlinson was involved also in the implementation of the public works to improve the sanitation of the town. All of that is now below ground but two examples of his work can be seen locally. The first is the redundant chapel at Chorley cemetery, the design of which is credited to Rawlinson by Nicholas Pevsner. The second, and more impressive project was at Worthington Lakes where ingeniously he diverted the River Douglas under the reservoirs through a tunnel. This was a project for the Wigan Local Board.

Much more about Rawlinson's career and national status could be written. Local newspapers paid tribute to him on his death but we have no local plaques or street names, never mind a statue, to commemorate such an important man.

Rawlinson seems to have first worked with Florence Nightingale in 1855. The Crimean War had begun in 1853 which allied the United Kingdom, France and the Ottoman Empire against Russia. It was one of the first wars covered extensively by newspaper reporters and they highlighted sanitary issues in the camps and hospitals. The government, influenced also by Florence Nightingale, set up a Sanitary Commission to investigate. Robert Rawlinson was a member of the Commission in recognition of his dedicated and technically innovative work. The Times on 20 February 1855 reported that his duties

“will extend over the whole area of our operations.....and he will chiefly devote himself to the organisation of the labour which his brother commissioners will require in the hospitals and elsewhere , as well as to the supervision of everything connected with what may be called the lay or non-medical services of the commissioners.”

The Commission identified blocked sewers, choked cess pools and contaminated water supplies. Florence Nightingale said that the work of the Commission “saved the British Army.”

Rawlinson was a friend of Florence’s for the rest of his life and they exchanged correspondence. On one occasion he stayed at Lea Hurst on his way to Liverpool and in advance of his visit Florence wrote to her father “Pray forgive him for murdering the Queen’s English....he is just as much a gentleman as you and I.”

Between 1863 and 1869, on behalf of the government he organised public relief work in Lancashire, in response to the Cotton Famine and in 1864 Rawlinson again assisted Florence Nightingale in her report “Suggestions in regard to Sanitary Works required for the Improvement of Indian Station.” He clearly left his mark on Chorley, across the United Kingdom and across the world. When he died, he left £35,000 (a huge sum) to St. Thomas’s Hospital in London, where our Prime Minister was treated during the current Pandemic.

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