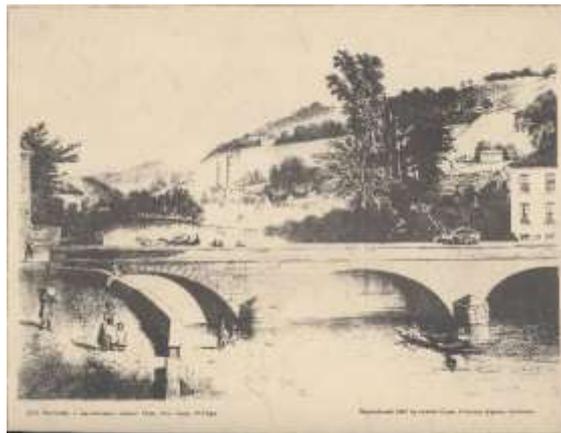


Woollen manufacturing in Newtown

Up until the end of the eighteenth century, the production of woollen flannel had been a small-scale cottage industry carried out in the homes of the rural population. But at the turn of the century conditions were changing, making for the possibility of greater organisation of the industry within the urban area of Montgomeryshire. External factors such as war in Europe against Revolutionary France had created an increased demand for cloth from which to make the uniforms of soldiers fighting against Napoleon's armies. At the same time, within Montgomeryshire too, things were changing, Newtown was starting to develop.

William Pugh was a prominent Newtown entrepreneur who had single-handedly financed the building of much of Newtown's communications infrastructure, including the building of a new bridge across the Severn in 1827.



It was this development which finally ended the payment of tolls to cross the medieval wooden bridge and allowed for development on the north bank of the river in Newtown, an area known as Penygloddfa, site of the Museum building. Two years after the completion of the bridge, the vicar of Llanllwchaiarn petitioned the Justices for an alehouse in the area. This was almost certainly the Grapes Inn in Commercial Street. Perhaps it was the thirst of the weavers in the nearby woollen factory, just two doors up which prompted his petition. These men and women, working long hours in a hot, noisy environment thick with the dust and fibres of the woollen yarn needed some liquid sustenance after a day's work!

We do not know who built the factory at 5 to 7 Commercial Street. Perhaps it was one of the town's 40-odd woollen manufacturers listed in Pigot's Trade directory of 1832 or a speculative building developer keen to make a quick profit from the newly released land in Penygloddfa. It combined domestic accommodation with industrial space. In this sense, the building represented a half-way house between the traditional domestic system of manufacture and the new factory system associated with the industrial revolution. Perhaps some thirty people were crammed into the six, back-to-back, one-up-one-down cottages of the two lower floors of the building, but the two large loom floors above probably had sufficient weaving frames to employ some fifty people, so other workers had to gain access. For this reason, a stone staircase in the yard at the rear of the property gave external access to the loom floors for other workers who lived nearby.



Stone steps



Street view of museum

The Commercial Street factory was one of several similar developments in Penygloddfa in the 1830s. For a time, they existed side by side with bespoke woollen mills, such as the Clock Factory on Bryn Street and the Oversevern Mill situated close to the present-day Halfpenny Bridge. But ultimately such dual-purpose buildings could not compete with the much larger mills, and they were converted to other uses or just used for accommodation.



Most of these early weaving factories were demolished in the 1960s making the building which now houses the Textile Museum a unique example of a vanished world. This building was saved from demolition at that time and the top two floors were converted into a small museum telling the history of the wool, weaving and associated industries in the town in the 19th century. In the 1990s responsibility for the Museum was transferred to Powys County Council and the Museum was upgraded to include the cottages on the lower floors as well as the loom floors.

In about 2012, because of budget cuts to Council funding, it was open intermittently mainly for school visits, and then not open at all in 2015. Our committee which was formed in June 2015 took over the Museum, putting it back in the hands of volunteers again, and we have been open for a summer season since then.

The Newtown Textile Museum is an essential asset in telling the story of how Newtown came to be how it is.

For more information:

http://walesher1974.org/herumd.php?linktable=her_source1_link&group=CPAT&level=3&docid=301360614

The Aberystwyth University Geography Department:

<http://s3.amazonaws.com/uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/f5641269cf756a7cd319ed628381f38/newtownish/index.html>