

# Whatever happened to Sarah?

*Vic Gray explores the background to a chance survival which uncovered a forgotten Rothschild initiative*

We know nothing of Sarah Tomlin. The Tomlin family lived modestly in the Buckinghamshire village of Aston Clinton in the 1860s, a family of rural labourers. But when the census enumerator called, Sarah was not there, perhaps away in service. All we have now is her name, engraved on the rim of a bronze medal. It may have been her only moment of fame.

The medal, recently acquired at auction by The Rothschild Archive (000/851), commemorates the Halton Industrial Exhibition of 1868, now virtually forgotten but in its day a bold experiment in rural community regeneration.

The Exhibition was the brainchild of Sir Anthony de Rothschild, second son of Nathan Mayer Rothschild, a committed countryman who, in 1851, had taken up residence in Aston Clinton at the foot of the Chiltern Hills.

1851 was a significant date. In that year Joseph Paxton was designing the Rothschild's first English country house, at Mentmore, just down the road from Aston Clinton, while at the same time his innovative and influential structure at Crystal Palace was taking shape to house the Great Exhibition, intended to display the best in industry and arts from around the world. It spawned many imitations around the world, most of them on an equally grand scale. What Anthony did in 1868 was to take the concept of the Great Exhibition and apply it on a more local scale, in an effort to demonstrate the range of creativity and skills in a small rural community.



*The opening of the Halton Industrial Exhibition by Benjamin Disraeli*

The seed of this idea rapidly took root. The original intention to focus on Aston Clinton and its immediate neighbourhood was rapidly left behind as applications to display crafts, artefacts and produce poured in from an area more than 20 miles across and covering 50 parishes. The fact that small rural industries, often cottage work undertaken by individuals, might merit a place in an exhibition aimed at a broad range of society, encouraged participation in just the way that Anthony had intended. More than 3,000 exhibits were eventually submitted and displayed.

Central to these were agriculture and cottage husbandry and the traditional Buckinghamshire craft of straw plaiting. But exhibits demonstrating individual crafts – building furniture, tool-making – were welcomed as a means of raising standards and of encouraging self-help initiatives to relieve poverty. A special prize was to be awarded for the best model of a modern farm cottage to be submitted by a local carpenter or builder, a contribution to the great movement of the time to provide cheap but hygienic housing for the rural community.

The Exhibition opened on 1st June on a 4-acre site at Halton Park on Sir Anthony's estate.

A brave showing of marquees lined the site on a fine English summer day. At one o'clock, a band of Grenadier Guards and a choir of local village school children took up their positions on the lawn. Past a Guard of Honour formed by the Aylesbury Corps of the Bucks Volunteers, filed Sir Anthony and his family with an entourage of dignitaries. They included Miss Angela Burdett-Coutts, the philanthropist, Mr Abel Smith M. P. who, ten years previously had introduced Lionel de Rothschild to the House of Commons and, as guests of honour, the Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli and his wife, long friends of the Rothschild family.

The Prime Minister made the opening speech, extolling the virtues of the county of Buckinghamshire. 'I think, my friends, under these

It is felt that this is a fitting opportunity to record the sense of genuine personal regard and affection in which you are held by the entire Jewish Community of which you have so long

encouraging circumstances, we need not despair of our manufactures flourishing and increasing in the good County of Buckingham, especially met as we are today to recognise success, to stimulate effort, and to excite to further excellence in these different branches.' Then to the strains of 'God Save the Queen', the crowd was let loose on the displays. In the old mansion at Halton, once the seat of the Dashwood family, were laid-out paintings and other artwork by local amateurs, together with locally produced lace. In the first of the marquees, surrounding an ornamental fountain erected by the Chiltern Hills Spring Water Co., were the produce exhibits: bread, butter, beer, wine, jam and confectionery. Next door, was a geological model of the parish of Halton together with fossils and rocks and locally collected natural history specimens. In two further tents, were the products of local industry: straw-plaiting, silk weaving, engineering models, needlework and furniture. Among the wilder fruits of cottagers' ingenuity was a model church made of 5,000

pieces of cork and 16,000 pins and a model mansion constructed wholly of fragments of chair leg, the fruit of 20 years' labour.

More than 5,000 visitors attended the Exhibition on its first gala day, at a cost of two shillings per head. On the four following days entrance was reduced to two pence. On the Wednesday alone 8,000 people attended – no mean number when the nearest railway station was five miles away. Canal barges and omnibuses had been commandeered to provide transport to the site.

On the final Saturday, 300 medals were distributed. The Gold Medal, for cottage design, was awarded to Mr A. Mayne of Aylesbury, with plans for cottages which he proposed to build for £225 a pair. And among those who wandered away happily on that June evening, clutching her bronze medal for embroidering a baby's shirt, was Sarah Tomlin – back home and into obscurity.

## Sources

*The Times*, 2 June and 6 June 1868

*The Bucks Advertiser and Aylesbury News*, 30 May and 6 June 1868

Census Returns for Aston Clinton, 1861 and 1871 (microfilm held by Buckinghamshire Records and Local Studies Service, Aylesbury)



*The bronze medal from the Halton Industrial Exhibition awarded to Sarah Tomlin of Aston Clinton. The reverse (right) carries the monogram of Sir Anthony de Rothschild, with the inscription: 'Halton Aston Clinton Industrial Exhibition' and the family motto, 'Concordia Industria Integritas'. On the obverse (left), the inscription is reduced into English: 'Let Truth and Concord ever be the Faithful Friends of Industry'.*