

The “Sand House” – A Victorian Marvel

**A talk given by Richard Bell to Tickhill & District Local History Society
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The majority of Doncaster’s 21st Century residents are oblivious to the unique and fascinating residence which graced the town from the mid-1850s until the Second World War. Imagine a house created by excavating the ground from around a massive block of sandstone and then hollowing out rooms within, in order to create a 40-metre long, 12-metre wide house, equipped with all the mod cons that a wealthy businessman of the Victorian era would want. And yet there is nothing to be seen now of this incredible house.

The story of the Sand House began with the birth of William Senior in 1802. He had moved to Doncaster by 1825, as that is when the baptism of his first child, Henry, is recorded in parish records. But the first significant event in the Sand House story came when William bought Balby Lane Close, in 1832. This was a parcel of land then lying on the southern edge of Doncaster, just under 2 acres in area and containing a market garden, cottages, a water pump and, most significantly, a sand pit, or small sandstone quarry.

Over the following two decades Doncaster expanded greatly, with the arrival of the railways, and much house-building took place, placing great strain on the town’s sewerage system. This led to a major new drain being constructed in 1854, passing through William Senior’s land. As part of this project a tunnel was dug, from Senior’s sand pit south-eastwards towards Doncaster Carr. This tunnelling scheme attracted great interest and, combined with William and Henry’s house-building activities in the area, led to their having an idea to combine the sand excavation with a housing project, so giving birth to the Sand House.

The initial house comprised four rooms and was two storeys high. Its existence was noted in a conveyance of Balby Lane Close from William to Henry in April 1857, referring to a “tenement...cut out of rock sand, lately converted by Henry Senior into a dwelling house”. Over the next decade or so, the house was extended by removing more ground from around the massive sandstone block from which the original house had emerged until, once completed, the Sand House had ten rooms, with the largest being a first floor ballroom able to accommodate upwards of 200 people.

Photo 1 shows the front of the completed house, viewed from Green Dyke Lane.

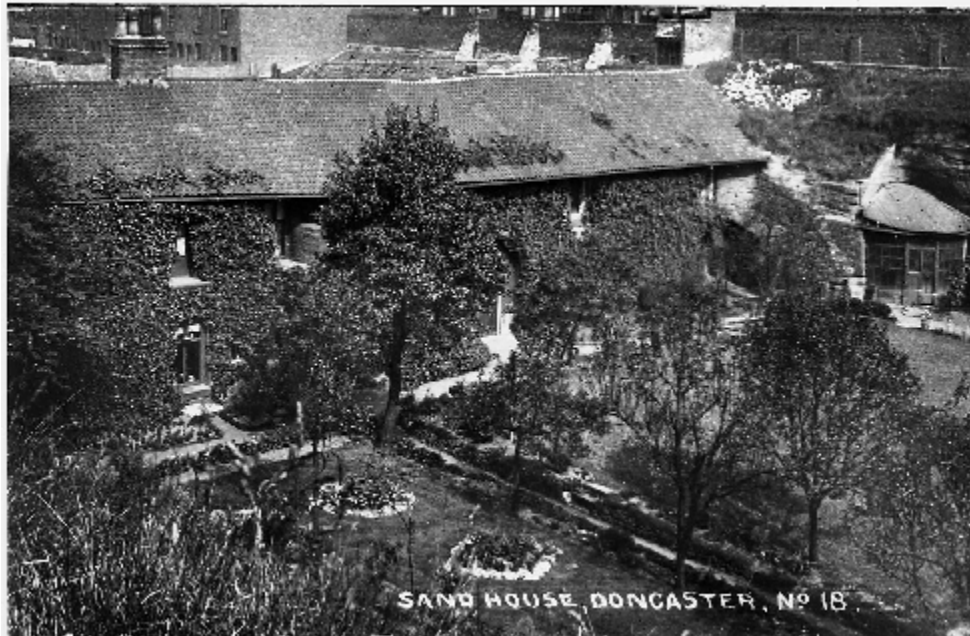


Photo 2 was taken at the back of the house. Note the carving on the projecting corner of the building, this being typical of the adornments around the house's exterior.



The roof of the house, the intermediate floor and ceilings were all built by traditional methods, but all the walls were formed from the undisturbed sandstone which had lain there for millions of years.

The completed house incorporated the space previously occupied by a section of the tunnel that had been dug in 1854 to facilitate constructing the new town drain. In order to form a room, this space had a bay window fixed at one end and french doors at the other and formed what became known as the “Long Room”.

Photo 3 shows the inside of the Long Room and was taken around 1920.



Although the Sand House, or ‘Don Castle’ as it was referred to by Henry Senior, was well-known to the townsfolk of Doncaster in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is mainly the tunnels which led from the house that remain in the memory of elderly residents now. There was quite a labyrinth of tunnels created by Henry and his workmen, but the most notable portion lay beneath the edge of Victoria Street, and ran parallel to and a few metres behind the rock-face of the former sandstone quarry, which by this time had become the Sand House’s ‘sunken garden’. Every few metres along the main tunnel were side-tunnels, each of which emerged through the rock-face. A window was fitted where each side-tunnel emerged. The afternoon and evening sunlight would flood through the windows to illuminate the main tunnel and the whole arrangement, because of its similarity to the architecture that one may find in a monastery or abbey, took on the name of “the Cloisters”.

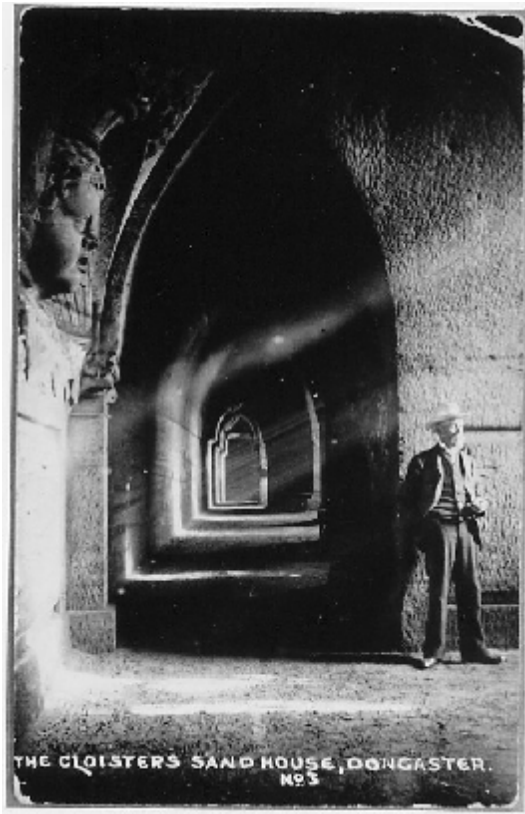
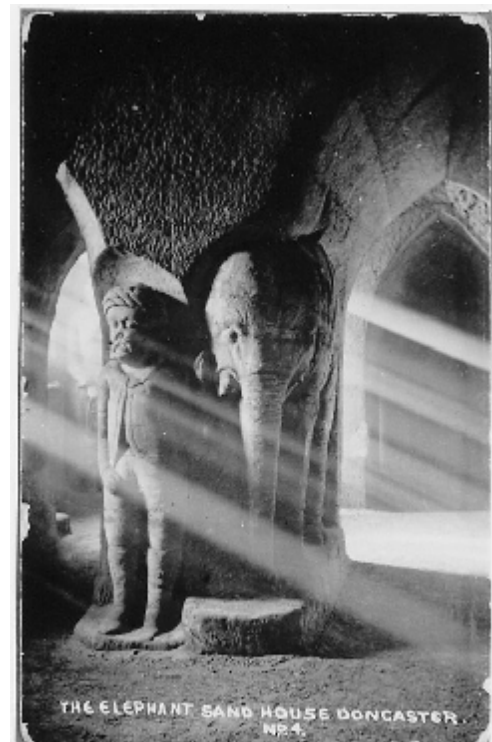


Photo 4 shows a view south-eastwards along the Cloisters.

The Cloisters were extensively decorated with carvings, fashioned from the sandstone. There was a variety of subjects, including kings and queens, a pope, a cherub, a clown, friezes, floral decorations, 'Pat' and 'Bidly' the Irish-folk and, most imposingly, a life-size elephant and its mahout.

Photo 5 shows this elephant and its mahout.

After Henry Senior's death in 1900 the house and tunnels were sold to Doncaster Corporation, who installed the foreman of the Sanitary Department, running the town's refuse and night-soil collection services from the premises. This continued until the mid-1930s, by which time not only were the Corporation's needs changing, but also the Sand House no longer met the occupants' expectations for modern living.



Various committees of the Corporation debated what should be done with the house and its surroundings but, with hindsight, its fate was sealed. In 1935 formal approval was given for the former quarry to be used as a land-fill site and, around the beginning of the Second World War the roof was removed to allow filling to continue within the house itself. By 1951 the area was a wasteland, with no visible signs of the house or its garden remaining.

Following several collapses of tunnels in the vicinity through the 1970s and early 1980s the decision was taken by Doncaster MBC to locate and infill all the remaining tunnels and, in February 1984, this work was completed. And so, to this day, nothing exists above ground to mark the location of this remarkable creation...that is, unless one was to deem Silverwood House – a 17-storey block of flats – to be a sort of signpost to the past, for it stands directly above the former Sand House!

It was with remarkable foresight that, in 1900, Henry Senior's obituarist referred to the Sand House thus: "...it is in association with that unique dwelling and its passages that the name of Mr Henry Senior will go down in posterity, if that honour should befall him, for the changes of time in such a rapidly developing neighbourhood may clear the whole thing away".

For more information and photographs on this subject see Richard Bell's book "The Sand House – A Victorian Marvel" which, although out of print, is available for reference at some local libraries in the Doncaster area.

*Richard Bell
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