

Robert or Richard? An Owen Conundrum

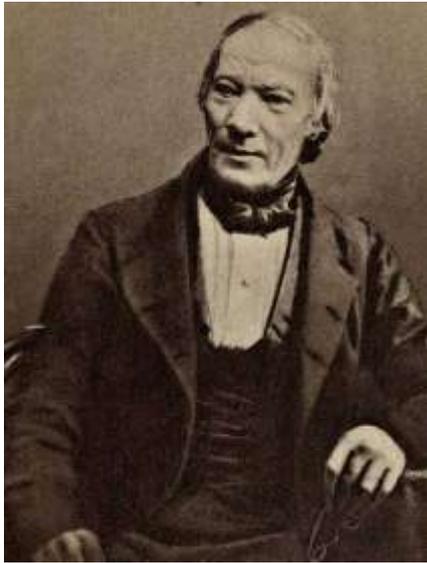
A couple of weeks ago, a Newtown resident, John Rush, brought into the Museum a *carte de visite*, which he had been reliably informed was of Robert Owen. Indeed, the name on the front, although smudged, appeared to be that of Owen. As you can see below, it was apparently of Russian origin, and an early attempt at translation suggested that it was from a photographic studio in St. Petersburg.



THE OWEN CARTE DE VISITE

The image of Owen was not one that we had in our collection, though it was not unlike many of Owen in later age, but dating it was looking something of a problem: photographic images such as this were unlikely to be produced until at least the late 1840s or early 1850s, which would put Owen at upward of 70 years old. Other images of Owen at around this time certainly showed a passing resemblance to the Russian version, but not exactly a 'direct fit' in terms of dating this particular one.

The Russian context was an interesting one, as it was known that Owen had met Alexander I, the Tsar of Russia, in 1818 and we had just received, on loan from David Smith, a packing slip (in Cyrillic), which we presumed was for the export of fine quality cotton from New Lanark to Russia, though the chronological context was also problematic here, as this was much earlier than any photographic image possibly could be commercially created.

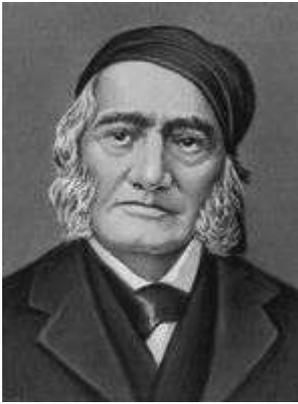


IMAGES OF ROBERT OWEN IN LATER LIFE

Initial research on the internet threw up two Russian sites on Роберт Оуэн (the Cyrillic version of Robert Owen), which used a very similar image to the *carte de visite*, as did an entry in the Marxists Internet Archive Photo Gallery:



One Russian website provided a reference for their image ('courtesy of the Clendening History of Medicine Library, University of Kansas Medical Center'), but this didn't lead anywhere. However the other site also had an additional image of Owen, which bore no relationship to any known image of Robert Owen (see below); so the plot thickened!



[фотография Роберт Оуэн \(peoples.ru\)](http://peoples.ru) Photograph of "Robert Owen"

This latter image threw the whole thing in doubt, and so it proved as both the *carte de visite* image and the one above turned out to be RICHARD Owen (1804-1892), whose dates overlapped with Robert Owen, but was a very different character. Richard Owen was an English anatomist and palaeontologist who was born in Lancaster not Newtown, who coined the name 'dinosaur' in 1841 while reconstructing fossil reptiles, including those brought back from South America by Charles Darwin. He was opposed to Darwinism, as he felt that natural selection was not sufficient to explain evolution. He later co-founded the Natural History Museum in South Kensington, London, in 1881 and was knighted in 1883.

So, unfortunately, we don't have an interesting new display for the Museum which further extends the interest and fame of Robert Owen across the world, but we do have a case of mistaken identity!



RICHARD OWEN IN LATER LIFE