

## **Sandbach History Society Report of the December 2023 meeting**

**Speaker: Anthony Annakin-Smith**

At the online December meeting of Sandbach History Society, Dr Anthony Annakin-Smith gave a fascinating talk entitled "Statesmanship, Tragedy and Love, a tale of nineteenth century adventurers abroad." Dr Annakin-Smith said that his research started with finding a grave in Neston churchyard with an engraving of a sailing ship and the names of three people underneath. The people were Charles Roscoe who lost his life at sea on Oct 7 1889 aged 34, Zebby who died in 1926 aged 65 and Thomas Roscoe who died in 1939. Charles is remembered on the grave as a dearly beloved husband and Zebby as the wife of Thomas Roscoe. Dr Annakin-Smith was interested in the ship on the gravestone and the fact that Charles and Thomas shared a surname.

Dr Annakin-Smith began by researching Charles Roscoe and found from the 1871 census that he was aged 16 and working at Talbot House in Parkgate employed by a wealthy widow called Elizabeth Holbrook. Elizabeth died in 1873 and in the same year Charles is recorded on the Merchant Navy Crew Lists as a mariner. He worked on several ships over the next 15 years and in 1885 married his childhood sweetheart, Hephzibah Campion, known as Zebby. After the marriage he took command of the 64 foot schooner Primus which traded along the west coast of England to Ireland. This is the ship shown on the gravestone.

According to newspaper reports in October 1889 there was a great storm in the Irish Sea with almost hurricane force winds. Charles was in charge of the schooner Primus with two other crew members sailing from Wexford in Southern Ireland to Connah's Quay near Chester and was caught up in the storm. Primus went aground on a sandbank at the mouth of the Dee estuary and was wrecked and all the crew were lost. Charles's body was not discovered until late December and then he was buried in Neston churchyard.

Dr Annakin-Smith then researched what happened to Zebby. She was now a poor young widow who needed to earn a living and she started work as a servant at the Union Hotel, now the Ship Inn, in Parkgate on the Wirral. It seems unlikely she would have been able to afford the expensive headstone for her husband's grave so it was unclear who paid for it.

In 1891 the passenger list for the ship Circassian shows Zebby travelling from Liverpool to Quebec in Canada. She then took the steamer to Montreal and then the newly opened railroad 2,900 miles to New Westminster, now a suburb of Vancouver. At the time, the largest town in British Columbia. On the day after Zebby arrived she is recorded as marrying Thomas Roscoe, the brother of her deceased husband. It appears that this was well-planned and that Thomas had made his way separately to New Westminster from Britain.

However, this marriage was in fact illegal. A British law, passed in 1835, made it illegal for a man to marry his deceased wife's sister and also, as in this case, for a woman to marry her deceased husband's brother. Such a marriage was seen as a form of incest and, though unpopular was not repealed until the early twentieth century. It was also illegal in Canada so this does not explain why the couple emigrated to New Westminster but could explain why the gravestone in Neston churchyard does not identify Charles and Thomas as brothers. Dr Annakin-Smith suggested that the motivation for emigration came from Henry Holbrook, the son of Elizabeth Holbrook of Talbot House in Parkgate. He was a Cheshire-born businessman and politician who lived in New Westminster for many years and was a passionate advocate for Canada when he returned to Parkgate.

Henry Holbrook was born near Northwich in 1820 and his mother's family came from Bradwall near Sandbach. He grew up on the Wirral and became a merchant and businessman, initially in Liverpool. He travelled to San Francisco at the time of the gold rush, then to Crimea when the war was waging and from there to western Canada at the time of the gold rush. Dr Annakin Smith described him as an opportunist entrepreneur and what we would call a wheeler-dealer. In the 1850s British Columbia and Vancouver Island were British colonies and not part of the Dominion of Canada which consisted of Quebec and Ontario.

The colonies had their own parliaments and Holbrook became a Minister of the Crown in British Columbia whose capital was New Westminster. He became the Honourable Henry Holbrook and was an advocate for British Columbia joining the Dominion as well as supporting the building of the trans-continental railway. He was also often a lone voice in support of the rights of the Indigenous people who he called 'Indians.' On his gravestone in Sandbach is written "*Hon Henry Holbrook J.P., Late Minister of the Crown in the Cabinet of the Government of British Columbia, Canada.*"

Dr Annakin-Smith said that research shows that Henry Holbrook returned to England in 1871 to see his mother before she died and then came back permanently in 1881 to live at Parkgate. He took an active part in the local community and was a member of the Cheshire County Council Local Fishery Committee where he advocated the rights of the fishing community. He was the unofficial ambassador for Western Canada and ran public meetings where he encouraged emigration to Canada which he called God's country. It seems very likely that it was he who encouraged Zebby and Thomas to emigrate in 1891 and it may be that he paid for their fares. It is also possible that he paid for the elaborate gravestone to Charles Roscoe.

Henry died in 1902 and was buried at St Mary Church in Sandbach where his parents were married. In his lifetime he paid for a stained-glass window in the church in memory of his mother. He also donated the bell chimes and the illuminated clock dials in the tower which are still in use today. There is a stone memorial on the south wall of the church commemorating these gifts by Henry Holbrook in memory of his mother and sister. Dr Annakin-Smith concluded this remarkable story of statesmanship, tragedy and

love by referring back to the gravestone and engraving of the ship which had started this fascinating research into the lives of Zebby, the Roscoe brothers and Henry Holbrook. He stated that Zebby and Henry led very different lives but both were pioneers who shared a sense of courage and adventure.

The next meeting of the Sandbach History Society will be held online on Tuesday January 2<sup>nd</sup> at 8pm when Margaret Roberts will talk about “Fodens Ladies”, the story of one of the leading women's football teams, the works team for Edwin Foden, Sons & Co., based in Sandbach. For more information, go to the Society website, <https://sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk>, Visitors are most welcome but please contact the Society at [info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk](mailto:info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk)