

NEWTOWN TEXTILE MUSEUM

Highlights of summer 2024

Visitors: We had a total of 1461 visitors which was 300 more than 2023 and our highest number to date. 1151 of these were individual visitors and 310 from tours, schools and other group visits.

Opening date: Our standard opening times are 4 days a week from the beginning of May to the end of September but in 2024 we opened a few days earlier to allow visitors going to and from Wonderwool to have a chance to visit us. This proved very fruitful and is likely to be repeated in 2025 and beyond.

Exhibitions: The earlier opening date enabled the Braid Society to have an exhibition to celebrate their 30th anniversary. This in turn was linked to a number of workshops they also ran on aspects of Braid making.

The Museum's main exhibition then followed on, which focused on Sport and Leisure between 1875 and 1914. Sporting activities developed when workers were given Saturday afternoons off. Employers were concerned that their workforce would spend this time in the pub and so encouraged sports, especially football. The Pryce Jones business had 8 football teams, and also organised Sports Days which attracted hundreds of people.

We invited visitors to respond to the exhibition by writing their impressions on Post-It notes, which produced a number of positive comments. It also led to two further developments - 1. EatSleep Media video for the Football Association of Wales and featuring the exhibition focus on the White Stars' and Newtown AFC's early Welsh Cup wins. 2. Contact with Barry Gardiner related to Newtown's AFC's 150th anniversary to be celebrated in 2025. They have acquired what I believe to be the only medal awarded to the White Stars in 1879. They would like to be able to exhibit this alongside our certificate and the photograph in their exhibition.

Finance: Income per person increased a little in 2024 but it is a continual struggle to take enough cash to cover our revenue costs especially with the increased utility bills of the last few years. We were not able to do this during and post Covid. Luckily we have been helped

by Welsh Government grants in various ways and are still a going concern. But we need to increase our visitor numbers and our income to secure our longer term future.

Charging: We don't have a formal entrance charge at the moment but ask for donations. We did discuss whether this was the right policy and concluded that it was. We are able to claim Gift Aid on donations, but not on entrance charges. We understand that when people have been charged there is no inclination to give more. Given our location and wish to be open to all, we would be unlikely to be able to charge more than £2 or £3.

Shop: Our small shop goes from strength to strength. Organised by Christine Davies we sell a variety of things made by local craftspeople on commission as well as postcards and odds and ends. The profit from the shop is a welcome addition to our income.

Fundraising: We have been successful in raising funds for a couple of developments that we have been wanting to do for some time.

Schools: At the end of 2023 we applied to GEM (Group for Education in Museums) for a Learning Mentor to help us develop our offer to schools. Lorna and colleagues encouraged us to reach out to local schools and to improve what we offer by creating an Activity Box, and period-appropriate toys for pupils to play with plus some replica food. We had a number of schools visiting and the volunteers who act as hosts for the visits incorporate these items into the stories they tell. They have been very well received. We are hoping that we can build on this and that other schools from Newtown and the surrounding area will come in future.

A film of the Museum. In early 2024 we applied to Powys County Council's 'Making a Difference in Powys' fund, managed by PAVO. We asked for funds to film a tour of the Museum, in both English and Welsh, so that those visitors who are unable to get upstairs can get a taste of what the museum has to offer. The application was successful and we found a local film maker, Gwyn Cole, of Still River Films, who has been great. Unfortunately the films were not finished until after our season closed but will be an important feature of what the museum offers next summer. They are available on Youtube and we will be promoting them on social media and in other ways, so that those who are not able to get to Newtown can still learn something about us.

A weaver in residence: In 2023 we funded a bursary for Kay-Lee to be our weaver in residence for 6 weeks in the summer, which was very successful. Our funds were not sufficient to do this again and we were lucky enough to get a grant from the Ashley Family Foundation to fund a weaver in residence for three years, including this year. Rachel joined us for three days a week from mid July and in the end stayed until we closed for the winter, as she had found working on our loom so useful. Our visitors greatly enjoyed seeing the loom in action. The residency is being run in conjunction with the Carmarthen School of Art which still offers a weaving course. Students graduating from the School are eligible to come to us.

Workshops. It proved very difficult to recruit people to come to the specialist workshops that Victoria organised and led. We are therefore re-thinking this and what we might do next year. But Tapestry Tuesday sessions were run again in the summer holidays and were, again, a great success.

VAQAS: As an accredited museum we had an unannounced visit from an assessor from VAQAS (Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance). We passed with a rating of 74% and one or two areas for improvement were identified which have now been acted upon. Eg Better signage for the entrance through some new banners.

Donation from Llandinam Local History group: Sadly the Llandinam group has been wound up but we have been the lucky recipients of their remaining funds. The donation of £1,000 was marked by a small gathering at the Museum. The funds will go towards resources for the 2025 Exhibition in the Museum which will focus on the photographs of John Owen, an early photographer in Newtown.

Links with other organisations. In addition to the link with Carmarthen School of Art we have contributed to activities organised by Textile Junkies, the Heritage Hub for Mid Wales, and the Town Council. There have also been contacts with the people involved with the nascent National Museum of Welsh Football in Wrexham and the National Railway Museum in York. Wrexham made initial contact asking us to stage a Football themed 'Away Day' at our museum in the summer to help raise their new museum's profile. Unfortunately nothing materialised. The National Railway Museum contacted us to request images of the Pryce Jones mail order boxes we have, in order to make

copies for their upcoming year of celebrations. It marks the 200th anniversary of the Stockton to Darlington Railway, including a bespoke Exhibition Train which will tour Great Britain:

<https://www.networkrail.co.uk/stories/all-aboard-railway-200/>. It will reveal the permanent ways our lives have been shaped by over 200 years of railway history, including the birth of mail order. They have now created a website which features PJ and the establishment of mail order on their timeline - <https://railway200.co.uk/timeline/>

We also provided a venue for a French film company producing something on Pryce Jones, and to the local theatre which was putting on a performance of Oliver! and wanted some background shots.

Volunteers: We have been lucky enough to recruit three new volunteers to join our band of hosts. We are always delighted to welcome new people especially as the additional activities we organise, such as School visits, add demands on our relatively stretched resources. It is literally the case that without our volunteers we would not be able to open. A number of our visitors, who leave enthusiastic comments, say they hope we can stay open – and that is our wish! We have also had help from a student, Matilda, who came to us via our Mentor at Powis Castle. She has been visiting regularly to clean parts of the Museum and monitor the heat/humidity measures and the pest traps. This has been a great help.

This year, our Volunteer Co-ordinator, Andrea, has experimented with an on-line rota which has had some teething problems but we hope these have been ironed out so it can be successfully used from now on.

The Committee: This is the mainstay of the organisation. Some members of the Management Committee act as hosts as well as carrying out additional tasks. This is a considerable commitment for which we are enormously grateful. Some Committee members have been with us from the beginning, which is wonderful, but there is also a regular turn-over as the demands on people's lives change. Sadly Victoria resigned from the Committee at the end of the summer to be able to commit to getting her own work off the ground. She has put a great deal of time into transforming what we are offering on the weaving and craft side, as well as contributing in a variety of other ways. We hope that we can keep in touch with her and seek her advice occasionally.

The Collection: We have received some additional items of our collection this year. As a reminder our collection currently comprises some 1600 items related to Newtown's textile industry and the wider history of the town in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We also have a particularly significant and growing collection of items related to Pryce Jones's Royal Welsh Warehouse and the establishment of one of the World's first mail order companies. Other significant collections include a small number of items related to the opening of the Newtown to Llanidloes Railway in 1859 and an archive of c. 1300 papers of the business of Amelia Ray, a significant female entrepreneur of nineteenth century Newtown. We also hold the largest museum collection of photographs by John Owen, Newtown's first professional photographer. We are always looking for additional relevant material.

Janet Lewis 21.11.2024