
A Room with a View: Three Photographs of Broad Street

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National Library of Wales

The Royal Cambrian House (formerly Pryce Jones's The Royal Welsh Warehouse) of draper Mr Thomas Rowlands stood at the Cross in Broad Street until its demolition in 1897. It was replaced by the new clock tower, now known affectionally as 'Old Sarah'. The first floor windows of the Royal Cambrian offered a commanding view of the length of Broad Street, the Long Bridge and Crescent Street in Penygloddfa beyond. It was a favourite spot for Newtown's earliest photographer, John Owen, to record the comings and goings of the townsfolk. Here we look at three moments in Broad Street's life in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

At noon on a 9th July 1881, more than 450 workers assembled outside of the Cambrian Woollen Mill, near the canal basin, to take part in the Third Annual Procession of the Welsh Woollen Mill. Processions, for one reason or another, were a regular feature of life in late Victorian Newtown. And this was a spectacular demonstration of the importance of the textile industry to the town. The Cambrian was the first, and largest, of the three integrated steam-powered flannel mills erected after 1856 which were fast monopolising the production of the woollen cloth that had made Newtown famous as 'The Leeds of Wales', and ringing the death knell for the handloom weavers of the town. The Company had been formed under the Chairmanship of Charles Hanbury Tracy of Gregynog as a rival to the mills of Pryce Jones. In an effort to diversify production, he had instigated the production of serges and tweeds necessitating the recruitment of skilled Scottish weavers which resulted in the building of Dysart Terrace (named after Hanbury Tracy's Uncle, Lord Dysart) to house them.

On this July day in 1881, the workers were headed by the 23-strong Newtown Brass and Reed Band under its conductor Mr W.P. Phillips and before them was displayed a huge banner with the motto "Success to the Welsh Woollen Company" and on its reverse "By our Industry we Live". The procession moved off, cheered along by crowds of spectators. It was carefully arranged in the order of the thirteen stages of cloth production. First came the Wool department, followed by the Dying and the Mixing Departments. The Carders were next, followed by the Spinners and Yarn Storing Departments. They were followed by the Twisters and the Pattern Weavers and then the Warpers. After they passed, it was the turn of the Power Loom Weavers, the Darners and the Millers. Finally, and fittingly, it was the Finishers who brought up the rear. It was reported that the whole procession was "most imposing", not only for its sheer size, but also because it presented a "picture of most respectably attired townsfolk", which were a credit to both their town and their industry.

The Procession proceeded through Penygloddfa, passing the old handloom factories, some of which by this time had been converted to steam power, before heading across the Long Bridge into Broad Street. When the head of the procession reached The Cross, it halted in front of the Royal Cambrian House where "arrangements had been made with Mr J. Owen, photographer, to have the procession photographed"¹. Owen had positioned his camera at one of the open windows ready

¹ *The Montgomeryshire Express*, 12 July, 1881



to capture the moment and preserve it for posterity. And this is the photograph which he took on that day.

The photograph captures the town at the very height of its success as a manufacturing centre. By the following year the numbers employed in the Cambrian Mill alone amounted to 600 with 110 power-looms capable of producing 50,000 yards of flannel for the Royal Navy alone. But within a decade the Company was in serious financial difficulties, thanks to the effects of the US imposed McKinlay tariffs which excluded Welsh woollens from the American market.



Broad Street showing The Bear's Head after its 1893 renovation.

The photograph also provides a wonderful view of Broad Street, just before significant changes were made to one of its most prominent buildings. On the left of the photograph above can be seen the seventeenth century *Bears Head Hotel* as it appeared before its mock Tudor makeover and its name change to *The Bear Hotel* in 1893. The sign board above the entrance proclaims that the licensee was in the name of *Langworthy*. In 1881 Elizabeth Langworthy was 72 years of age. She had been at the hotel since 1841, initially with her

husband who died seven years later, leaving Elizabeth to continue as sole proprietor until her own demise in 1889².

On the right hand side of Broad Street and the third shop down can be seen the photographer's own studio. John Owen had moved to number 49 Broad St. in 1867 from the smaller premises he had occupied since 1862 at number 19. Through his doors passed all the well known and lesser known members of Montgomeryshire society who were keen to have their portraits taken.

In the distance, beyond the Long Bridge, the huge six-storey Syars Flannel Mill rises above the river. The mill was probably named after Thomas Syars (born 1791), but, in 1881, as can just be discerned by the large painted lettering, it was occupied by 78 year old Samuel Morgan³. Samuel was described in the census of that year as a wool merchant living in High Street. It is likely that some of the wool for his flannel came from his own sheep, as the census of 1871 records him as a farmer also, probably owning land in Penygloddfa⁴.

Time had moved on a little when John Owen took the second shot from the same window of the Royal Cambrian House. The view this time is of a far more hum-drum, relaxed, work-a-day Broad Street, with trunks and barrels piled up on the pavements and horse-drawn carts bringing goods, including a milk churn, into town. People stop in the middle of the street to engage in conversation. Time seems to stand still. There are signs of change, however. Look closely at the *The Bear's Head Hotel* sign. It appears quite weather beaten with the hotel's name obliterated and Elizabeth Langworthy's barely legible. The giant padlock sign above the ironmonger's shop on the right hand fifth building which can be seen in the earlier photograph has been removed. Samuel Morgan's name has also been removed from the Syars Mill to be replaced by the 'Montgomeryshire Flannel Company'. That's because the aged Samuel Morgan had died in 1882 and the new company was incorporated the following year⁵. But when exactly is this time? It is still pre-1893 as the alterations to *The Bear's Head*, have still not taken place. It's also before 1891. Notice the cobbled pavements. These were removed in that year to be replaced by stone paving slabs.

² Newtown Local History Group, *A Brief Survey of Public Houses, Inn and Taverns in Newtown and LLanllwchaearn*, p.27

³ The National Archives (TNA) 1881 census, RG11/5486, f.4

⁴ TNA 1871 Census, RG10/5616, f.14

⁵ The National Archives BT 31/3247/19051



Newtown Textile Museum

This view provides us with a slightly wider angle of the east side of Broad Street. The first building in view is *The King's Head* public House another seventeenth century building demolished during the redevelopment of The Cross in 1897. The licensee's name appears above the door as 'Chas. Cotton'. Who Charles was is a mystery, as his name does not appear in either census for 1881 or 1891. Neither does it appear in Slater's Trade Directory of 1895. We know that in 1883 David Kinsey was in charge and had been since at least 1871. In 1886 it was a K. Williams and 1888 Emily Evans⁶. By 1891 it was John Helton⁷. Quite clearly, there was a rapid change-over of licensees in this particular establishment and Mr Cotton could have been resident there in any of the intervening years.

⁶ NHG, *Ibid*, p.81

⁷ TNA Census 1891RG12/4593, f.11

There is one other clue which helps us to pin down the date of this photograph more precisely. The original glass plate negative is held by the National Library of Wales and is entitled *Broad Street, Newtown with Drs Hall and Purchase in the foreground*⁸. This refers to the group of three figures who can be seen in conversation on the street. A top-hatted, bearded gentleman wearing a heavy coat and carrying an umbrella is shaking hands with another bare-headed man in a frock coat while a third looks on. Dr. Edward Hall was born in Newtown in 1824, the illegitimate son of Christopher Breese and Hester Hall, both tanners⁹. By the age of 17 he was practising as a surgeon in the town¹⁰ and by 1846 he was enrolled as a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons¹¹ which meant that Edward had studied for 3 years at the University of London and had completed 21 months work in a hospital. By 1871 he was also acting as coroner¹² and in 1881 he was described as a Justice of the Peace¹³. Edward died in 1889¹⁴.

Whilst Edward Hall was a Newtown man, born and bred, Dr. Frank Utten Purchas was the exact opposite.. His father, Henry Martin Purchas hailed from St Arvans in Monmouthshire, but by the time he was in his mid twenties, he had left Wales for a new life in Jamaica. It was here in the parish of Trelawney on the island's north coast, that he married Harriet Helen Utten Todd, the daughter of a London merchant in 1858. The couple settled in Dry Harbour in the neighbouring St Ann's parish where their first son, Frank, was born on 7 January 1861. It is probable that, at some time in his early youth, Frank was sent back to the UK to complete his education. At about the age of 20 he enrolled at the University of Edinburgh as a medical student gaining his M.B. (Bachelor of Medicine) in 1887. He then joined a practise in the town of Laurencekirk, Aberdeenshire, but did not stay for long. In 1890 he gained his M.D. (Doctor of Medicine), by which time he had already

⁸ NLW <http://hdl.handle.net/10107/1293677>

⁹ St Mary's Parish Register (PR), 1813-1839, baptisms 19 April 1824, p.103

¹⁰ TNA census 1841 HO107/1440/1, folio 21A

¹¹ Royal College of Physicians of Ireland; Dublin, Ireland; The Medical Register; Reference Number: TMR/185

¹² TNA CENSUS 1871 RG10/5616, f.40

¹³ TNA census 1881 RG11/5487, f.68

¹⁴ General Register Office, Deaths June 1889 Vol. 11b, p.131

made the move to Newtown¹⁵. Thus, if these figures are Drs. Hall and Purchas, it would suggest that the date of this photograph must be about 1888-9.

Frank Purchas would spend the rest of his life in Newtown, establishing a successful career. 1891 found the unmarried Frank living in Crescent Street, Penygloddfa, where he is described as a "duly registered general practitioner"¹⁶, and being attended to by his old Edinburgh housekeeper, Christine Finni (Finney?). Although a newcomer to the town, Frank soon established himself both professionally and socially. On 25 June, 1891 he married Elizabeth Ann, the eldest daughter of Sir Pryce Pryce-Jones. No doubt the marriage opened doors for him. The following month, he was initiated into the Cedewain Lodge of the Freemasons¹⁷ and in 1894 the Newtown and Llanidloes Board of Guardians appointed him as Medical Officer for the Llanllwchaearn District¹⁸. In 1895 Slater's Directory included Frank's name as a consulting surgeon at the Montgomeryshire County Infirmary, whilst his practise was also listed as being in Upper Bridge Street¹⁹.

Dr. and Elizabeth Purchas moved across the river to take up residence at The Bank, which is where the 1901 census finds them, along with their only child, four year old Eleanor²⁰. Later, the family moved to 'Homestay' in Penygloddfa, where Frank died at the early age of 48 in January 1909²¹.

There is one final interesting features associated with this photograph which I've attributed to John Owen. The National Library catalogue states that it was the work of P.B. Abery. Percy Benzie Abery, the son of a grocer, was born in Folkestone in 1877. By 1898, Abery had set up a photographer's business in Builth Wells, where he continued

¹⁵ Wellcome Trust; London, England; *The Medical Directory*, 1890, p.882

¹⁶ TNA, Census 1891, RG12/4593, f. 107

¹⁷ Library and Museum of Freemasonry; London, England; Freemasonry Membership Registers; *Country S 1576-1703 to Country T 1705-1822; Reel Number: 17, Cedewain Lodge*, p.51

¹⁸ *The Montgomeryshire County Times and Mid Wales Advertiser*, 20th October 1894

¹⁹ Slater, 1895 , pp. 354-355

²⁰ TNA 1901 census, RG13/5196 f. 24

²¹ National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations 1858-1995): Purchas, Frank Utten of Homestay Newtown, Montgomeryshire ,medical practitioner, died 31 January 1909. Probate Shrewsbury 27 March to Elizabeth Ann Purchas widow, Edward Powell and William Ernest Pryce-Jones gentlemen. Effects £3914 12s. 6d.

to work until the 1930s. During his career, he established himself as a photographer of note, being appointed official photographer by the Birmingham Water Works during the construction of the Elan Valley Dams. Before his death, he gifted over 1,500 of his glass negatives to the National Library. But this photograph is clearly not by Abery. The census for 1891 shows the then 13 year old boy was still living in the family home in Kent²². If we accept the National Library's attribution we therefore have to accept that the photograph was taken after his arrival in Builth at around 1898. If we do this, then we have to refute all the evidence contained in the photograph itself. It is, therefore, more than likely that this is a photograph by John Owen, taken from his favoured vantage point in Broad Street. How did the photograph become included in the Abery collection? We know that he did acquire a number of negatives from another local photographer, Robert Newton Heywood of Knighton and it may be that in the early part of his career he was using these to supplement his stock of views which he could sell as postcards. It is quite conceivable that Owen may have sold some of his negatives towards the end of his own career in 1904, and there are, indeed , other examples of Owen's work, including the one at the top of this article, which are mistakenly ascribed to Abery by the Library.

Our final photograph shows yet another contrasting scene of Broad Street life, and, by the look of things, it's a warm sunny late Spring or early Summer's day. The trees are in full leaf. The shopkeepers have their sunshades open. The strong shadows suggest that the time is around midday. It appears to be a market day in town. There has been a market held here ever since the granting of the town's first charter back in the thirteenth century. If one had been standing at the window of the Royal Cambrian House forty years earlier, the view on to Broad Street would have been obscured by the gable wall of the old market hall which had stood in the centre of the street since its construction in the 1570s. But in 1852 the crumbling structure was finally demolished and Newtown had to wait until a new market hall was built in High Street in 1870 for a replacement. In the meantime, market traders had the benefit of covered accommodation in the Flannel Exchange built in 1832 for Newtown's thriving textile industry: otherwise, they did as most of their forebears had done; they pitched their stalls in Broad and High Streets. The presence of cattle suggests that we are looking at one of the regular fair days held, according to Slater's Directory, 'on the last Monday and



Print of c.1840 showing the old Market Hall. The Royal Cambrian House can be seen in the background.

²² TNA 1881 Census, RG11/1011, f.38



Powysland Museum/People's Collection Wales

Tuesday in every month, first day for sheep and pigs, second day for cattle and horses"²³.

One of the other notable features of the scene is the number of boys that can be seen. They seem to be very conscious that a camera is turned on them. They stand like statues gazing at the figure in the window who is about to uncap the lens to expose the treated glass plate. These boys are probably there for a reason. For a penny or two they can help keep the livestock in order while their owners take a drink in the many pubs in the street. There are at least two boys with sticks in their hands for this purpose.

Apart from the cattle, it is difficult to see what else is on sale on this market day. At the bottom right two men seem to be

²³ Slater's Directory, 1895, p. 348

arranging their wares, carried in a large wicker basket, on to a trestle table. These appear to be large jars, perhaps of pickled onions. There are also a couple of covered stalls set up, but the contents are hidden by the canvasses. Mostly, this market day seems to be a good day for socialising. Farmers and countryfolk have come into town and are using their time to renew acquaintances and to pick up the recent gossip. Others choose to laze in the warm sunshine, leaning against the walls of *The Bear's Head* or to sit on the bales which are piled up in the street.

There are few clues to help us to determine the date of this final photograph. Things look very much the same. The Montgomeryshire Flannel Company is still operating in the Syars Mill and would do so until early 1893, when the building was acquired by A.S. Cooke and converted into a furniture warehouse. The slopes of The Bryn above Penygloddfa are still undeveloped. The allotments which could be seen on the earlier photographs are still there, as is the tall chimney stack of the old Union Street Flannel Mill gutted by fire in 1873 and awaiting its final demolition. The only real indication we have is, once again, *The Bear's Head*, still in its un-renovated, pre-1893 condition. And it is that sign board which gives us the best indication. It's a new sign, clearly telling us the name of the hotel and its proprietor - Pryce Wilson Jones an estate agent and auctioneer. Mr Wilson Jones had bought the hotel in June 1889, following the death of Elizabeth Langworthy. Evidently, he was still trading on the good name of his predecessor as he has included "Late Langworthy" under his own name. Perhaps we are, therefore, looking at Broad Street in the final summer of 1892 before *The Bear's Head* was given its mock Tudor appearance in the following year.

These three photographs are separated by no more than a decade. They each provide a contrasting view of the street which has been at the centre of Newtown's life for almost 800 years. A street of commerce. A street of celebration. A street of casual meet ups of friends and acquaintances. At first glance the views appear to show continuity, but there are subtle changes taking place in each and there were more to follow. Only six years after the last photograph was taken, the favoured spot of John Owen's was no more. The Royal Cambrian House was demolished by the sledgehammers of Victorian workmen to make way for the new Cross Building with its clock tower proclaiming the Queen's diamond jubilee. Within a decade the arrival of the first motor vehicles heralded a new age when holding a casual conversation in the street became a more perilous activity. Cattle and other farm

animals would be banned within another thirty years with the provision of a special livestock market site on the edge of town. Electric street lighting would replace the old gas lamps. Broad Street would continue to evolve, but today, over 130 years later, it still remains a place of trade, of celebration and of friendship.