

Lewis and Son (Newtown) Ltd: Four generations of a family tanning business

1829 saw the start of the Lewis family tannery when Lewis Lewis (1791–1861) moved into No5 Severn Square and took over the existing business behind with its tan pits, bark sheds and leather drying rooms with louvre-boarded sides.

His son, also Lewis Lewis (1819–89) later joined him in the business now called Lewis and Son making roller leather: strong, tight-grained leather of even thickness that was ideal for the rollers in spinning machines in the cotton industry developing in Lancashire at the time.

The American Civil War (1862-63) intervened to cut demand for roller leather: it upset the cotton supply and caused a drop in cotton production in Lancashire. This could have been a disaster for the tannery, but Lewis carried on producing the roller skins and stored them with the hope that demand would revive. It did! Records show only 700 dozen skins were sold in 1863, but by 1870 this had risen to 5,295 dozen.

With the resulting profits Lewis built a fine new tannery in 1872, by the river, next to the old yard. A key figure in the tannery's management, Richard Barnes, was taken on. Production was increased: around 3000 dozen (36,000) of the highest quality skins were sold as roller skins each year in the 1880s, with many more lesser skins tanned for other uses.

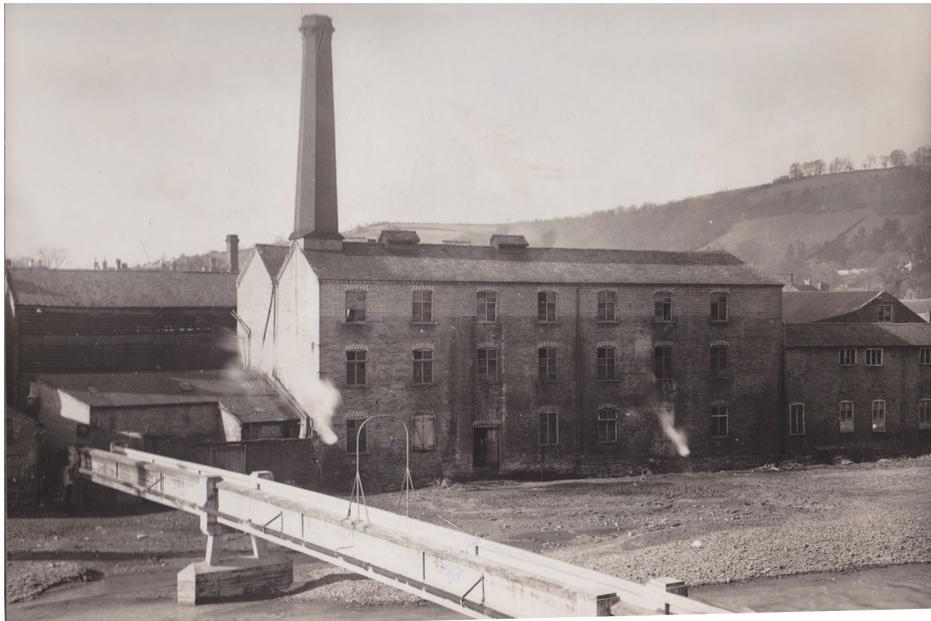
In 1889 Lewis Lewis died, leaving his son Hugh (1860–1921) to take on the business. He ran the business and knew his customers personally but his wide interests –as a magistrate, chair of the County Council and the Education Committee, managing his properties and a busy social life – meant he left the day-to-day running of the business to Richard Barnes.

Some of the sheepskins that came to be tanned arrived with the wool still on them. Others came as 'pelts', the wool having been removed by fellmongers elsewhere. Before the First World War skins from the butchers were carried by hand-truck through the streets of Newtown with country butchers depositing skins in the Market Hall to wait for the hand truck. This would have been a messy and smelly business. A weekly load of skins also came by rail, to be delivered by the railway's horse and dray.

When Hugh Lewis died in 1921, his son Peter (1908–1993) was too young to take on the business. Instead, Hugh's wife Eveline became chairman, and Richard Barnes continued as manager, assisted by his son Albert. Hugh's daughter Medina became the bookkeeper, despite no previous experience. It was a hard time. Boom and slump as a result of misjudgments of the post-war demand for cotton by the Lancashire Trade, led to over-supply of roller-skins at

Lewis and Son. Prices fell, other sales for leather were difficult and unsuccessful attempts were made to sell the business.

Peter Lewis joined the business in 1930. After a few months learning the trade in Newtown he spent an intensive six months studying 'light leather' at the Leathersellers' College, Bermondsey. This was important because it led to modern more scientific methods being used in the fellmongering and tanning processes, including blended wood-extracts replacing traditional but ineffective liquor made from tree bark, and extract of pig's pancreas used instead of dog dung. Machines began to be used for some jobs traditionally done by hand. Peter also benefited from making contacts through the College, and appointing staff with greater tanning expertise who helped increase the volume and quality of leather produced so it could be sold for glove making, book binding, and fancy leather goods. Despite these changes times were bleak during the 1930s depression.



Tannery buildings on the bank of the river. 1939

At the start of the Second World War Peter joined the army and was able to arrange for the tannery to be run by Strong and Fisher in Rushden, a company owned by friends met at College – John and O.B. Strong. As a result leather tanned by Lewis and Son was sent to Strong and Fisher for finishing, including, in later years, as suede for luxury clothing. A big change during the war was the employment of women in all parts of the tannery. In 1947 the two companies merged.

Back at the tannery after the war, Peter wanted to restart fellmongering (buying skins with the wool on, and removing the wool) but this was difficult. Meat had been rationed during the war, with the Ministry of Food taking ownership of all sheepskins. With meat control still in force until 1948, Lewis and Son had no

access to domestic sheepskins, so started fellmongering with imported skins. By 1951 they were able to demonstrate their 'pullers' expert skills in sorting wool as they took it off the skins, so that in 1953, when controls ended, Lewis and Son were permitted to 'pull' domestic skins once again.

Over the next 25 years Lewis and Son developed and expanded the business by securing supplies of domestic skins from butchers and slaughterhouses throughout Wales and the north-west, setting up a number of depots where skins were assembled for collection by Lewis and Son's own shiny red lorries.

Peter Lewis, the last of the four generations, retired in 1971. Strong and Fisher continued to run the business and moved it from the centre of town to purpose-built premises down the Pool Road in 1981. This closed in the mid-1990s, leaving Newtown without a tannery. The building on Pool Road maintains links with the woollen industry however as it is now the Welsh depot for the British Wool Marketing Board. The old tannery building was extensively destroyed by fire in late 1981 and demolished to make way for new housing soon after.