

Location! Location! Location!

At the end of the 18th Century, Newtown was still a very small town with a population no greater than a modern-day village. Yet, within the space of forty years, it had developed beyond its medieval boundaries and its population had grown to 7,000 people. In the process it had acquired the epithet of 'The Leeds of Wales'.

Prior to this, the town's development was limited to the south bank of the River Severn where it served as a market centre for corn from the surrounding area. Newtown, and its neighbouring parish of Llanllwchaiarn, situated on the opposite bank of the river had, in 1801 a population of only 1600.

As the third decade of the nineteenth century dawned, Newtown was experiencing a boom. The old medieval town, nestling on the south bank of the River Severn, served as the market centre for commerce for the surrounding area. The two parishes of Newtown and Llanllwchaiarn had only a combined population of some 1,600 according to the first census of 1801. But things were changing. Over the next fifty years the population rose to nearly 7,000 inhabitants.

The reason for this dramatic change can be summed up in one word: wool. Since medieval times, Montgomeryshire had been associated with the production of woollen cloth, known as flannel. This however was a small-scale affair, taking place in the homes of the rural agricultural workers dotted throughout the county. By the sixteenth century, control of this industry was in the hands of a powerful organisation called the Drapers' Company. Operating from their Drapers' Hall in Shrewsbury, they stifled any development in the industry for more than three centuries. But by the 1790s, the Company had lost its monopoly of the wool trade, allowing woollen manufacture to become concentrated in the towns of the Severn Valley, principally in Newtown. With the growing organisation of the woollen industry came the prospect of better housing and pay. This provided the migratory 'pull' which brought poor tenant farmers and labourers in from neighbouring Montgomeryshire parishes

as well as from further west in Cardiganshire to try their luck in the fulling mills and weaving shops of Newtown.

Across the river from the old town of Newtown lay Penygloddfa, within the parish of Llanllwchaiarn. This was a small hamlet surrounded by fields and pasture. It was here that the new manufacturing district of Newtown would develop. The tithe map of 1848 (below), gives us our first glimpse of this growing area. Already the grid-like feature of Crescent St., Union St., Bryn St. and Commercial St. can be clearly identified. And it was on Commercial Street that the present building, which now houses the Textile Museum, was built some ten years previously.



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