

# OXTON HISTORY



## George Rae: the Scot who moved to Oxton

*Scottish born George Rae settled in Oxton during the exciting Victorian era. He had a startlingly successful career as a banker and was centrally involved in the early development of Birkenhead and Oxton townships. As his personal fortune grew, he became an avid art collector and had an impressive impact on national art collections that we know today.*



*George Rae, by Margaret Rae. Oil on canvas, (after Frank Holl). Williamson Art Gallery*

George Rae was born in Aberdeen in 1818 and died in Oxton in 1902. He was educated at the Classical & Commercial Academy in Aberdeen and was intended for a life of law, starting work at a Scottish law firm aged 18. But after 18 months he joined the North of Scotland Bank as branch accountant first at Peterhead, then Keith and Elgin.

The turning point for George (and Oxton) was in April 1839 when, aged only 21, he was appointed the Inspector of branches at the Liverpool Head Office of the North & South Wales Bank. Rapid promotion followed and after a short spell as manager of the Oswestry branch he became the General Director of

the firm and settled with his family on the Wirral. There was a banking crisis in 1847, which he and the bank weathered well; the bank was able to rapidly expand its operations. In 1865, Rae became the Managing Director and in June 1873 he was elected as the Chairman of the Board. He held these joint positions until his retirement at 80 in 1898.

He married Elspeth Kynoch of Keith in 1845 and moved to 10 Kenyon Terrace (now 19 Devonshire Road, Claughton, Birkenhead). The improved and reliable ferry services across the Mersey meant many prominent Liverpool businessfolk settled in the new expanding leafy Birkenhead suburbs of Claughton and Oxton. The Wirral peninsula was ideally situated between his Liverpool city financial base and his clients across Cheshire, North Wales and beyond. The couple had two sons and a daughter but in 1851 his young wife suddenly died, leaving Rae a widower with three children under the age of five.

Unsurprisingly, Rae married a second time in 1855 to Julia Williams, a young lady from Carmarthenshire with the full blessing of her father (she was under 21 at the time).

Rae became a substantial shareholder, expert financial adviser and a wealthy man. He played a prominent part in the passage of the Liabilities Bill of 1879 and wrote a best-selling manual of banking, *The Country Banker: His Clients, Cares and Work*, which went to several editions between 1885 and 1939. Much of his advice about getting to know your customers well is still applicable today.

Throughout his career, Rae played a pivotal role in local life, politics and economics. He was a much-respected businessman and an upstanding member of the expanding Birkenhead community. He joined the Birkenhead Commissioners in 1847 as the treasurer and is often quoted in the local press commenting on projects such as Flaybrick Cemetery, the local tram service, the docks and urban utilities. He was in demand for company boards and committees.

By 1861, the family had moved to a larger house at 32 Devonshire Road and then to an even larger one at 57

Devonshire Road; they clearly liked the Oxton area. George Rae had a big passion for art and he began to buy contemporary paintings from artists he met in Liverpool, London and Paris. His preference was to buy art direct from the artists themselves rather than intermediate art dealers and agents. He became one of the biggest collectors of Pre-Raphaelite art.

His blossoming family moved in the top echelons of Victorian society, attending balls and events with royalty, the gentry and the wealthy merchant classes of Liverpool, Wirral, Cheshire and North Wales. They became a sporting, shooting, cultured, socialising and travelling clan. Rae maintained a holiday home at Rhoscolyn in Anglesey. For health reasons and holidays, he travelled across Europe, Russia and the Middle East, which was then the fashion. In 1898, aged 82, George privately published two volumes of his adventures at sea and holiday travels for his grandchildren's entertainment – the books contain his amusing correspondence to his family detailing his trips. Both his sons were involved in financial business; the elder married an American lady and the younger wrote books about his own globetrotting adventures to the Middle East.

With a growing family, a household of servants, souvenirs from the family escapades abroad and a burgeoning art collection what he needed was a house to accommodate this lifestyle. The solution: Rae commissioned Edmund Kirby, another Oxton resident and Liverpool-based architect, to build a house on approximately nine acres of land he had acquired just off Devonshire Road. Kirby is mainly famous for designing churches but he also built some banks for the North & South Wales Bank; so Rae had business connections to the architect too. Work began on Redcourt (most recently St Anselm's Preparatory School) in 1876, the perfect home to house not just his family but also his paintings.



*Redcourt*

Redcourt was completed in 1879.

Rae was also responsible for commissioning another architect, John Pollard Seddon, to design the bank's Birkenhead branch at 52 Hamilton Street, which opened in 1880 and another branch in Liverpool. Interestingly, Seddon's brother, Thomas, was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.



*The Beloved by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1866)*

Rae became a major patron of contemporary artists and built an impressive collection of national importance. Rae is especially remembered for his patronage of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) and enthusiastically collecting their paintings. He was first inspired by their work after seeing 'A Huguenot' by Millais at the Liverpool Academy in 1852. He bought his first watercolour painting by George Price Boyce in 1860. He bought his first Ford Maddox Brown in 1861 and his first Rossetti in 1862. His Rossetti collection alone numbered 19 works, at the time the largest collection of Rossettis in private hands. He owned six pictures by Ford Maddox Brown and five by Arthur Hughes. A brief printed catalogue of paintings at Redcourt listed 95 works. By 1893, there were 200 paintings in Redcourt or Rhoscolyn. He also owned 80 paintings by Liverpool artists, in particular Irish-born William Davis, who worked in Liverpool about 1842 to 1870 and William JJC Bond. His collection was so significant that he regularly loaned paintings to national exhibitions and books were published about it.

Edward, George's second son, married the daughter of another PRB collector, James Leathart, of Newcastle. Edward also collected art and loaned work to exhibitions in his lifetime too.

The Rae family were Anglicans and attended St Mary's in Birkenhead, then St Saviour's Church in Oxtan, where the West window with Burne-Jones' designs is a memorial to George Rae (1817-1902). Edward his son also carved the chancel screen, choir and clergy stalls in the church and the reredos in the South Chapel. George was laid to rest in Flaybrick Cemetery in 1902.

George left a substantial fortune of £198,000 and extensive instructions in his will for his family, servants and property including his 'pictures'. He also left many charitable donations. His art collection appears to have remained intact within his properties in Oxtan and Anglesey – he specifically requested in his will that his executors avoided selling any of his paintings while his widow, Julia, remained living at Redcourt. However, after his wife died in 1915, possibly due to death duties or maybe encouragement from leading art figures, part of the art collections were sold off in 1916 and 1917. Some were sold to national galleries such as the Tate and some to private individuals and collectors such as Lord Leverhulme. As a result, many significant paintings from the Pre-Raphaelites have ended up across the UK (and beyond) in prominent public galleries today. The family held on to some special paintings, which were much later bequeathed to galleries such as the Williamson and Walker. Leverhulme in turn later donated his purchases to the Lady Lever Art Gallery.

Alice Rae, George's youngest child, who never married, remained living at Redcourt, regularly supporting the charities and causes her father had favoured, such as local hospitals and universities. George B. Rae, the eldest son, had already moved south to Lambeth in London and later to Kent with his American born family. Edward Rae, the second son, a Liverpool stockbroker, remained close by in Oxtan with his family in a house called Courthill but sadly suffered the loss of one of his sons in World War I; the son's remains have never been found.

Finally, after Alice Rae herself died in 1939, Redcourt and all its contents were put up for sale, marking an end of an era for George Rae connections. It seems the house struggled to sell but World War II interrupted things and the house was requisitioned for official war time use along with other large buildings in the area. After the war, the house was once again offered for sale and the Congregation of Christian Brothers (sometimes called the Irish Christian Brothers) bought it for £3,250 in 1946 to use as one of their schools – Redcourt became a Catholic boys' preparatory school and the gardens became concrete playgrounds. In 1991, the independent school admitted girls. The junior school continued until very recently but dwindling pupil numbers and economics meant the place was eventually put on the market again in 2019.

Who knows what the future holds for George Rae's house?

## Number 1a Village Road

Number 1a Village Road, soon it seems to become another member of the family of Oxtan restaurants, was built as an outbuilding at the same time as the main 'Greens' building, which was both commercial and residential. That building was occupied for many years by the Male family business; painting, decorating, plumbing and general contracting services. It was undoubtedly first used as a garage for their horse-drawn and petrol-driven vehicles. And it has kept that general purpose through much of the 20th century, home to an engineering business of "Thomas Amery, Engineer". Subsequently it was occupied by 'Borough Tyres', as can be seen in this advertisement from 1964. 'National Tyres' took them over in the 1970s and the manager was Ian Hosie, who later set up his own business in Grange Mount. So in those days, some 50 years ago, in addition to buying knitting needles, electric fires, clocks and watches, even placing a bet in the betting shop, you could also purchase your new car tyres and get your wheels balanced in Oxtan. And as you can see in the advert you could also get them "regrooved", though I couldn't recommend it.

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## The Lords of the Manor of Oxton

W.W. Mortimer in his classic work “*The History of the Hundred of Wirral*” published in 1847 says of Oxton that it was “... passed by successive heirs from the Domvilles, in whom it was vested at a very early period, through the Hulses and the Troutbecks to the Talbots.” We can reasonably assume that “at a very early period” means soon after the Norman Conquest of 1066.



*George Talbot*

Almost five centuries later, Sir John Talbot of Albrighton, Shropshire, married Margaret Troutbeck of Mobberley, Cheshire. She was the sole heiress of the Troutbeck estates in Wirral, and she brought with her, in part, to that marriage both the ownership and the Lordship of Oxton. Margaret died in July 1521 at just 27 years old (having by then given birth to 3 sons and 5 daughters) and, almost immediately, Sir John Talbot gifted Oxton to his cousin, George Talbot, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shrewsbury. Why he should have done that is not clear, but the death of his wife Margaret at that very time seems significant. So, it is from that date (1521) that the direct connection between the title of *Lord of the Manor of Oxton* and the Earls of Shrewsbury begins. Move forward now another 440 years.

In 1962 John George Chetwynd-Talbot, 21<sup>st</sup> Earl of Shrewsbury, sold off what then remained of the earls’ historic interests in Oxton. Those interests had gradually reduced over relatively recent times, and especially since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century when land here had been made available by them for residential development – either through purchase or (more popularly) leasing. The successful purchasers were

Ashdale Land & Property Co. Ltd.; the cost to them was £337,674. Within the conditions of their acquisition, Ashdale could continue to collect the rent on existing leases, or to sell land for development (which begins to explain the almost immediate development of Oxton’s last remaining farm land into modern housing estates), but clearly they could not claim the rights to the title of *Lordship of Oxton*. That remained with the Talbot family.



*Charles Henry John Benedict Crofton Chetwynd Chetwynd-Talbot*

The 21<sup>st</sup> Earl of Shrewsbury died in November 1980, and was survived by his second wife, Nina. The title of *Earl of Shrewsbury* passed to his son from his first marriage – Charles Henry John Benedict Crofton Chetwynd Chetwynd-Talbot — the 22<sup>nd</sup> and current Earl. Having no property interests in Oxton, the new Earl decided in 1990 to “divest himself of manorial titles through auction houses”, and so the title of *The Lordship of the Manor of Oxton* was put up for sale. After almost 500 years, the ownership of that title by the Earls of Shrewsbury was about to end.

So who owns the title now? Find out in the next Oxton history periodical.

### Notice Board

For further information about the Oxton History Research Group, or anything else that you are interested in or would like to know more about Oxton’s history, contact **Bob Knowles** at [history@theoxtonsociety.co.uk](mailto:history@theoxtonsociety.co.uk).