

Life in Commercial Street c.1840

The Textile Museum at 5-7 Commercial Street was constructed about 1830 at a time when Penygloddfa was developing rapidly as the result of the boom in the Welsh flannel trade. Unfortunately, we cannot identify the first individuals who would have moved into the six back-to-back dwellings, but we can surmise that they had been drawn to the area by the prospect of work in the handloom factories.

We must wait a further decade before we can catch a glimpse of who these individuals might have been. In 1841 the first census of population was taken in Great Britain. From this it is clear the population of Penygloddfa was linked closely to the flannel industry. Some sixty-five percent of listed occupations in that census for Penygloddfa were associated with it. Of these about forty percent are identified as weavers and about twenty percent are described as spinners.



The first census has its limitations: we cannot, for example, assign individuals and families to specific houses because at this time house numbers did not exist. Neither do we know how methodical the census enumerators were in recording the information. However, we can speculate about the kind of family which may have occupied one of our six houses.

Thomas Clayton was a native of the parish of Llanllwchaiarn,



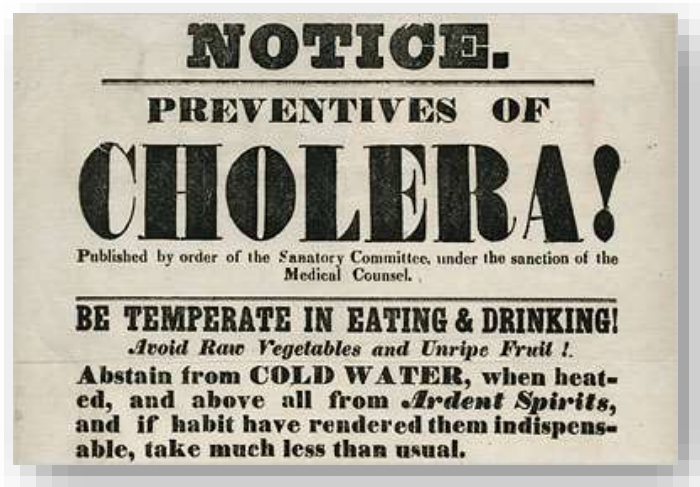
having been born at Port House, a small farm near the canal, in 1790 and baptized in the parish church. His father was an agricultural labourer. Perhaps the family supplemented their meagre income by spinning and weaving. Thomas had

certainly acquired the skill, for by 1841 he is described as a flannel weaver living in South Street (later to be re-named Commercial Street). By this date, also he had been married to his wife, Mary nee Humphries, for twenty years and their family had grown to six children.

It is difficult for us to imagine how cramped conditions must have been for a family the size of the Claytons occupying only two rooms. Imagine a family of eight people occupying a total floor space of approximately 18 square metres. To give a comparison: the government's latest minimum internal floor area for a one-bedroom, two-storey apartment is 58 square metres! It is not surprising, therefore, that accidents in the home were a fact of life and death. One of the greatest risks to small children at this time was scalding and burning from the unguarded cooking utensils on the small ranges, such as the ones we can see in our reconstructed rooms.

There were, of course, far more sinister threats to life. Disease spread rapidly in the overcrowded conditions, where a shared toilet drained into an open cess pit (there are cases of children drowning in such pits). Children succumbed quickly to diseases such as scarlet fever and whooping cough. People of all ages could also be struck down by tuberculosis.

But within two years of the completion of 5-7 Commercial Street, a more deadly disease was sweeping across Britain. The *Cholera Morbus*, a bacterium, which thrived in water, contaminated by sewage, was first



noticed by British troops in India in 1817. By 1823, it had reached St Petersburg and from there travelled along the trade routes of the Baltic, arriving in Hamburg in 1831. A few months later Sunderland became

the first town in Britain to feel its affects, where 250 died of the disease. The following year it had spread to most urban areas, and in November 1832 it arrived in Newtown. Here, the disease killed 17 people, all in the parish of Llanllwchiain where William Slyman, an apothecary within the town "extended himself to the utmost attending every case with the most fearless devotion". It is quite conceivable that the occupants of 5 -7 Commercial Street would have been affected either directly or indirectly by this outbreak.

Overcrowding, lack of adequate sanitation, and high mortality are features which we readily associate with the large urban conurbations of Victorian Britain. The survival of buildings like Newtown Textile Museum also allows us to understand that such miserable conditions existed in the smaller rural communities of the country as well.