

Thomas Allsop, Robert Owen, Chartism and Montgomeryshire

1. Thomas Allsop

As well as being a leading Owenite, Thomas Allsop was also important in the history of Chartism which, in turn, has an important part to play in the history of Montgomeryshire, being the first place that Chartism appeared in Wales (though Chartism is probably now more associated with Newport in South Wales than Newtown in Mid Wales).

As well as having a long-standing communication with Robert Owen [see the associated essay on *The Allsop Almanack*] Allsop also had extensive correspondence with the Chartist leaders Feargus O'Connor and Bronterre O'Brien; there is a collection of 23 letters from O'Brien to Allsop in the Thomas Allsop Collection of Chartist Letters, which is deposited at the London School of Economics, along with 46 to Allsop from O'Connor, ranging between the early days of Chartism in 1836 to long after the end of Chartist activity (1862). Allsop contributed more to the Chartist movement than just corresponding with its leaders; as a 'man of means' (as George Holyoake notes in his entry on Allsop in the *Dictionary of National Biography*):

When Feargus O'Connor was elected member for Nottingham [in 1847], Allsop gave him his property qualification, then necessary by law, that Chartism might be represented in parliament.ⁱ

Allsop was also in a position, in 1841, to try to bring the two Chartist leaders together and heal what had become a major division within the Chartist movement. Allsop wrote to O'Brien 'to arrange a private meeting with Feargus at [Allsop's] home Redmarly, and for O'Brien to "shake hands with O'Connor" for the good of the movement'.ⁱⁱ



Bronterre O'Brien



Feargus O'Connor

2. Chartism

Chartism was so named because of The People's Charter, which was drawn up and issued by the London Working Men's Association on 8th May 1838. The LWMA itself had been founded nearly two years earlier in June 1836. Although their aims were primarily about gaining the vote (which had been extended primarily to urban middle class property owners in the 1832 Reform Act), there were a number of contemporary issues which had brought the members of the LWMA and their supporters together, such as the collapse of Robert Owen's GNCTU amidst the transportation of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834, the impact of the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) and the Municipal Corporations Act (1835) and the failure of the Factory Reform Movement to really address the issue of adult male working hours and conditions through the 1833 Factory Act. Many saw political reform as only the start, with the end point addressing these 'knife and fork issues', that is the Charter was as much about social and economic change as it was about getting the vote.



The People's Charterⁱⁱⁱ had six main aims:

- Universal Suffrage
- No property qualification for MPs
- Annual parliaments (and therefore elections)
- Equal representation through equal size constituencies
- Payment of MPs
- Vote by secret ballot

The high points of Chartism were in 1839, 1842 and 1848, the years in which 'monster petitions', calling on parliament to adopt the Six Points, were presented. Although nearly all the proposals were adopted in subsequent parliamentary reform acts, none were in the lifetime of the Chartist movement.

3. Owen & Chartism

Given the apparent overlap between many of the causes of Chartism and the issues that Robert Owen was interested in, it may be thought that there might be a natural 'fit' between Owen and his supporters (variously known as Owenites, Co-operators or Socialists in this period) and Chartism; this was not so, however. At the time of the agitation over the 1831 Reform Bill (eventually to become the Great Reform Act of 1832) Bronterre O'Brien (editor of *The Poor Man's Guardian*) and William Pare (President of the Birmingham Co-operative Society) had tried to get Owen to support parliamentary reform cause in general and the Birmingham Political Union (led by Thomas Attwood) in particular. Owen 'declined to become a member' of the BPU, but eventually did agree to go to Birmingham to speak in support of Attwood's candidacy in December 1832 in the election that followed the passage of the Act; in his speech Owen referred to the 'existing ignorance, poverty and degradation of a large portion of the industrious classes' and the sufferings of the people under the 'present accursed system [monetary as well as social]'^{iv}, but provided no overt support for the Act or the movement that had agitated for it. Indeed, following a public meeting in September 1832 'to discuss a point of difference which appears to exist between the National Union of the Working Classes and Mr Owen', *The Poor Man's Guardian* made the difference clear in their editorial under the title 'The Radicals and the Owenites':

We have, it is true, censured some of the Owenites; but our censure was aimed, not at the principles of co-operation, but at what we conceived to be a most unworthy, as well as a most unwise attempt, to throw discredit on the RIGHTS OF MAN. No one can admire Mr Owen more than we do, nor entertain a higher opinion of his enlightened views; but, at the same time, we are of the opinion that if he supposes the wealth-producers of England will ever reap the fruits of his benevolence, until they have first obtained their political rights, he greatly deceives himself, and will find it so, when it is too late. Does Mr Owen suppose, that if we had our political rights, we should allow fifty millions a year of

taxes to be collected for fundholders, soldiers, and sinecurists, when these millions could be so much better employed in reclaiming the waste lands, and establishing co-operative communities all over the empire? Does he suppose, that with the power in our hands, we would suffer his principles to stagnate for want of circulation?"^v



The *Guardian* also reported on a further meeting where Owen himself made the differences he had between himself and the reformers (or Radicals):

At a public meeting of the "Unproductive Industrious Classes", *alias* the shopkeepers, held at Mr Owen's Institution on Monday last, that gentleman took occasion to revert to his favourite theme - the "*violence of the Radical party*," and to designate us as a set of men possessing little or no knowledge of the affairs of government", and wholly incapable (did we ever obtain all we wanted from government) to make any beneficial use of it.^{vi}

Owen did not believe that winning the vote would be the 'game-changing' event that he believed was necessary to affect the changes that society needed; it would merely scrape at the surface, changing the faces of the people's representatives (possibly installing less able, knowledgeable and effective ones), but certainly not changing the underlying 'rules of the game'.

4. Chartism in Montgomeryshire

Despite Owen's opposition to Chartism and that being the official line in Owenite circles and publications such as *The New Moral World*, many Owenites and those who considered themselves as influenced by Owen's ideas were important in the Chartist movement. At the national level that would include the main 'moral Chartist' leader William Lovett, and many more in local Chartist associations, for, as the *Poor Man's Guardian* had put it in the extract quoted above 'No one can admire Mr Owen more than we do, nor entertain a higher opinion of his enlightened views'. A good example of this was Thomas Powell, from Owen's native Newtown, who was a personal friend of the Radicals Henry Hetherington and Hugh Williams and who was central in organising the first Chartist demonstration in Wales, held in Newtown on 10th October 1838. Powell was described by R Williams, in *Montgomeryshire Worthies*, as "a fiery little Welshman, who had much of the rebel in him, albeit a sensible man, clever and wary" However it was the crisis in the flannel industry in Montgomeryshire in 1838, and the economic insecurity that followed, that led to the spread of Chartism across the county.



In the months that followed, Hetherington visited the area from London however it was the influence of Birmingham radicals that particularly introduced Chartism into this part of Wales. Further branches of the Working Men's Associations (WMAs) were founded in Newtown, Llanidloes and Welshpool on the model of the Birmingham Political Union. At the Newtown demonstration, a delegate from Birmingham explained the principles of Chartism and among the speakers was Charles Jones. Jones was chosen as delegate at the Chartist National Convention. Hetherington visited the area again in April 1839 as a missionary from the national Convention; on his return to London he reported that the Montgomeryshire towns had 600 armed men drilling regularly.

The following account of Chartism in Montgomeryshire and the 'Chartist Outrage' (as *The Times* called it) in Llanidloes in April 1839 can be found on the *Our Chartist Heritage* website:^{xi}

On Christmas Day 1838 a group of Chartists processed to the place where Caersws workhouse was being erected and Thomas Powell, Charles Jones and others spoke about the Charter, the repeal of the Corn Laws and the New Poor Law. In March 1839 Charles Jones took leave of absence from the Convention to tour his home area with Chartist orator Henry Hetherington. On 9th April 1839 the three Chartists, Powell, Jones and Hetherington arrived in Newtown and addressed a huge but peaceable crowd.

The outbreak of violence in Llanidloes began on 30th April 1839. There had been rumours of an armed uprising and the Llanidloes magistrates became alarmed and demanded police support from the Government. Thomas Edmund Marsh, a wealthy Trewythen landowner, lawyer, magistrate, and former mayor played a major part in causing the riots. He took a leading role in bringing police and troops to the town possibly to discredit the Chartists. The normal force in the town consisted of just one elderly night watchman and some part-time unpaid constables. Marsh warned the authorities that there was serious unrest in the town and three constables were sent from London and took up lodging in the Trewythen Arms. Marsh also recruited 300 special constables, mostly from amongst his own tenants. On the 30th April the Chartists held a peaceable meeting on the Long Bridge in the town. Special constables had arrested three Chartists, Abraham Owen, aged 48, a weaver, Lewis Humphreys, aged 29, a shoemaker and Thomas Jerman, aged 27, a carpenter and imprisoned them in the Arms.

The events that followed are subject to conflicting accounts. When information about the arrests circulated a large crowd gathered at the Trewythen Arms, fired on the door, gained entry and freed the prisoners. It would appear that many of the crowd were not Chartists, but

discontented towns people and it was in many ways an anti-police riot. Two of the special constables hid in a hay loft and the third was badly beaten with iron rods before escaping. Chartist, Thomas Powell was in Newtown and hurried to Llanidloes. He attempted to calm the crowd and helped Armishaw, an injured Welshpool policeman to safety. For five days the Chartists were in control of the town, but they worked to preserve law and order and appointed watchmen to make sure peace was maintained. The period from Tuesday 30th April to Saturday 4th May 1839 was named the 'Five Days of Freedom'. Marsh now requested military assistance and on 4th May forces entered the town including Yeoman Cavalry who rode with sabres drawn. They found an essentially quiet town.

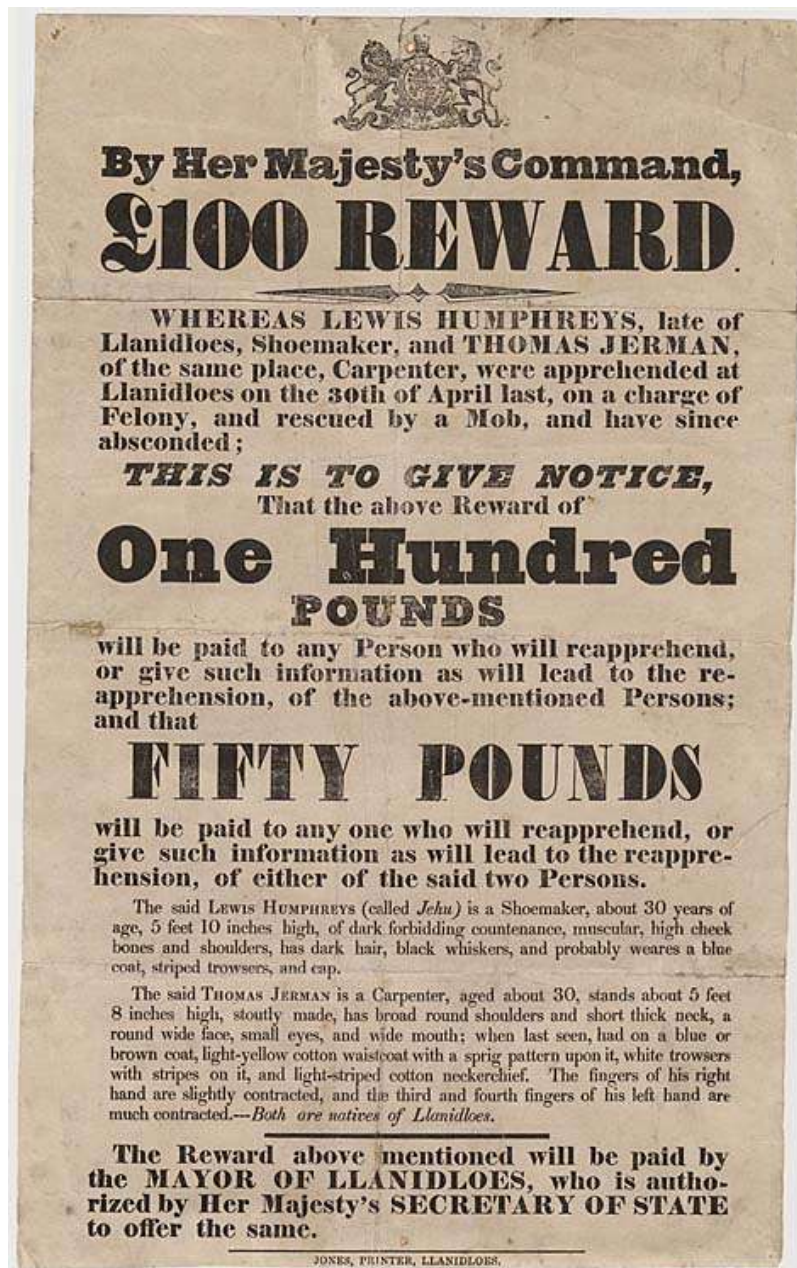


The plaque mounted on the Trewythen Arms in Great Oak Street to record the events of 1839.

The town was sealed off and the riot was used as an opportunity to arrest local Chartists. Rewards were offered and Abraham Owen, one of the three men freed from the Trewythen Arms, was arrested outside the town. The 'Wanted Poster' refers to Thomas Jerman and Lewis Humphreys who had also escaped from the Trewythen Arms. While Lewis Humphreys was captured in Merthyr Tydfil, Thomas Jerman managed to escape to America via Liverpool. A photograph shows him in Mankato in Minnesota with his family. There was no proof that the attack had been planned by Chartists, but thirty convictions followed the July trials and sentences were harsh ranging from fifteen years transportation to months of imprisonment. Three Llanidloes men were transported on the convict-ship Woodbridge to New South Wales: James Morris for riot and stabbing and Lewis Humphreys and Abraham Owen for riot and training with arms. Chartist, Thomas Powell from Llanidloes, was one of the thirty-two people arrested and imprisoned. He received a sentence of twelve months, but in order to obtain his release he had to find sureties totalling £800 to ensure he kept the peace for five years. He was not imprisoned for the riot of 30th April, but for using seditious words on 9th April, even though there were witnesses who denied that his speeches were inflammatory.



Thomas Jerman and his family



The BBC website also has an account of [How Llanidloes was captured by Chartists 175 years ago - BBC News](#)

Llanidloes Museum has a small collection related to the Chartists [Llanidloes Mid Wales UK - A small town at the heart of Wales](#)

Newtown Textile Museum has background on the Montgomeryshire flannel industry www.newtowntextilemuseum.co.uk - [Newtown Powys, Mid-Wales, UK](#)

The Robert Owen Museum has a full run of The New Moral World which can be consulted by arrangement; we also have copies of Penelope Harris's book *Robert Owen and the architect Joseph Hansom: An unlikely form of co-operation* available to buy.

The BBC's *In Our Time* also has an episode on Chartism [BBC Radio 4 - In Our Time, Chartism](#)

REFERENCES

ⁱ **Dictionary of National Biography, 1885-1900, Volume 01**, Allsop, Thomas *by George Jacob Holyoake*

ⁱⁱ Ray Faherty 'Bronterre O'Brien's correspondence with Thomas Allsop: New Evidence on the decline of a Chartist Leader' Newsletter: European Labor and Working Class History No. 8 (Nov_1975) p. 31. The quotation within is from O'Brien's letter to Allsop, August 7th 1847(#15).

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/people-charter>

^{iv} Penelope Harris *Robert Owen and the architect Joseph Hansom: An unlikely form of co-operation* (Brewin Books 2020)p. 81

^v *The Poor Man's Guardian* September 22, 1832

^{vi} *The Poor Man's Guardian* September 29, 1832

^{vii} Robert Owen 'To the Chartists of the British Isles' *The New Moral World* April 30th 1842

^{viii} Robert Owen 'Address to the Disciples of the Rational System of Society' *The New Moral World* April 23rd 1842

^{ix} Chushichi Tsuzuki 'Robert Owen and Revolutionary Politics' in ed. Sidney Pollard and John Salt; *Robert Owen: Prophet of the Poor* (Macmillan1971) p. 16

^x The establishment and history of Queenwood is outlined much more fully in Penelope Harris *Robert Owen and the architect Joseph Hansom: An unlikely form of co-operation* (Brewin Books 2020) esp. pp 96-115

^{xi} [Llanidloes Chartists – Our Chartist Heritage \(our-chartist-heritage.co.uk\)](http://Llanidloes Chartists – Our Chartist Heritage (our-chartist-heritage.co.uk))