

A Ramsden Family Perspective

MERIEL BUXTON

Mother and son: Isabella and John William

JOHN WILLIAM RAMSDEN HAD a lonely childhood. Before he was born his parents had already lost a son and daughter. One of his two surviving sisters died while he was still a baby, leaving only John William and his sister Charlotte, sixteen years his senior. He was too young to remember any of his other siblings. Worse still was to come when his father, John Charles, died suddenly in 1836, leaving his five-year-old son heir to the baronetcy and all the vast estates of the Ramsden family. Just before his eighth birthday, his grandfather also died. John William was now the fifth baronet.

He had been born on 14 September 1831 at Newby Park near Thirsk (now known as Baldersby Park) but this was only a rented house and his parents took the opportunity to buy Buckden House and its estate in Wharfedale not long before his father's death. John William's mother was the Hon. Isabella Dundas, daughter of the first Baron Dundas and, on her mother's side, a Fitzwilliam. Isabella had a profound influence on her son's life, both as a mother and in her capacity as one of his trustees. Throughout his minority the estate was administered by Trustees, the two longest serving and most influential of whom were Isabella herself and her first cousin and brother-in-law, Charles Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, 5th Earl Fitzwilliam. They proved a formidable team, with Isabella giving full support to Fitzwilliam in his determination to run the estate as efficiently as possible and to right the damage done in the last years of the fourth baronet's life when he had allowed his agent to let many matters drift, in particular with regard to the tenancies at will.¹ The fourth baronet's agent, John Bower, had with his employer's tacit agreement taken the line of least resistance on everything. Whenever John Charles had tried to alter things he had been met with mocking laughter.

The decision to appoint George Loch to sort out the most important issues was taken primarily by Isabella and Fitzwilliam. They were looking for

a man with the right professional attributes and sufficient personality to drive through the necessary changes. Loch had been working with his father on the Bridgewater estate, where canals were the central feature. He had been called to the Bar and was able, in addition to his work in Huddersfield, to work in London on the legislation being put through Parliament relating to the Ramsden estate, which Earl Fitzwilliam was satisfied justified the high salary Loch demanded. He was initially asked to report on the condition of the estate and was highly critical of the appalling state in which he found it. He was then appointed auditor and manager.² While the tenancy issue was highlighted rather than resolved during John William's minority, Loch not only turned round many other management issues but also started to change the culture whereby people looked back to the fourth baronet's time as a golden age when the townspeople could do anything they liked. Loch succeeded in altering the public perception to an appreciation that in the long run good management of the Ramsden estates was of benefit to everyone in Huddersfield.

Loch sometimes went too far in refusing support for local projects, instinctively turning down all requests for new schools or support for the hospital. Fitzwilliam took issue with him here, concerned that John William, even before he came of age, could acquire a reputation for stinginess.³ On such occasions, Loch would attempt, usually unsuccessfully, to play one trustee off against another. He knew that the two most senior trustees would usually support each other but also realised that Isabella in particular had immense confidence in his judgement and he saw her as a potential ally and means of influencing the other trustees.

The major issue of the time was the building of the railways. Traditionally the Ramsden position was to oppose the building of any railway close to Huddersfield because of the competition it would offer to their canal. A proposal from the Manchester and Leeds Railway Company to build a branch line to Huddersfield sparked strong reactions in the town. The townspeople were determined not to be excluded from the new age of steam. When an official publicly declared that 'Huddersfield is not worth stopping the engine for' the question also became a matter of pride.⁴

The Trustees then suggested that the proposal for a branch line should be rejected but that they should themselves build the line. Loch did not think that this was wise but instead entered into negotiations with a different railway company, having noted what generous terms the Huddersfield and Manchester Railway Company had been forced to offer in a comparable case. Once the decision had been taken, Loch faced a struggle to get the appropriate legislation through Parliament. He lost the first round but was determined not to give up and, against all the odds and with Fitzwilliam's help, he eventually emerged victorious. He had been aware throughout that

this was only the first step. He must now strike a suitable deal with the railway company and knew that the Ramsden Trustees must own not just most but all of the land affected. Unfortunately, the fourth baronet's will stated that additional land could be purchased only when there was excess income to pay for it. There was none. The most important relevant block of land was the Bay Hall estate, outside the town centre but on the route of the proposed new railway.

Here is where Loch's good relationship with Isabella and her determination to do the best for her son came into play. The Trustees could do nothing to raise the necessary funds so Isabella personally borrowed from her brother-in-law, Charles Ramsden, the money to buy the land, putting Loch in a strong enough position to negotiate an excellent deal with the railway company. After Isabella had been repaid there were still sufficient funds for the rebuilding of the George Hotel, the opening up of what was now named John William Street and the purchase of the Greenhead/Gledholt estate.⁵

Isabella was equally successful in her relationship with John William himself. She remained throughout her life the one person who was always prepared to stand up to him whenever she felt that it was right to do so, usually with a sense of humour which seldom failed to win him round. She would happily tell him how uncomfortable his carriage was and that she would therefore avoid using his coach makers, or how dismal his servants looked in their new, all black livery. This continued throughout her life. Even aged 97, on noticing her son's receding hairline, she commented, 'Well, Sir John, and when are you going to buy a wig?'⁶

Highly intelligent, she would read a wide range of books, even ones in German when in her nineties, and she remained almost unbeatable at backgammon to the end: when her son played a move which did not impress her, she made her views extremely clear. Although she could be sharp with her son, she remained thoughtful and considerate to staff and to her companion, Bunny Dundas, an unmarried younger cousin who remained with her to the end of her life, an invaluable support and friend.

Not surprisingly, when she was seriously ill in 1879 and forced to endure the horrors of contemporary medicine (including treatment with a turpentine plaster and doses of brandy and ammonia), John William never left her side: temporary fluctuations in her condition created an emotional roller coaster for him. 'Oh if this can only last, but it is too much to hope that she is really getting better,' he exclaimed.⁷ To his delight, she eventually confounded everyone, even the doctors, by surviving another nine years, weak but with her brain unimpaired, and dying only three years short of her century. A few months before her death she decided to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee in her own way. Letting only Bunny into the secret, she had her bedroom redecorated with



41. Sir John William Ramsden, 5th Bt (1831–1914), by Camille Silvy, albumen carte-de-visite, 26 June 1861.
Ramsden Family Collection

new wallpaper and a new carpet. She delighted in being surrounded by the family, counting the days till her ten-year-old grandson John Frecheville – her ‘Monkey Boy’ as she called him – came home from school.⁸

Yet even she made few demands on John William. In a fit of gloomy introspection at the age of 32, he confided to his diary that the only request she had ever made of him was that he should be up and ready for Prayers at 9 o’clock every morning and even this he rarely managed to achieve. He perceived himself at this time in his life as idle and lethargic – with neither

quality was he associated in later life – and he gave the credit to his brother-in-law, Edward Horsman, husband of his sister Charlotte, for getting him more actively involved in the world around him.

After his marriage, Isabella's support took a practical form. She had an excellent relationship with his wife Guendolen, aware as she was of John William's many shortcomings as a husband, and indeed pointed them out to him bluntly if unavailingly: 'This being dear Guen's birthday and the day she comes of age ... What a pity it is that you did not postpone the journey.'⁹

She offered practical support by stepping in when ill health restricted Guendolen's activities. Repeated pregnancies, too often ending in miscarriages, meant that she was unable to play a full part in John William's lifestyle of perpetual motion. His mother, and sometimes his sister Charlotte, would deputise as hostesses for him in London when the House was sitting. After the birth of Hermione Charlotte (known as Mymee), their first child, Isabella frequently had her, and later the other children, to stay at Buckden, or eventually Byram, for extended periods. Mymee and Isabella's companion, Bunny Dundas, remained close for the rest of Bunny's life. This gave Guendolen the opportunity to travel, which she loved, when her health and intervals between pregnancies permitted.

For many years, John William and his mother were united by their love for Buckden, where John William undertook a massive tree planting scheme, but eventually Buckden lost its appeal for him when he fell in love with Ardverikie, the Scottish estate which he first started to buy in 1870. He wrote his mother a marvellous letter at that time, setting out both the appeal of the place and his immensely complicated plans for acquiring all the land that he wanted there, plans which he later followed almost as a blueprint.¹⁰ She gave him full backing, even supporting his sale of outlying parts of the Buckden estate to finance his plans elsewhere, while remarking that it was sad that he would never again care as deeply about Buckden as he had previously.¹¹

John William was a man who loved places more than he ever loved people. Ardverikie became the abiding passion of his life. He also loved his other country estates, Buckden, Byram and Bulstrode, the Buckinghamshire estate Guendolen inherited from her father. His relationship with Huddersfield was quite different. If Ardverikie was his wife, his mistress, his favourite child, Huddersfield was his business. As such it remained of supreme importance to him. Despite his own misgivings about himself as a young man, John William was always a hard-working, capable businessman, enjoying to the full the many benefits life had conferred on him but, unlike his son, having no illusions about the responsibilities which accompanied those benefits. On the other hand, he was less of an idealist than his son. He had no burning ambition to improve the lot of the people of Huddersfield, merely to keep to



42. Sir John William Ramsden, 5th Bt (1831–1914).
Kirklees Image Archive



43. The Hon. Lady Helen Guendolen Ramsden (1846–1910),
married to Sir John William Ramsden in 1865.
Muncaster Castle

his side of the bargain between him and them as he understood it, without interpreting it unnecessarily against his own interests.

Husband and wife: John William and Guendolen

Guendolen had a more powerful influence on her husband than was immediately apparent. The youngest of three daughters of the Duke and Duchess of Somerset, Guendolen was also descended through her mother Georgiana from the great playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, author of *The Rivals* and *School for Scandal*. They were a remarkably talented family: both Georgiana's sisters were writers and had many other accomplishments. Georgiana herself, whose wit and originality were legendary, was chosen to be the 'Queen of Beauty' at the Eglinton Tournament, which attracted 100,000 spectators in 1839. Guendolen's father was a politician, author of two books and served as Lord Lieutenant of Devon for a quarter of a century.¹²

Guen had a fey, almost unworldly side to her nature which was quite unlike her down-to-earth mother-in-law. This could cause her unhappiness and anxiety: a dream might leave her worrying and despondent, though when she had ether for an operation she came round feeling that much of the mystery of life had been made clear to her, leaving her blissfully contented. Sometimes John William was mocking but, especially as she got older, he became more considerate. Once a dream left her convinced that if he travelled to London for a meeting that day as planned, he would, against all probability, be drowned. Remarkably, he agreed to forgo attendance at the meeting.¹³

Guen had two brothers but the younger was killed by a bear in India. The older never married but had two children with a beautiful, fiery 17 year-old girl of gypsy extraction, Rosina Elizabeth Swan. While both children were still small, first their father and then their mother died. The Duke and Duchess never hesitated but brought up the two children, Ruth and Harold, as their own with Guendolen giving full support and remaining close to both for the rest of her life. While Harold devoted much of his life to a vain attempt to prove that his parents were married, making him a Duke and heir to all his grandfather's possessions, Ruth was later described in her obituary in *The Times* as 'One of the most vivid personalities [her friends] have known', a socialist, rebel and 'inveterate champion of the underdog.'¹⁴ She married William George Frederick Cavendish-Bentinck. Two of their sons became successively 8th and 9th Duke of Portland.

When the Duke of Somerset died, the title passed to his brother but he ensured that his property was divided between his three daughters with his grandchildren too being provided for. This was how Bulstrode in Buckinghamshire passed into the ownership of the Ramsden family.

Guendolen, only 19 at the time of her marriage and immediately plunged into a seemingly never-ending cycle of child-bearing and ill health, did not succeed in producing the longed-for son and heir until she was over 30. But throughout those years she enjoyed the support of her mother-in-law and gradually grew in stature. Independent enough to pursue her own interests – travel, literature and the theatre – she eventually developed the confidence to impose views dictated by her own social conscience on her husband, as the following letter illustrates:

I hear some more children have died of the scarlet fever Bunny heard and she hears Mr Haslam is sinking a well for the good of Brotherton at his own expense. Oh dear, what it is to have an UNenergetic husband. Have I not begged you to do something – a drain or a something as the water and everything stinks so. If my school children are ill I will whip you ... Cotton has stopped his children from going to school I am glad to say. When are you COMING?
Ever your loving wife.¹⁵

Whether Guendolen was as conscious of what was happening in Huddersfield in the early days as she was aware of events in Brotherton, the village close to Byram, is unlikely. She willingly and graciously played her part in any formal duties she was asked to undertake in Huddersfield but she was too far away at Byram to take the direct interest which she did, for example, in the school in Brotherton. But whilst neither she nor John William would have seen it as her place to devote the full day or more a week spent by John William on Huddersfield affairs, she was held in deep affection in the town and with increasing age shared more and more of her own interests with the people of Huddersfield.

She was a keen supporter of the Needlework Guild, entertaining the members annually, and when she wrote a play entitled *Beauty and the Beast* it was premiered for the Guild. Every Monday when in Yorkshire she would attend the meetings, referred to by John William as her Mothers' Meeting. Together with her two daughters, she came up especially from London to spend five days manning a stall at the Huddersfield Drill Hall Bazaar. When the people of Huddersfield put on an opera entirely composed and performed by local residents, she not only attended but was unreserved in her support and praise for the success of the venture. On opening the Art Gallery she made a speech so impressive that even John William dropped his usual ironic mockery and gave her unstinting praise. To celebrate the marriage of their son, John Frecheville Ramsden (known in childhood as 'Freshie' but later as 'Chops') to Joan Buxton, a special train was commissioned to bring 300



44. Opening of Somerset Bridge by Lady Guendolen Ramsden, 25 May 1874.
Kirklees Image Archive

people from Huddersfield to Byram to join the celebrations. No doubt here again the lead was taken by Guendolen rather than her husband.¹⁶

Family Matters: Yorkshire and beyond

With the passing of time John William and Guendolen took it for granted that their role would gradually be taken over by the younger generation. In 1898, soon after his 21st birthday, John Frecheville, rather than his father, gave the main speech and laid the cornerstone for the Victoria Tower on Castle Hill, at a ceremony attended by all the dignitaries of Huddersfield. In the main surviving photograph (see p. 204), which does not appear to include any women, John William Ramsden is in the centre of the front row with his son behind him and, standing close by, Isaac Hordern, treasurer of the Ramsden estate in Huddersfield who served the estate loyally for almost 64 years.

But the path of duty had little appeal for John Frecheville. His main struggles at Cambridge were to avoid being sent down from the university. His time and his dreams were focused on dancing, wine, horses, the internal combustion engine and the sister of an old school friend. Her name was Joan Buxton. Three years later he sought his father's approval, gladly given,



45. Portrait group at the Yorkshire Agricultural Show, 1888, taken outside Longley Hall entrance porch. From left to right: standing, Lord Harewood, Sir John William Ramsden, Lord Auckland; seated, F.W. Beadon, Col. Ramsden, Hon. G. Lascelles
Huddersfield Local Studies Library



46. Official party at the laying of the corner stone of the Victoria Tower, Castle Hill by John Frecheville Ramsden, Saturday 25 June 1898. Sir John William Ramsden is centre front; John Frecheville Ramsden is immediately behind him; Isaac Hordern is to his far right.
Ramsden Family Collection

before making her his wife. It was one of the best decisions of his life. But her Norfolk background was yet another factor in his drift southwards.

John Frecheville's older sister, Mymee, had long made her own life far from Yorkshire. An independent spirit, Mymee cared for none of the things which so attracted her brother, but her parents' way of life was not for her either. She travelled extensively, particularly in Norway, and resisted all attempts to find her a husband. A puzzle and something of a disappointment to her mother, she of all the family was the most willing to stand up to her father.

John William and Guendolen's middle child, a sweet and gentle girl named Rosamund, was close to her mother, in awe of her father and increasingly dependent financially and socially on her brother, John Frecheville. Later she made what the rest of the family viewed as an unwise marriage, had a son, then died while the child was still a toddler. Had she lived she would have been so proud of her son who went on to become the great art connoisseur Sir Brinsley Ford, an exceptionally charming and erudite man. She was probably more settled in Yorkshire than either her brother or sister, but she too eventually drifted south. After her marriage she bought a house in Sussex.

So gradually in a single generation the ties with Yorkshire were loosened. Guendolen herself really preferred to be at Bulstrode, her parents' old home, with easy access to London, to her sisters and to the doctors on whom she was increasingly dependent. Perhaps because of his nomadic lifestyle, constantly moving between Byram, London, Bulstrode and the place he loved more deeply than any other, Ardverikie, none of John William's family ever imbued his deep sense that, no matter where he might spend time, Byram was truly home.

In 1909, for the first time in his life, John William passed a whole year without spending a single night at Byram¹⁷. Guen's health was a major factor, but, even when he came up to Huddersfield to celebrate 70 years since he had inherited the estate, he stayed at Longley and returned south immediately afterwards without visiting Byram. However, of Huddersfield he wrote:

My visit . . . was most satisfactory. Everybody was most cordial and the Town looks very prosperous. I am much impressed with the large amount of building going on in many different parts of the estate.¹⁸

His relationship with the town could be compared to that of an elderly married couple who have had many disagreements, some deep and bitter, but are indissolubly bound together by a lifetime of shared memories of every kind. In 1860 he had been amongst the officers who joined the 1st Yorkshire (West Riding) Artillery Volunteer Corps on its formation. More than 40 years later he was the sole survivor of that original intake. He alone had witnessed the work of Isaac Hordern in the estate office for more than sixty years.



47. Byram Hall (as remodelled from 1762 by John Carr); main house, demolished after 1945.
Matthew Beckett/Lost Heritage (www.lostheritage.org.uk)

When a Huddersfield church needed £1,000, he took for granted his duty to provide 10 per cent of this in response to the appeal.

After Guen's death in 1910, John William and Rosamund returned to Byram for a sad visit sorting out Guen's possessions. After Rosamund herself died the following year, her father only once returned to Byram before his own death in the spring of 1914. John Frecheville and Joan did their best to make his stay at Byram as happy and as close to the past as possible, bringing their children, arranging guests and shooting parties and even themselves returning briefly after the children went back to school. But soon John William was left alone for eight weeks, apart from the company of the old agent, Cole Hamilton, who worked with him as far as possible in the old way, interviewing tenants, going through accounts, clearing out the old Deed Room and even accompanying him on local expeditions. But Cole Hamilton himself was about to retire.¹⁹

John Frecheville and Joan did return to Yorkshire for a night once during this time, to entertain the Duke of Teck at Longley. John William sent grapes, flowers, cream and eggs from Byram but to his disappointment the party went straight back to their Northamptonshire home next day without visiting him at Byram.²⁰

Father and son: John William and John Frecheville:

For such an intolerant and demanding man, John William was remarkably patient and tolerant with his son. Believing as he did that he himself had been idle and ineffective as a young man, without even the excuse, as he would have been the first to admit, of filling his time with all the social and sporting activities so dear to the heart of John Frecheville, he never doubted that the young man would eventually shoulder his responsibilities. There is no evidence that he in any way excluded John Frecheville from business matters: on the contrary, he did his best to involve him in everything, delighting in any sign of interest and grieving only when, as all too frequently occurred, John Frecheville found that important meetings clashed with his private amusements and he invariably prioritised the latter.²¹

The point has frequently been made that John William could have shackled his son's inheritance with trusts to ensure its survival for future generations. But the restrictions which his own grandfather had imposed had served only to make more difficult the position of his Trustees during his own minority, and he himself had always revelled in his freedom to take his own decisions, which he had done with spectacular success in financial terms throughout his life.

Remarkably Huddersfield was no longer the primary source of family income. Early in the 1870s, just when John William was so keen to put any spare cash available into Ardverikie, a family situation had arisen which was to have repercussions far beyond the lifetimes of any of those involved. John William's only sister, Charlotte, was married to a man named Edward Horsman, a reactionary politician chiefly remembered for his failed attempt to set up a third political party.²² At first he provided a much needed father-figure for John William who gave him full credit for helping him to find his way in life at a difficult time.

As a young man Horsman had seen himself as an entrepreneur ahead of his time. He had invested in sugar plantations in Malaya and in 1851 set up the Penang Sugar Estates (PSE). Unfortunately, he lacked the determination, hard work, sound judgement and judicious investment necessary to make a success of such a project, particularly as he was attempting to run the enterprise from the other side of the world at a time when even a letter might take many weeks to come through. Almost inevitably he was soon begging his rich brother-in-law for financial assistance. John William was initially supportive, at least for his sister's sake. But matters showed no signs of improving and, as Horsman's debts continued to pile up, the position was not helped by his devious, ungrateful attitude.²³

Finally, John William told him that matters could not go on in this way. He was prepared to pay off all the older man's debts, eventually revealed to be in

excess of £300,000, but John William stipulated that the plantations must be made over to him and he refused to provide an income for his brother-in-law for the future. He saw this as the only way to save his sister from bankruptcy, but she and her husband erupted with fury. Relations between brother and sister never really recovered, despite, as is clear from the correspondence, John William's best attempts to heal the breach. This was sad: in earlier years they had had a good relationship. Charlotte gave children's parties for Mymee and teased her brother when, contrary to his own interests, he stubbornly refused to pay a groom's moving expenses from Byram to Bulstrode – 'I hate trouble and so do you'²⁴ – but now loyalty to her husband blinded her to her brother's point of view. She felt that he was being unreasonably harsh: presumably if it had been possible to sell the Malayan estates for a sum sufficient to cover his debts and leave something for himself as well, Horsman would have done so.

'Poor Siss!' John William later wrote to his mother, 'If she is still in the same frame of mind she was in last spring it can be no pleasure to her and certainly a great pain to me for us two to meet.'²⁵ But later, not long before her death, they were on good enough terms for her to write to him saying she longed to see mountains again, and for him immediately to invite her up to Ardverikie.²⁶ Almost equally indignant on the other side of the Horsman question were many of John William's friends and in particular his father-in-law. The Duke believed that if John William escaped without losing more than £80 – 100,000 he would be 'well out of it.'

But John William had taken detailed professional advice throughout. He never set foot himself in Malaya but established a team out there whom he could trust, and a second team in London. He took a detailed interest himself, sometimes too detailed, but the business went from strength to strength. At precisely the right moment, they changed from growing sugar to growing rubber. From the mid-1880s through to the outbreak of the Second World War, the Malayan plantations, or the PRE (Penang Rubber Estates) as they became, were bringing in even more income than Huddersfield and were the primary source of family wealth.

The Malayan position no doubt had considerable bearing on John Frecheville's approach to Huddersfield. From his earliest memories, Huddersfield had ceased to be 'the family business'. Malaya was equally important and, to John Frecheville, who loved travelling, infinitely more attractive. Unlike his father, he did go out there on a number of occasions. At first this pleased his father, who listened eagerly to any suggestions he put forward, taking care, even if he disagreed, not to be discouraging.

Although John William's diary in the last years of his life gives occasional indications of his anxiety over the direction in which his son was moving, he continued to place total confidence in him. He had no alternative. Lloyd

George's controversial 1909 Budget increased death duties even in cases where property was passed on to the younger generation but the donor failed to live for a full three years after making the gift. So, without further consultation with John Frecheville, John William decided (in his own words) 'to abdicate'. This meant that provided he survived until the spring of 1913 no tax would be payable on the transition of the estate. In fact, John William died in April 1914. John Frecheville was astounded, suitably appreciative but did not even fully understand the basis on which the decision was taken. John William thereafter made no attempt to interfere, reserving for his diary his mistrust of the advice now being offered to John Frecheville by a young friend, who made 'a new proposal which I cannot say that I understand.'²⁷

John William's death was immediately followed by the outbreak of the First World War. John Frecheville's letters home are full of plans for ways in which he might spend money once peace came, at his home in Northamptonshire, at Ardverikie and at Muncaster Castle in Cumberland. This had passed to him on the death of the last Lord Muncaster and his wife, both in 1917, following an agreement made by John William seven years before.²⁸ His letters contain few references to Byram or to Huddersfield. By 1918 the world had changed immeasurably from John William's time, which in itself would justify to John Frecheville a reversal of his father's policies. Further, the Huddersfield estate was no longer showing a profit. How much this was due to factors beyond John Frecheville's control and how much to bad management it is impossible to tell. Either way, this situation did little to increase his interest in or enthusiasm for the town.

Another factor too had come into his life, his fascination with Kenya. Even before the outbreak of war in 1914, both a sister and brother of John Frecheville's wife Joan had moved out to Kenya and settled there. Another brother and sister had joined them before the end of the war. John Frecheville and Joan themselves had visited the country first when coming home from Malaya. The wild outdoor life and the challenges of creating a new world attracted him, seemingly offering the best of British life free of the encumbrances he deplored in the modern world. Joan, on the other hand, much as she enjoyed spending time with her brothers and sisters, had reservations. The most sophisticated of the nine Buxton siblings, she had no desire to abandon the comfort and trappings of the modern civilised world. She did not want to spend long days in the saddle rounding up cattle, building a house miles from the nearest European neighbour or even welcoming a lion or cheetah cub into her home, as her siblings happily did. But she supported her husband when he started to buy land in Kenya.

A part of John Frecheville longed to emulate his father and create his own estate with a mansion designed and built by himself, just as John William

had done at Ardverikie. Kenya offered the opportunity to do precisely that. Further, land in Kenya could be bought at subsidised rates by those who had fought in the War.

Early in 1919 John Frecheville started to buy land, initially at Marula. He also invested £900,000 in the Trust which he had set up for speculative investment in raw materials, mostly in Africa, and a further million pounds in Cox's Shipping Agency. Algernon Cox was the friend whose schemes had puzzled and concerned John William before the war. John Frecheville was spending capital which he did not have.²⁹

The sale of Huddersfield

Little was known of the circumstances in which John Frecheville came to sell the Ramsden estate in Huddersfield to the Corporation until the Dawson File, detailing the course of events, came to light in 1970.³⁰ Even then, Stephenson knew little of the position, financial and psychological, of John Frecheville Ramsden; and nothing of the background of the 'Mystery Man' in his story.³¹

The precise sequence of dates is unclear but undoubtedly the financial pressure on Sir John Frecheville was rising within a few weeks of the end of the war, well summarised by the 'cryptically explicit' comment on the sale made to Clifford Stephenson by a member of the family: 'Because we owed eight hundred thousand pounds to the bank.'³² But if Sir John had decided to sell, why did he not go on the open market, or approach the Council himself? Perhaps he could not believe that anyone would be prepared to buy the estate at anything approaching its full value, especially at a time when a number of estates were coming on the market.³³ Selling the estate piecemeal would have been quite a different proposition, and there is no evidence that this was entertained. Wilfrid Dawson may have seen an advantage in conducting negotiations in secrecy to prevent competitive bids. He also believed that Ramsden would not wish to sell to a corporate buyer and there is some evidence for this, but it is more likely that Ramsden was concerned about what others might think or say, and it is more likely still that he had not thought the matter through at all beyond his general desire to sell. He certainly would not have known what sort of reception the idea would be given by the Town Council. If he had thought about it he is likely to have considered it most improbable that the Council would either want or be in a position to buy the whole estate. The proposal put forward in 1894 by Councillor E. A. Beaumont for the Corporation to buy the Estate, had come to nothing.³⁴ There were strict limits on what councils could spend and they were not even allowed to buy land. There is no evidence that Sir John had even heard

of Wilfrid Dawson or of his great ambition 'to see the Corporation own the Ramsden Estate'.³⁵ This was not widely known about even in Huddersfield at the time. Dawson was able to act as he did only because a man such as Sam Copley existed, both able and willing to finance the venture himself and happy, had things turned out differently, to keep the whole estate for himself.

If Sir John were minded to sell but without any clear idea about how or to whom, then this is where Stephenson's 'Mystery Man' comes in. It was he who brought the parties together and it was his solicitor who drove the negotiations forward, so who was he and why did he become involved?

It is clear from names included in the Dawson File that the 'Mystery Man' was Captain Charles Le Despencer Leslie Melville, seventh and youngest child of the fifth son of the Earl of Leven. Born and brought up at Branston Hall in Lincolnshire, he joined the Grenadiers, finishing the war as a captain. In 1911 he had married Rose Chesney at the fashionable church of St George's Hanover Square, but all was not as the family might have wished. Charles was the black sheep of the Leslie Melville family. He was declared bankrupt in 1912.

The family was well-known and respected in Branston. Charles' father was a banker, had been High Sheriff of Lincolnshire, and served as a magistrate and Deputy Lieutenant. There was no shortage of money at home and perhaps Charles began to pin his hopes on an inheritance. If so, he was to be disappointed. His parents in fact handled his bankruptcy with dignity, sensitivity and caution. His mother made a new will in 1912 in the light of the situation. Apart from a number of legacies for family, godchildren and staff, her main property was 338 acres of land in County Cork, known as her Irish estates. This land, or the capital representing it if it were sold, was put in trust with the income going to her husband during his lifetime and after his death to Charles as the main beneficiary.

Charles had an older brother, Alexander, also a captain in the army, but apparently a man more in the mould of his father. He and Arthur Tritton, probably a London banker, were the two trustees for what became known as Charles' Trust, with the extremely onerous duty of ensuring that the capital remained intact and deciding how the income was to be allocated. Everything was tied up as tightly as possible to ensure that neither Charles nor his creditors had access to the capital and it was for the trustees to decide whether the income went to Charles, his wife or any children.

His mother died in March 1918 and his father in the following January. His brother was an executor of both wills, together with other family members and, in their father's case, another local banker. Although their mother's estates, including the Irish land, were worth less than £17,000, their father left more than £120,000. Once again, everything was kept well away from Charles and his creditors. The family pearls might be worn by his wife or a daughter if he

had one, but the likelihood of him attempting to sell them was foreseen and forestalled. His debts to his father were to be dealt with sympathetically but not totally written off: £5,000 and some further land was added to his Trust fund, and £1,000, partly in kind, was made available for furnishing a house, but everything else went primarily to his brother with a portion for his sisters.

His parents were determined that he should not have the opportunity to fritter away any more of the family money and the details of their settlements indicate how aware they were that they were dealing with a highly manipulative man, and one who would not hesitate to sacrifice not only his siblings but his wife and any future children for his own benefit.

From the time the contents of his father's will were known, early in 1919, Charles considered his position desperate. Precisely what happened next will probably never be known. In order to persuade Copley to pay him the huge commission of £20,000, having originally negotiated twice that amount, he must have been both convincing and determined. To prevent Copley and Dawson from thinking, as Clifford Stephenson later thought, that 'never was so much earned so easily'³⁶ he must have convinced both men that he, and he alone, could persuade John Frecheville to sell. This was Copley's recollection of events.³⁷ Though indubitably a rogue, Melville was evidently a plausible one. This was his opportunity in a lifetime: even the reduced figure of £20,000 was probably close to the capital value of his Trust fund and here there would be no meddling trustees or interfering lawyers to frustrate him.

There is nothing surprising about Melville's knowledge of John Frecheville's position. The two men were exact contemporaries. They had been at school together. Melville was a second cousin of John Frecheville's former sister-in-law Clare, originally married to Geoff Buxton, brother of Joan and a Kenyan resident. Another second cousin was David Leslie Melville, who, like John Frecheville, built himself a house in the Wanjohi Valley in Kenya, where Geoff Buxton was the first Briton to build. The two men could have met anywhere, in England, Scotland (where the Leslie Melville family owned an estate near Kingussie, not far from Ardverikie) or in Kenya. It is particularly easy to visualise the conversation taking place around the campfire in the African bush, John Frecheville's eyes lighting up with enthusiasm for all that he longed to do and commenting on how dearly he would love to exchange a future in Kenya for his fractious and unrewarding Huddersfield. It may be that Melville in exchange grumbled about his lack of money, with Ramsden even suggesting that Melville might secure for himself a healthy commission if he could arrange a sale. We shall never know, but Copley's recollection of what Melville told him at their first meeting suggests that all this is quite plausible – more plausible than Stephenson's string of coincidences.³⁸

The story as told by Clifford Stephenson relies so heavily on coincidence that it almost beggars belief. That the group of Dawson's friends who met on the train, on the unusual occasion when Dawson himself was unable to go to his own flat in London, should happen to include a stranger, who by chance invited him to stay and only then discovered that he came from Huddersfield, so then casually asked if he knew anyone interested in buying a large estate there, stretches coincidence to breaking point. It also ignores the cunning displayed in other parts of the story by Charles Leslie Melville as well as his nature and circumstances. Copley's account seems much more probable: that the friends were Copley, Dawson and White and that he had met them in White's office where the initial Huddersfield conversation took place. It may have been a coincidence that Melville visited White's office when Copley and Dawson were there, or Melville may already have done his homework, found out about Copley's or Dawson's dreams for Huddersfield and made sure that he was himself in the right place at the right time so that the whole process could progress with a slickness engendered by careful planning.

The man who sold Huddersfield

John Frecheville was generous but not a good judge of character and he always kept his own counsel. His closest confidante was his wife, Joan. Their marriage was exceptionally close, despite the willingness of both to spend months apart when he was in Kenya and she was happier in the garden at home. In many ways they were very like each other but, in common with most men of his generation, he would not have discussed financial matters in depth with her. The one with whom arguably he should have discussed the whole issue of Huddersfield was his oldest son and heir, John St. Maur Ramsden, who was eighteen in 1920, a young man of high intelligence, sensitive, thoughtful, but also practical. There is no record of what he thought about the sale of Huddersfield but he spent much of the following year, 1921, with his father in Kenya, sometimes just the two of them and sometimes joined by John's uncle, Geoff Buxton. All the indications are that John became very close to his father at this time. He certainly fell in love with Kenya, where he was to spend much time later in his life, writing in his diary 'I speak of Africa and Golden Joys'.³⁹

John was supposed to be going up to Cambridge in October 1921 but, at his father's instigation, a somewhat high-handed telegram was sent to the university informing them that he would not now be coming up until after Christmas. John, unlike his father, was a hard worker by nature and he eventually returned having prepared a presentation for the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford of an anthropological collection. Father, son and uncle all relaxed together, joking and enjoying the country.



48. Sir John Frecheville Ramsden (1877–1958).
Ramsden Family Collection

Yet John Frecheville's mind at this time was filled with the need to decide on the future of Byram, family home for the Ramsden family for hundreds of years and, now that Huddersfield was sold, their last real link with Yorkshire.⁴⁰ He discussed it with no-one, probably not even Geoff Buxton. When John eventually returned to England he picked up a copy of *Country Life*. As he wrote in his diary:

I came on an advertisement for Byram to be sold. It is the first I have ever heard of it. I think it is a very good thing as it is expensive to keep up and we never live there. I really don't know the house at all and have no regrets about it but the garden with its beautiful terrace and statues by the lake and its wonderful yew fences, the highest I have ever seen, will be a loss. I am afraid Daddy who knows it well is very sad at parting with it. However it is such an expense to keep up and wants so much money spending on it before we could live there that it is hardly worth keeping it.⁴¹

John William, while making all the decisions himself, had allowed his son to make a playground of his empire, visiting Malaya in lordly style, in the

hope that the young man would develop a sense of responsibility towards his inheritance. John Frecheville was a much more kindly and sensitive man than his father, yet he made no attempt to involve his children in any aspect until they were older, when John St. Maur in particular was sent out to undertake relatively menial duties in both Kenya and Malaya, where tragically he was eventually murdered.

On the other hand, even without knowing John's reaction to the sale of Byram, there can be no doubt that, had he been consulted on the sale of Huddersfield, he would have given his unconditional support: what seventeen-year-old would not choose the paradise on earth which Kenya then was for him to the responsibilities of Huddersfield? The people of Huddersfield benefited from the decision.

Conclusion

John William and John Frecheville were very different men. John William was never what in the modern world would be described as a 'people person.' He cared more deeply for places than for people. The lethargy of which he was so conscious in his youth perhaps sprang from a perception that his role in life demanded all the qualities which did not come naturally to him. He had no wish to socialise with his neighbours, take a kindly interest in the lives of his employees, show gracious charm when opening a new building in Huddersfield or, as an MP, win the hearts of his constituents. He was not what at the time would have been described as a 'clubbable man'. It was probably this aspect of his nature which led to the oft-quoted comment: 'From his childhood Sir John William Ramsden, the fifth baronet, lived with the reputation of being a dislikeable person.'⁴²

John William's skills were rather those of the businessman or entrepreneur. Gradually he turned his life round so that he was doing the things at which he excelled. He gave up politics, in which he had little interest, and took on running his estates with total personal commitment. The acquisition of the Malayan plantations provided him with precisely the challenge he needed. Once he had a job which suited him, he worked as hard as anyone he employed. His interests too came to fit in well with his commitments. He derived enormous pleasure from planting trees on all his estates, initially in particular at Buckden and later at Ardverikie. Building and designing houses was another passion which accorded well with his position. Whilst never an easy man personally, as he found scope for the things at which he excelled he undoubtedly became a better husband, son, father and eventually grandfather.

On the other hand, he could be ruthless and vindictive. His treatment of the architect and his wife at Ardverikie is the classic example, with the couple

dragged through the courts even after the unfortunate man's death in a lunatic asylum to which John William's behaviour had driven him for his misguided attempts to help his client, but there were many others. John William's habit of suing people whose performance had fallen short of what he expected at times resulted in him being unable to find anyone prepared to work for him.⁴³

Yet his diaries in later life reveal a more sensitive, caring man than outsiders ever dreamed of. He undoubtedly mellowed with age. Many of his staff were extraordinarily loyal to him and stayed with him for most of their lives. Sometimes he struggled to see things from the point of view of others, in part because his personal life experience was so utterly different from that of the majority of people with whom he came in contact. If his system provided for paying bills on a six-monthly basis, it simply would not have occurred to him that this could create cash-flow problems for others. But, while he remained in charge, the jobs of his employees were secure. His empire was built on a sound foundation. In later years, his diary records numerous instances of his care and concern for members of his staff. He spent long hours sitting by the bedside of the much loved Ardverikie factor when the man was dying, talking to the doctors and undertaking various chores himself. Three years after Guen's death, and only a year before his own, he wrote in his diary:

I walked to the Beaconsfield Lodge to enquire after old Mrs. Dancer, aged 85 [three years older than John William himself] the widow of old Dancer who died there some months ago. I am paying a nurse as her daughter seems incapable of tending her.⁴⁴

This was not an isolated incident. Guendolen would have been proud of him.

With the family, his worst tendency was to bully where he could do so with impunity while respecting any demonstration of qualities matching his own unbending determination. Thus, while he often laughed at his independent daughter Mymee, she could speak her mind to him with absolute impunity while the gentle, loveable Rosamund, endlessly kind and considerate to her father, frequently dared not approach him. Yet it is apparent from his diary, as it was not apparent to Rosamund herself, that this was simply his habitual way of expressing himself. He adored his younger daughter, was immensely appreciative of all she did for him after the death of Guendolen, and found Rosamund's death at such a young age probably the most tragic and shattering event of his lifetime. Even in practical, financial terms, while offering little support to her husband, he ensured that her son was extremely well provided for.

John William's relations with Guendolen improved throughout his life as age, experience and the support of her mother-in-law built up her confidence. With John Frecheville, while the mockery was often to the fore, he never took off the kid gloves. Falling out with his only son was one disaster

in life which he was determined to avoid at all costs. He often worried, sometimes despaired, strove to guide him in what John William believed to be the right direction, but ultimately he had no alternative. John Frecheville was his future. Had he had two sons, or even lived at a time when a daughter could be considered on an equal footing with her brother, he might perhaps have played one off against the other. It is impossible to tell. As it was, John Frecheville held the ace of trumps.

Considering the differences in their characters, it is remarkable that the two men got on as well as they did. But then it was so clearly in the interests of both that they should do so. Each ultimately wanted the relationship between them to work and neither ever risked seriously endangering it. The very skill which was John Frecheville's strength, and the absence of which was his father's weakness, helped the younger man immeasurably. He did have considerable charm, a natural way of getting on with people which stood him in good stead throughout his life and worked even with his own father.

His strengths and weaknesses were quite different from those of his father. John William only really flourished once he entered the commercial world. This was never an environment with much allure for John Frecheville, cultured, with wide interests, undoubtedly a 'people person'. John Frecheville was an urbane man with a large circle of friends, playing a prominent part in the social and sporting worlds of England, Scotland and Kenya, well-travelled, well-read, an immensely knowledgeable plantsman, interested in history and a number of scientific subjects where he was keen to attempt to turn such knowledge as he had into successful business ventures. He was also a practical man who earned his Swahili nickname Kimondo, referring to the bag of nails and basic tools he carried everywhere with him. He, almost alone amongst the European settlers, knew exactly how to build waterways on the land, something of vital importance when establishing new grazing areas. He and Arthur Cole, husband of his niece Tobina, had a shared enthusiasm for all such projects and delighted in working together to bring life-giving water to their arid estates.

Tobina (then Cartwright), as a young girl in Kenya, had lived in her uncle's house for extended periods, and described him some 70 years later as a giant among men. People of all ages and from different walks of life undoubtedly adored him. He would bring a young grandson into a group in a way which made the boy feel on equal terms with his grandfather's friends. With his own children as they grew up, however, he could sometimes lack imagination and if they were acting on his behalf he was frequently reluctant to accept their accounts of events, preferring the word of an unreliable employee: he did not always show good judgement when making appointments.

Whether John William would in fact have delegated authority had the young John Frecheville been willing to take responsibility was rarely tested.

John William certainly believed that he was keen to do so and only his son's total lack of interest prevented him from playing a prominent part in the family businesses. A generation later John Frecheville was not good at delegating to his children, all of whom in different capacities tried to undertake some of his burdens, only to have their efforts rebuffed. John St. Maur in both Kenya and Malaya, Bobbie at Muncaster and Joyce at Ardverikie all suffered from this.

More of an idealist than his father, John Frecheville was at one time keen to enter Parliament, fired with enthusiasm for the good he might achieve. John William had no such ideals: his principles were concerned rather with running a sound and successful business. John Frecheville's dreams were more uplifting and inspirational. Unfortunately, he rarely showed the determination necessary to put them into practice.

The fact that John William died in April 1914 (demonstrating, one is tempted to feel, his usual impeccable timing) meant that the transition of power from father to son (for, despite a few ominous rumblings, little of major importance changed in John William's lifetime after his so-called 'abdication') was simultaneous with one of the greatest watersheds in history. John William was not the only Victorian to build up an enormous business empire in an age of expansion. John Frecheville had to contend with two world wars and the Great Depression. Had their roles been reversed, it is interesting to speculate how the fortunes of all involved would have been altered.

John Frecheville would no doubt have settled into the role of a Victorian country gentleman as so many others did, enjoying a full social life, country pursuits, sport, books, developing and caring for some magnificent gardens and perhaps dabbling in some scientific experimentation, a relaxed, contented dilettante. He would happily have left the management of Huddersfield to an agent: the outcome would have depended upon the approach of the man in charge. The income it provided would have kept him in the style to which he was accustomed. He would not have taken on the challenge of Malaya.

John William, had he been dealt the same cards which life presented to John Frecheville, would have played his hand quite differently. Quick to spot opportunities and, with none of the temptations of Kenya which so attracted John Frecheville, he would have worked to retain a more dominant role in Malaya and to build up Huddersfield after the war. The sale of the complete estate – particularly at such a low price – to the Corporation would have been unthinkable to him. Nor would he have had dealings with a man such as Charles Leslie Melville: John William tolerated neither fools nor villains. So, Huddersfield owed its chance to become 'The Town That Bought Itself' to John Frecheville. His father would never have given the town that opportunity.

Note

Most of the information in this chapter is taken from private sources not accessible to the public. Enormous numbers of family letters, diaries and other papers are in the possession of the family but have never been catalogued. Thus any attempt to reference them would be meaningless. The author had access to some of this material for her book *Poverty is Relative* and this is the source for much of the material contained in this chapter.

Endnotes

- 1 See chapter 3, p. 89.
- 2 See chapter 2, pp. 56–7.
- 3 See above, chapter 4, p. 120.
- 4 Whomsley (1974), pp. 191–2.
- 5 Whomsley (1974), pp. 198–200 and above, chapter 2, pp. 57–8.
- 6 JWR Diary, 1887.
- 7 JWR Diary, 1879.
- 8 Several references in diary of Sir John William Ramsden and in correspondence between JWR and his wife
- 9 Buxton (2017), pp. 71–4.
- 10 JWR to Isabella Ramsden, 4 September 1869.
- 11 Isabella Ramsden to JWR, 1869.
- 12 Buxton (2017), pp. 69–71.
- 13 JWR Diary.
- 14 *The Times*, 3 February 1953; see also *ODNB* (2004), ‘Bentinck, Ruth Mary Cavendish-
[née Ruth Mary St Maur] (1867–1953).
- 15 Guendolen Ramsden to JWR, 1874.
- 16 Various letters from JWR to Guendolen Ramsden.
- 17 JWR Diary, 1909.
- 18 JWR Diary, 1909.
- 19 JWR Diaries, 1910–14.
- 20 JWR Diary.
- 21 JWR Diaries.
- 22 *ODNB* (2004), ‘Horsman, Edward (1807–1876)’.
- 23 Cumbria Record Office, Whitehaven, Pennington-Ramsden Papers, DPEN 383/10, Correspondence regarding Edward Horsman’s accounts, including a detailed list of £17,000 of Horsman’s general debts on 30 Jun 1876; and 386/4, Correspondence mainly between Sir John Ramsden and Edward Horsman concerning their efforts to raise money to ameliorate Horsman’s financial situation, 1874–6; Buxton (2017), pp. 114–17.
- 24 Charlotte Horsman to JWR.
- 25 JWR to Isabella Ramsden.
- 26 JWR Diary.
- 27 JWR Diary.
- 28 Correspondence between JWR and 5th Baron Muncaster.
- 29 Buxton (2017), pp. 247–78.

- 30 Stephenson (1972), pp. 9–16. See chapter 6 for details, pp. 175–7.
- 31 Stephenson (1972), p. 11.
- 32 Stephenson (1972), p. 16.
- 33 Beard (1989), pp. 38–54.
- 34 *HDE*, 28 October 1919; see chapter 6, p.177.
- 35 DF 77, W. P. Raynor to Dawson, 1 November 1919.
- 36 Stephenson (1972), p. 11.
- 37 KC/592/2/15, ‘How I came to be interested in Huddersfield’ – see chapter 6, p. 181.
- 38 KC/592/2/15, ‘How I came to be interested in Huddersfield’ – see chapter 6, pp. 181–2.
- 39 John St Maur Ramsden Diary, 1921.
- 40 See Wickham and Lynch (2019).
- 41 John St Maur Ramsden Diary, 1921.
- 42 Although a number of authors quote this, I have been unable to trace its original source.
- 43 Buxton (2017), pp. 102–9.
- 44 JWR Diary, 1913.