

Even the Museum has a history

We are sometimes asked about how the Museum came to be set-up in this spot. The idea for a museum was first proposed in November 1962 by Peter Lewis who wrote to Dr Iorwerth Peate of the National Museum of Wales at St Fagans seeking his support to create a museum in the upper two floors of our current building in Commercial Street. One floor to be dedicated to wool and looms, the other for general exhibits in the town. The lower two floors were then occupied and used as three cottages, and the proposal was that this would continue. This building was one of many similar ones in the town at the time. They had been built to provide worker's accommodation with loft space for hand-loom above. A number of 'weaving factories' such as this one were being demolished in the town, but the heritage value of the building was recognised and the surrounding area of Penygloddfa was declared a conservation zone at the same time in the mid 1960s.

The idea for a museum was supported by St Fagans and in January 1964 the first meeting of the Museum Trust was held to approve the purchase of the building for £1,250, with another £250 to be used for repairs, using a loan from the National Provincial Bank. The rents for the cottages would bring in £50pa which would help to offset the running costs. Over the next three years good progress was made by an army of volunteers to make the building safe and collect items to be displayed. St Fagans agreed to provide two hand looms which have been with us ever since. On the 19th of October 1967 the Museum was officially opened by Iorwerth Peate and Eiluned Lewis (sister of the Museum's founder Peter, a well-known author).



Major Peter Lewis, committee members and guests admiring exhibits at the new Textile Museum in Newtown.

Textile Museum opened

NEWTOWN Textile Museum, set up largely through the initiative and enthusiasm of Major Peter Lewis of Milford Hall, was officially opened on Thursday by Dr. Iorwerth Peate of the National Museum of Wales, also present was Mrs. Graeme Hendry, sister of Major Lewis, well-known for her books as Eduned Lewis), Cllr. R. G. Davies, chairman of Newtown U.D.C. who spoke in appreciation of the venture, and other Councillors, together with the Town Clerk Mr. N. Morris, and

Mr. G. Davies, surveyor.

The chairman, Aid. J. D. K. Lloyd, referred to the need to preserve the records of the past, and praised the work of all those who had helped in the establishment of the Museum.

Dr. Peate said there were about 40 such museums scattered throughout Wales. They were of great educational value, and it was important that as high a standard as was humanly possible should be maintained in them. He appealed to the

people of the district to look around for material which could be exhibited in the Museum.

After tea provided by the ladies of several local organisations the party toured the Museum.

Situated in a former handloom-stitch factory over a group of weaver's cottages in Commercial Street, the Museum has been attractively laid out.

It has many exhibits, ranging from wooden handlooms loaned by the National Museum of Wales, to fleeces, a model of a typical Welsh upland farm, and many pictures of famous breeds of sheep.

One corner of the old handloom factory is devoted to a replica of a Welsh weaver's cottage interior, complete with spinning wheel, an original kitchen fireplace and old wooden armchair.

There are also many exhibits from Newtown itself, and several examples of shawls and clothes made from local handloomed cloth.

19 OCTOBER 1967

In August 1968 the Museum appointed a caretaker who was a weaver who would offer demonstrations and open the museum each weekday afternoon. After he left in 1970, the role was taken up by one of the residents in the cottages and at that time approximately 500 – 600 visitors came to visit each year. New items for display were constantly being donated and over the next twenty years various projects to improve the displays and the general arrangements for demonstrations changed but the museum continued to run successfully. The Trustees came and went, but Peter Lewis continued as chairman until 1990, ably supported by a small group of volunteers. In 1988 the Trust agreed that it was time to plan for the future, and in 1990, following extensive negotiations, Powys County Council took over the Museum Trust.

Up until that time the three cottages in the lower floors had been occupied but the aim since 1967 was always that the whole building should become the museum at some point, and this was one of the projects that the Council undertook after obtaining a Heritage lottery

grant. A new internal staircase was installed at one end of the building, but minimal other structural changes were made so that the lower floors still resemble the six cottages as built in the 1830s, and the upper floors have been kept as spaces for looms and exhibits.

During the County Council period of ownership, temporary exhibitions were held, and school visits were encouraged as well as casual visitors, but by 2014 the PCC decided they could no longer support the Museum, as visitor numbers had dropped and financial constraints in the Council limited the opening hours. At that time two of Peter Lewis's daughters, Janet Lewis and Sally Rackham (nee Lewis) started to investigate the possibility of returning the Museum to its original organisational structure, ie entirely run by volunteers, and to breathe some new life into the displays. After protracted negotiations with the PCC and with the MCRA (Montgomeryshire Community Recreation Association - without whose help this would not have been possible), the Museum was finally reopened in August 2016.

Since that time, the Museum has been open during the summer months (May – September inclusive) apart from the covid-forced closure in 2020 – and has welcomed a steady stream of visitors each year. Temporary exhibitions and demonstrations of weaving and spinning as well as some classes to teach these skills, have been a regular occurrence as they were when the Museum opened in 1967.

The building has been preserved as a reminder of the mid-1800s when Newtown was the heart of the hand-loom weaving industry in Wales just as Peter Lewis had envisaged in 1962 when he proposed the idea. In 2030 the building will celebrate its 200th birthday and hopefully the Museum will continue to showcase its past long into the future.