

Randolph Douglas and the Douglas Museum, The Stones, Castleton

Randolph Robert Osborne Douglas was born at Yew House, Greenhill, Sheffield on 31 March 1895. His father Robert had come to Sheffield from Scotland in the 1890s. His mother Margaret Helen née Osborne was one of the Osborne file-making family of Sheffield. The couple may have met in Edinburgh, possibly at the Trustees Academy on the Mound Art College. They were married at Norton Church on 19 July 1894. Randolph's father, Robert Douglas, worked as farm manager for Greenhill Hall (demolished in 1965) but later as a very fine silversmith and silver engraver in Sheffield. His mother died of TB in November 1910 and Randolph, his father and his aunt Katherine (Kitty) moved to Carrington Road, Endcliffe, Sheffield. This was where Randolph lived until his marriage to Harriet (Hetty) Bown in 1926.

It's clear that Randolph inherited his parents' artistic talents but his first love was escapology. From a very early age, he had been fascinated by Harry Houdini, the American escapologist. Houdini performed twice at the Empire Theatre in Sheffield in 1904. We don't know if the 9 year old Randolph was there but over the next few years, styling himself "The Great Randolph", or "Randin" he collected and designed locks and handcuffs and dreamt up a variety of illusions and magic tricks and escapes. His detailed drawings of "The "Living Mummy", "The Great Box Trick" and the straitjacket escape echoed the stunts performed by Harry Houdini who would later play an important role in his life.

With his artistic and design talents, Randolph seemed destined to follow in his father's footsteps as a silversmith. An unpaid apprenticeship was arranged for him at a Sheffield silversmiths but although he showed talent and promise and continued to work as a silversmith, his heart was set on the less traditional career of escapologist. In April 1913 Randolph met Houdini at the Empire Theatre in Sheffield. They clearly hit it off. Houdini and his wife Bess visited the Douglas family at Carrington Road and they corresponded regularly.

Randolph's own career as an escapologist had begun in 1913 at a smoking concert at the Catholic Young Men's Society club rooms in Solly street. Later that year he

performed at Greenhill as Randini, the Self-Liberator. In 1914, he designed a daring new escape– upside down from a straitjacket – and demonstrated it to Houdini in his Sheffield home. It became one of Houdini’s most ambitious stunts.

Randolph continued to earn his living as a silversmith and in 1915 was at Cooper Brothers where he met his future wife Hetty Bown. In December that year he enlisted and was recruited into the 3rd Yorkshire and Lancaster Regiment and later into the Scottish Rifles. But his time as a soldier was shortlived–his heart had been weakened by a bout of rheumatic fever and he was discharged. His weak heart ended too his longed–for career as an escapologist.

Changing direction, Randolph left Cooper Brothers and concentrated on model–making, using his skills to make commercial models and decorative pieces. With Hetty, he also became a keen caver and explored the Castleton caverns alongside J.W Puttrell, the pioneer of cave exploration.

On 31 March 1926, Randolph and Hetty married at the Union Street Registry Office, Sheffield. They moved to their new home in The Stones, Castleton where they were to live until their deaths. This was to become much more than a cottage home but a “cabinet of curiosities”, a “House of Wonders”– the Douglas Museum. The museum displayed Randolph’s collection of keys and locks, mineral specimens and all the wonderful items that he had picked up over the years. The stars of the collection, however, were his own miniatures and models and his intricate foil pictures. The models included a greenhouse, the size of a thumb nail; a safe the size of a stamp; “the smallest electric motor in the world”: tiny houses and cottages; and much more.

In pride of place, was the photograph of Randolph and his hero Harry Houdini outside the Empire Theatre, together with the letters and cards that Harry had sent him over the years and newspaper cuttings about his exploits. But 1926, a most happy year for Randolph and Hetty brought the sad news of Harry Houdini’s death on 31 October.

Randolph died on 5 December 1956 and is buried in St. Edmund’s Churchyard. Hetty continued to run the museum until her death in 1978. The collection is now in the care of Buxton Museum and Art Gallery with a number of items on loan to the Castleton Museum.