

The First Royal Welsh Warehouse

The name of the World's first mail order business is synonymous with the iconic building erected adjacent to Newtown's railway station in 1879. Pryce Jones, however, had adopted this name for his draper's business long before. In this article we delve into its origins and take a peek inside the premises which was to become the heart of the revolution in shopping.



The original Royal Welsh Warehouse on The Cross in about 1885 after Pryce Jones had moved his business to the station site.



Pryce and Eleanor Jones, in 1863. They are probably dressed in the clothes in which they were married four years earlier. This was probably their first photograph together

Pryce Jones's journey from obscurity to millionaire knight of the realm began, like many other less distinguished traders, with him entering into an apprenticeship. John Davies had launched his draper's business sometime in the 1830s and by the time of the first census in 1841 he was clearly well established at The Cross on the junction of Severn Street and Broad Street, where the present clock tower now stands. It was here that Pryce began his training in about 1847. Having completed his seven year apprenticeship, Pryce continued as assistant to Davies for several years before striking out on his own.

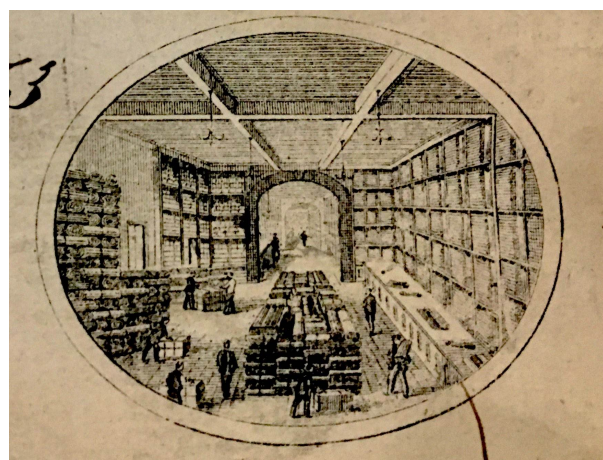
The year 1859 was a momentous one for the budding entrepreneur. In April of that year, he married dressmaker Eleanor, the daughter of Edward Rowley Morris, a wool stapler of Llanllwchaearn. The marriage entry in the register of St David's Church records that Pryce was a draper's assistant indicating that he was still in the employ of John Davies. However, within a few months, the couple had opened their own rival business just a few steps away from his master's shop, at number 50 Broad Street. By 1861 both the family and the business were prospering. Eleanor had already given birth to two children and Pryce was employing three assistants and two domestic servants all of whom, along with his brother John, were living above the store. It was probably the need for a larger shop, as well as more spacious living accommodation which prompted Pryce to move to his former employer's premises on The Cross, when Davies's business was wound up around 1863.

It is not difficult to see why Pryce Jones, the great self-publicist and the man with a vision of a new way of shopping, would want to move from his modest shop at No 50 to the much larger premises at The Cross. The building is no longer in existence, having been demolished in 1898 to make way for the splendid new clock tower which still dominates the town. But, as we can see from the top photograph overleaf, when it was in the occupation of another draper, Thomas Rowlands, it was a spacious, four-storeyed structure offering a double-fronted shop on the ground floor with ample space for storage and accommodation above. In 1893, Rowlands placed an advert in the press for the sale of the lease of the building (*South Wales Daily News* 28 July 1883) which provides us with a detailed description of what it calls "a splendid business premises" having a "dual frontage, 31 feet on Broad St. and 21 feet on High St". The description continues, "The business part of the premises consists of a ground floor, 31 feet by 19 feet depth, by 12 feet height" In addition, the first floor provided further business space with three show rooms, including one of 62 feet by 32 feet which, it was claimed was "the largest of the kind in Wales". Warehouse space was provided in two rooms on the first floor as well as a "dry cellar . . . well lighted by gas".



The domestic accommodation was equally spacious consisting, on the two upper floors, of a parlour, dining room and drawing room with windows fronting both Broad St and High St. It had a "large commodious kitchen", two larders, wash house (with boiler) and boot room. Finally, there were "eight large bedrooms, attics, closets, wc's etc".

Another image exists of The Cross Shop in the form of a tiny engraving (below) forming the letter-head to a Pryce Jones invoice of 1873. The shop appears to be divided into two bays separated by a central arch. Diminutive figures are dwarfed by the shelving stacked with fabrics from floor to ceiling. There is more stock piled on the left hand side as well as in the centre of the room. Four gas lights hang from pendants in the ceiling below which perhaps half a dozen staff are assisting customers. This is the one and only image we have which offers just a tantalising glimpse of the interior of the early Royal Welsh Warehouse.



It was not, however, only the size of the property which attracted the ambitious draper. The shop on The Cross dominated the commercial centre of Newtown. As the 1893 advert indicates, it was "situated in the centre of the town, and in most commanding position". It was the only property which was visible from every part of Broad Street as well as High Street. The photograph (left) of Broad Street, taken from the Long Bridge, probably in the early 1870s, clearly demonstrates



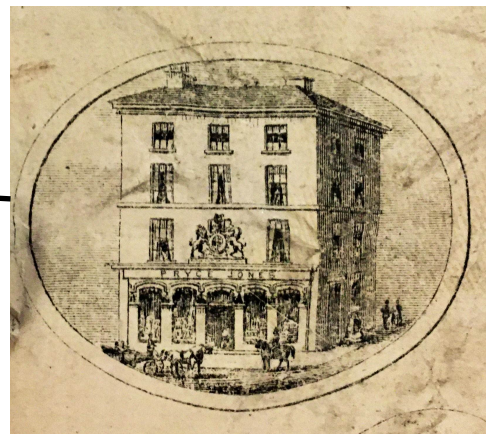
how the property was the focal point for any visitor approaching the town from the north.

The photograph opposite was probably taken from the first floor show room of the shop some time in the 1880s. From here, Pryce would have looked out on to his former premises, the fourth building along on the right. It is not difficult to imagine him gazing down to gauge the number of potential customers who might enter his store on such a day.



It was during his time as proprietor of the Cross Shop that the business transformed from 'Pryce Jones, Draper' to 'Pryce Jones, The Royal Welsh Warehouse'. As this view of Broad Street, of the mid 1860s, and the accompanying enlargement show, the shop bears the proprietor's name only. But the invoice below shows that by 1873, a change had taken place. The business had now been rebranded to the name which would become familiar to customers the world over for almost a century. The letter-head now bears an ostentatious crest of the lion and unicorn with royal coat of arms surmounted by a crown. On the left hand, below the medallion, there is a small engraving of the external view of the shop front which has had a make-over. A huge plaster, or wooden, effigy of the royal coat of arms hangs above the entrance.

When did this change take place? It is difficult to be accurate, but this the period when Pryce was moving from being a purely local purveyor of textiles to a recognisable name across the country. Very early on in his career, possibly whilst still at No 50, he hit upon the idea of sending out fabric swatches to his more valued customers in the surrounding area of Newtown and gradually the circulation area grew. In 1865, in order to promote his business further afield, he exhibited his wares at the first 'Exhibition of the Art, Industry and Products of Wales' held



at the National Eisteddfod in Aberystwyth where they attracted favourable press comment: "Mr Pryce Jones of Newtown had . . . on view an extensive stock of well manufactured goods, showing that great improvements had been effected in the colouring and make of real Welsh cloths". His efforts at attracting wider interest seems to have paid dividends, as it was at this time that he first attracted royal interest. The report continues, " He shewed also a super fine flannel made of Welsh mountain wool, same as a skirt made and presented to her royal highness the Princess of Wales" (*The North Wales Chronicle*, 16 September, 1865). The following year, he followed up his success by taking both the gold and silver medals at the National Eisteddfod in Chester. In the November of that year, Pryce received a further boost to his business:

A ROYAL ORDER AT NEWTOWN - The town on Monday afternoon was thrown into a state of most pleasurable excitement on finding that Mr. Pryce Jones, the extensive wholesale Welsh flannel and general drapery merchant, had received an extensive order direct from her Majesty the Queen, at Windsor Castle, for a number of red flannel cloaks and Welsh flannel of ordinary staple manufacture for charitable and other purposes . . . In addition to these valuable orders, Mr Pryce Jones received, by the same post, orders from half a dozen of the noblest ladies of the land for Welsh goods" (The Brecon Reporter, 17 November 1866).

By the time that he exhibited again at the National Eisteddfod held at Brecon the following year. The name of Pryce Jones was being widely associated with royalty. As *The Merthyr Guardian* reported on September 13 1867, "We understand that Mr Pryce Jones of Newtown, Montgomeryshire, who is especial flannel merchant to her Majesty the Queen, has exhibited magnificent specimens of the national flannel at the industrial exhibition department of the Eisteddfod".

By 1869, Pryce was receiving regular orders from the Queen. *The Aberystwyth Times* of 11 December 1869 states that Newtown's church bells rang out with joy at the news that it was the "third annual occasion" on which he had been "honoured with the immediate patronage of royalty" . It also stated that he enjoyed the patronage of the charities of HRH The Princess of Wales at Sandringham as well as Princess Christian Schleswig Holstein and numerous members of the English aristocracy.

So, it seems probable that the origins of The Royal Welsh Warehouse as a brand dates from the late 1860s. In exploiting this link with royalty, Pryce was taking some liberties, since he had not received the royal warrant at this time. For that, he would need to wait another decade. By that time, his business had outgrown the capacity of a



'Gold' medal awarded to Pryce Jones for flannels and shawls at the National Eisteddfod



mere draper's shop. Demand for his goods was so great that what he needed was a state of the art distribution centre. This became a reality, when in October of that year his 'new' Royal Welsh Warehouse was opened with great fanfare beginning a new chapter in the life of Newtown's most successful entrepreneur.



A tin of Welsh Cream Toffee sold to promote the new Royal Welsh Warehouse