

Travelling tales.

Newtown emigrants in the mid-1800s.

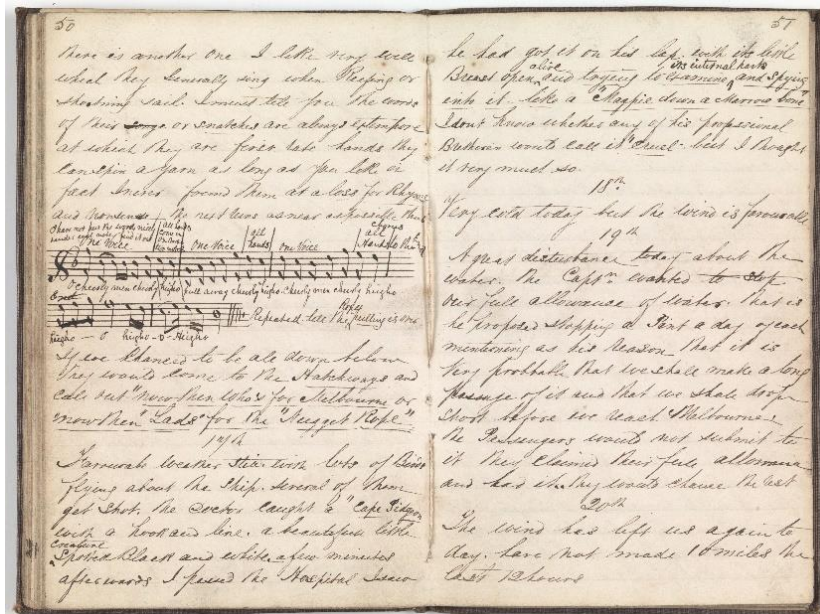
While Newtown has a history that encompasses periods where the population has grown quickly, from its establishment in the 13th century to the boom of the woollen industry in the 1800s, and again in the 1970s with the development of light industry and housing, there have also been times when the economy has meant that some of the locals have sought a better life in other countries. Some have left seeking work, an adventure or just a new start in a different country and a few even found themselves on the wrong side of the law and ended up being transported to Australia.

Improvements in travel since the 1800s helped this outward migration, providing more opportunities in places such as Australia and the US, but the accounts here demonstrate some of the challenges involved for those who chose to leave during the mid-1800s.

These two Newtonians have left us with accounts of their voyages to the other side of the world. The shipboard diary of Humphrey Lewis and the letter from Edward Humphreys from San Francisco which are in our collection both shed light on their experiences.

Henry Humphrey Lewis (known by his second name) was the second son of Lewis Lewis the first, the tannery owner in Newtown., He lived in Upper Bridge Street, Llanllwychaiarn in 1851 with his wife Ann and son Henry. A second child Anna Maria was born in 1852. The young family decided, for unknown reasons, to emigrate to Australia. They left Liverpool in March 1853 on the sailing ship *Bloomer*, bound for Melbourne where they arrived in July 1853, a relatively speedy voyage for those times. On the trip Humphrey kept a diary which recorded the events on board the ship. The original diary ([Diary of Humphrey Lewis on the voyage of the 'Bloomer' from Liverpool to Melbourne](#))

NS2412/1/1) is now located in the Tasmanian Archives, but a [link allows us to read it](#), and a transcript of the text is held at the Textile Museum.



[Tasmanian Archives: NS2412/1/1](#)

As can be seen in this extract, some days provided opportunities for Humphrey to record details of life on board and even music such as this sea shanty, other days there was not so much to report. There are accounts of the deaths of some of the passengers and their funerals held on board, the celebrations when the equator was crossed, and the excitement when messages were passed between ships that they encountered, or when they passed close to islands on their route. The last page is the tragic though inconclusive end to the diary. His wife Ann had given birth to another child on the ship and *'I carried my resolution out till my wife's confinement and even a few days after but I found I could not possibly continue it [writing the diary] and was obliged to give it up in despair'*.

Further research into the family shows that Anna Maria, aged 1, died in Victoria in 1853 soon after their arrival, and a second daughter (the one born on the voyage) called Ann, also died in Victoria in 1854.

This sad beginning to their life in Australia, the loss of a daughter who had left Newtown, and perhaps some major complication from the birth of a second daughter, must have tested the resilience of Humphrey and wife Ann, but records show that they moved to Sydney and went on to

have six more children. A recent addition to the Museum's collection of an album of portrait photographs has confirmed that they maintained contact with the family in Wales. Photos of Humphrey, Ann, their son Henry and one of their daughter - Eliza Mary Lewis, taken in Sydney, are included in the family albums of their cousins in Newtown. Ann died in Sydney in 1886 and Humphrey (then known as Henry Humphrey) in 1898, his death notice in the Sydney newspapers stating that he was from Newtown, mid-Wales. No more is known of the family, but perhaps some of them have visited the town, and even the museum!



Humphrey Lewis and his wife Ann.

Letter from **Edward Humphreys** from California to his father Richard Humphreys back in Newtown.

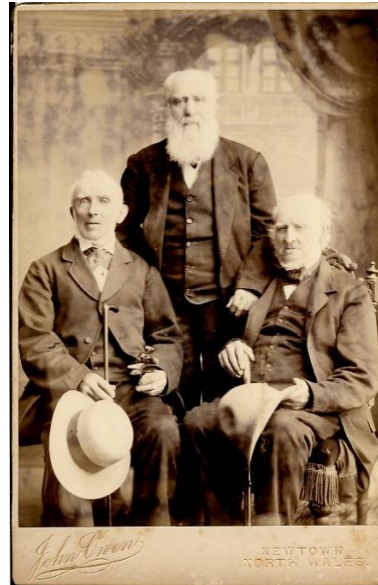
Sometime in the mid-1860s Edward Humphreys set off from Newtown to seek a better life in America. His father was Richard Humphreys, firstly recorded as a grocer then as a flannel manufacturer, who lived in Park Street, Newtown. We know that Richard was an official of a working man's welfare society for some years where he recorded how much was paid to men unable to work through illness¹. 'If a man was seen playing ball with his children, he couldn't be ill so got nothing' was one extract from this record. He and his wife Elizabeth had a large family some of whom are mentioned in Edward's letter. Richard continued to live in Park Street until he died in 1899 aged 100.

¹ Sadly this record from the Welfare society is no longer available at the Museum. It may have been relocated to the Powys Archives.

Edward was not alone among Newtonians in this quest for adventure, quite a number emigrated to the United States over the years. Several families, for example, went together to Blackinton, Massachusetts to work in a woollen mill there and the connections back to mid-Wales remained strong. So strong in fact that in 2017 an American family from that area visited the Textile Museum and told us of their ancestral links to the town. Letters to the Montgomeryshire Express in 1893 from emigrants gave varying accounts of the life in their new country, not all presenting a rosy picture, but they clearly kept in touch, and frequently donated money for the work of the infirmary in Newtown among other causes.

Edward's letter written from San Francisco tells of his trip with his friend Griff Davies. It is not clear exactly where they started, but after 11 days at sea, surviving a fearful gale where their ship could make no progress, and they broke all 'the Paddle Boxes', they arrived in Gray Town on the east coast Nicaragua, passing Cuba and Jamaica along the way. From Gray Town they boarded a river boat up the Nicaragua River, seeing a great number of alligators. At Castello the passengers – 600 hundred of them, had to walk while the boat navigated some rapids. On reaching Lake Nicaragua they left the boat and had the 'best bit of fun I ever had' as the passengers rode ponies and mules to reach the west coast. All this, of course, was before the building of the Panama Canal. Finally boarding another ship, they reached San Francisco where trade was 'very bad but we got work enough to pay our way'. Edward talks of it being a 'splendid country' where they get 11 crops on the same land in 12 months, and every luxury is available. When he was writing he was living with a Welshman together with 39 others, so it is hard to picture what sort of accommodation it was. He reported that 'there is [sic] hundreds of Welshmen here but they are south Welshmen' so perhaps with few connections to Newtown and maybe predominantly Welsh-speaking unlike Newtonians who were almost all English speaking. He arrived in San Francisco too late to be part of the California Gold Rush but agriculture was thriving and providing employment. When the railway linked the West Coast to the rest of the nation in 1869, Edward would have been able to travel all over the country in search of work. It is a pity that we do not know where he went or how he prospered, or

whether he continued to write to his parents back in Newtown. Maybe a reader of this short piece will be able to provide some answers.



Richard Humphreys, father of Edward. With two friends in right hand picture

November 24th 67

San Francisco

Dear father and Mother

I write these few lines hoping they will find you well as it leaves me at present I ought to have written before but did not know where for you to write to me as in my last that I expected to be out of work so I was for 16 weeks as you see it is not all plain sailing here if it is in America so Griff Davis and me started for California on the 23rd of August and set sail on the 25th on board of the San Francisco on Sunday the first of September at four in the morning it blew a most fearful gale we did not gain one yard but it blowed us on hundred and fiftys miles south so if it would continue 2 hours more we should have been in portland ~~was~~ muns it continued for thirteen hours it Broke the two Paddle Boxes all to Pieces every one thought that we were lost but we Reached Gray town 11 days after a verry rough Voyage then we went on Board of a River Boat down the Higgaranger ~~Beaver~~ River we could see Alligators in great numbers it was splendid scenery then we came to a place called Rappids it was so shallow that the Boat was on the Bottom six hundred of us had to land and walk a mile and half untill they cropt the Rappids when we went on Board again and Reached fort Castillo. This fort was Built By the Spanes 4 hundred years ago it is a curious Place But verry strong and commands the River this castle is a siling the natives copper colour fine looking men an wicones but wicones smoke cigars

Page 1 of Edward Humphrey's letter.