

The Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust Ltd

Director's Biography

Prepared Jun 2005 to celebrate the Trust's Centenary

Arnold Rowntree (1872-1951) Director 1904-1951



Arnold Stephenson Rowntree had a remarkably full life; he was a businessman, a newspaper man, a Quaker and a Liberal MP. Family, religion, business, newspapers and politics blended in a life which began with a Victorian childhood and ended in the early post war years with the Liberal party at its lowest ebb.

Arnold was the fifth and youngest son, and eighth child, of John Stephenson Rowntree, a wealthy grocer from York and Elizabeth Hotham, the daughter of a prosperous Leeds draper. Both families were Quakers and extremely active both locally and nationally in Quaker committees and affairs. His grandfather and father were also leading lights in York's civic life; his father was Lord Mayor from 1880-1881.

After attending the York Quaker boarding school, Bootham, Arnold went into his father's grocery business. But he soon left to join his uncle, Joseph Rowntree, at the cocoa works and in 1897 when Joseph turned the business into a limited company, Arnold was on the board of directors alongside his cousins and JB Morrell. Arnold was put in charge of marketing and advertising.

In the family tradition, Arnold was a leading Liberal in York, but he did not have great political ambitions on the national stage and only became a parliamentary candidate for York in 1910, after much agonizing, when no else came forward to fight the Tories.

During the campaign and in his pre-war years in parliament his interests were very much those of the Quaker Renaissance – social reform, temperance and the reduction of armaments. With the war, Arnold's position became much more difficult; he was one of a handful of pacifist MPs, regarded as traitors by the majority. But Arnold remained a loyal Liberal, believing his party had done its best to avoid war and refused to join in any public declaration by anti-war MPs. He believed in non-military service for pacifists – setting up the Friends' Ambulance Unit, a group of volunteers who agreed to go to the Western Front to carry out nursing and orderly duties. Like other pacifists, Arnold was not re-elected in 1918.

Arnold returned full-time to his duties at Rowntree & Co, and looking after the newspaper interests. When the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust was set up in 1904, Joseph hoped it would be able to help ailing Liberal papers. Arnold, with fellow Rowntree director, JB Morrell, took up the job of managing the papers bought by the JRSST. These were mainly local and regional - forming the North of England Newspaper Company which later merged to become the Westminster Group. But there was also a brief period of involvement with the Star and the Morning Leader which merged in 1911 with the Cadburys' Daily News. The national venture which lasted longest was the Liberal weekly, The Nation, which was bought in 1907 by the JRSST and was not sold until 1923 when it emerged as The Statesman and Nation. The papers were bought to give Liberalism a voice – but it was Arnold and JB Morrell's job to ensure they did this, while not losing too much money.