THE GREAT BENEFACtor

Lord Brotherton is famous as a great Leeds University benefactor, but what else did this philanthroplist do? Sheena Hastings met his great-nephew David Brotherton.

FACTFILE

Lord Brotherton’s legacy

THE BROTHERTON GLEBE recognises the special commitment made by an Englishman and his friends who have pledged a legacy to Leeds University, and is named after Lord Brotherton of Wakefield, whose lifetime gifts and subsequent bequests funded the building of the Brotherton Library. They also established the Brotherton Collection where English literary section is based on the gift of his own magnificent collection of rare books and manuscripts.

Since his death, his generosity has meant that Leeds University’s Brotherton Collection - an English literary collection of 34,000 books, 400 manuscripts and 30,000 letters at its core - has become one of the finest in the world.

It includes a set of first folio collected edition of Shakespeare’s works, written seven years after his death, and a first edition of Andrew Marvell’s Miscellanies Poems. Today that collection has grown into the Treasures of the Brotherton, with its own special, recently opened 39m gallery, funded in part by the Ratcliffe Brotherton family and also by Lottery money.

Until now, anyone could access the Collection, but it was housed in far-flung places around the Brotherton Library, and viewing was by appointment only. The gallery means the public can simply walk in and marvel at items such as a manuscript of an ancient clay tablets, a draft manuscript in the hand of a 14-year-old Felix Mendelssohn or the Writs of Geoffrey Chaucer, bound in embossed leather.

Although he did not know his great-uncle Edward, David Brotherton is vastly proud of the previous legacy. With other members of the family, David is on the advisory committee that approves acquisitions to the Brotherton Collection.

He is also a trustee of the Brotherton Charity Trust, which exists to give financial help to needy pensioners in and around Wakefield. “My great-uncle would be immensely pleased with how the Collection has grown, become so renowned and now has a dedicated gallery,” says David. “A teacher spotted Edward’s potential and got him a job in a chemical laboratory. By 19 he had taken up a job as a chemical works in Wakefield, before long he was running the place and saving to buy the business, and at 25 the company was his. One factory became six nationally, including a plant in Detroit, Leeds.

During Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee year in 1897, Edward chartered trains to bring all 2,000 employees from his six factories to a garden party at his home, where entertainment included food and drink, a hand, a very bouquet, cricket match and fireworks - all at the host’s expense.

He was a model employer,” says David. “A time of rudimentary employment legislation to protect workers, he ensured that his workforce had paid holidays, continued payment when injured or ill, and recreation facilities provided by the firm.

He gave employees shares in Brotherton & Company, and when the company reached its golden jubilee, every staff member received a gold sovereign for each year worked. The longest serving got £25,500. He was also renowned for knowing all the staff by name.”

Having become the most successful in his field in the UK, in the early 1890s century he turned his attention to public life and was elected Conservative MP for Wakefield. “Certainly one has the impression that he didn’t enter public life with any personal ambition, but more with a sense that a man in his position ought to serve the community,” says David.

Later, as Lord Mayor of Leeds at the outbreak of the Great War, he offered to equip the ‘Leeds Pals’ at his own expense. The cost of this was said to be a small fortune, but it was dwarfed by the colossal amount he donated to support the war effort nationally. One report says he gave £500,000, and another that he offered the government half his personal capital and his entire income for the duration of the conflict. Unsurprisingly, Brotherton was created a Baronet in 1898.

His two great enterprises were brought together by his extraordinary selfless determination to improve all aspects of people’s lives - materially, intellectually and spiritually. It’s wonderful that he was the way he was, and left so much for others to enjoy.”

http://www.leedspost.co.uk

Proud part: Marking 50 years of Lord Brotherton in business.

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