



John Owen: Newtown's First Photographer.

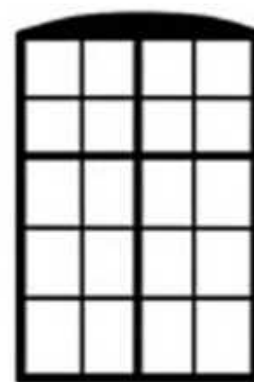
24th April - 30th September 2025

See website for opening times
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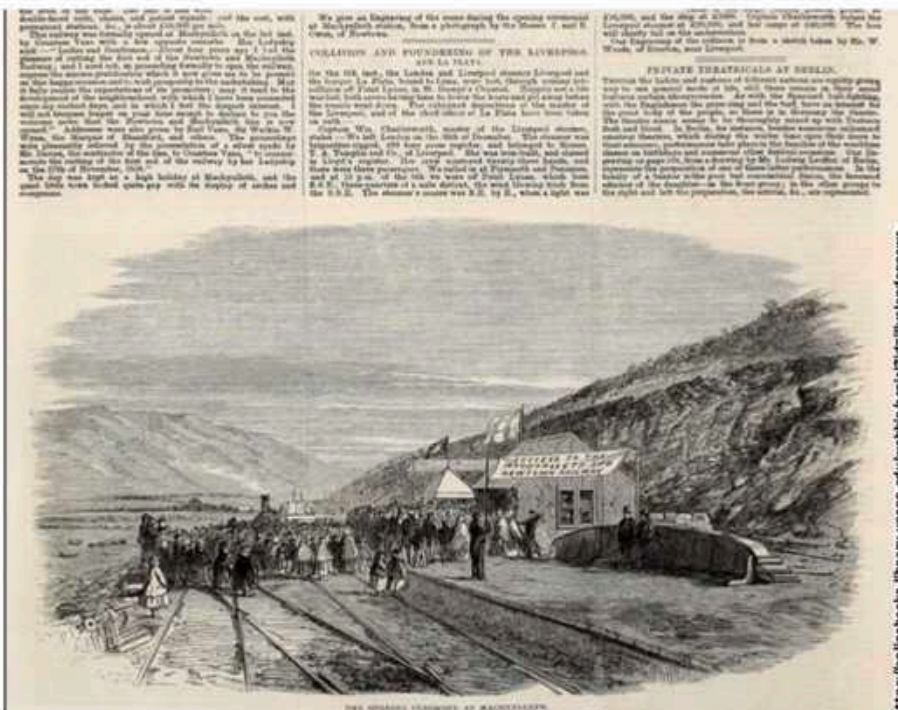
John Owen (1829-1907): Newtown's First

In a career spanning over forty years, John Owen photographed Mid Wales's great and not so great inhabitants and left an extensive corpus of work, which, as time goes by, takes on a greater significance.

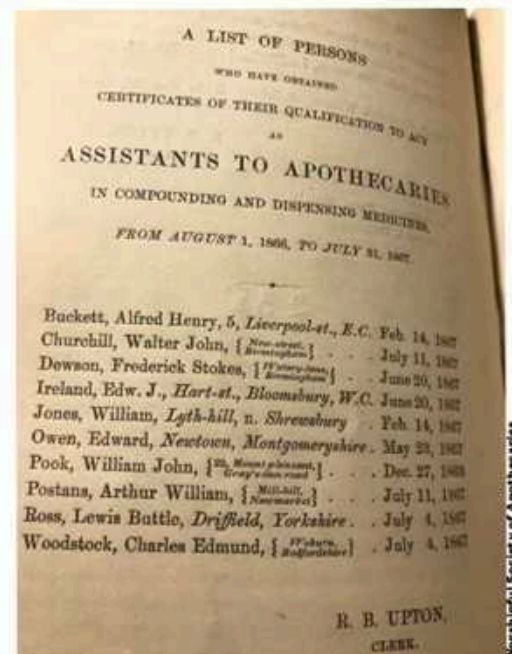
John was one of three children born to carpenter James Owen, and his wife Sarah, of Montgomery. After a varied career as painter and glazier and a spell in London as a builder's clerk, he and his younger brother Edward returned to Montgomeryshire in 1862. Towards the end of that year the brothers set up a business at 19 Broad Street, Newtown. Edward operated as druggist, selling a combination of traditional remedies, as well as pharmaceuticals such as opium. John indulged his passion for photography. In 1868, the brothers dissolved their partnership and moved premises to numbers 48 & 49 Broad St: Edward as a chemist and John as a photographer. Here, the brothers would practise their professions until the early years of the 20th century.



An elderly Gentleman, carte de visite, c.1875



The Owen brothers were present at the opening of the Newtown to Machynlleth Railway in January 1863. It was one of their earliest commissions. Sadly, the photograph has not survived. However, two weeks after the event, the *Illustrated London News* published an engraving of the scene. The caption reads "We give an engraving of the scene during the opening ceremonial, at Machynlleth Station, from a photograph by Messrs J. and E. Owen, Newtown."



In 1867, Edward Owen appeared before the Court of Examiners of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries to be examined on his knowledge of pharmaceuticals. The successful outcome was recorded in the Society's register. His success in London resulted in the dissolution of the partnership with his brother. Edward was free to practise as a dispensing chemist.

Art for the Masses

The age of photography had barely dawned when John Owen was born. Just three years earlier, in 1826, Frenchman Joseph Nicéphore Niépce succeeded in taking the first true photograph with a camera.

Until the 1850s, photography was very much the preserve of the rich, as was owning a photograph. Early images were known as daguerrotypes (after their inventor, Louis Daguerre), made by exposing a silver plated copper plate to sunlight. Not only were these expensive but each daguerrotype was a unique image incapable of duplication.

In 1851, Englishman Frederick Scott Archer introduced a process (the wet collodion process) whereby a photographic negative was produced on a cheap glass plate making it possible to duplicate unlimited positives from a single negative.

By 1862 another Frenchman, Andre Adolphe Disdèri invented a special camera capable of taking eight separate images on one glass plate. Each small image was stuck on to a small card measuring 10.5cm x 6.2cm, known as a carte de visite (CdV).

Archer's wet collodion process and Desdèri's CdV revolutionised photography, making it accessible to the masses. As the *The London Review* commented in 1862, "there is no barrier to rank . . .; the poorest owns his three inches of card board and the richest can claim no more." Suddenly, photographers' studios became a common sight on the High Street. 'Cartomania,' as it was dubbed, had gripped the nation.



Portrait of an unknown lady, daguerreotype, c.1850



Complete plate of André Adolphe Disdèri (1863). Uncut, unmounted carte-de-visite albumen silver print from glass negative 18.8 x 24.3 cm.

Gilman Collection, Gift of The Howard Gilman Foundation, Metropolitan Museum of Art (Creative Commons)



A Young Woman in crinoline, John & Edward c. 1864. An early CdV when the Owen brothers were still in partnership operating out of what is 19 Broad Street. Up until the late 1860s, the upper part of Broad Street was known as Bridge Street. The CdV was Owen's stock in trade which he sold for 6d. each or 4s. 6d. a dozen.



Richard Humphreys, Flannel Manufacturer, John Owen, c.1895. Larger size Cabinet Cards became popular from the 1880s. Measuring 16.5cm x 11.5cm. which sold for 1s. each. The card back shows the Owen brothers shops at 48 & 49 Broad Street



Victorian photographers used their card backs to advertise their services, and Owen was no exception to this. This selection shows how his designs changed between 1862 and 1904 and are a valuable aid to the dating of his photographs.

A visit to the Studio

Portraiture was John Owen's 'bread and butter'. In almost a half century a large portion of the population of Newtown and Montgomeryshire passed through his studio. He took at least 25,000 images of his subjects.

Once settled in his studio and having discussed the particular needs of his sitter, John would have retired to his dark room to prepare his glass negative. Reappearing after a few minutes he loaded the glass plate into the back of the camera and then arranged his sitter accordingly. Immediately after exposing the photographic plate, he returned to the dark room to perform the 'miracle' of photography.

The low cost of a single cdv meant that for the first time a permanent true likeness of oneself could be purchased for the value of about an hour's labour of a skilled tradesperson. As a consequence, Owen's clientele represented a wide stratum of Montgomeryshire society. It ranged from wealthy landowners, politicians and business people, to flannel workers and lowly domestic servants.

One thing uniting his customers was a desire for an image reflecting economic success and prestige. Owen, quickly understood how pose and props could be the answer. The earliest photographs are invariably full length portraits. The subject is either seated, or standing in an empty space with a blank wall and patterned carpet. Props are gradually added but are minimal. A velvet curtain may be draped either to the left or right of the subject. An upholstered padded chair, bureau or carved three-legged table regularly appear. Later more props are added - a balustrade, trellis fence or even rocks to lean against.

The painted backcloth remained the essential tool throughout his career. It could contain a painted item of furniture. A painted window could be added or an archway offering a view into a garden. It can also suggest an outdoor scene, perhaps in a garden.



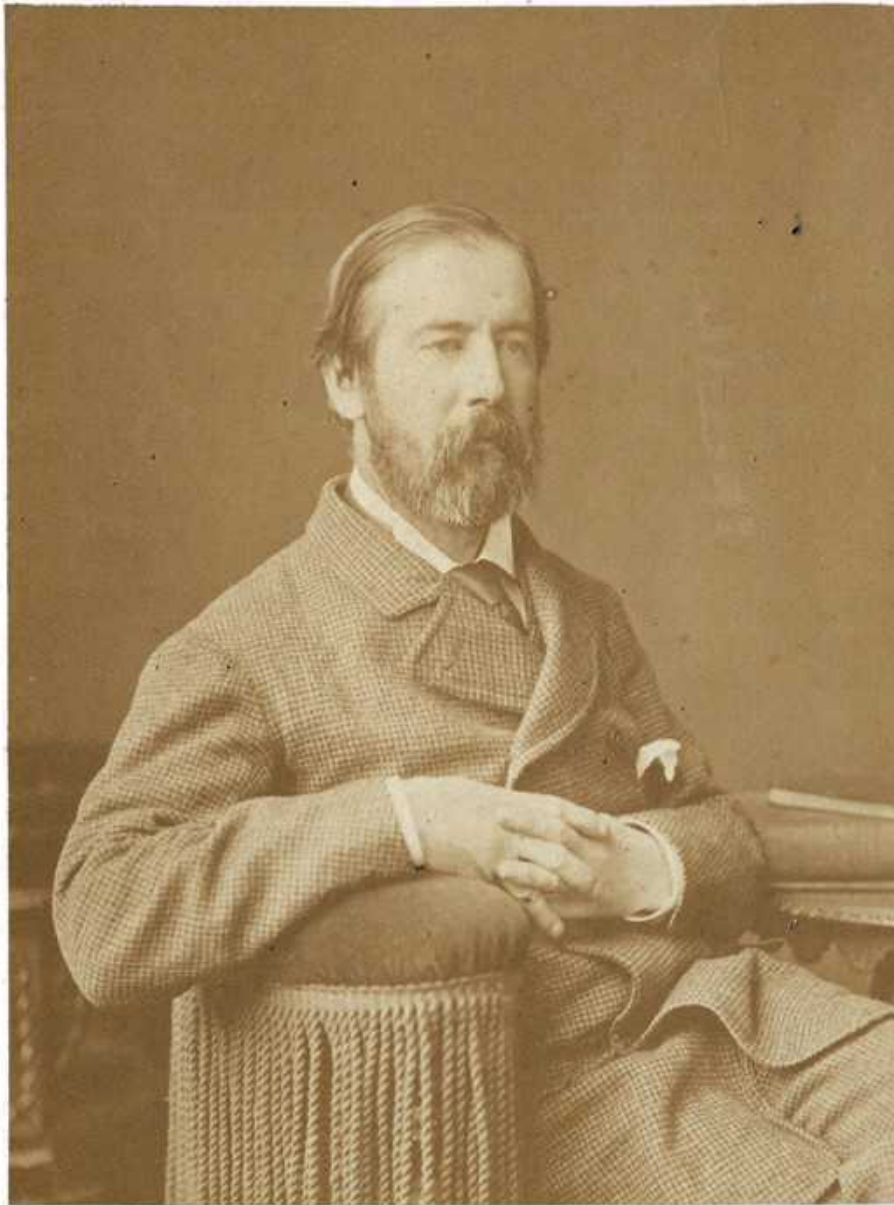
John Owen's studio at 49 Broad Street, to the right, with his brother Edward's chemist shop to the left at number 48. From a cabinet card back of c. 1895



No. 49 Broad Street today



A visit to Owen's studio added to the sense of occasion of having one's photograph taken. For the sitter it was akin to visiting the artist's studio of an earlier age. This oil portrait of Newtown Doctor Richard Jones (1815-1872) was probably painted by an itinerant portrait painter in about 1840. Itinerant painters performed a valuable service to middle class patrons in the many rural areas of Wales where there were few, if any, established commercial artists.



J. OWEN, PHOTO, NEWTOWN.

Frontispiece, *Rendell's Speeches in Montgomeryshire, 1880.*

Stuart Rendell was Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire between 1880 and 1894. Although English by birth, he was known as 'the Member for Wales' because of his vocal support for Welsh related causes.



Richard and Jane Hughes & Family of Severn Place.

Richard was a substantial flannel manufacturer, employing in 1861, 30 men and 29 women. All three CdVs were taken in c.1865, but the right hand is a reprint of c.1881, perhaps made at the time of his death to serve as a memorial.



Fashion, as well as studio poses and props changed over time as this selection of CdVs between 1863 and 1900 demonstrate.

Mr Owen & Mr Jones

Socially, John was regarded as a strong pillar of the community and noted for his musical ability, being "a first class musician, a flautist of no mean ability" and, along with his brother Edward, a founder of the Newtown Glee and Madrigal Union. He could count Pryce Jones as one of his friends.

This friendship must have been formed early; by 1868, John was a close neighbour of Pryce's, only a few steps away from his Broad Street draper's shop. The earliest photograph we have of Mr & Mrs Pryce Jones was taken at John's studio in 1863 at the very start of the couple's remarkable success. As well as being neighbours, they met regularly in the same social circles. Both men were staunch Anglicans, both serving as Church Wardens in the parish. They were also active in the masonic movement.

In June 1880, Pryce's eldest daughter, Eleanor was married to local solicitor Edward Powell. John was listed as one of the friends who collected £200 to purchase a gift to the bride of "a gold and jewelled bracelet and silver centre piece". Two years later, amidst huge celebrations on the occasion of Pryce's eldest son Edward's coming of age, the elaborately illuminated address commissioned by the townspeople and factory workers of the Royal Welsh Warehouse were proudly displayed in the photographer's window.





The Pryce Jones Family

John was responsible for the earliest photograph we have of the young couple (see overleaf), as well as their children. The family commissioned portraits by Owen throughout the second half of the 19th Century. Top L.-R.: a young Pryce Jones, c.1870, Eleanor Jones (née Rowley Morris) c.1879, son Edward (1864). Bottom: William Earnest & Albert (1877), Edward & Eleanor (1863), Edward(1890)



Illuminated testimonial to Edward Pryce Jones on the occasion of his coming of age, February 6 1882, designed by John Owen. Neo-gothic design with three photographs at top centre by Owen of Pryce Jones, Eleanor Jones and Edward. Each corner has painted scenes of (clockwise from top left) the Royal Welsh Warehouse, Plas Dolerw, Llanllwchaearn & St David's Church. Floral border to left and right with gothic style address to centre with list of subscribers

Documenting the World

John's earliest card stock referred vaguely to "Views etc. published". By 1869, he was referring to himself as as "Portrait and Landscape Photographer" with "Views in North Wales Published". Ten years later he had added "Adjoining Counties" to his list of locations. He clearly had a talent for outdoor photography and he was twice awarded first prize at the National Eisteddfod for his work.

In 1879, Owen published a list of over 450 'views' covering the counties of North Wales and Shropshire. He utilised the growing rail network to reach places which only a few years earlier would have proved difficult.

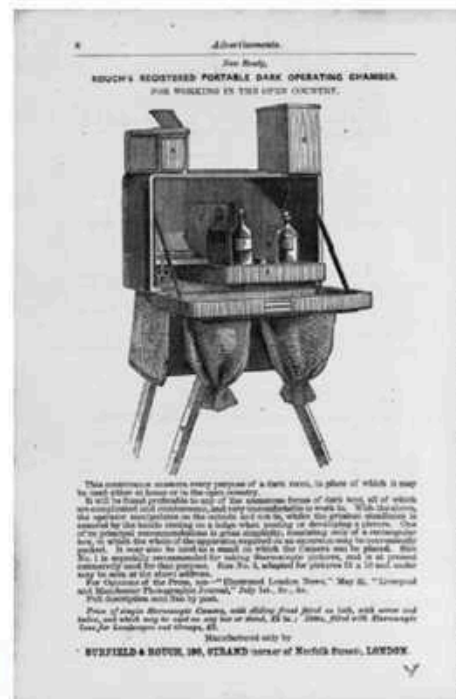
Nevertheless photographing outdoor scenes presented its own challenges. Chief of these was the changing light levels meaning exposure times were difficult to calculate. Busy street scenes created more problems. How could he prevent people going about their business from becoming blurred streaks in the photograph when the exposure time might be a few seconds?

Then there was the sheer difficulty of transporting the equipment needed - a bulky camera, a wooden tripod and, not least, heavy and fragile glass plates.

Finally, the photographic process itself imposed severe restrictions. From the time that John had prepared his glass plates with chemicals, he had only fifteen minutes to expose the negative and develop it. He therefore needed to take a portable darkroom with him including bottles of chemicals, metal developing trays and plate holders to hold the glass negatives. No wonder he needed to employ an assistant!



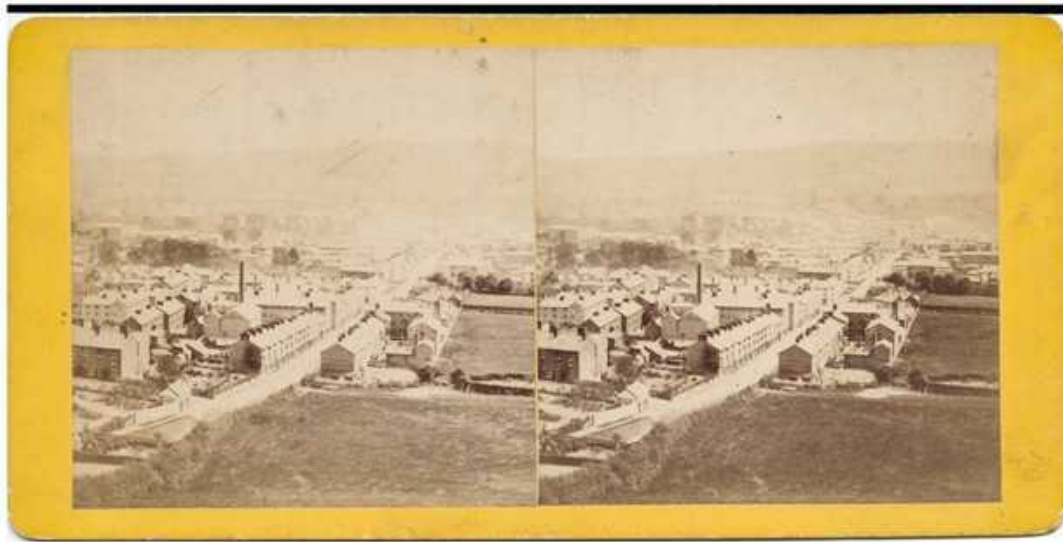
The completion of the Aberystwyth & Welsh Coast Railway in 1867 meant that places such as far north as Porthmadog were accessible in a day for Owen, enlarging his portfolio of views



Owen probably used a portable darkroom, like this one advertised in the 1858 edition of Sutton's 'English Dictionary of Photography'



For most of his career John was working before the introduction of the printed photographic postcard. It wasn't until 1894 that photographic postcards were accepted for postage. Thus for much of his business life, John sold CdV views, each one laboriously printed in his studio dark room, glued to his card stock and sold individually or as 'county' sets. These three views were all taken before 1870. **Top: The Elephant & Castle from the Long Bridge. Middle: St Nicholas's Church, Montgomery. Bottom: Montgomery Castle.**



A stereograph is composed of two pictures mounted next to each other, viewed with a set of lenses known as a stereoscope. Taken around 7cm apart, roughly corresponding to the spacing of the eyes, stereographs gave the Victorians a 3-D view of their world - a 19th Century Virtual Reality! These three images show Newtown from the Bryn, Broad Street and the New Market Hall, all taken between 1865 and 1870.



The Checkers Inn, c. 1870, albumen print by John Owen.

The Checkers stood on the junction of Broad Street and Old Church Lane and was one of the few buildings to escape 'The Great Rebuild' of the early 19th Century. It was a popular subject for photographers until its demolition in the 1930s.



Newtown Hall, c. 1880, hand-coloured albumen print by John Owen.

Owen wanted to capture the most realistic image possible. But Victorian photography could only project a monochrome image of the world. Thus, photographers began to experiment with hand-colouring as a post-print process. By the 1850s oil, watercolours and crayons were being used. From the early 1870s, John Owen was using his photo-backs to advertise "Photo crayons from stock negatives", and this is a rare example of one of his efforts.

Commercial Competitors

Where John led, others soon followed.

William Ewing, a shoemaker turned photographer from Kerry, was Owen's earliest competitor. He appears in Slater's Trade Directory of 1868 along with John as the only two photographers in Newtown. By 1870, he seems to have left Newtown as he cannot be traced in any subsequent census.



Henry Worrall of Birmingham arrived in Newtown around 1870 and became an assistant to Owen before branching out on his own in 1882 at the Gainsborough Studio in Severn Street. Worrall died in 1895 and his business was continued by his widow, Jane, into the early twentieth century.

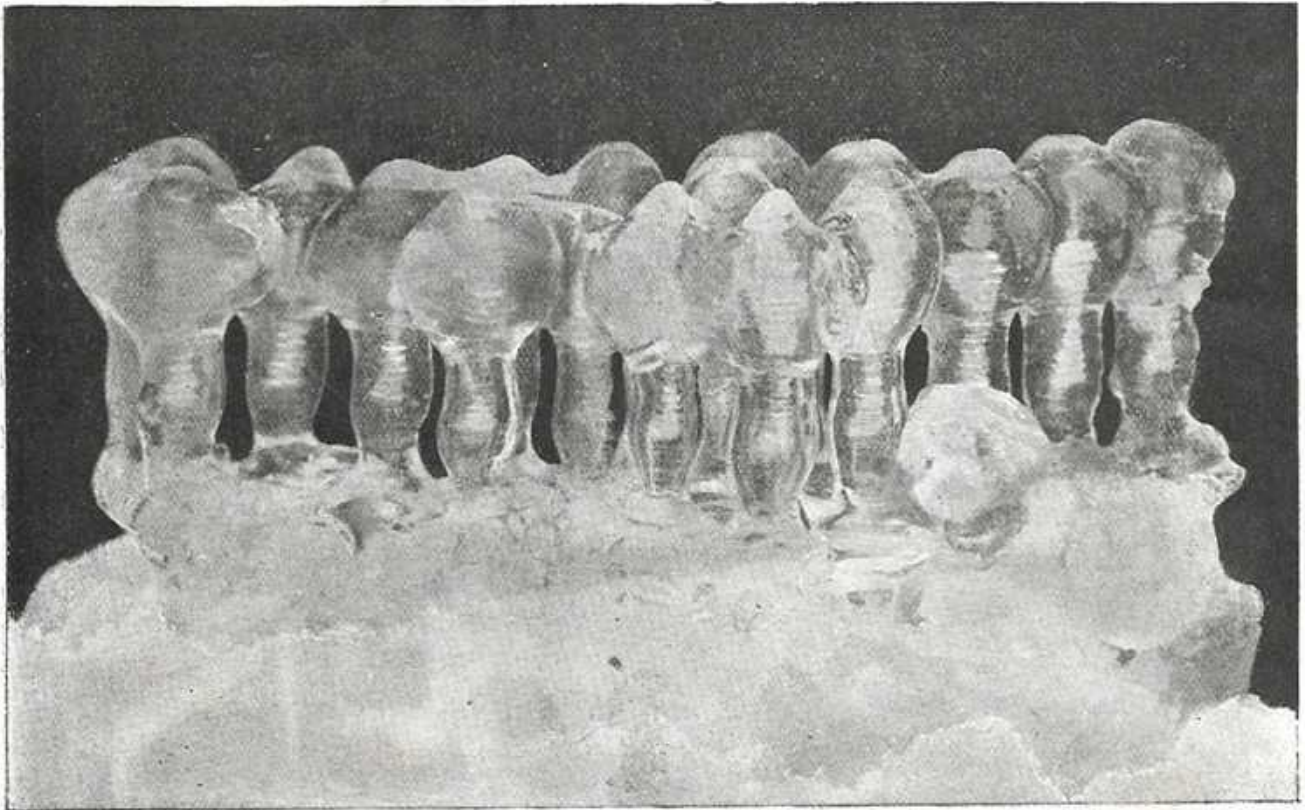


Edwin Davies was taken on by John after Worrall's departure from the business and, like his predecessor he too turned from being assistant to competitor. He set up first in High Street in 1901 before taking over Owen's old premises at number 49 Broad Street on his former employer's death in 1907.



Morley E. Park set up his stationer's and printer's business opposite Owen in Broad Street in the late 1870s. It is probable Park supplied Owen with some of his card stock but by the end of the century he was taking his own photos and selling them as postcards.





A CRYSTAL CORONET.

The above represents a remarkable freak in the crystallization of water. This curious formation was found by Mr. J. Owen, of 49, Broad Street, Newtown, North Wales, and was sent to us for reproduction. Mr. Owen says: "I found the original on the top of a hedge; it was formed by droppings from the branch of a tree during a slight thaw that took place during the period of severe frost experienced in January. The ice is perfectly clear, and the effect of the whole is very beautiful."

John was clearly fascinated with photography's ability to record the transience of the natural world. This cutting comes from a photographic magazine of 1893.

Legacy

As the twentieth century dawned, time was catching up with John. He was now in his seventies, and his business was declining. He had once been a pioneer in the photographer's art, but now he was subject to more competition. In 1904 John was forced to file for bankruptcy. At his bankruptcy hearing, John explained that, "He had adapted his business to modern systems of trade, and every improvement he had tried to the best of his ability. The photographic business was not so good as it used to be, and the introduction of cheap reproductions of works of art had to some extent affected his business detrimentally".

To make matters worse, John had an outstanding loan, for which his brother stood as surety. Edward lacked the financial resources to rescue his brother and he too was declared bankrupt. Thus, the two brothers who had started out in business together and had remained next-door neighbours, both fell victims to the same financial and commercial forces and were declared bankrupt at the same time.

John died at the age of 77, in 1907. He was born just three years after the birth of photography. He lived long enough to see celluloid film become an alternative to the fragile glass plates of earlier times. By 1907 photography was no longer the preserve of the professional. The Kodak Box Brownie camera, invented in 1900, cost a mere five shillings and made photography accessible to the mass of people for the first time. It was probably such developments, as well as local competition, which contributed greatly to John's ultimate business demise.



Celebrated harpist John Roberts of Newtown (Telenor Cymru) dressed in his elisteddfod bardic robes. John Owen, cabinet card, c.1880.