



Thomas Robson

Thomas Robson was a rope and twine-maker living in Claypath in Durham City in the early 19th century. His will, made in 1852, is held in the Durham diocese probate records collection in Durham University Library's Archives and Special Collections at Palace Green.

1854/R23/1

This is the last will and Testament of me Thomas Robson of Claypath in or near the City of Durham esop^r my having previously disposed of all that my Freehold property situate number Twenty five Claypath in or near the City of Durham aforesaid with the Appurtenances by Conveyance or Deed of Gift bearing date on or about the ^{Twenty fifth} day of July one thousand eight hundred and forty six unto my two Daughters Isabella Robson and Jane Robson I now give devise and bequeath unto my Daughter Hannah Robson All my interest right and title to a Pew in the parish Church of Saint Nicholas in the City of Durham numbered seventy six and also All my household furniture plate linen and China and all other my personal Estate whatsoever and wheresoever to and for her own proper use benefit and disposal but subject Meets and charged and chargeable with the payment to my two sons Thomas Robson and Hunter Robson and to my Daughter Mary Warner the sum of one Shilling each And

2 I do hereby appoint my said Daughters Hannah Robson and Isabella Robson Executors of this my will hereby revoking all other wills by me at any time heretofore made In witness whereof I have to this my last will and Testament set my hand and seal this first day of June in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty two.

Signed sealed published and declared by the said Thomas Robson the testator as his last will and Testament in the presence of us who in his presence at his request and in the presence of each other have herunto subscribed our names as witnesses the said will and Testament having been first read over to the said Thomas Robson the Testator in our presence

The mark and Seal

 of Thomas Robson
 the testator

J. Allen
 3-54

Thomas Allen Wilton Gilbert
 George Hopper Jun^r Durham

Later censuses offer us a view of sorts into the household itself, nine persons living at No. 25 and in the long yard behind it in 1841,

Thomas Robson	68	Ropemaker	Y
Hannah D ^o	67		Y
Isabella D ^o	35		Y
Hannah D ^o	30		Y
Jane Robson	25		Y

The 1841 census entry for the Robson family.

and thirty-eight persons in 1851.

91	25 Claypath	Robert Robson	Head	Mar	29	Grocer	Durham, Hareholm		
		Ann Frances D ^o	Wife	Mar	27		D ^o Middle Rainton		
		John George D ^o	Son	-	3		Durham City		
		Thomas D ^o	Son	-	1		D ^o		
		Sarah Blackey	Servant	U	14		Servant		D ^o
		Robert Boyes	Servant	U	16		D ^o		D ^o Carlton
92	Claypath	Thomas Robson	Head	Mar	79	Rope Maker	D ^o St Margaret	Blind Deaf	
		Hannah D ^o	Wife	Mar	77		D ^o Monkwearmouth		
		Isabella D ^o	Daur	U	51		D ^o St Margaret		
		Hannah D ^o	Daur	U	46		D ^o St Giles		

The 1851 census entry for the Robson family.

Even student lets in the city today don't aim for such numbers. The population of Durham was clearly growing in this period, but some of his neighbours appear in the census as consistently as Robson himself. One neighbour, at No. 27, was the Maguire family; another was Matthew Wardell, in 1841 a builder of some success for by 1851 he was describing himself as an architect: indeed, a Mr Wardell also appears on Wood's 1820 plan alongside that of Mr Robson.

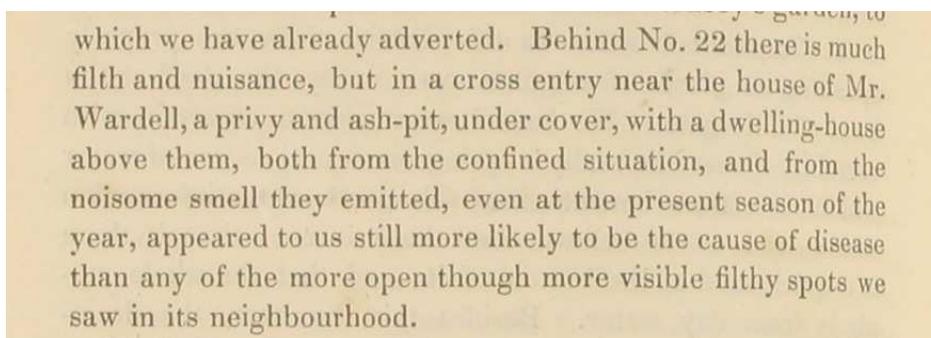
The side-effects of such overcrowding can be traced in the Durham City Health Reports of 1847 and 1849, evidence of a growing national intolerance for the overcrowded, unsanitary and dangerous urban environments that had developed during the rapid industrialisation of the preceding decades, and which conditions were countered with the first of a series of Health Acts in 1848. After the first outbreak of cholera in Sunderland in 1831 Durham, along with the rest of the country, suffered a number of further outbreaks in the following years, and the 1847 report on Gilesgate and Claypath to the Sanitary Association of Durham City reveals why.

The other locality to which our attention has been drawn is the receptacle of the drainage of the lower part of Claypath, on the north side. It is a cross ditch, several hundred yards in length, into which the house drains from this part of Claypath discharge themselves. It is in a most filthy condition—gorged, choked, and overflowing. It appears to

Report on the Sanitary Condition of the City of Durham (1847), p.7

There was no sewer and there were no house drains, privies discharged into the street, the effluent eventually making its way to the River Wear via open gutters, ditches and some covered drains; and house construction and ventilation was also inadequate.

Tanners, knackers and slaughterers carried on their trades alongside the streets' inhabitants, and in the houses' yards numerous pigs and other livestock were reared. The very locality of the Robson's home attracted particular comment.

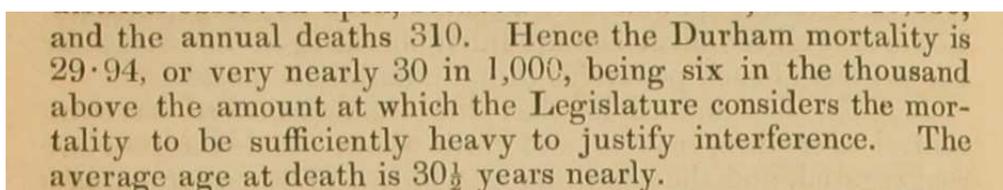


which we have already adverted. Behind No. 22 there is much filth and nuisance, but in a cross entry near the house of Mr. Wardell, a privy and ash-pit, under cover, with a dwelling-house above them, both from the confined situation, and from the noisome smell they emitted, even at the present season of the year, appeared to us still more likely to be the cause of disease than any of the more open though more visible filthy spots we saw in its neighbourhood.

Report on the Sanitary Condition of the City of Durham (1847), p.10

Clean drinking water was available from the Pant in Durham marketplace, piped from Ayckley Heads in Sidegate across the river, and there was a trade in clean rain or river water delivered to people's houses for the purposes of laundry and washing – 6 pence a cask to Claypath, and 10 pence a cask further up the hill in Gilesgate. The connection between contaminated water and cholera epidemics was not proved until after Robson's death in 1854. An excellent illustrated article on the health and sanitary conditions in the region during this period is available online as part of the [4Schools learning zone](#).

These conditions had a direct impact on people's health, causing life expectancies to fall. The 1849 Report to the Durham General Board of Health found life expectancy in Claypath was 28.7 years, somewhat lower than the city mean of 30.2 years, and higher than that at Leazes Place, just off Claypath on the slope down toward the river, where it was 19.6 years.



and the annual deaths 310. Hence the Durham mortality is 29.94, or very nearly 30 in 1,000, being six in the thousand above the amount at which the Legislature considers the mortality to be sufficiently heavy to justify interference. The average age at death is 30½ years nearly.

Report to the General Board of Health on a preliminary inquiry into the sewerage, drainage, and supply of water, and the sanitary condition of the inhabitants of the borough of Durham (1849), p.8.

To return to No. 25, this property has also been researched by David Butler publishing in the *Durham County Local History Society Bulletin 52* (1994). This is due to an explosive incident that occurred some seven years before Robson's death on 9th June 1845. From the newspaper accounts in the *Durham Chronicle* and *Durham Advertiser* we learn that a grocer and tea dealer operated at No. 25, run by a tenant of Robson's named George Steele whose wife and two young children also lived on the property. Like many such shops of the time located in mining areas, quantities of gunpowder were stored on the premises for sale to the public: there was, following the incident, immediate action by the city council to better regulate such storage within the city.

The Mayor as soon as the excitement subsided, issued orders to the police to ascertain the quantity of gunpowder held in stock by the different dealers in the town, and called a special meeting of the corporation, on Tuesday night, to take the subject into consideration. At that meeting the following report was delivered by Supt. Liddle:—Boyd, 175 lbs; Hill 150 lbs; Cato, 40 lbs; Bridick, 37 lbs; R. Hodgson, 100 lbs; Wallace 75 lbs; Oliver, 70 lbs; Thornton, 120 lbs:—Total, 767 lbs.

The Corporation, on hearing this report and having taken the matter into consideration, resolved,— 1st That the police should be vigilant in inspecting the transit of gunpowder through the town, and in seizing it whenever there was an infraction of the law. 2ndly That a remonstrance should be addressed to the shopkeepers in the town, against the dangerous practice. 3rdly That search warrants should be issued when danger was suspected. 4thly That a memorial should be addressed to the Secretary of State for the Home Department; and 5thly That a copy of the resolutions be forwarded to Sir James Graham.—The memorial to the Home Secretary, after reciting the accident, states, that the collieries caused a demand for coarse gunpowder, for the purpose of blasting—declares the opinion of the council, that the limitation in the act was an insufficient protection to the public; suggests that, in the colliery districts especially, magazines should be built apart from the habitations, in which gunpowder in bulk should be deposited and taken from them direct to the collieries, and some better enactments passed for the regulation of the safe custody and sale thereof generally.

Durham Chronicle, 13 June 1845, p.2

It was reported that Isabella, Hannah and Jane Robson, dressmakers, and a thirteen-year-old niece were upstairs working when around 1.45pm Steele's young shop-boy Christopher Spencer placed a lit candle too close to some 11 or 12lbs of black powder, suffering severe burns in the ensuing explosion which was heard all over the city. The sewing circle upstairs were blown out into the yard or trapped in the house as it collapsed. All survived the explosion and were rescued by their shocked neighbours with the help of the fire brigade, although sources suggest Christopher Spencer was taken to the infirmary in Allergate but later died of his wounds. A shopkeeper across the street, showing a customer a pair of shoes in front of his store when the blast occurred, was blown back through his shop window into his shop. The damage to neighbouring properties was later noted in detail in the *Durham Chronicle* (13 June 1845) – precisely 398 panes of glass were broken in all.

We know the Robsons all survived, indeed the will records that two of the daughters were granted the freehold by their father in July 1846, just over a year later: this may have been once the property had been rebuilt, helped by a public subscription for Robson raising £66 15s. This cannot have completely made good the financial consequences of the disaster for Robson, the cost of rebuilding his house being estimated at the time at around £300-£500. Steele estimated his lost stock to have been worth between £150 and £200.

The public subscription for Thomas Robson, published in the *Durham Advertiser* within two weeks of the explosion.

We are desirous to direct the attention of our readers to "The case of Mr. Thos. Robson, roper, of this city," which will be found in our advertising columns. This meritorious individual, who has toiled for many a long year in the hope of obtaining a competency to support himself in the decline of life, and to leave to his family on his decease, has been suddenly reduced to a state of penury in consequence of the destruction of his premises by the late explosion of gunpowder in Claypath. A more industrious man is rarely to be met with; and, though now far advanced in the vale of years, he still pursues his calling with unabated assiduity. He was altogether unaware, as we are informed, of the presence of gunpowder on his premises until the explosion, which deprived him of his property, took place. Under all the circumstances of the case, poor Robson may be regarded as having a powerful claim not only upon the sympathy, but also on the pecuniary resources, of his fellow-countrymen, we might say of mankind.

Durham Advertiser, 20 June 1845, pp.2-3

THE CASE OF MR. THOMAS ROBSON,
ROPER, OF THIS CITY.

VOLUNTARY SUBSCRIPTIONS will be received by Messrs. BACKHOUSE AND Co., at the other Banking Establishments in Durham, and by Mr. ANDREWS, Bookseller, to assist THOMAS ROBSON, of Claypath, to Re-build the Shop and Rooms, accidentally destroyed by an explosion of Gunpowder, on Monday, June 9th, instant.

Committed:—THE MAYOR OF DURHAM; ANTHONY WILKINSON, Esq.; and Mr. JAMES TELFER.

	£.	s.	d.
The Mayor of Durham	2	2	0
Thomas Wilkinson, Esq.	5	0	0
Mr. Telfair	1	0	0
Mr. Jno. Thwaites	2	0	0
Mr. William Tiplady	1	0	0
Mr. J. W. Elliott	0	10	0
Mr. Richard Dixon	1	0	0
Rev. Thomas Eldon	2	2	0
H. Stapylton, Esq.	2	0	0
Mr. Ald. Marshall	1	0	0
Mr. Henshaw	0	10	0
Mr. R. W. Matthews	0	5	0
Mr. W. Webster	1	0	0
Mr. W. H. Thompson	1	0	0
Mr. W. Henderson	1	0	0
Dr. Alexander	0	10	0
Mrs. Alexander	0	10	0
Messrs. F. Humble and Son	1	0	0
A. Smith, Esq.	1	0	0
Mr. P. S. Reid	0	2	6
Mr. G. Gray	0	2	6
Mr. James Robson	0	10	0
Mr. James Scawin	1	0	0
Matthew Woodfield, Esq.	2	0	0
Rev. Dr. Miller	5	0	0
Mr. Caldclough, Old Elvet	1	0	0
I. Bonomi, Esq.	1	0	0
Mr. Maric Story	0	10	0
Mr. Christopher Jamison	1	0	0
Mr. J. H. Forster	1	0	0
Mr. F. Wharton	0	10	0

Robson survived to the summer of 1854, the Durham directories listing him at No. 25 Claypath until his death. The 1851 census records he was aged 79 and blind, living with his wife Hannah, and two daughters, who continued to live there and indeed also carried on their father's trade of rope-making until the 1880s. The property of No. 25 Claypath today is occupied by an estate agent, and sits between a derelict cinema and a snooker club.



No. 25 Claypath, as it is today.

This article was written by Pat Atkinson, and published as part the North East Inheritance Project (2008): <http://familyrecords.dur.ac.uk/nei/>.