

The Origins of the Museum Building

Capital, the fuel needed to feed any industrial development, was becoming more accessible along with the presence of a group of forward looking individuals who could see the potential for industrial growth in Newtown. The town itself was already becoming a centre for some parts of the cloth making process, notably fulling and carding. Mills were soon located along the banks of the Severn from which this process could be undertaken.

William Pugh was a prominent Newtown entrepreneur who single-handedly financed the building of much of Newtown's communications infrastructure, including the building of a new bridge across the Severn in 1827. It was this development which finally ended the payment of tolls to cross the medieval wooden bridge, and opened up development on the north bank of the river at Penygloddfa.

Two years after the completion of the bridge, the vicar of Llanllwchaiarn petitioned the Justices for an alehouse at Penygloddfa. This was probably the Grapes Inn. Perhaps it was the thirst of the weavers in the nearby woollen factory, just two doors up which prompted his petition. These men and women, working long hours in a hot, noisy environment thick with the dust and fibres of the woollen yarn were in need of some liquid sustenance after a day's work.

We do not know who built the factory at 5 to 7 Commercial Street. Perhaps it was one of the town's 40-odd woollen manufacturers listed in Pigot's Trade directory of 1832 or a speculative building developer keen to make a quick profit from the newly released land in Penygloddfa. Whoever it was, the design he chose was innovative in that it combined domestic accommodation with industrial space. In this sense, the building represented a half-way house between the traditional domestic system of manufacture and the new factory system associated with the industrial revolution

Perhaps some thirty people were crammed into the six, one-up-one down cottages of the two lower floors of the building, but the two large loom floors above probably had sufficient weaving frames to employ some fifty people. For this reason, a stone staircase in the yard at the rear of the property gave external access to the loom floors for other workers who lived in neighbouring cottages.

The Commercial Street factory was one of a number of similar developments in Penygloddfa in the 1830s. For a time, they existed side by side with bespoke woollen mills, such as the Clock Factory on Bryn Street and the Oversevern Mill situated close to the present day Halfpenny Bridge. But ultimately such dual purpose buildings could not compete with the much larger mills and they were converted to other uses. Most of these early weaving factories were demolished in the 1960s making the building which now houses the Textile Museum a unique example of a vanished world.



The Textile Museum about 1968



A similar dual purpose building in Frankwell Street mid 1960s



The rear of the Textile Museum (Grapes Court) showing the original stone staircase, mid 1960s