

Pryce Jones: The Birth of Mail Order

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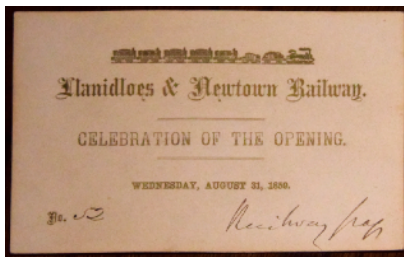


Pryce Jones is regarded as one of the early pioneers of mail order, paving the way for our modern on-line world. Just like today's internet companies, he relied upon advertising to stimulate sales and he was one of the first retailers to send out catalogues to his customers. But when exactly did this happen?



*Mr and Mrs Pryce Jones,
John Owen, carte de
visite, 1863*

The year 1859 was a pivotal one for Pryce Jones, the illegitimate son of a Newtown solicitor's clerk and a Llanllwchaearn dressmaker. The boy who had been brought up by an aged aunt before being apprenticed out to a local draper was about to open his first business in Broad Street, just a few steps from his former master's shop. It was also the year in which he 'tied the knot' with Eleanor Rowley Morris, a wool stapler's daughter of Penygloddfa. The two were a formidable partnership expressed in the earliest image we have of the couple from 1863. The photograph was one of a number taken by the town's first and only professional photographer, John Owen to mark the second birthday of their son Edward. Interestingly, the photograph seems to portray the young couple as equals Pryce gazing into the camera with his hand on his partner's shoulder. Eleanor gazing sideways into the distance, towards their future.



One of 2,000 tickets sold on the opening day of the Newtown to Llanidloes Railway



Thanks to the introduction of the 'Penny Post', a letter posted in London could be delivered to Newtown by the following morning



A newspaper advertisement of 1870 shows both the rebranding and use of the royal coat of arms.

1859 was significant for Pryce in one other way. It was the year that the railway revolution arrived in Newtown which Pryce and Eleanor witnessed at first hand. They were probably among the 2,000 people who travelled on the inaugural service of the Newtown to Llanidloes Railway. A twelve mile journey on an isolated stretch of track in Mid Wales? 'So what?', you might think. Yet, within a decade the two towns were connected to a growing national rail network. Perhaps it was on this first rail journey at the end of August 1859 that the idea entered the minds of Mr and Mrs Jones. Could this new mode of transportation be a method of reaching more customers? Could it be used in tandem with the still recent universal postal system to send out his publicity whilst the steam locomotive transported the completed orders to his customers?

It's perhaps not surprising that this idea should come to a business couple in a small rural town. Think, if you will, what a profound change the railway would have on people in scattered rural communities. Until this moment, getting into town to do some shopping was a real problem, unless, of course you were sufficiently well-off to own a horse. For the ordinary person it might mean a walk of a couple of hours each way, unless they're lucky enough to hitch a lift on a willing farmer's cart. Suddenly, that changed. The railway could bring the shopping to you. All that was required was to post an order to Mr Pryce Jones and he would ensure it would be packaged up and sent on the next available train. All the customer had to do was to pop down to the local station and and meet the train to pick up the parcel. Simple!

To be fair, it wasn't only the Jones's who had this idea. Other businesses, like fellow draper Amelia Ray, were doing the exact same thing. But what made Pryce different to his competitors was his grasp of marketing and his ability to aggressively publicise his wares. An early example of this was his re-branding of his Broad Street business. Not content with being merely 'Pryce Jones, Draper' he renamed it 'The Royal Welsh Warehouse' in an attempt to connect his products with quality. This probably happened some time after 1866 after he received his first order from Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle. A little later, around 1870, a large plaster royal coat of arms hung above his shop door. Technically, of course, he was pushing it: in 1870 the grant of an official 'Royal Warrant' which would have allowed him to officially use the Royal Coat of Arms, was still a decade away. That did not come until 1881. In the meantime, however, he was no longer sending orders by train in response to his customers' requests. Rather



An example of a Pryce Jones fabric swatch, from about 1890.



Pryce Jones 1878 Price List



The 'Nightingale' Bed Jacket 1881

he had started the the process that would eventually evolve into the basis of the mail order system we know today.

It was probably not long after he had started in business in 1859 that he began sending out fabric swatches to his customers. No doubt, these originally were simple off-cuts from fabric rolls with a price label attached. They gradually morphed into more professional looking pieces with a printed label of details and an illustration of the kind of garment that he was selling. They were also made up into small fabric booklets.

Soon, the swatches were accompanied by a printed list of his goods for sale and, as time went on and his customer base grew, the list became longer. By the 1878-79 season, Pryce was describing himself as both "merchant and manufacturer". This was also the year that his new, state of the art, Royal Welsh Warehouse opened next to the station, Pryce was becoming more adventurous, introducing colour and a few illustrations of his best selling ranges. There were also copious references to royalty as well as lots of pictures of the medals won at international trade fairs. Nevertheless, his 'catalogue' still only amounted to six printed sheets held together by a single brass staple. In reality, it was a circular listing approximately 120 different types of textiles, along with 90 styles of garments for men, women and children.

Three years later, Pryce was becoming more adventurous. The front page of his catalogue has a Neo-gothic illuminated border blocked in gold, emblazoned with an etching of his magnificent new Royal Welsh Warehouse. It also features a few illustrated examples of the garments on offer, some in colour. But inside, this six-page circular (a term that he uses rather than 'catalogue') remained a glorified list of items for sale, supplemented by lengthy descriptions of PJ's championing of home-produced fabrics and a summary of the main items in the price list. All this, of course, accompanied by the usual visual references to his medals as well as to his royal patrons from across Europe.

It was not only his royal customers that he was exploiting. One of his earliest 'celebrity' patrons was the heroine of the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale. In 1862, 'the Lady with the Lamp' placed an order for a length of Newtown flannel. Not one to miss a marketing opportunity, he was soon selling a particular flannel, 'The Florence Nightingale' and, in this catalogue some twenty years later he was still cashing in on her name advertising an essential item of bed wear for those chilly winter nights, particularly appreciated by "old women",

apparently!



Pryce Jones Catalogue, 1896



Ladies fashions, 1896



Pryce Jones Catalogue, 1907



Pryce Jones Catalogue, 1941

The year 1890 marked another significant step in the development of PJ's business. In that year he installed his own printing press in the Royal Welsh Warehouse. Up until then, Pryce (or Sir Pryce Pryce-Jones as he had now become) had had his circulars printed in Oswestry by Woodall & Venables. But now he was able to produce illustrated multi-page bound catalogues to tempt his mail-order customers to spend even more. This 166-page example from 1896 exemplifies the change that had taken place in his publicity. It is a catalogue with all the features of modern marketing. Gone are the long wordy descriptions of PJ's efforts to revive the Welsh flannel trade and the endless prose itemising the highlights his store. Instead, they have been replaced by illustrations revealing the latest fashions. It is also clear that by this time, the Warehouse was diversifying its wares, becoming a real department store. There are pages devoted to bags and cases, curtains, cushions, sprung mattresses, teas, soaps and even "Horse Clothing" and harness. And, ever the supreme self-publicist, the inside cover proclaims "Pryce Jones . . Originators of the system of direct distribution to the Public, without intermediaries". Ordering instructions included "essentials", such as the need to include a full address of the railway station for parcel deliveries and the need to include the correct title of the person ordering, "whether 'Lady', 'Mrs.', 'Miss', 'Rev.', or 'Esq.'"

1907 broke new ground in the evolution of Pryce Jones's catalogues. For the first time, it sported a full-colour glossy cover with an illustration on front and back. On the front, a pair of 'Welsh ladies' were portrayed busy at work spinning on a Great Wheel, in front of their flower bedecked thatched cottages, an image far removed from the realities of textile production in early 20th century Newtown! The back cover displayed the usual medals won some 20 or 30 years earlier along with a splendid image of "One of our special railway vans leaving Newtown", with the buildings of the Royal Welsh Warehouse forming a backdrop.

World War Two brought challenges to the Pryce Jones Company which was now in the ownership of Lewis's of Liverpool. Despite still being able to print a colour cover, the size of the catalogue and the number of pages were drastically reduced, as this 1941 example shows. But Ann Pryce, in her foreword was able to put a positive spin on things explaining that, despite shortages, customers could benefit from the "vast buying organisation" that was still the Royal Welsh Warehouse



*Pryce Jones Catalogue,
1955*



*Pryce Jones Centenary
Catalogue*

By 1955, the Pryce Jones Company had been sold to Great Universal Stores. The family connection had been long lost, but the Pryce Jones name remained an important marketing tool. The claim of being the world's first mail order company had also been downgraded to "Britain's Original Mail Order Store" by the new owners. The return of peace ushered in a new age for mail order. Not only more colour pages, but an easier way to purchase items with the introduction of 'Easy Terms'. For a modest deposit, customers could receive their goods immediately and pay in instalments of as little as 5 shillings per month.

By the end of the fifties, it had been a hundred years since Pryce and Eleanor had set up their first business in Broad Street. The business had grown from a simple draper's shop to a global mail-order emporium. But as the new decade began, it was simply one of many similar mail-order stores. Nevertheless the Pryce Jones name lasted just long enough to feature on the special "Centenary Celebration Catalogue of 1959".

Whether or not Pryce Jones was the founder of mail-order is debatable. There were indeed others in Europe and the U.S.A. who could claim the same title. However, he was certainly an early pioneer of the new concept of 'home shopping' and he was one of the first to move from publishing a simple list of goods for sale to producing an illustrated catalogue as a means of persuading his customers to buy more. Pryce Jones, the Royal Welsh Warehouse and Newtown should, therefore, justly be seen as helping to shape our modern method of shopping.