

## The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd

### Director's Biography Prepared Jun 2005 to celebrate the Trust's Centenary

## Joseph Rowntree (1836-1925) Director 1904-1925



Joseph Rowntree was the famous founder of the cocoa works and a great Quaker and Liberal social reformer.

He was born into the family of a Quaker grocer in York. His father, also Joseph, was active in the Society of Friends and wider civic life; and the young Joseph grew up in a lively political and intellectual environment – with such Liberal parliamentarians and campaigners as John Bright and William Wilberforce among visitors to the family home.

Joseph junior was educated at the Quaker School, Bootham which his father had helped to set up, and at fifteen he entered the family business as an apprentice. In his early twenties Joseph was allowed to work in London for a few months, and spent much of his spare time in the gallery of the House of Commons – sending home critiques of performances by Gladstone and Disraeli.

After seventeen years at the Pavement grocery store, Joseph, then aged 33 joined his younger brother, Henry Isaac, in his cocoa works. Starting as a small concern with a handful of employees, the business expanded dramatically, employing nearly 7,000 at the time of Joseph's death in 1925. Joseph continued to run the business alone after Henry Isaac died in 1883, bringing in his sons and nephews to help.

Joseph had a life-long interest in education, teaching an adult class of working men on Sunday mornings from the age of twenty-one. In the eighteen-sixties and seventies he co-managed the Hope Street British School for Boys, then the only non-denominational school in York for children from poor families. In his factory he also ensured there were classes and activities for workers.

In 1901 JR bought one hundred and twenty-three acres and started drawing up plans for building a model village. New Earswick was designed to provide good housing at a reasonable cost for ordinary working people.

Joseph's interest in social welfare pervaded both his business and civic life. In his business Joseph ensured that Rowntree was one of the earliest companies to develop a pension scheme. Outside he served for forty-two years on the committee for The Retreat – a Quaker hospital for the mentally ill.

Joseph was confidant and adviser to senior Liberal politicians of his day. He encouraged the Social Service Trust to buy newspapers because he understood the importance of the press in communicating political ideas. Among his contemporaries he was well-known for his work in the temperance movement and for political reform (particularly of the House of Lords). The range of Joseph's interests bears witness to the intellectual curiosity and vitality he maintained to the end of his life.

The establishment of the three Trusts in 1904 followed naturally from JR's interests in social reform and his belief that inherited wealth could be damaging. His mission to develop understanding of the causes of human misery is enshrined in the founding memoranda of his trusts.