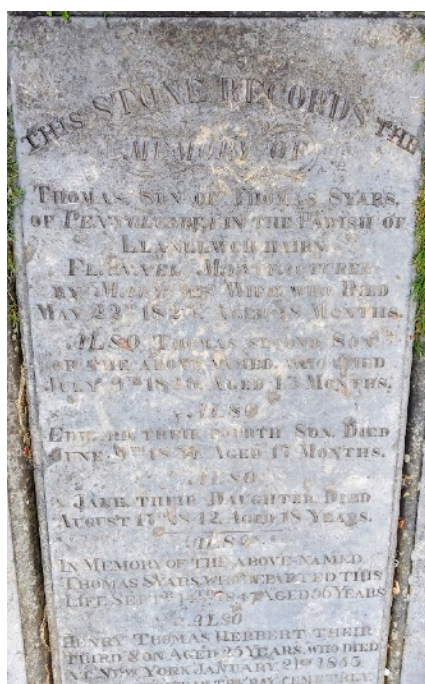

The Syars: The Tragic Story of a Newtown Flannel Manufacturing Family

John Evans, Curator.

Amongst the time-worn gravestones in Newtown's long abandoned riverside church of St Mary's lies one which provides the outline of a family's tragic story. The memorial is inscribed with the name of Thomas Syars, one of the town's many flannel manufacturers. It also records the burials of four of his children, three of whom died in infancy and a fourth before she reached adulthood. At the very base of the stone a fifth child is named but one who died in a distant land far from his birthplace. This is their story.



The Syars gravestone (courtesy of Edward Parry)

The Syars name can be found in the parish registers of Berriew and Manafon in the eighteenth century. It was there that Henry Herbert Syars was born to Ursula and her husband Morris Syer in 1747¹. Henry would find a bride, Catherine Goodwin, in Llanllwchaearn², but the couple would continue to live in Berriew and it was here, in 1790, that Thomas Syar was born, the youngest of the couple's five children³. By the time that Thomas had reached adulthood, he had migrated to Newtown, probably around 1810, just at the time when the town was developing as a flannel producing centre. He married Mary Owens, another migrant from the Montgomeryshire hinterland, this time Llanwnnog, in St Mary's Church on 1 May 1815. His occupation was recorded as an innkeeper⁴. Mary was some eighteen months older than her husband and seems to have come from very humble stock. Her baptismal entry in the Llanwnnog register indicates that her father, John, was a pauper⁵. Life must have been extremely hard for Mary and her two siblings surviving only on the handouts from the parish poor rate to support the family⁶.

¹ Parish Register (PR) Berriew (Mixed) 1709-1749, p.81: Herbert the son of Morris Syer and Ursula his wife, baptised 15 March 1747

² 1775: PR Llanllwchaearn Banns (1754-1812), p.25

³ PR Manafon (mixed) p.11. 24 Oct 1790 Thomas son of Henry Seyer and **Catherine** his wife, Berriew

⁴ PR St Mary's, Marriages(1813-35), p.9: 1 May 1815

⁵ PR Llanwnnog Mixed (1725-1809),p.127 - Mary daughter of John Owen pauper by Catherine his wife, baptised 26 March 1789

⁶ The register records the baptism of at least two other children to John and Catherine Owen, paupers.



The Syars Mill photographed about 1880 by John Owen

When the new couple's first child, Mary, in 1817, the Newtown baptismal register records Thomas's occupation was a spinner⁷. Within another decade Thomas had become a successful flannel manufacturer who may have been responsible for building the large six-storey flannel mill of that name which commanded the entrance to Penygloddfa across the Long Bridge. The factory also contained living accommodation for its workers and for the owner. The Syars family would occupy the house attached to the Bridgend flannel factory for the next fifty years.

Mary bore Thomas a total of eight children in the two decades following their marriage. Sadly, not all would survive beyond infancy, as the the gravestone in St Mary's testifies. She had already given birth to two daughters - Mary and Elizabeth - by the time their first son arrived, probably in early December 1821⁸. Like so many other Victorian parents, he would be given his father's name. But within 17 months, the infant was dead, buried on 23 May 1823⁹. At the time of his burial, Mary was already again pregnant with her fourth child. The child, born the following Autumn, was named Jane, baptised on November 10 of that year¹⁰.

Celebrations and mourning were regular occurrences for the Syars family. The parents once more remained behind after Sunday service on November 27 1825 to mark the baptism of another son¹¹, again named Thomas. But tragedy struck for a second time when the boy was barely a year old. He was buried on Christmas Day 1826¹². Would this be the last family tragedy? Perhaps so, for in the next four years two further children were baptised in St Mary's: Henry Thomas Herbert¹³, who took both his father's and grandfather's names, and a brother named Edward¹⁴. However, fate turned again in 1831

⁷ PR St Marys (baptisms) (1813-1839), 21 Sept 1817. p. 46

⁸ PR St Mary's baptisms (1813-39), p. 82 - Thomas Syer, son of Thomas Syer Manufacturer, and Mary baptised December 2 1821

⁹ PR St Mary's burials (1813-36), p. 67

¹⁰ PR St Mary's baptisms (1813-39), p.100

¹¹ PR St Mary's baptisms (1813-39), p.117. Thomas baptised 27 Nov 1825

¹² The gravestone erroneously records this as July 9 1826, but PR St Mary's burials (1813-36), p.101 records the burial as December 25.

¹³ PR St Mary's baptisms (1813-1839), p.131

¹⁴ PR St Mary's baptisms 1813-1839), p.147 Feb 7 1830.

when 14 month-old Edward joined his other two siblings in the family grave.¹⁵

Despite these family set backs, by the end of the 1830s, Thomas Syars appeared to be prospering. When Parliamentary Commissioners arrived in the town in about 1838, they included Thomas in a list of 72 flannel manufacturers¹⁶. Thomas owned 18 handlooms, probably all located in the mill he had built at 'Bridge End'. The number suggests he was one of the larger manufacturers in the town: the average number of looms owned by the listed masters was 9.7. Unlike some other manufacturers, all of Thomas's looms were being worked - by three men and 15 women, indicating that business was good for Thomas, at a time when there was considerable hardship in industry. Although not included in the Commissioners' report, he probably had manually operated spinning jennies installed in his mill too, each one operated by a spinner responsible for up to a hundred spindles supplying the yarn to his weavers. A notice in *The Shrewsbury Chronicle*¹⁷ of the same year also indicates that Thomas had been in a partnership with a Thomas Williams and Thomas Ashford as carders and slubbers at Tibbott's Water Mill on the southern bank of the Severn. In other words, Thomas was a substantial employer, perhaps directly employing in total around 30-40 hands.

Despite the economic uncertainties of the period, the first detailed census of 1841 indicates that the family was still living in reasonable comfort. Thomas and Mary and their five surviving children continued to live at Bridge End. Only Thomas's occupation as a flannel manufacturer was recorded. With elder daughters Mary and Elizabeth now both in their twenties, and Jane aged 16, it might be expected that they would be contributing to the family's income. But there is no evidence of this¹⁸. Yet, just a year later Jane, their 18 year old daughter was struck down and was buried three days later on August 20, 1842.

Perhaps this particular death affected Thomas in a way more than the others. At the age of 52 and having buried four of his children, he must have been feeling his own mortality at a time when the average life expectancy of a male at birth was

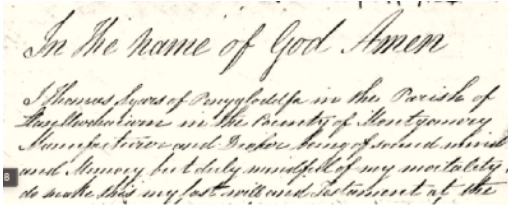
¹⁵ PR St Mary's burials (1813-36), p.144 June 11 1831

¹⁶ *Handloom Weavers Report* London, 1840

¹⁷ *The Shrewsbury Chronicle*, Friday, 15 June 1838.

¹⁸ The National Archives (TNA) 1841 census HO107/1440/3,f.11

around 42¹⁹. Consequently, two years later, he sat down to make his will, which he signed on 10 December 1844²⁰, naming his wife Mary, daughters Mary and Elizabeth, and son Henry Thomas Herbert as his executors. Three years later, the will came into force when Thomas died of “apoplexy” in the late summer of 1847²¹. He was 57.



The preamble of Thomas's will, 1847

Thomas's estate, made up of “Goods, Chattels and Credits” to the value of £800, was divided equally between his wife and four surviving children. There were conditions placed on all parties, however. The most striking was that “they all agree to live together”. If any of the named recipients could not agree to this, “then those of my wife and any one, two, or more [who] wish to live together shall cause and agree by writing all of them to be at equal expenses to get the whole of my Property, Houses, and Lands, Goods, and other Property”. Furthermore, the children also had to agree, “that if any one or more of my children shall at any time disobey their mother while she remains a widow and shall refuse to assist her and help her in any way of business and in managing the Property to the best advantage do leave the whole of his, hers or theirs . . . share . . . to the disposal of Mary, my wife and she shall divide his, hers or their [share] . . . amongst those of my children that are more dutifull and deserving, and instead . . . she may pay them off[f] with 20 pounds each, and they are to have no more claim to my estate”.

For a time the terms of the will seem to have held. The census of 1851 records that the family were indeed still living together at the Bridge End. Widow Mary Syars, now aged 60, had clearly taken over the running of the business and is described as a flannel manufacturer employing 30 men. Daughters Mary and Elizabeth are linen drapers, Henry is a grocer, Frederick 18 a wool sorter. There is also a, servant 26 year old Sarah Watkins. It is likely that both Mary's flannel manufacturing, the drapery and the grocer's businesses were all taking place under the roof of the Syars Mill. Indeed, it was commonplace for flannel manufacturers to have a grocery shop attached to the factory. These were often truck shops, enabling the employer to recoup the money paid out in workers' wages by charging inflated prices for the essential goods they needed.

¹⁹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/howhaslifeexpectancychangedovertime/2015-09-09>

²⁰ Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru/ National Library of Wales (NLW), The Will of Thomas Syars SA/1847/124

²¹ *The Liverpool Mercury*, Friday, 24 September, 1847

The family members may have inherited equal shares in Thomas's estate, but it was the mother who was in charge, as that second proviso of the will intimated. When the 1850 edition of *Slater's Trade Directory of North Wales* was published, the extent of Mary's control was evident. Not only was she listed as a flannel manufacturer in Penygloddfa, she is also the proprietor of the grocer's and tea dealer shop in the mill. It is also evident that she had expanded the business, striking a partnership as wool carders and slubbers probably at the Craigrfryn Mill, under the business of Corbet & Syars²². The Corbett in this partnership may have been another widow, Mary Corbett, and her two sons, Edward and Richard who also appear as a flannel manufacturer in the census with her two sons as wool staplers²³.

From this detail it is evident that the Syars children were very much the junior partners in the business arrangements of the Syars Company, post Thomas's decease. Perhaps this fact irked Henry Thomas Herbert Syars, or perhaps he was looking for a more exciting life than that offered by a Penygloddfa grocer. Whatever the reason, he took the momentous decision to opt out of his father's posthumous arrangements and 'cash in' his share of the family's business and move away. Move away not just from Penygloddfa, or from Newtown, or even from Mid Wales. No. Henry Thomas Herbert would be one of the estimated 60,000 people who would emigrate from Wales to the USA during the period 1850-70.

Henry's name appeared in the Newtown census of 1851 but, shortly after, he began his gruelling journey to the New World, probably in the Autumn of 1852, although no record of him has yet been traced in the manifests of any New York-bound emigrant ship. Liverpool was the likely port to which he travelled, as this was the major embarkation point for North Wales emigrants throughout the Victorian era. In 1852 it was possible to make the journey from Mid Wales to Britain's 'western gateway' in a day thanks to the arrival of steam power. But it would be another seven years before Henry could board a train in Newtown, so the first part of his journey would involve more traditional transport. Henry's best option was to catch the stage coach, *The Nettle*, which departed from *The Bear's Head Hotel* in Broad Street every morning at 8 o'clock (except Sundays) to Welshpool. The hour and half journey would give him time to catch the connecting coach to Oswestry which left the *The Royal Oak* at 10 o'clock. Oswestry

²² Slater, I., *Directory of North Wales*, 1850, pp.60-62

²³ TNA 1841 census HO107/1440/1 f.

had been connected by rail only five years earlier, so this was probably Henry's first experience of travel by steam locomotion. He boarded the 2 o'clock train of the Shrewsbury and Chester Railway Company, arriving at Chester two hours later. Here there were regular connections to Liverpool via Runcorn, or via Birkenhead and steam paddle ferry, meaning that Henry could have arrived in the great city in the early evening.

EMIGRATION!
THE AMERICAN LINE OF PACKET SHIPS.
P. W. BYRNES and CO., LIVERPOOL.
 The following Ships are now on the Berth:—
FOR NEW YORK.
 "Philadelphia," Taylor..... 2500 tons .. 11th August
 "Isaac Webb," Cropper 2500 tons .. 16th August
 "Ashburton," M'Williams 2500 tons .. 21st August
 "May Flower," Croker..... 1800 tons .. 24th August
 "Waterloo," Harvey..... 2000 tons .. 28th August
FOR PHILADELPHIA.
 "J. H. Glidden," Child 2000 tons .. 18th August
FOR BALTIMORE.
 "Annapolis," Graham 1800 tons .. 20th August
FOR NEW ORLEANS.
 "Ellen Maria," Whitmore 2000 tons .. 20th August
FOR CHARLESTON.
 "Huguenot," Gardner..... 1800 tons .. 15th August
 "G. A. Hopley," Pierce 2000 tons .. 25th August
THESE are all First Class Vessels, of the largest size, fitted up with all the modern improvements for the convenience of Emigrants.
 Passengers will be found with provisions, as per Act of Parliament, during the voyage.
 Parties residing at a distance, can have the best berths secured by remitting a deposit of £1 for each person going, in part payment.
 For Cabin, Second Cabin, and Steerage Passage, apply to P. W. BYRNES and CO., 36, Waterloo-road, Liverpool; 83, South-street, New York; and 65, Gravier-street, New Orleans.
 Liverpool, 6th August, 1851.

Adverts, like this appeared frequently in the newspapers of the day

It is difficult to imagine Henry's feelings on arrival. It was his first experience of a major port city full of noise and bustle, not to mention the many unsavoury characters, known as 'runners' only too willing to relieve him of whatever baggage he had and only willing to return it on payment of a large fee. The city would have been teeming with would-be emigrants - evicted Welsh tenant farmers, labourers desperate to escape rural poverty, industrial workers, and, of course, huge numbers of Irish peasants seeking a better life from the famine of their homeland - all waiting to board the nineteen sailings a day; all seeking a better life in America, New Zealand, or Australia where gold had just been discovered. In 1851, the city hosted the leading emigrant port in the whole of Europe with some 160,000 passengers sailing to America alone. In 1852, the cheapest means of emigrating was to travel as a 'steerage' passenger. 'Cabin' passengers were allowed on board a few days before sailing, but 'steerage' passengers, probably including Henry, were not allowed to board until the day of embarkation. Thus, Henry's first task was to find accommodation in one of Liverpool's many overcrowded and insanitary lodging houses where he could wait out his time before boarding.

Henry boarded his ship at the appointed hour. As squalid as his lodging house accommodation was, it was nothing compared to what he would have to endure for the 35 days of the Atlantic crossing. Steerage passengers were often housed in makeshift dormitories in the holds of the ships, with bunks on either side and tables running down the centre. They were dark, damp and poorly ventilated spaces: conditions where disease could spread rapidly. Some indication of the dangers of life on board an emigrant ship can be gauged from this contemporary report:

The 'Silas Greenman' and the 'Isaac Wright', emigrant ships, from Liverpool to New York, have had cholera amongst the passengers. The former was lying in the Mersey, outward bound, when the epidemic appeared, and all were removed to the workhouse at Liverpool. Up to yesterday morning 21 fatal cases had occurred. The 'Isaac Wright' . . . met with an accident



*Steerage passengers, 1850,
Illustrated London News
(Canterbury Museum)*

off the coast of Ireland, and was compelled to put back to the Mersey—but it has been stated that nearly 50 victims were committed to the deep before she made the port. The passengers on board the 'Isaac Wright' complain very much of the treatment they received on board. They were unanimous in the assertion that the water was bad, and quite rotten, and that it induced sickness; that only one-third the quantity, both of water and meal, was meted out to them, and that they could not get the water boiled, except on payment of 6d. the quart to the cook²⁴.

Mortality rates amongst emigrant passengers could be alarming, as the report from 1853 testifies:

The ships 'Marathon' and 'New World' from Liverpool, and the 'George Hurlbut', from Le Havre, have arrived at New York with an aggregate loss of no fewer than 214 of their passengers²⁵.

And, of course, there was always the ever-present danger of shipwreck, although the passengers onboard the *Winchester* seemed to have been lucky:

The 'Washington' brought the crew and passengers of the emigrant ship 'Winchester', which foundered on the 3rd. She saved 445 passengers, and of the crew ; only four passengers were drowned²⁶.

In 1853, the processing of immigrants into the US was still in its infancy. The Immigration Centre of Ellis Island was still 40 years distant and for now immigrants disembarked directly at the many wharves on New York's vast waterfront. It is likely that Henry's first, and last, view of the great city, as he emerged blinking in the bright January sunshine, was the district of what was then Ward 7 fronting the East River on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was here, in a run down tenement set amongst the bonded warehouses, lumber yards and paper mills of this rapidly developing slum area, that Henry died. His death is recorded on 21 January, 1853 at 41 Hammond Manhattan, New York²⁷. The cause of death was given as 'Phthisis', a term used at the time to refer to a pulmonary disease usually tuberculosis.

21. South. Richard	3	21. South. Richard	
22. South. Henry	10	22. South. Henry	
23. South. Henry & A	25	23. South. Henry & A	
24. South. Mary	20	24. South. Mary	
25. South. Mary	20	25. South. Mary	
26. South. Mary	20	26. South. Mary	
27. South. Mary	20	27. South. Mary	
28. South. Mary	20	28. South. Mary	
29. South. Mary	20	29. South. Mary	
30. South. Mary	20	30. South. Mary	

*Henry's death is recorded in the
Manhattan Register of Deaths for 21
January, 1873*

²⁴ *The London Express*, 7 Oct 1853

²⁵ *The Glasgow Commonwealth*, 17 December 1853

²⁶ *Newry Examiner and Louth Advertiser* - 31 May 1854

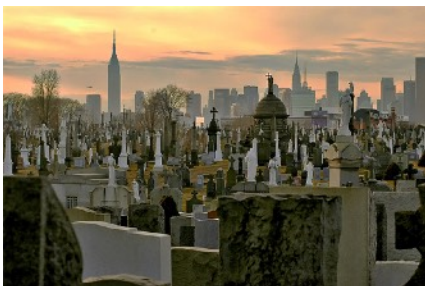
²⁷ New York City Municipal Archives; New York, NY, USA; Manhattan Vital Registers; Source Record Group: RG 095 Vital Records, p.350

How had Henry contracted the disease? Tuberculosis is primarily spread through the air when a person with active (infectious) TB in their lungs coughs, sneezes, or speaks, releasing tiny droplets containing TB bacteria. There were any number of possibilities for exactly when Henry succumbed to the illness as TB has a long incubation period remaining latent until physical stress and poor nutrition accelerated bodily decline.

Because of its long incubation period, it is possible that Henry was carrying the disease even before he left Newtown. However, it is more likely that he fell victim to the disease during his short stay in the Liverpool lodging house or, more likely still, on board the emigrant ship. These vessels became incubators for tuberculosis disease's airborne transmission. Emigrants spent long hours below decks, where damp bedding and crowded conditions were ideal breeding conditions for the disease.

News of Henry's death arrived in Montgomeryshire fairly rapidly. A letter, probably written by an emigrant companion must have been borne across the Atlantic by one of the new steamships in operation by 1853, which cut the journey time down to around 10 days. Thus, The Shrewsbury Chronicle could report on Friday, 11 February 1853 the death on "21st ult., at New York, aged 25, Henry Thomas Herbert Syars, eldest son of the late Mr Thomas Syars, Bridgend, Newtown, Montgomeryshire".

Henry's name is the last to appear on the St Mary's gravestone. But when was it erected, and who arranged subsequent burials to be recorded? Judging by the variations in the actual lettering of the inscriptions and the amount of wear, it would seem likely that the stone was erected by the grieving parents of the first Thomas, back in 1823 and subsequently added to up to the receipt of news of Henry's death in 1853. By that time Mary Syars had buried five of her children, as well as her husband, Thomas. She was, then, a woman in her mid 60s: an old woman by the standards of the times in which she lived. On top of that she had taken on the burden of running the family's businesses, now with only three children to help her. When the following census was taken in 1861, Mary no longer appears, having passed away in March 1857 aged 67²⁸. Neither was there any reference to the youngest child, Frederick Syars. That's because he had died two years previously, in June 1859²⁹, although his name is not recorded



Henry was buried in the Bay Cemetery, New York

²⁸ PR St Marys burials (1836-59), p. 373

²⁹ PR St Mary's burials (1836-59), p.59

on the gravestone. At least, his mother had been spared this particular misery.



The Syars Clock

The family house attached to the Syars factory in Bridge Street and overlooking the river, which had once contained a large family now only housed the two surviving unmarried daughters, Mary and Elizabeth, who carried on the draper's business, along with their maid, a local girl named Catherine. At that point the factory building seems to have remained in the ownership of the two sisters, but it is unclear as to whether they still operated it as their own business or rented out the space to other manufacturers. Mary, the elder sister, died at the age of 47 in January 1867 and Elizabeth was now left to carry on alone. Two years after the death of her sister, perhaps in an attempt to off-load some of the expense of the upkeep of the factory building, she offered the large clock which hung from the top storey of the factory "for the use of the town", on the condition that the maintenance was paid for by the Local Board³⁰. 'The Syars Clock Question' became a hot topic of discussion in the Autumn of 1869, following the Local Board's decision to refuse to pay for its maintenance. A 'Penny Protest' attracting 600 signatures of those who opposed the Board's decision was presented. In the end the Honourable Charles Hanbury Tracy of Gregynog personally bore the cost for the necessary work to be undertaken, concluding that the clock had "already received too much attention"³¹.

Elizabeth Syars passed away in March 1875 aged 59. Probate was awarded to another Syars, also name Thomas³², possibly a cousin of Elizabeth's. Thomas was a weaver himself, but clearly lacked the resources or the inclination to carry on the family business. In May 1875, both the Syars house and factory was put up for auction at *The Elephant & Castle Hotel*,

*All that freehold Dwelling-House, lately occupied by the late Miss Syars, containing Kitchen, Back-kitchen, Pantry, Drawing and Dining Rooms, Parlour, 4 Bedrooms, Closets, and capital garden. Also all that immense and well built premises, known as "Syars Factory," of 6 Stories [sic], two floors of which factory are 70ft 6in by 22 ft, situate under which Factory are 4 Cottages. . .*³³.

³⁰ *Aberystwyth Times*, 13 November 1869

³¹ *The Montgomeryshire Express*, 23 November 1869

³² TNA 1841 census HO107/1440/5, f. 17 names him as a ten year old in the household of William Syars, weaver, and his wife Mary in Upper Green Street.

³³ *The Montgomeryshire Express*, 11 May, 1875

A week later, it was reported that both factory and cottages had been purchased by a Mr T. Owen.³⁴ Thomas Owen was another flannel manufacturer, who, according to the 1871 census, employed 13 men, 1 boy and 3 women in his Crescent Street factory³⁵. By 1881, it appears as though he had moved into the former Syars home in Upper Bridge Street

Thus, the Syars dynasty, established by Thomas and Mary Syars did not outlast their children. The Syars Mill still survives, albeit it in a stunted form, as the Roman Catholic Church. Only the gravestone in St Mary's remains as a testament to the family who once lived there. None of the Syars children married; three failed to survive infancy; one died a teenager; two others in their early twenties and only two into their middle age. The average age at death of these children was 22.1 years. A sobering statistic which throws a spotlight on the life expectancy of our Newtown ancestors.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 18 May 1875

³⁵ TNA 1871 census RG10/5616, f. 21