

Thomas Randall and Grandpont House

Mark J Davies, August 2014 – www.oxfordwaterwalks.co.uk

Alice Liddell, the inspiration for *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, was a frequent visitor to Grandpont House as a girl. In 1932, aged 80, she recalled that a 'special pleasure was to be allowed to take Rover out for a walk. Rover was a retriever belonging to a well-known Oxford tailor, called Randall, who lived in a house built on arches over the Isis, which he christened Grandpont'.

Thomas Randall (1805–1887) had moved into Grandpont House at some point in the 1850s, and while he was indeed a tailor, with a prominent business on the High Street, he generally preferred to refer to himself as a hatter. Indeed, there is reason to believe that some of the eccentric traits of Lewis Carroll's 'Hatter', and the visual depiction of the character in the two Alice books, may have been inspired by Randall. The grounds of Christ Church, Alice's home, were just opposite of course, and Randall's daughter Eliza (1837–1916) was friendly with the Liddell family's governess, Mary Prickett. This idea is explored fully in Mark J Davies' books *Alice in Waterland* and *Alice's Oxford on Foot*.

Randall was certainly an interesting man. Unusually well-educated for a tradesman, he would 'for a consideration' compose weekly essays for undergraduates to present as their own work (GW Kitchin, *Ruskin in Oxford*, 1904), a suggestion which is endorsed by James Pycroft of Trinity, who remembered that Randall 'was scholar enough to do verses and essays, as well as impositions, for the incapable and the idle' (*Oxford Memories*, 1886).

He was also known as the 'link between the town and the gown'. One example of this was his instigation of a scheme to provide summer vacation employment at seaside resorts for otherwise redundant (and therefore unpaid) college servants, even though he himself had no direct University affiliations. Another is that he salvaged the remains of the Oxford University eight-oar boat used in a famously heroic victory against Cambridge in 1843. It had been on display, 'rotten and decayed', on the river bank opposite Grandpont House, where the Trill Mill Stream joins the Thames, until in 1867 Randall purchased it and had it fashioned into the Boat Club President's chair inside the University barge.

Randall served as a town councillor from 1833, was elected Mayor in 1859, and became an Alderman in 1861, by which time he was living in Grandpont House with his wife Elizabeth (née Cecil) and two adult children. He retired from business in 1864, after which, as the 1881 census shows, he thought of himself as a 'retired hatter'. When he died his obituary in *Jackson's Oxford Journal* of 24 September 1887 emphasised his generosity to the poorer children of St Aldate's parish – he had provided some of them with a tea-party in the grounds of Grandpont House only a month earlier – and praised a man who 'has left a name behind him that will long be affectionately remembered not only in the homes of the rich, but in the cottage homes of the poor'.