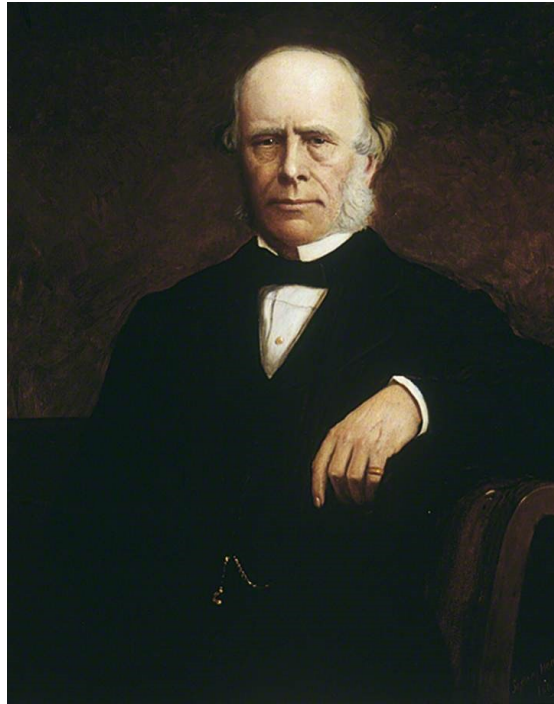


PEOPLE HEADINGLEY



J Sydney Willis Hodges RA, *William Brown*, 1882
Leeds General Infirmary

The Brown Family Merchants and Philanthropists

‘The Brown family have done a great deal for Leeds.’ So said the *Leeds Mercury* reporting the death of **George William Brown** in 1927, yet theirs is not one of the well-known Leeds names. They took little part in public life but in quiet ways left a legacy to Leeds, in the face of personal tragedy.

The story begins with **William Brown** (1805-1882), originally from Kendal, partner since 1831 in the thriving Bradford textile firm of Stansfeld, Brown & Co. He and his wife **Eliza** (1813-1880) were staunch Unitarians, active members of Mill Hill Chapel in Leeds and committed to good causes, particularly care for the sick and vulnerable. In addition to his business interests, **William** served for nine years in the demanding role of Chairman and Treasurer of the Leeds General Infirmary as well as supporting other ventures like the Cookridge Convalescent Home.

In the 1850s he was living on Headingley Hill with his wife and their two children, **George William** (born 1844) and **Jane Elizabeth** (1847), when he saw an opportunity for an upmarket move into the country. In 1858 a swathe of land came up for auction along Weetwood Lane (also known as Adel Road), part of the former estate of Sir Henry Englefield. Secluded, wooded, it was marketed as ideal for ‘country residences’, targeting monied businessmen looking for a select rural retreat not too far from town. **William Brown** bought a plot on the west side of Weetwood Lane and commissioned the architect Cuthbert Brodrick of Town Hall fame to build him a handsome stone mansion, with stables, outbuildings and a lodge to guard the family’s privacy – **Bardon Grange** (still there, now a hall of residence, formerly owned by Leeds University). The Tetleys, the Oxleys, and his business partner Thomas Wolrych Stansfeld would be his neighbours in this exclusive, wealthy enclave.



Bardon Grange



The Hollies

The land for sale in 1858 on the opposite, east side of Weetwood Lane did not sell initially, scarred as it was by the rough stone quarries worked by Ann and Joseph Husler, who had been granted a new lease until 1881. When this land (93 acres in all) was offered for sale again in 1860, now divided into five lots, **William Brown** bought some 30 acres across the road from **Bardon Grange**, including the quarries – he saw its potential. He had a second grand house built there with an entrance lodge, probably ready for his son **George's** marriage in 1871: **The Hollies**. It stood in its own grounds, but when the quarry lease finally ran out 20 years on, there would be scope to develop and landscape woodland gardens along the hillside and down to the beck. **William** was clearly a keen gardener, already laying out fine gardens around his new home **Bardon Grange**, so this must have seemed an attractive if distant prospect.

His son **George William Brown (1844-1927)** followed his father into the family business of Stansfeld Brown, and after his marriage in 1871 moved into **The Hollies**, where he and his wife **Elizabeth Clay Brown** had five children over the following 10 years – three daughters and two sons, **William Alsager** (1877) and **Harold** (1879). There were private gardens round the house for their playground, but in 1881 their world was transformed as the old stone quarry finally stopped working, the equipment was dismantled, and the land could now be developed into the gardens which **William** had envisaged. The *Leeds Times* reported in 1881 that **William** was having 'the rough quarry planted with shrubs and trees and in a few years the place will be a thing of beauty instead of an eyesore'. So it proved. A magical woodland garden was created, with mossy cliffs of stone, ferns, rhododendrons, steep narrow paths and steps and trickling streams down the hillside to the beck below. The design may well have been influenced by Edward Oates' creation of a romantic 'American Garden' at Meanwoodside just across the beck – Oates was a fellow Unitarian and they will have known each other well.

But the same period saw a series of sad events which proved a turning point in the family's life. In 1880 William's wife **Eliza** died, and two years later **William** himself. The great and the good attended his funeral and his kindness and generosity, integrity and practical ability were celebrated. In the same year, 1882, **George's** sixth child died in infancy, followed two years later in 1884 by the death of his wife **Elizabeth**, only 39 years old. Within four years **George** had lost his parents and his wife and was left with five young children to bring up. Like his father, he was a generous donor to local causes: the Yorkshire College (the forerunner of Leeds University), the Adel Reformatory, the Meanwood Waif and Strays' Home. In 1886, aged only 42, he retired from business, remarried in London and moved out of **The Hollies**, retaining ownership but renting the house out to tenants. He moved with his extended family to live in Ilkley where three further children were born, two daughters and a son. He also owned a house in London where the family often stayed. Sadly his eldest son, **William Alsager**, always in poor health, died in 1907 aged only 29.



Major Harold Brown

George's eldest surviving son, **Harold Brown**, born at **The Hollies** in 1879, read history at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he was a member of the Jesus College Boat Club and a leading light in the Cambridge University Rifle Volunteers, foreshadowing his later military commitment. He settled in Filey, marrying and setting up a school there, but when war threatened in 1914 he enlisted and was made Lieutenant in the 5th Battalion of the Princess of Wales Own Yorkshire Regiment. The following year he was in action at Ypres, was awarded the DSO and promoted to Captain, but was taken ill and had to return home. Back in France in 1916, he was again in action and was awarded the Military Cross. Later that year, he was wounded by an exploding shell, and on returning to France was awarded the Croix de Guerre. In 1917 he was seriously wounded in the leg and the head, and again sent home. Once more he returned, promoted now to Acting Major in command of the 4th Battalion of the Yorkshire Regiment. On 23 March 1918 he was killed in action on the Somme, aged 39.

The bereaved **George Brown** wanted to commemorate in some enduring way the death of his beloved eldest son, his courage and resilience. In 1920 he offered to donate **Harold's** birthplace, **The Hollies**, with its grounds, to the Corporation as a public park, together with an additional 9 acres of land to make the park accessible from across the beck. There were certain conditions – a tablet to be erected in Harold's honour, and only plain meals and no alcohol to be available there. Work had to be done to clear the tangled vegetation, create winding paths down to the beck and make a bridge across. The formal handover to the Lord Mayor took place on 24 June 1921. As promised, a bronze tablet was put in place at the entrance to the park in memory of Harold, with a matching plaque on the other side recording the gift and the date but at George's special request omitting the donor's name.

(The plaques are still there.)



George William Brown hands The Hollies to Leeds
Leeds Mercury, 25 June 1921

There was some debate about how to use the house itself but in the end it became a sanatorium for Leeds children suffering from tuberculosis, and later a hostel for the elderly, then a sanctuary for homeless women – offering care for the vulnerable, much as both **William** and **George Brown** would have wished. (It was closed and sold in 2011 and is now a private residence).

There were other deaths for the family to endure. George's stepson **James John Kearney Brown** was killed in action at Gallipoli in 1915, aged 32, and his mother, George's second wife, **Sarah Kearney Brown**, died in 1918, just a few months after Harold. Only George's younger son, **George Leonard Brown**, who enlisted in 1915 aged 23, survived the war. Then in 1921, the same year his sister **Jane** died, George's daughter **Jean Millicent Brown**, aged 33, was killed falling under a London Tube train; the official verdict of suicide, based on the train driver's evidence, was never accepted by **George Brown** and on the family grave at Lawnswood she is recorded as 'accidentally killed'. **George** himself married again in 1920 and moved away to Bournemouth but continued as a Trustee of Mill Hill Chapel and as Treasurer for the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, committed to international peace and goodwill. At his death in 1927 he was celebrated for his 'devoted work for every human need.' He was buried in the family grave at Lawnswood.



George's sister **Jane Elizabeth Brown (1847-1921)** has her own story. After her mother died and then her father in 1882, she stayed on in **Bardon Grange**, never marrying, cared for by a retinue of servants. She had the time and means now to devote her energy and her considerable fortune to a cause close to her heart. She was very conscious of the vulnerability of single women of her own class and the need for a sanctuary for the sick and disabled without money or family, whose only recourse otherwise would be the workhouse. So she set about founding a home 'for invalid ladies' to provide security and care. The institution she founded was to survive over 120 years.

Her dream was realised when she opened the first **Victoria Home** in a rented house in Grosvenor Road in 1885, with five residents. It was dedicated to her parents, **Eliza and William Brown**.

When the waiting list for admission grew she bought larger premises in Broomfield Crescent, and finally in 1901 a spacious detached house in Kirkstall Lane, called 'The Limes', set in gardens. She undertook a major extension to take 20 residents and vested the property in trustees. A body of loyal subscribers helped to fund and maintain the Home.

Jane Brown was a formidable figure, acting first as Secretary, then as President of the Home, trotting down regularly from Weetwood in her pony trap. She set firm rules. All residents were expected to contribute, usually 10 shillings to £1 a week, in return for board and lodgings, nursing and medical care. Applicants had to provide evidence of their medical condition, ability to pay – and their social position. There were no religious barriers.



The Limes, Kirkstall Lane, c1905

The aim was to provide a comfortable, permanent home for chronically sick or disabled women of education and status who had no means of support (no state benefits then). In 1903 the Home in Kirkstall Lane was formally opened by Lady Lucy Cavendish, who praised the cheerful home-like rooms, the exceptional care, and the moderate charges. A 1909 newspaper article on the Home commented that here gentlewomen could enjoy the niceties of life – no ‘thick-cut bread and butter’ or ‘ready-made tea mixed with milk and sugar’ which might suit the multitude but would be nothing short of a nightmare for ladies of refined tastes. More importantly it provided life-long security and dedicated care.

Jane Brown continued to devote time and money to the Home. There was a financial deficit each year but she and her supporters managed to keep it afloat through fund-raising bazaars, donations and volunteers – the two doctors attending gave their time free of charge. Treats and outings were organised when possible, as in 1908 when borrowed carriages took the ladies down to see the decorations for the visit of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. Improvements like a lift (worked initially by ropes) were introduced when cash allowed.

In the First World War, the ladies knitted assiduously for the forces and army horses occupied the stables. **Jane** herself had to cope with the losses within her family, particularly the death of her nephew **Harold**, whom she had known as a young child across the road at **The Hollies**.

Jane died in 1921, aged 73, but left a generous bequest to the Home. A strong character, motivated by faith and duty, she had inspired great affection (and awe), and was long remembered on ‘Founder’s Day’. Old-fashioned as she was in her ways and dress, her ideas had been ahead of their time. Over the years the **Victoria Home** continued to offer care and refuge, but struggled to modernise. Money remained tight in spite of a YEP appeal on the centenary in 1985. In the end it could not survive and closed in 2007, its 20 residents, some over 100, dispersed. Its assets were transferred to MHA to provide care facilities for the elderly, and a modern assisted-living complex, **Victoria Court**, built 2013, now occupies the site. **Jane** would probably have approved.

Bardon Grange, with its ‘unusually beautiful’ grounds and gardens, was sold immediately after **Jane’s** death in 1921 (for £6000) and stayed in private hands until 1947 when the University took it over to house students. Today, **The Hollies** remains open for everyone to enjoy, a shady, wooded fairyland of ferns and shrubs, paths and stone steps, a peaceful haven for wildlife and plants – a gift to the city from the Brown family.

Eveleigh Bradford
Local Historian, 2023



For more information, see Eveleigh’s biography of Jane Brown (2018) in ‘They Lived in Leeds’, on The Thoresby Society website, at <https://www.thoresby.org.uk/content/people/people.php>. Also, for Major Brown in the Great War, see *The Yorkshire Regiment: First World War Remembrance* at <http://www.ww1-yorkshires.org.uk/html-files/pickering-names/pickering-names-major-brown.htm>. And for The Hollies, see David Cundall, *The Leeds Preventorium 1925-1956*, The Thoresby Society (2023), on You Tube, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKEH_yMTI8U and also [The Hollies gallery](#).