

## Mysteries of the Churchyard

### Remembered inside the Priory Church of St Mary

As one enters the church through the main (West) porch, one can immediately see that the flooring is made up of gravestones and memorial slabs, together with a very few bare slabs. These stones surround the central block of pews and number 57, of which 50 have wholly or partly legible inscriptions.

On the rear west wall beside the entrance, on the left-hand wall and in the nave extension on the far right there are 17 memorial plaques. In terms of dates on the plaques, the earliest is 1624, for **Roger Edwards**, although the plaque itself dates from 1822. He was a great philanthropist who set up many charities for the poor of Usk. (See Appendix 1.) The next earliest is for the soldier **Walter Jones, 1636**.

The largest plaque on the west wall is for **Thomas Prothero** [1754-1819 (Aged 65)]. A lawyer, living in Ty Brith, a house just a short distance from the church. (See Appendix 2.)

The latest dedication is to **Colonel Richard Brown Roden** of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Volunteer Battalion the South Wales Borderers, who died in Corsica on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1887. His gravestone can be found in the churchyard (see churchyard reference) Another military memorial is to former **Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Browne** of the 4<sup>th</sup> Regt. of Dragoons, deceased on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1790 at the age of 71.

Taking a non-martial line are plaques commemorating two clerics, the **Revd. Henry Rogers** former Rector of Gwernesney and Llanhamlach in Breconshire, who died on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1788 aged 61 and the **Revd. Abednego Prichard, who** died on March 25<sup>th</sup> 1775 at the age of 69.

A very famous brass memorial strip fixed to the choir screen is dedicated to **Adam of Usk**, priest, lawyer and historian of the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries; it is in Medieval Welsh and not translated until 1921 by Professor Morris-Jones.



Priory Church of St Mary, Usk  
History Day 9<sup>th</sup> August 2025

More professions are represented in the flat memorial stones, particularly in the Shepard family in the left-hand (North) aisle: **William Shepard** was a malster\* who died in 1758 on December 20<sup>th</sup> aged 72, **while Richard Shepard** was an innkeeper who passed away on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1784 at 54. Meanwhile **James Shepard**, possibly Richard's brother chose to become an attorney-at-law and died in 1802 aged 77.

Another innkeeper was **William Prichard** of the Three Salmons, who died on 27<sup>th</sup> June 1829 at 77, just over six months after his wife Mary passed away, a sad sequence; this may have induced their eldest daughter **Mary Thomas** to move away – she died in Paris in 1850. There are also two surgeons mentioned: **James Boulton**, who was married to Ann Kentish Cordelia, who died on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1840, aged 31; also **Thomas Bernard Davies**, who died on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1808 aged 62.



Two highly placed town officials appear, though not by reason of death. **James Henry Clark** (see churchyard research) was Portreeve of Usk in the 1880s and appends his name to a commemorative window on the West wall of the nave in connection to a charter granted to the burgesses of Usk in 1398 by **Sir Roger de Mortimer**.

**Nicholas Jones**, former High Sheriff of Abergavenny was grandfather to **Letitia or Lettice Jones**, who died in 1776 on January 17<sup>th</sup> aged 54. Finally, two sailors are seen, one next to Letitia being Roger Jones of Llantrissant, formerly Lieutenant of the Man O' War Tor Bay who died on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1769 aged 61. \*

**Rose Mary Brown**, who married **John Brown** of Roscommon in Ireland, was the daughter of **Admiral Richard Hughes**, 2<sup>nd</sup> Baronet. He was Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia from 1778-81 and was second-in-command to Lord Howe at the relief of Gibraltar in 1782; Fort Hughes in Nova Scotia is named after him. Sadly, Rose Mary died in childbirth on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 1791 and is buried with her infant child, aged 23. Happily, she was survived by three other children.

It is noticeable that, in a rural settlement like Usk, none of the gravestones commemorate the lives of farmers, presumably because farming was not a profession of the level of those just mentioned. It is, however, common to see the appellation **Gent. or Esq.** after men's names and therefore one might surmise that these were gentlemen farmers who wanted a suitable title on their graves that had a "respectable" image that was not indicative of a mere worker on the land.

The tragedy of losing a young child is seen frequently on the stones. **Frances, daughter of William and Frances Nicholas** of Usk Priory, died on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1803 after only nine weeks of life. **Jane Price**, wife of John, died only months after giving birth to her daughter at the age of 27 on June 15<sup>th</sup>, 1798; **James, son of James Lewis**, died on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1769 aged 5 years; Charlotte, the wife of **Thomas Davies** the surgeon, died with her infant child on 12<sup>th</sup> March 1812. On the other hand, most of the people here lived reasonably long lives, though not usually so long as **Jenette Thomas**, who made it to 99 years, 9 months and 17 days on the 17<sup>th</sup> of August 1712. Her gravestone is remarkable for having a skull and crossbones inscribed on it, for reasons that will probably always remain a mystery.

This also applies to **Henry, William and Thomas Penoyre**, three sons of **Henry and Jane Matthews** aged 32, 28 and 37, in the prime of their lives, who died in Jamaica, no dates given on the plaque that was placed on the North wall by their mother. There are two possibilities that could explain this tragedy. First, there was a **Christmas Slave Revolt in Jamaica in 1831** that caused many deaths amongst both the military and civilian populations and the Penoyres could have been caught up in this as innocent bystander. Second, the West Indies were well-known as a death-trap in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries because of endemic diseases like yellow fever, scurvy and dysentery. The British Army suffered over 50,000 deaths there because of these.

The three Penoyres are their family's only members in the stone memorials in St Mary's, but other families are much more common. Top of the list come the **Prichards** with 22 representatives, followed by the **Lewises** with 10, **Jameses** and **Protheros** with seven and Joneses with six.

There are 42 surnames altogether, 30 different female Christian names and 27 male. Most popular female names are **Mary** with 22 and **Elizabeth** with 17. Most distinctive (to the writer) are **Kimbrah**, **Temperance**, **Sebella** and **Augusta**. Males – most common are **John** with 19 and **William** with 16 examples. **Abednego**, **Nathaniel** and **Theophilus** stand out. One memorable plaque is probably the smallest – a brass item with the names **Richard and Anne Probert** and daughters **Sarah Ann and Harriet Elizabeth** 1866-1930; this is attached to the screen next to the altar with no other details.

A few grave inscriptions have poetic epitaphs such as that for **Mary Prichard**, who died at 12 years of age on 6<sup>th</sup> January 1754:

*You that are young, be wise in Time  
For I was cut off in my prime.  
I soon sprung up and soon was gone,  
So frail is life to everyone  
My friends, as you my grave do see,  
Stay but a while you'll follow me. \**

**Frances Nicholas, 9 weeks, died 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1803:**

Repine no more but hope in time to meet  
Your lovely infant in a happier seat.  
Yet, yet awhile and then 'twill be your lot  
To join her in this sweet solemn spot  
Where war, nor strife nor sickness can oppress  
But hope through Christ to be forever blest.

\* Malster or maltster is someone who makes malt, which is a key ingredient in brewing and distilling.

\* A man o' war is a general name for an 18C warship but in this case probably a small two-masted sloop or similar, since a lieutenant was in charge, rather than a captain as would be the case on a larger vessel.

\*This sort of epitaph does lend itself to parody, as in:

**A Husband's Epitaph**

As I am now, so you must be  
Therefore prepare to follow me

**The Wife's Epitaph**

To follow you I'm not content  
How do I know which way you went?



## Appendix 1. Roger Edwards

So - who was **Roger Edwards**, who died on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1624 and is buried here in our church yard? The answer can be viewed on the monument, here in St Mary's, erected in 1822 some 200 years after his death to commemorate the laudable charities of this wealthy local farmer and merchant.

Roger Edwards, who resided at Alltabilla, about three miles distant from Usk, in the parish of Llangwm Ucha, and was proprietor of that and considerable other property in Llangwm, Llangeview, and neighbouring parishes. He names in his will three nephews—**Walter Williams, William James, and Jenkin Williams**. On the 29th of April 1621, he, by deed, which was enrolled in the year 1627, constituted three distinct charities, the funds for the maintenance of which were to be received from certain land specifically appropriated to each of the three charities. They were each to be administered by the same trustees.

One of these charities, which is now called the " Usk Branch “, had assigned to it landed estates at Llanbadoc and Raglan, at present amounting to 285 acres. This branch includes the free school, which he directed to be established, and certain local doles. The second branch, called the " Alms-house Branch " of the Charity, had appropriated to it nearly 397 acres of land. This branch includes the alms-house at Coedcwnnwr. The third branch, now called the " Country or Tyry-lay Branch," had assigned to it 47 acres of land. Roger Edwards made a will, dated January 18, 1622, confirming what he had done by deed, and this will be proved at Llandaff, 23rd of February 1636. Roger Edwards died on the 28th of March 1624.



**\*\*Roger Edwards founded Usk Grammar school and in his will of 1622, he left property an asset to fund the school, which provided free education for the town. Teaching was originally carried on in Usk Church; the schoolmaster lived at the current site in Maryport Street.**

In 1836 the school was moved to Maryport Street and was enlarged and rebuilt between 1843 and 1862. It is now a Grade 2 listed building, renamed Roger Edwards House, and is let to a range of tenants including the NHS and several local businesses, providing an income to support the Roger Edwards Educational Trust (REET) charitable activities. (REET) which is a registered charity which makes grants to individuals and organisations. All grants are to be used for educational and training purposes, which benefit people of all ages living in the Usk district.

In 2015 MCC gave up its lease on the site and since then REET has incurred considerable costs in making good sixty years' worth of accumulated dilapidations and poor maintenance. The first stage of this programme was completed in 2020, and the building has since been awarded the Usk Civic Society's Annual award for environmental improvement.

The building, renamed **Roger Edwards House**, is now fully let to a range of tenants including the NHS and several local businesses, providing an income to support REET's charitable activities.

**The Alms-houses at Llangeview** were founded on the instructions of Roger Edwards to give homes to 'necessitous persons' of three local parishes. Under the terms of the **Roger Edwards Charity**, those who lived in the alms houses were occupants by licence, not tenants, and paid a contribution towards maintenance, not rent. Originally there was a chapel attached to the buildings and a chaplain appointed by the trustees. The alms-houses still survive providing social housing. Roger Edwards also founded Alms-houses in Newland, Gloucestershire,

The **Roger Edwards Educational Trust** (REET) continues and is a registered charity which makes grants to individuals and organisations. All grants are to be used for educational and training purposes which benefit people of all ages living in the Usk district/ NP15 1 postcode area.



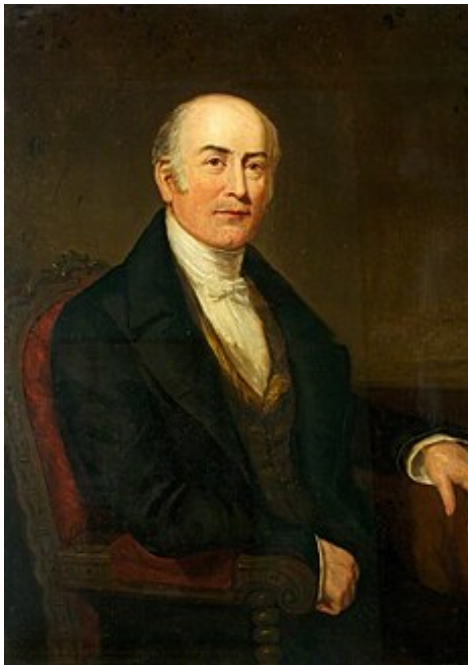
## Appendix 2. The Chartist Connection

Usk is not a town that instantly springs to mind when reflecting on the Newport Chartist riots of 4<sup>th</sup> November 1839. Focus tends to be on the valley towns, where the ill-treated workers were employed and lived and where Chartism, as a movement, began to grow in South Wales; or in Monmouth town- famous for its gaol and for the trials of prominent Chartist leaders such as **John Frost**, **Zephaniah Williams** and **William Jones** (amongst others).

For Usk, the story begins with the memorial plaque- found on the west wall of the church- of **Thomas Prothero [1754-1819]** (Aged 65)]. A lawyer, living in Ty Brith, a house just a short distance from the church.

Thomas Prothero (1754-1819), was a prominent and well-respected local gentleman, holding positions of authority and responsibility. He was recorded as one of the **Trustees of the Roger Edwards Charity** (established 1621 and still in place today). Prothero was an attorney, clerk of the peace for Monmouthshire, recorder of Usk, and steward of the duke of Beaufort.

His own father, also Thomas Prothero, is believed to have moved to Usk to work as a cobbler within the town.



(Prothero in later life. Date and author unknown- Wikipedia)

Whilst interesting in his own right **Thomas Prothero (1754-1819)** links Usk to many of the key events in local history of the time through his son, also Thomas Prothero; born in 1780 to Mrs Mary Campbell and believed to be illegitimate. A Lawyer, Banker, Estate Manager and Business Owner, this son became notorious in the history of the local area.

Born in 1780, the Baptism record held in St Mary's show that Thomas was not baptised until 1789, his mother's name being recorded on his baptismal certificate.

Thomas was well educated and supported by his father, despite them not sharing a close relationship, to become a solicitor. He moved to London to train as an Articled Clerk.

Following his training in London, Thomas returned to **Newport in 1806** (aged 26), just as Newport was beginning to experience rising prosperity linked to the docks. He soon became Estate Manager to **Sir Charles Morgan of Tredegar Park** and ran the estate with a firm hand; he sought personal financial gain at every opportunity, exploiting gaps, skating close to the edge of the law without actually breaking it.

He attained acquaintances in high places, becoming a senior lawyer and partnering **Thomas Phillips, the Mayor of Newport**. He became a Burgess of Newport in 1807 and within 3 days was appointed Town Clerk for Newport- a prestigious and powerful role.

As Agent of the Tredegar Estate, Prothero lived in Friars, at the back of the Royal Gwent Hospital, Newport. He went on to increase his power and assets; becoming agent for Kemys estate, a Magistrate, Coal Exporter, a partner in the Prothero-Powell Slate and Timber merchants as well as the Treasurer for the Caerleon Charity established by Charles Williams. He was able to control and profit from both the Tredegar Estate tenants and the Caerleon tenants.

He held other roles of significance within the area and was a political figure linked to politicians such as **Sir Benjamin Hall (Llanover)**.

Thomas appears to have been able to find and befriend influential people, he became their 'second in command', influencing their actions and decision making but never actually being the leading figure himself. Unlike other peers in similar positions, he was never honoured.

A personal feud between Thomas and **John Frost**, initially, over a disputed family will, was prominent in Protheros life and influenced local affairs for many years. This acrimonious relationship persisted over decades and Thomas Prothero was instrumental in the arrest and sentencing of John Frost and other prominent **Chartist leaders after the Newport Rising of 1839**.

John Frost published a letter he had written to Thomas Prothero, describing injustices he had found as a councillor for Newport. Thomas took action against Frost and in 1822 Frost was found guilty of libel, fined and sentenced to six months in Coldbath prison.



Thomas gathered information leading up to the Newport Rising in 1839 and was able to advise the Mayor of Newport and his supporters. Following events on 4<sup>th</sup> November, he sought out Frost who was in hiding in Newport. Frost was arrested and later tried in Monmouth for High Treason. His sentence of death was commuted and he was transported, along with other Chartist Leaders, to Tasmania.



John Frost: National Portrait Gallery published in 1840

Prothero made his family home at Malpas Court-Newport, designed and built for him by **Thomas Henry Nicholl**, the architect also responsible for Usk Gaol (1840) and The Sessions House, Usk (1877).

On his death in 1853 (aged 73) Thomas Prothero was buried in St. Mary's Church, Malpas-alongside his favourite daughter Henrietta.

Following the Newport Rising in 1839 other, less prominent, Chartist rioters were tried and sentenced in the Assize Court (Quarter Session) in Usk- then held in what is now the British Legion.

But that is another story to be told.....