

*Priory Church
of St Mary, Usk*

**The Victorian era in Usk
1837-1901**



Introduction

St Mary's Church History Group aims to explore the lives of people who have worshipped at the church through different periods in history.

We make use of research and evidence from other historians, documents and artefacts available within the church and the wider community, look for clues and make interpretations based on what we find.

The Victorian era has been a particularly interesting piece of work. This period in time was one of great change and innovation in many ways. Efforts were made to improve the quality of people's lives, changes in industry affected employment. Developments in infrastructure led to improved sanitation, safer streets and homes. There was more direct government and management of aspects that had previously been locally based.

There was much development in the town of Usk. It would seem that the opening of the new gaol in 1844 stimulated improvements on Bridge Street. The previous House of Correction (Bridge Street) was purchased and revamped as business premises, which in turn, encouraged other business owners to improve their premises. Bridge Street began to have shops with plate glass windows and look more like the street we know today.

Roads were improved. Houses were redeveloped and began to have mains drainage and gas lighting. The importance of education was evidenced by the number of schools in Usk at the time. Religious worship played a large role in people's lives.

The research presented here is a collation of the work done by members of the History Group. It is our 'best interpretation' based on what we have found, and we continue to find more each time we look. We hope that collating so many areas of Victorian life in one place will be of use and interest to our community.

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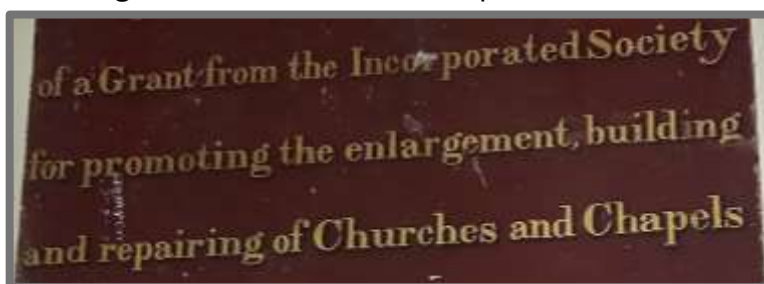
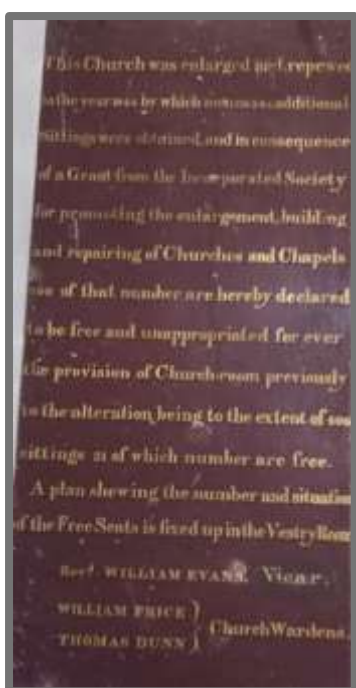
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1: Architecture of St Mary's Church

St Mary's Priory Church, Usk

During the Victorian period, St Mary's Church was still part of the **Church of England**. It wasn't until **1920** that the **Church in Wales** was created as a result of the **Welsh Church Act 1914** (an act of Parliament under which the Church of England was separated and disestablished in Wales and Monmouthshire).

By Victorian times, St Mary's needed much repair and renovation. Several sources, written at the time or shortly after, give valuable and significant details of development projects and the changes made. Evidence of these alterations can still be found in the church, although much is hidden by subsequent improvements-which have continued up to modern day, leading to interesting 'detective work' and interpretation.



Commemoration of the work carried out in 1844.

Mention is made of a Grant from the Incorporated Society.

Plaque on north wall of extended nave

The plaque found on the north wall of the nave extension explains the nature of some of the work carried out and reasons for it. It also references funding for this work coming from the charitable organisation '**The Incorporated Church Buildings Society**' (ICBS), registered in 1828. At this time, **pew rent** was payable on seats within a church, and the addition of **free seats** allowed for less wealthy people to be able to attend church, increasing the inclusivity of the Church of England. The ICBS provided grants, upon application, to extend churches in England and Wales and increase the number of **free seats**. A plan of the pew arrangements in St Mary's, including the **free seats** is held within the church.

'By 1815, only half the population of England belonged to the established Anglican Church. Faced with a rapidly growing population in the new industrial towns, the growth of Nonconformism and the fear of revolution, the Church of England set about building and enlarging churches.' (Hedley, 2018)

'Backed by Hoares Bank, the ICBS, in contrast to the government-supported Church Building Commission, raised the funds it needed for church building and enlargement privately.' (Hedley, 2018)

Thomas Henry Wyatt worked as architect on the project to develop the main nave of the church. Reports suggest he became unpopular locally as his plans kept changing which increased the cost of the work.

The interior of the church must have looked quite different as there are references, from different sources, to a gallery running along the north wall.

'At the time of the alteration a gallery extending along the north side of the church and intercepting the light from the windows was taken down, and a wing for the reception of the organ in a gallery near the roof added.' (Clark, 1896)

'The nave was lengthened to provide accommodation lost by the removal of the north gallery' (Rickards, 1904)

Following the extension to the nave, the roof of the church, originally covered in stone tiles, was recovered in slates.

A gallery was created in the new addition, and the organ was located there. A staircase was built to enable access to the organ gallery. This was built on the south wall of the west porch. (Rickards, 1904).



The stone facing of the building which housed the staircase is of the same construction as the nave extension of around 1844 and is distinct from the stonework of the west porch.

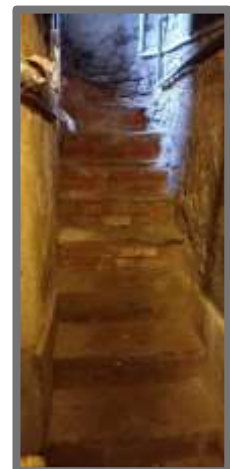
Contrast in stonework of 1844 construction and 15th century west porch.



Staircase to organ gallery and boiler room accommodated here.

Stairs leading up to ground level, from the boiler room.

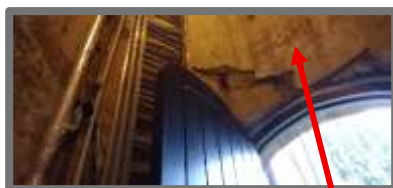
The doorway opens to stairs which lead down to the boiler room. A coal fired boiler was installed, thought to be towards the end of the 19th century. Rickards recommends the installation of a proper heating system for the comfort of worshippers and for the *preservation of the fabric* of the church- exact date is unknown. The window above the doorway is still visible inside.



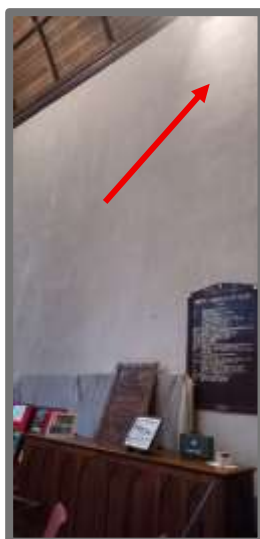
The spiral staircase continued upwards and, although it is no longer present, evidence of the stairs leading to the organ gallery remain. At the top of this staircase is a bricked-up doorway which must have given access to the organ gallery on the north wall of the nave extension- now covered by lime render, following later reparation works.



Remains of a fireplace- suggests this is part of the Victorian coal-fired boiler system.



Evidence of staircase leading up to the organ gallery



North wall of the nave extension- suggested position of the doorway to organ gallery

Doorway which led to the organ gallery- now bricked up.

West wall of nave- where organ gallery would have been.

Window-1886

In 1875 the organ gallery was removed and the organ was relocated to its present position in the north-east bay of the church at the suggestion of James Henry Clark. From Clark's notes it would seem the organ gallery must have filled much of the space above the nave extension. He refers to the light from the west window being blocked and the seats underneath it being '*rendered almost useless*' and that the removal of the organ and gallery '*opened out the window and brought back into use those seats which are now well situated for hearing the service.*' (Clark, 1896)

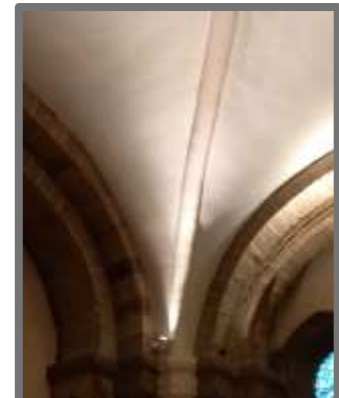




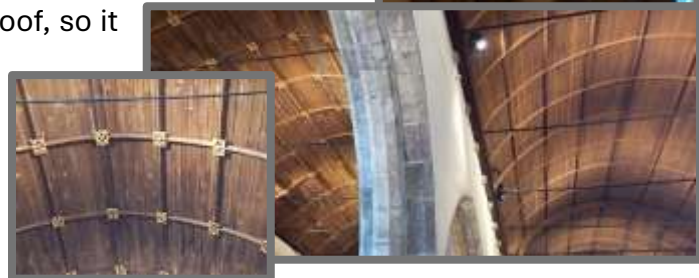
As part of the 1844 work, the wall blocking the western arch of the tower was removed, presumably this wall enclosed the top of the arch and beneath it was open to allow passage through the arch to the crossing beneath the tower.

A wall was built to enclose the eastern arch. The former eastern **choir** (originally extending beyond the current wall) had collapsed by this time. The stained-glass window dates from 1913, it isn't clear what form the wall and window would have taken in 1844.

The space created beneath the tower was adapted as part of the chancel and changed the layout of the church. A groined roof with four massive ribs supported on corbels covered the chancel. The Norman piers and arches of the tower, had been concealed by cement, removed as part of the reparations. These piers, along with the stair turret (see below) were thought to be the only original Norman parts of the church which had survived. The materials had been well preserved and the bases of the piers were, at that point, 15 inches below the pavement. The roof of the nave and north aisle was originally open timber and the ceiling made of lathe and plaster. Rickards reported that little of the original roof remained. An architect's report, prior to the installation of the Llandaff Cathedral organ, also refers to the poor condition of the roof, so it is likely these repairs took place in the late 1890s.



The decision was made to replace the plaster ceiling with an oak barrel roof and moulded ribs. The roof of the north aisle has decorative emblems but no explanation of the different finishes of the two roofs has been found as yet- although the roof of the nave appears to have a better finish so further restoration may have taken place at some point. Similarly, no information on the plaster angels on the roof of the nave has been found yet.



The whole of the interior, including walls, arches and pillars were covered with a thick coat of cement and whitewashed. It is interesting to note that during the Victorian reparations, consideration was given to the original appearance of the church. *'The cement facing was removed, and as no traces of original plaster appeared, the masonry was carefully pointed, the ashlar [facing of stone wall] being cleansed from the accumulated whitewash.'* (Rickards, 1904). The walls were left as open stonework.

However, during restoration work carried out more recently in late 20th century in association with CADW, the walls were recovered in lime plaster to reflect current thinking on the original design of the interior of the church.



During this work to remove old cement, a door to a former rood-loft, positioned in the angle or stair turret at the side of the tower, was revealed. Rickards noted that this could only have been used before the north aisle was added in the 13th century. He thought the loft probably crossed the church on the western side of the west arch of the tower.



Interior of door accessed via stairs to bell tower.



Access to former rood-loft, from stairs to bell tower.



External view of the angle/stair turret.

During the removal of the plaster, a door was opened which had led from the north transept to the aisle.

A lintel was discovered beneath the middle south window, Rickards reports this was believed to be the access to the church from the priory.



Middle window on south wall

An architect's report, prior to the installation of the new organ at the end of the 1890s, highlights the poor condition of the tower and also its significance as one of the few early Norman towers in the Monmouthshire Diocese. Urgent restoration work was suggested to return the tower to its original form.

In 1899 work began to move the current organ from Llandaff Cathedral to St Mary's, Usk. At this point further restoration work was planned and carried out to complete the restoration of the church to its '*pristine beauty*'. Mr G. E. Halliday of Llandaff was commissioned to carry out the work.



Choir stalls replaced old pews. During this work a monumental slab was found underneath the old pews and was moved to the west wall.

'The letter N and figure 4 are cut backwards, and the inscription is surrounded by a geometric design and a representation of a sword and pike. The Isle of Ree alluded to is on the west coast of France, where English troops were landed to assist the persecuted Huguenots.' (Rickards, 1904)

The Huguenots are a religious group of French Protestants who held to the Reformed tradition of Protestantism.

Also at this time, three of the windows in the nave and aisle were reglazed. The large western window had become *dilapidated and dangerous*, and this was restored and replaced with the stained-glass window, seen today, with armorial bearings. (Rickards, 1904)

Viewed from inside:

Upper row:

- 1- The Royal Arms (Henry VIII)
- 2- Troutbeck
- 3- See of Llandaff (Bishop- 1904)
- 4- Fleur de Lys- Tudor badge
- 5- Percy



Lower row:

- 1- Josceline de Louvaine
- 2- Clare- Earls of Gloucester and Lords of Usk, founders of the Priory
- 3- Town of Usk
- 4- Somerset or Beaufort
- 5- The Pomegranate badge of Queen Katherine of Aragon

With the exception of those of the See of Llandaff and the town of Usk, the arms were based on the frieze in the Priory and were probably born by the benefactors to the Benedictine order. (Rickards, 1904)

The **Rood Screen** dates from 15th century. By the time of reparations at the end of the 19th century, it was reported to be in poor condition and having been carefully examined, it seems that it was likely to collapse soon after had it not been given attention. At this time, it was privately restored. Reports of the time tell us that care was taken to investigate the original style and design, demonstrating- once more- that the restoration works at the church were carried out with care and consideration. An iron girder and rods were used to 'sure up' the screen. The south wall of the church leans outwards at that point and the screen could not be repositioned to be perpendicular- so leans towards the wall. Paint and varnish covering the screen were carefully removed and showed that the screen had at one time been blue, it had also been painted to imitate oak. Decorative features had been destroyed but enough remained for reproductions to be made. When the screen was cleaned, remains of gilding and colour were discovered and were distinct enough to allow the restoration of the screen to its original scheme- seen today. *'With the exception of the upper parapet, and probably the rood and figures, the screen now stands as it did at the time of its erection.'* (Rickards, 1904)

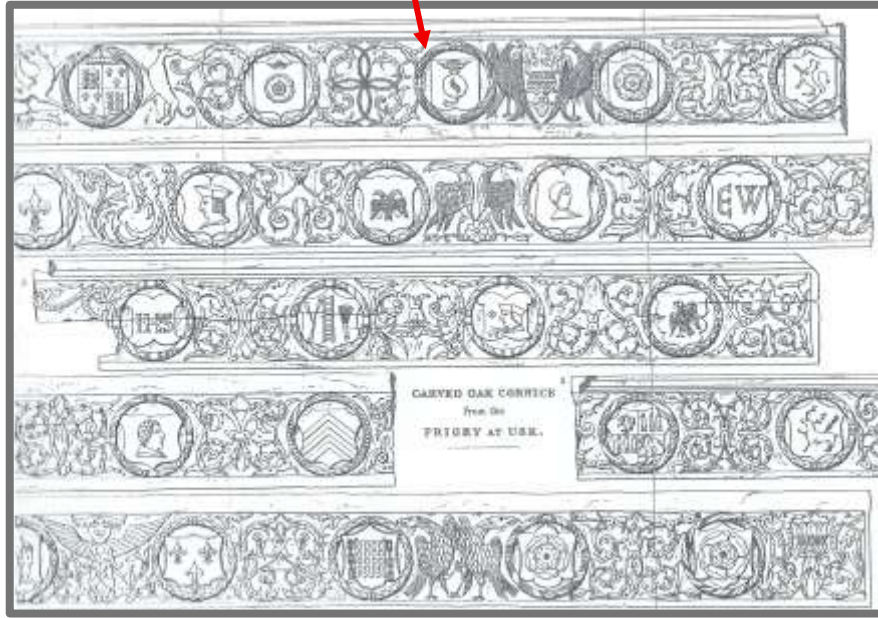


The rood screen can be seen leaning towards the south wall (right).

The Priory House

The Priory house, on the south side of the church had originally housed the nuns of the Benedictine order, for whom the priory church was built, and was itself a building of interest and design.

In an apartment on the first floor of the Priory the frieze of the ceiling was decorated with thirty emblems and emblazoned arms- the coats of benefactors of the Priory, or more probably the Benedictine order. (Coxe, 1801). These emblems included the pomegranate of Catherine of Aragon.



Rickards (1904)

The Priory had fallen into disrepair by the middle of the 19th century. In 1860, the architect Matthew Digby Wyatt was engaged to carry out renovations at Cefn Tilla Court (the home of Lord Raglan). During this work oak panelling and the remains of cornice work from the Priory House was removed and taken to Cefn Tilla Court. By this time only part of this frieze remained with only 24 shields present.

The Priory was sold by the Duke of Beaufort in 1869 and purchased by Mr Thomas Watkins who demolished the remains and rebuilt the house style, making use of materials salvaged from the original building. Some of the architectural features were preserved, although the building was more gothic in style. The gate-house remained and was occupied, at the time, by Lieutenant-General Barnard.



The Gate House: Usk Recaptured 100 Years in Pictures, David R Lewis

The Priory: Usk Recaptured 100 Years in Pictures, David R Lewis



2: The Organ of St Mary's Priory Church, Usk

Considerable interest is shown by visitors, and "organ buffs" in particular, in the Gray and Davison instrument at St. Mary's.

It is thought that the organ was built in 1860/1861, but an account of Country Organs in the 1877 edition of "Hopkins and Rimbault" quotes the date as 1857. It was constructed for the newly restored Chancel of Llandaff Cathedral with Sir Fredrick Gore-Ouseley of St Michael's Tenbury Wells fame, as consultant. The case and pipe decorations were designed by J.P. Seddon.



Between 1883 and 1902 the remarkable Robert Hope-Jones had his somewhat questionable career in organ design and the Dean and Chapter of Llandaff Cathedral sought his advice and decided to invest in a new instrument.

The old organ was sold for £375 to Mr Rickards of the Priory and re-erected at Usk in 1899/1900, and



was dedicated to the memory of his son, Hely Bennet Rickards. The replacement instrument at Llandaff was twice rebuilt, once just before the second world and again in 1958 with much of the original pipework in today's instrument.

Grey and Davison introduced a new stop named Keraulophon in their model organ at St, Paul's Wolton place in 1843 but the original name for this invention was "Corno-Dulciana". The stop has a limited use and insignificant history. There are few historic organs of the period left and very few survive in original condition.

The organ is difficult and awkward to play since manual coupling is much too heavy, but the reward of hearing and playing the transparent quality of the bold choruses and the "en Chamade" trumpet make it a treasure. It is believed to be the most complex Victorian organ in existence. The organ was moved from Llandaff to Usk in 1900. It was restored in 2006 by a firm in Malvern, Worcestershire.

It is of very considerable importance to the history of English organ building and serves as a reminder of one of the most unwise decisions ever taken by the Authorities of a British Cathedral.

3: Music of the era

Music has been performed in churches and other communal places from as far back as the 7th century. Both church choirs and congregations in Wales would have participated in singing songs and psalms, and they would have been accompanied by a musician playing the harp.

The Patron Saint of Music in Wales is St. Caradoc. A 12th-century Welsh nobleman and hermit who was a noted harpist in the court of Rhys ap Tewdwr. He is regarded by Welsh musicians, particularly harpists, as their specific patron. He died in 1124. His shrine is located in St David's Cathedral, where he is often depicted with a harp.



The first Eisteddfod in Wales was held in 1176 at Cardiff Castle and organised by Lord Rhys.

Progress of Music during the Victorian Period

The industrial revolution during the Victorian period resulted in some industrialists attaining great wealth. Some became benefactors and donated large sums of money towards the building of churches and chapels, they also paid for thousands of new organs to be built. This allowed all levels of society to have access to music through churches, temperance houses and music halls.

Consequently, more professional musicians were required and various musical colleges were founded. The Royal Academy of Music had already been established in 1822. This was followed by The National Training School for Music in 1876 and The Royal College of Music in 1883. At that time, there was no dedicated music college in Wales, however music was taught in teacher training colleges across Wales. The *University College of Wales at Aberystwyth*, established in 1870s, went on to achieve a long and distinguished tradition of teaching and research in musical studies.

The publication of Musical journals also took off and titles such as the Music Times, Musical Standard, Musical News and the Musical Opinion started to appear. These journals featured adverts for music teachers and musical instruments.

Prior to 1870, the teaching of music in schools was an integral part of education. However, in 1870 the Elementary Educational Primary Act was introduced and the national framework concentrated on teaching the three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic and music became overlooked. Consequently, there was more of a demand for music in Sunday Schools.

Congregational and choral music

- **Gymanfa Ganu:** (song festival) These mass hymn-singing festivals were launched in 1859 and became a central feature of Welsh musical life, particularly in nonconformist chapels. They were seen as evidence of both innate Welsh musicality and cultural development.
- **Hymnals:** The publication of hymn books, such as John Roberts' *Llyfr Tonau Cynulleidfaol* (1859), provided congregations with standardized, accessible tunes and helped to lay the foundation for the *Gymanfa Ganu*.
- **Tonic Sol-fa:** The growing availability of music in tonic sol-fa notation, (Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti) promoted by figures like Welsh born Eleazar Roberts (1825-1912), allowed more people to read and sing music more fluently.
- **Temperance movement:** The temperance movement helped to boost large-scale choral singing by organizing annual festivals that included hymn singing by combined choirs.

Traditional and specialized music

- **Plygain Service:** This is a traditional Christmas service that predates the Victorian era but remained popular, especially in rural areas. It is characterized by Welsh-language carols sung in smaller groups by agricultural workers.
- **Cerdd Dant:** A unique tradition of singing or chanting poetry to harp accompaniment. While it existed before this period, the harp became increasingly associated with Welsh musical identity.

Victorian Hymns/Composers

During Queen Victoria's reign about 400,000 hymns were written. Less than 1,000 survive.

These were written for every occasion

- Rich in Theology
- Emotional and evocative
- And they became part of oral tradition

The Church of England was slow to accept hymns because of the poor state of congregational singing, but by 1820 the Archbishop of York approved a collection of 146 hymns and by 1840 these had become fully accepted by the Church.

Hymns appeared on postcards, tombstones and framed posters to hang in the home.

Queen Victoria's favourite hymn was "The day thou gavest ---". It was sung at her Diamond Jubilee and her funeral. The Queen also liked "Lead kindly light."

As an aside "Dear Lord and Father of mankind" was written by John Whittier, a Quaker poet, and was never meant to be sung. In 1888 Hubert Parry composed the music to accompany the poetic words.

Victorian hymns that are sung today

Abide with me - Henry Lyle

At even when the sun was set - Henry Twells

Come ye thankful people come - Henry Alford
Crown Him with many crown - Matthew Bridges
I heard the voice of Jesus say - Horatio Bonar
Jesus calls me o'er the tumult - Cecil F Alexander
O Jesus I have promised - John E Bode
Praise to the Lord - J Newton
There is a green hill - Cecil Alexander

Female composers were rare. Elizabeth Clephone, with her sister, devoted her life to the poor and was known as "Sunshine".

She wrote:

"There were ninety and nine"
"Beneath the cross of Jesus"

Mr Sankey found the verses in a religious paper and put it in his pocket. After Mr Moody preached *the Good Shepherd* he took out the verse and composed the tune we use today.

"Just as I am" was written by Charlotte Elliot 1789 – 1881. Her brother, a clergyman, declared his sister's hymns had saved more souls than his sermons.

"Like a river glorious" and *"Take my life"* were written by Frances R Havergal 1836 – 1876

"Cwm Rhondda: Composed by John Hughes (1873 – 1932). Also known as "Guide Me, O Thou Great Redeemer," this is one of the most famous Welsh hymns and is still sung today.

"Lief: "A Cry", written by David Charles (1803-1880). This was a particularly popular hymn during this period, found in many hymn collections.

Composers

Joseph Parry, a renowned Welsh composer and musician, was born on May 21, 1841, in Merthyr Tydfil, Wales. He is best known for composing the beloved Welsh song "Myfanwy" and the hymn tune "Aberystwyth." Parry made history as the first Welshman to compose an opera 'Blodwen' the first opera written in the Welsh language.



In 1854, Parry's family emigrated to the United States, settling in Danville, Pennsylvania. There, he worked at an ironworks, where he found camaraderie with fellow workers who were also musicians. During a temporary closure of the ironworks, they offered music lessons, which helped cultivate Parry's growing passion and talent for music.

He began submitting compositions to Eisteddfodau - Welsh cultural festivals both in Wales and in the U.S., quickly earning recognition and awards. His achievements culminated in earning a doctorate in music from the University of Cambridge,

becoming the first Welshman to receive both a bachelor's and a doctoral degree in music from the university.

In 1874, Parry returned to Wales to become the first professor of music at Aberystwyth University. He later joined Cardiff University, further contributing to Welsh musical and academic life. He died on 17 February 1903 in Penarth.

Evan James and James James

The words of the Welsh National Anthem, *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau* (Land of my Fathers) were written by **Evan James** in 1856, and the music by his son **James James** in the same year. The song's words are probably Evan James' response to his brother's request for him to migrate to the United States of America. He says that "the land of his fathers" is good enough for him – in a time when a large number of Welsh people were migrating to the USA to seek employment and a new start.

The song was first performed in 1856 in Maesteg before being sung at the Great Llangollen Eisteddfod in 1858. It was sung at an international rugby match for the first time in 1905 at a game between Wales and New Zealand, this was the first time a national anthem had been sung at the start of a sporting event.

Ivor Novello

Ivor Novello (real name David Ivor Davies), was born in Cardiff in 1893. It was Novello who wrote the popular first war songs 'Keep the Home Fires Burning and 'We'll Gather Lilacs'.

Lady Llanover



Augusta Hall, Baroness Llanover (21 March 1802 – 17 January 1896), born Augusta Waddington, was a Welsh heiress, best known as a patron of the Welsh arts. She and her husband, Sir Benjamin Hall, commissioned the building of their home Llanover Hall, which was largely completed by 1837. The house became a centre for the investigation and development of Welsh culture, promoting Welsh dancing and the playing of the harp, especially the Welsh Triple harp.

Lady Llanover encouraged the production and use of the traditional Welsh Triple harp and employed a resident harpist at Llanover Hall. Triple Harp players are very rare. The Triple Harp's name in Welsh is Y Delyn Deires.

Queen Victoria's Coronation Party in Usk

A party was held for the townspeople of Usk to celebrate Queen Victoria's coronation in 1838. Although, there are no records to confirm that music was played, it is very likely that such a celebration would have been accompanied by the popular music of the time.

Music Halls

Music halls had been springing up all over the country. Many songs were written and performed, some of the popular songs at the time were 'Daddy wouldn't buy me a bow, wow', written in 1892 by prolific English songwriter Joseph Tabrar. Also, 'Come into the garden Maud', written by Alfred Tennyson in 1854.



Brass Bands



Brass bands in Wales during the Victorian period were a significant, yet historically under-researched, cultural phenomenon that emerged from the industrialization of the country, particularly in mining and steel-working regions. Often viewed as a form of "rational recreation" to keep workers out of trouble, these bands became essential community institutions, symbolizing solidarity and pride, and flourished particularly in the late 19th century.

Key Characteristics and Context

- **Industrial Roots:** Many bands were sponsored by coal mines, ironworks, or factories, with some of the earliest ensembles emerging in the 1830s and 1840s.
- **The Cyfarthfa Band:** One of the most famous bands of the era was the Cyfarthfa Band, established in Merthyr Tydfil by iron baron Robert Thompson Crawshay in the mid-19th century. Unlike many, this band played a sophisticated repertoire, including opera overtures and
- **Cultural Significance:** While Welsh culture is often identified with choral singing, brass bands provided a separate instrumental, working-class identity.
- **Role of Temperance:** Various bands were formed by temperance societies, such as the Rechabites, to promote abstinence.
- **Regional Spread:** While concentrated in the industrial South (Glamorgan, Monmouthshire), bands were also established throughout Powys, with many forming in the 1840s and 1850s, such as the Caersws Rechabites (1839) and Welshpool (1839).

Entertainment in the Victorian Home

Pianos became increasingly common in Welsh homes during the Victorian period, particularly from the mid-to-late 19th century onwards. While initially a luxury item for the wealthy, the industrial boom in Wales and the rise of the middle class, followed by the mass production of smaller "cottage" pianos, made piano ownership accessible to a much broader section of society, including smaller traders and artisans.

- **Cultural Significance:** In Wales, music played a central role in family life, and the piano became a primary source of home entertainment in an era before recorded music.
- **The "Sixpenny Lesson":** By the late 19th century, piano ownership was accompanied by the rise of affordable music lessons and sheet music, allowing for widespread amateur playing.
- **Railway Transport:** The rapid expansion of the railway network in the Victorian era allowed for pianos manufactured in London to be transported to the provinces, including Wales.

Piano Tuners

Piano tuning was a critical part of maintaining the most popular instrument in the Victorian home. Because of the rapid advancements in piano technology and the shift towards, and subsequent struggle with, standardizing pitch, regular maintenance was essential.

- **Professional Tuners:** Piano tuning was a respected trade, and tuners were often considered gentlemen. They were known to enter homes through the front door, rather than the service entrance, because they were working on a highly valued possession.
- **Signatures on Instruments:** It was common practice for Victorian piano tuners to sign and date their work on the interior of the piano (often on the hammer rail or soundboard), a tradition that continued into the 20th century.
- **"Pitch Inflation" Challenges:** The early-to-mid Victorian era saw "pitch inflation," where the standard pitch rose higher and higher to achieve a more "brilliant" sound. This meant that tuners were constantly fighting to keep instruments in tune, as the increased tension could cause strings to break or the piano to warp.
- **High Demand for Service:** During the peak of the piano boom in the 1850s and 60s, a huge number of tunings were required, both in factories (where 60,000 -100,000 pianos were made in London alone) and in private homes.
- **Tuning Tools:** Victorian tuners often used a "T-hammer" rather than the modern crank-style tuning hammer, which allowed them to deal with the oblong-headed tuning pins common on pianos from that era.



Victoria's Favourite Composer

Queen Victoria was an ardent piano player. Her favourite composer was Felix Mendelssohn 1808 – 1847. She described Mendelssohn as “the greatest musical genius since Mozart and the most amiable man. He was quite worshipped by those who knew him intimately, and we have so much appreciated and admired his wonderfully beautiful compositions. We liked and esteemed the excellent man, and looked up to and revered, the wonderful genius.”

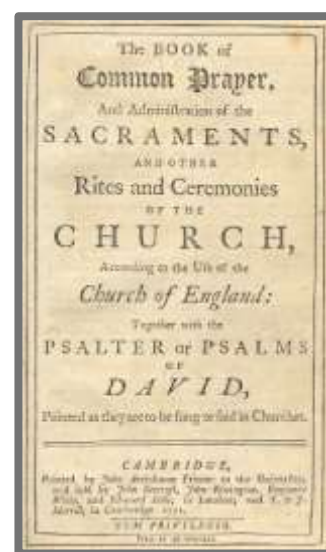


4: Worship

During the Victorian era, specifically by the mid-19th century, Wales had become a predominantly Nonconformist country, with chapel worship significantly outnumbering Anglican (Church of England) worship. The **1851 Religious Census** revealed that roughly **four out of five (approx. 80%)** of those attending a place of worship in Wales on that day were attending Nonconformist chapels, while only about **one-fifth** attended Anglican services.

Anglican worship in the Victorian era (1837–1901) was marked by a dramatic shift from dull, 18th-century "Georgian" simplicity to highly ornate, ritualistic services, largely driven by the Oxford Movement. While Evangelicalism initially dominated, fostering serious, sermon-focused worship, the later period saw the rise of Anglo-Catholic "ritualism" emphasizing candles, incense, and vestments. (The Victorian Web)

- **The 1662 Book:** Anglican parishes across Wales used this text for Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, and the Holy Communion.
- **Welsh Language:** Despite the liturgical dominance of an English-produced book, the Welsh translation (*Y Llyr Gwede Cyffredin*, originally 1567, revised 1664) was vital for worship in Welsh-speaking areas.
- **Influence of the Oxford Movement:** By the mid-to-late Victorian era, the way the 1662 liturgy was celebrated changed in many churches due to the Oxford Movement (also known as the Tractarians). This introduced more ritualistic, "high church" ceremony, such as the use of Eucharistic vestments and choral services, despite the text of the 1662 book remaining the same.
- **Nonconformity:** By the mid-19th century, the majority of churchgoers in Wales attended Nonconformist chapels rather than the Anglican church. These chapels did not use a set liturgy like the Book of Common Prayer, but instead focused on extemporaneous prayer and preaching.
- **Traditional Customs:** In some rural areas, traditional Welsh customs such as *plygain* (early morning carol services on Christmas morning) continued, often featuring unique, local musical traditions alongside the standard prayer book services. (Cambridge University Press)



Anglican Worship - The Role of the *Book of Common Prayer*

The 1662 BCP was the bedrock of Anglican worship and remained largely unchanged by official means during this period. It contained set forms of service for:

- **Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer (Matins and Evensong):** These daily offices were a staple, and the custom had developed for the Sunday morning service to often combine Morning Prayer, the Litany, and the Ante-Communion (the first part of the Communion service up to the Prayer for the Church Militant).

- **Holy Communion (Eucharist or Lord's Supper):** While intended as the primary service, frequent communion was less common in the early Victorian period, particularly in Low Church parishes.
- **Other Rites:** The book also contained services for Public Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony, Burial of the Dead, and more.

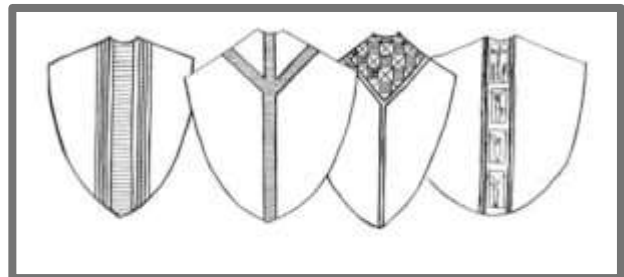
Divergent Practices: High vs. Low Church

Low Church (Evangelical)

- **Focus:** Emphasized Reformed theology, preaching, and the centrality of Scripture.
- **Ceremony:** Ceremonial practices were minimal. Clergy typically wore only a surplice for the service and a black gown for preaching. The focus was on the spoken word and congregational singing of metrical psalms.
- **Eucharist:** Holy Communion was celebrated infrequently (perhaps monthly or quarterly), with the main Sunday service being Morning Prayer and a sermon.

High Church (Anglo-Catholic / Ritualist)

- **Focus:** Stressed the Church's Catholic heritage, the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and the importance of sacraments and apostolic succession.
- **Ceremony:** The Ritualists introduced practices that sparked controversy and even legal prosecution, such as:
 - Wearing elaborate vestments (chasubles, albs, coloured stoles) instead of the standard surplice and gown.
 - Placing candles and a cross on the altar, and lighting the candles.
 - Using incense and the mixed chalice (mixing water with wine).
 - The priest adopting the eastward position (facing the altar with their back to the congregation).
- **Eucharist:** They sought to make the Eucharist the principal Sunday service, more in line with Roman Catholic practice.



The style of worship at the Priory Church of St Mary, Usk, during the Victorian era was typical of an Anglican parish church of the time, heavily influenced by the Gothic Revival movement and associated liturgical changes. The period was marked by significant architectural restoration that impacted how services were conducted. The church underwent work by architects, including T. H. Wyatt in 1844, and further restoration in subsequent decades, which reshaped the interior to align with Victorian ideals.

Medieval box pews were replaced by open bench pews to accommodate a larger congregation and provide a clear view of the altar; the pulpit was moved to one side of the church. (This was a move away from the Georgian-era focus on the pulpit and a "preaching box")

The addition of new stained-glass windows (e.g., by William Wailes in 1853) and a new pulpit (1861) enhances the visual richness of the worship space, in keeping with Gothic Revival aesthetics.

The presence of a substantial pipe organ, originally from Llandaff Cathedral and moved to Usk in 1900, indicates a strong tradition of music and choral worship, a common feature in Victorian churches.

The medieval screen that separates the nave from the area used by the former nuns would have still been a prominent feature, influencing the flow and structure of services.

Style of worship was influenced by the influence the Oxford Movement and thus worship at St Mary's Usk in the Victorian era moved towards a more structured, aesthetically rich, and ceremonially elaborate form of Anglican service than in previous periods, heavily influenced by prevailing architectural and theological movements. (Wikipedia)



Many of the windows in the church were restored during the 19th century and early 20th century.

One window, interesting to note, is above the choir pews on the south wall. The stained-glass window dedicated by the friends and parishioners of Rev. Stephen Cattley Baker. Funds to install the window were collected through subscriptions from local people (recorded in *Usk Past and Present*, Clark 1896) who were keen to commemorate the service and dedication of Rev. Baker over his 30 years in the parish.

In June 1889 funds were raised by the parishioners and friends of the Reverend Stephen Cattley Baker who had faithfully served the parish for thirty years, to enable the crafting and installation of the window. The individual donations by the 141 subscribers ranged from 1 shilling to a very generous £10 donated

by George Whitlock Nicholl Esq.

Reverend Baker requested that the subject of the window would be a representation of Martha and Mary in attendance of Our Lord. The window was crafted by Messrs. Joseph Bell and Sons of College Green, Bristol

The brass plate underneath the window is inscribed:

'To the Glory of God

This window was placed in Usk Church, Christmas 1889 by the parishioners and friends of the Rev. Stephen Cattley Baker, B.A., R.D. as a token of esteem after a pastoral charge of thirty years.'



A Special Service took place in the priory Church of St Mary on Wednesday, December 18th 1889 to commemorate the magnificent stained-glass window which can be seen in the south side of the church between the pulpit and the chancel.

Rev. W. Jones (Curate), Rev. T Hall (Llandenny) and Rev. W.N.G. Eliot, Rural Dean (Panteg) took part in the service for the Dedication of the window.

The service commenced by the choir singing the hymn 'Pour out thy Spirit from on high', followed by the Lord's Prayer. The lesson, read by Mr Hall was from 1 Chronicles XXIX was followed by a prayer and the hymn 'Lord cause Thy face on us to shine'

Mr. James Henry Clark, a representative of the donors, stood before Reverend Eliot and said, *'We have caused a Window to be placed in God's House and our humble desires that it may be dedicated to the Honour of God by your prayers. According to the Word of God and the custom of this Church'*

Rev. Eliot: *'... when once you give it to God, it can never be recalled, but it is His forever'*

Mr. Clark, *'We humbly desire He will be graciously pleased to receive it, and that it may remain His own, for His service and His Honour forever.'*

5: Worshippers



St Mary's Church
Choir. Christmas
Day, 1903

Baptismal Names in Victorian Times

During the Victorian period, children were generally given names that were passed down through the family or that were influenced by Royalty or the Bible. Usk was no exception to this, where, of the 687 boys baptised during that era, the most popular names were:

William (81) John (45) Frederick (39) Thomas (37) George (34)

It was similar with the 584 girls who were baptised at St Mary's.

Ann/e (43) Elizabeth (40) Mary (39) Florence (26) Edith (20)

Few Welsh names appeared- Llewellyn, Brynley and Wyndham for boys and Essyllt, Gladys, Gwenllian and Gwyneth for girls.

Unusual names are not purely a modern idea. During this time boys names included Capel, Hezekiah, Ruston, Shadrach and Whitlock, whilst the more unusual names for girls were Jessaline, Kezia, Rizpah Maudlin, Sylvan and Temperance.

Victorian names- Boys (found in Baptismal register)

<i>Alexander- 7</i>	<i>Colin- 2</i>	<i>Frederick- 39</i>	<i>Leonard- 1</i>	<i>Stephen- 2</i>
<i>Allan- 2</i>	<i>Caleb- 1</i>	<i>George- 34</i>	<i>Llewellyn- 2</i>	<i>Stanley- 2</i>
<i>Austin- 1</i>	<i>Clyde- 1</i>	<i>Godfrey- 2</i>	<i>Morwent- 1</i>	<i>Spencer-1</i>
<i>Abraham- 1</i>	<i>Cecil- 3</i>	<i>Gerald- 1</i>	<i>Michael- 1</i>	<i>Thomas- 37</i>
<i>Augustus- 1</i>	<i>Clifford- 1</i>	<i>Henry- 25</i>	<i>Oliver- 2</i>	<i>Theophilus-1</i>
<i>Albert- 16</i>	<i>Cyril- 1</i>	<i>Harry- 2</i>	<i>Oscar- 2</i>	<i>Trevor- 2</i>
<i>Arthur- 28</i>	<i>Daniel- 2</i>	<i>Hopton- 1</i>	<i>Onslow- 1</i>	<i>Vivian- 1</i>
<i>Alfred- 18</i>	<i>David- 11</i>	<i>Herbert- 7</i>	<i>Patrick-1</i>	<i>Vernon- 1</i>
<i>Archibald- 3</i>	<i>Donald-2</i>	<i>Hezekiah-1</i>	<i>Phillip- 1</i>	<i>Victor- 3</i>
<i>Andrew- 1</i>	<i>Edgar- 8</i>	<i>Humphrey- 1</i>	<i>Percival- 7</i>	<i>Walter- 4</i>
<i>Adam- 1</i>	<i>Eli- 1</i>	<i>Horace- 3</i>	<i>Peter- 1</i>	<i>Wilbur-1</i>
<i>Bernard- 1</i>	<i>Edwin- 5</i>	<i>Hubert- 1</i>	<i>Roger- 1</i>	<i>William- 81</i>
<i>Bertram- 2</i>	<i>Edward- 17</i>	<i>Harold- 2</i>	<i>Robert- 8</i>	<i>Wyndham- 3</i>
<i>Benjamin- 3</i>	<i>Ernest- 15</i>	<i>Isaac-1</i>	<i>Reginald- 17</i>	<i>Whitlock- 1</i>
<i>Brynley- 1</i>	<i>Eric- 2</i>	<i>Ivor- 2</i>	<i>Richard- 6</i>	<i>Wilfred-1</i>

<i>Clement- 1</i>	<i>Egbert- 1</i>	<i>Joseph-6</i>	<i>Ralph- 2</i>	<i>Yorath-1</i>
<i>Clarence- 1</i>	<i>Emlyn- 1</i>	<i>James- 20</i>	<i>Rushton- 1</i>	
<i>Christopher- 1</i>	<i>Emmanuel- 1</i>	<i>John- 45</i>	<i>Sydney- 3</i>	
<i>Capel- 1</i>	<i>Francis- 10</i>	<i>Laurence- 2</i>	<i>Shadrach- 1</i>	
<i>Charles- 1</i>	<i>Frank- 20</i>	<i>Lewis- 5</i>	<i>Samuel- 2</i>	

Victorian names- Girls (found in Baptismal register)

<i>Alice- 15</i>	<i>Christina- 1</i>	<i>Grace- 3</i>	<i>Lilian- 10</i>	<i>Nina- 3</i>
<i>Agnes- 7</i>	<i>Dorothy- 9</i>	<i>Gertrude- 9</i>	<i>Laura- 5</i>	<i>Nellie-2</i>
<i>Arabella- 1</i>	<i>Daisy- 3</i>	<i>Gladys- 10</i>	<i>Leila-1</i>	<i>Nora- 2</i>
<i>Ada- 4</i>	<i>Doris- 3</i>	<i>Gwenllian- 1</i>	<i>Louisa- 5</i>	<i>Olive- 4</i>
<i>Augusta- 2</i>	<i>Edith- 20</i>	<i>Gwendoline- 5</i>	<i>Lydia-1</i>	<i>Olivia-1</i>
<i>Abigail- 1</i>	<i>Elizabeth- 40</i>	<i>Gwyneth- 2</i>	<i>Lucy- 6</i>	<i>Rose- 7</i>
<i>Adelaide- 1</i>	<i>Emma- 9</i>	<i>Harriet- 5</i>	<i>Lena- 1</i>	<i>Rachel- 2</i>
<i>Amelia- 1</i>	<i>Ellen- 16</i>	<i>Helen- 4</i>	<i>Lottie-1</i>	<i>Ruth- 3</i>
<i>Ann(e)- 43</i>	<i>Eliza- 15</i>	<i>Hannah- 3</i>	<i>Marianne- 3</i>	<i>Rizpah- 1</i>
<i>Amy- 1</i>	<i>Eleanor- 3</i>	<i>Hilda- 1</i>	<i>Maria- 4</i>	<i>Rita-1</i>
<i>Beatrice- 7</i>	<i>Emily- 25</i>	<i>Ida- 1</i>	<i>Matilda- 3</i>	<i>Rhoda- 1</i>
<i>Bertha- 3</i>	<i>Essyllt- 1</i>	<i>Isabella- 7</i>	<i>Martha-10</i>	<i>Susan- 2</i>
<i>Bessie- 1</i>	<i>Ethel- 15</i>	<i>Janet- 1</i>	<i>Mary- 39</i>	<i>Susannah- 1</i>
<i>Constance- 1</i>	<i>Eva- 3</i>	<i>Justina- 1</i>	<i>Margaret- 16</i>	<i>Sophia- 2</i>
<i>Catherine- 7</i>	<i>Eveline- 3</i>	<i>Jessie- 4</i>	<i>Minnie- 3</i>	<i>Sarah- 13</i>
<i>Clara- 8</i>	<i>Elsie- 1</i>	<i>Jane- 4</i>	<i>Maud- 10</i>	<i>Sylvan 1</i>
<i>Caroline- 6</i>	<i>Eunice- 1</i>	<i>Jessaline- 1</i>	<i>Mabel- 5</i>	<i>Temperence- 1</i>
<i>Charlotte- 3</i>	<i>Flora- 1</i>	<i>Kezia- 1</i>	<i>Margery- 3</i>	<i>Victoria-1</i>
<i>Celia- 5</i>	<i>Florence- 26</i>	<i>Kathleen- 3</i>	<i>Myra- 1</i>	<i>Violet- 7</i>
<i>Carrie-1</i>	<i>Frances- 11</i>	<i>Kate- 3</i>	<i>Miriam- 1</i>	<i>Winifred-3</i>
<i>Clementina- 1</i>	<i>Fanny- 4</i>	<i>Lena- 1</i>	<i>Madeline- 1</i>	

Worshippers at the Priory Church of St Mary during the Victorian period

Those worshipping at St Mary's were from different classes as can be seen from their addresses and occupations. There was a distinction maintained during this period in the ways that people related to each other.

The population of Usk has risen from 1470 in **1881** to 2629 in **2021** so is still classed as a small town.

Many of the occupations at this time were as one would expect in a place of this size until relatively recently, such as tailor, grocer, draper; and those still in Usk today - butcher, plumber, hairdresser, baker, ironmonger and prison officer.

There is a list of older trades - weaver, cordwainer, turnkey, post chaise driver, hoop maker and clicker (a person working with leather). Many basket makers lived at Llanbadoc, but three of them married at St Mary's. Altogether we found 43 different occupations for the men of Usk and just 11 for the women. There were also a few 'gentlemen' and one attorney.

Some of the names were familiar, their descendants holding similar occupations during living memory.

Occupations of those worshipping at St Mary's:

Male Occupations:

Accountant	Confectioner	Maltster	Sawyer
Architect	Cordwainer	Mason	Schoolmaster
Auctioneer	Clerk	Mole catcher	Solicitor
Bailiff	Clicker	Outfitter	Surveyor
Baker	Druggist	Painter	Timber merchant
Blacksmith	Gardener	Post chaise driver	Time keeper
Brickmaker	Groom	Postman	Upholsterer
Butcher	Hairdresser	Prison officer	Waggoner
Cellarman	Hoop maker	Railway guard	Wheelwright
Coachman	Labourer	Railway porter	Vicar
Coal merchant	Mail driver	Reporter	

Female Occupations:

Charwoman	Housekeeper	Milliner	Shopkeeper
Dressmaker	Innkeeper	Publican	Staymaker
Female warder	Landlady	Servant	

Population figures: 1881 from Warne's Gazetteer published in 1890 2021 from Census returns

Occupations from St Mary's church registers



6: James Henry Clark

One of the most interesting worshippers and also a church warden at St Mary's during this period was James Henry Clark. He was born, son of a printer, in 1818 in Gloucester. Early in his life, the family moved to Chepstow. It was from here that, shortly before his 16th birthday, he set out on foot with his brother George aged 24. They walked through Crick and over Wentwood until arriving at Usk. Here they jointly set up a printing and stationery business. A year later George was taken ill and returned to his parents in Chepstow where he died. James continued with the business alone, first at a small cottage near the castle ruins, then at Buxton House (Old Market Street).

Some time later, in 1851, he moved to Woodbank House in Bridge Street (later the NatWest Bank and more recently a bistro). The business was very successful and,

although James was too young to vote, he was given the printing orders from both main political parties.

In 1837 he was elected to a committee to arrange the town's celebrations for the coronation of Queen Victoria. The following year he married Sophia Howell at St Woolos Church, Newport.

In 1839 during the Chartist uprising, James was one of the officers overseeing 180 men sworn in as special constables ready to resist the Chartists coming from Newport to release the prisoners held at Usk. However, the attempt was abandoned, so no resistance was required.

James became friendly with Edward John Trelawney, who lived at Cefn Ila where he planted many exotic trees. James became very interested in botany, studying it at this time, travelling and collecting many specimens to include in his herbarium. He was given an assortment of shrubs by Trelawney to plant along the Conigar to celebrate the marriage of Victoria, the Princess Royal, to Prince Frederick of Prussia.

James produced the first issue of the Usk Observer in 1855. He printed local news on sheets which arrived from London with general news already printed. The paper's name was changed to the County Observer and continued until 1907.

Usk's ancient charter was relinquished in 1886 after 488 years. James was the last Portreeve, a post he had held 9 times.

He also published many books on the South East Wales area, also on flora and one on King Arthur.

He was the first person in Usk to receive news of Queen Victoria's death in January 1901 and he immediately printed a black bordered poster giving the news, which he hung in his shop window. His wife, Sofia, died in May that year aged 91.

On New Year's Day 1908, seventy-four years to the day he had arrived in Usk, he unveiled an ornamental lamp frame in New Market Street to the memory of the three Usk men who fell in the Boer War.

On his 95th birthday he fell in his bathroom, breaking a pane of glass and cutting his back seriously. The wounds healed, but inflammation of the brain supervened and he

died on 16th February. He was given a memorable funeral, with the Territorial band playing the Death March as the cortege proceeded through the square to the church, where he is buried. He was one year older than Queen Victoria and outlived her by 12 years. He was a remarkable and versatile man - a printer, stationer, publisher, newspaper founder, proprietor and editor, local historian, author, botanist, leader in local government, first chairman of the Usk Board of Health, chairman of the Usk Local Government Board, churchwarden, a pioneer of Usk Farmers' Club and its secretary for 50 years, a pioneer of the GWR line from Little Mill to Usk (Mrs Clark cut the first sod at Rhadyr Farm), one of the original directors of the Usk Gas Company, an initiator of the Usk cattle market, organiser of the Usk volunteer rifles, founder and officer commanding a Volunteer Cadet Corps. There was no aspect of life in Usk in which he did not take a leading part.

Taken from Monmouthshire Medley Volume 2- James Henry Clark of Usk and his Times by J H Salter

7: Thomas Henry Wyatt and Matthew Digby Wyatt

Thomas Henry Wyatt (9 May 1807 – 5 August 1880)

Matthew Digby Wyatt (28 July 1820-21 May 1877)

Two brothers who were both architects, with strong links to Monmouthshire from an early age, both men had clear connections to Usk (including St Mary's Church) and have an interesting story to tell.

Although they grew up in Wiltshire, their uncle- Arthur Wyatt (1755-1833) was the agent of the Duke of Beaufort. Arthur managed the Duke's estate, which included the original seat of the Beauforts- Raglan Castle. He lived in Troy House, just outside Monmouth and Thomas Henry and Matthew Digby would come to stay there during the summers. It is suggested that 'the romantic old house stimulated their love of architecture'. Their family tree points to a number of skilled architects, sculptors, painters and carvers which must have influenced the brothers' interests.



Thomas Henry Wyatt by George Landseer

Thomas Henry was thirteen years older than his brother Matthew Digby and began his career as an architect first. His early training was in the office of Philip Hardwick where he worked until 1832, and was involved in work on Goldsmiths Hall, Euston station and the warehouses at St Katharine Docks.

He began practice on his own account in 1832. Much of his work centred on the design and construction of churches, mostly in Wiltshire. Thomas Henry was appointed as consulting or honorary architect to a number of bodies, including the Institution of Civil Engineers and the Diocese of Salisbury.



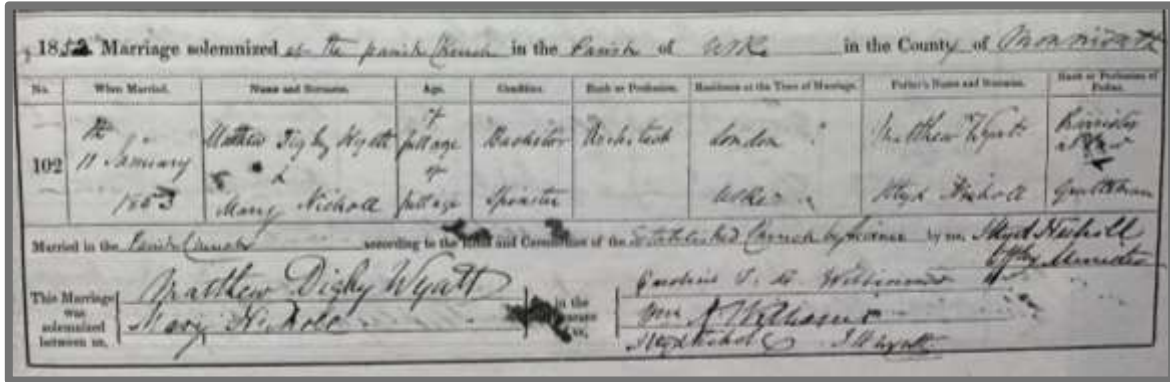
Matthew Digby Wyatt

Matthew Digby joined his brother's practice to train as an architect, studying also at the Royal Academy Schools and completing his training by touring the world, visiting the most widely admired buildings of the time.

The brothers took different paths in their lives and careers. Thomas Henry was married, in Usk, to his cousin (Arthur's daughter) Arabella. He was particularly active in Monmouthshire. Significantly for Usk he was the architect responsible for building the Usk Prison (1844) and later, the Sessions House (1877). He had powerful connections and was the architect responsible for building Malpas Court in Newport for the

infamous Thomas Prothero (whose father and other family members are buried in St Mary's Church, Usk). Critics of his work remark on his focus being on 'quantity not quality' and that some of his projects appeared 'old fashioned' for their time. Thomas Henry became president of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1870 and was awarded a gold medal for his achievements in 1873.

Matthew Digby also married in Usk, in St. Mary's Church on 11th January 1853 to Mary Nicholl.



Taken from St Mary's Church Register of Marriages

Mary came from a prominent local family, some of whom are buried in St. Mary's churchyard. Matthew Digby and his wife had friends who are well-known including the artist and poet Edward Lear.

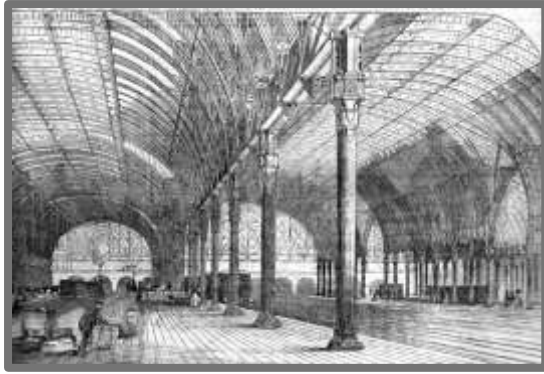
Matthew Digby focused on the quality of his designs, always looking for that 'special something'. Locally, he designed Christchurch in Coed-y-Paen in the 1850s and in the 1860s worked on the redevelopment of Cefn Tilla, Llandenny. However, his talents took him much further afield.

Architecture was only part of his work. He began to design in a variety of media. He wrote articles and shared his knowledge. He focused on preservation of cultural heritage. He authored numerous papers and books on a variety of topics relating to architecture and the arts and he contributed to the debates and developments of the time; a time of fast-moving changes in technology and thinking.

He visited France to report on the French Exposition in 1849 and subsequently was appointed as the 'Special Commissioner and Secretary to the Royal Commission' which organised the setting up of the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. He took the sketches of the Crystal Palace into reality and, as Secretary, played a crucial part in the project management of the Great Exhibition in 1851. His efforts were recognised by Prince Albert who gave him a gold medal and a monetary reward for directing the project.



Other notable projects for Matthew Digby include designing the intricate metal work for the Great Western Railway Terminus at Paddington, collaborating with Isambard



Kingdom Brunel and Owen Jones (1850-55). Also, working with George Gilbert Scott on the Foreign Office in Whitehall (1868), designing the lavish interior of the building.

The Great Western Railway Terminus, at Paddington. London. Designed by I. K. Brunel and M. D. Wyatt. Source: The Illustrated London News (8 July 1854): 14.

Colonial Office, Whitehall (Now the Foreign and Commonwealth Office). Sir George Gilbert Scott and Sir Matthew Digby Wyatt. 1861-68.



In 1855 Matthew Digby was appointed as the Surveyor of the East India Company.

He continued to be involved in projects arising from the Great Exhibition, including the relocation of the Crystal Palace to Sydenham. He acted as the art referee for the museum, in South Kensington, that would develop into the Victoria and Albert Museum and contributed to and advised on the collections there.

Matthew Digby was knighted in 1869 by Queen Victoria and was appointed the first Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge. He received many honours and offices.

Matthew Digby designed the tomb for members of the Nicholls family (his wife's family) located in St Mary's, Usk churchyard. The design includes intricate metal work, similar to that used in other projects of his, including Paddington Station.

When Matthew Digby died on 21st May 1877, he too was buried in a grave in St Mary's churchyard- next to the tomb for his wife's family. His tomb was designed by his brother, Thomas Henry.

Following his death in the practice where he lived and worked- Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury, London- Thomas Henry was buried in St Lawrence's Church, Weston Patrick, Hampshire.

Usk Prison

Usk Prison was built across an old, lost street of the town- Pook Lane. There had been 19 houses here which had all been abandoned because of flooding, possibly up to 200 years earlier. The name 'Pook Lane' comes from the Welsh **pwca** meaning 'a ghost', a reference to a memory of the people of the long-vanished houses.

The prison was designed by the architect Thomas Henry Wyatt and was opened in 1844 as a House of Correction, housing male (150) and female prisoners (50). The original building was extended in 1870 and at this time became the Monmouthshire County Gaol, previously located in Monmouth.

The prison design was based on Pentonville Prison and was a popular design for Victorian prisons. A central observation building with three corridors radiating from it allowed prison officers to view the blocks at all times and walk along the corridors to view inside prison cells.

The building has a high buttressed sandstone wall, with chunky polygonal towers either side of the entrance, which has a boarded-up door within its arch. Sandstone is the main building material and is lightened by paler ashlar dressings, the structure looks very forbidding. The musket-slits on the old gatehouse were not intended for decoration, but to allow the building to be defended against insurrection. There was concern at the time following the recent Chartist uprisings.

The facility included exercise yards and work sheds. Prisoners were engaged in trades such as rug and mat making, shoe making and tailoring.

The prison was lit with gas light and prisoners benefitted from gas lights in their cells. A chaplain was linked to the prison and performed services every morning and then visited prisoners in their cells. A surgeon was also attached to the prison.

A generous house was built next to the prison to accommodate the Governor and matron.

When the Sessions House, next door, opened in 1877- a tunnel linked the docks in the courtroom to the prison. This tunnel still exists but is blocked up.

As there were no permanent gallows built in the prison, equipment would arrive in Usk by rail and then be assembled for use. Hangmen complained that the execution pit below the gallows would fill with water and so the gallows was moved to the first floor-opposite the condemned cell. This meant that prisoners in the cell could hear the gallows, to be used for their execution, being assembled.

When the prison was opened, that section of Maryport Street was renamed Newgate Street, possibly a reference to Newgate Prison or possibly because it marked the site of the 'new gates' of the toll house which marked the entrance to Usk at that part of town, erected under the Usk Turnpikes Trusts which commenced operation in 1766.

The prison continued as the County Gaol until it closed in 1922. It was reopened in 1939 as a borstal, became a Detention Centre in 1964. It became a Youth Custody Centre in



An early surviving photo of the visiting justices at Usk goal — probably dating from the 1880s.

Usk Recaptured 100 Years in Pictures, David R Lewis

1983 and was a Young Offenders Institute from 1988-1990. The prison became an Adult Category C prison for Vulnerable Prisoners in 1990 and continues in this role today.



RCABritainfromabove.org.uk

Usk Sessions House

The Sessions House was designed by the architect Thomas Henry Wyatt and officially opened in 1877. It was built as a Court House to accommodate the Quarter Sessions for Monmouthshire, which up until 1877, had been held in the Town Hall in Old Market Street. Quarter sessions were held in each county to try criminal cases too serious for magistrates' courts but not serious enough for the assizes.



Usk Town Council- website

The design of the building was Italianate in style; it was built using mauve sandstone and with dressings of Bath stone. The building was decorative with pillars, arches and architraves, round-headed windows and a *loggia* (an open, covered gallery) with balustrades above.

There were two court rooms, and an underground passage was built under the dock leading through to Usk Prison- next door.

In 1944 a fire, caused by faulty heating, badly damaged Court Number 1. Although it was planned that the court would be rebuilt, other rebuilding after World War II took priority and the court was demolished in 1970. Court Number 2 survived and continued to be used by the quarter sessions until they moved to Newport in 1950, as one court room had become insufficient to deal with the number of cases to be heard.



“The design of the courtroom is supposedly modelled on the Old Bailey. The benches are all marked with the professions of those who sat in them. On the jury benches reference is made only to Jurymen as women, at that time, were barred from jury service. The reporters’ benches are inscribed with graffiti presumably done during times of boredom. Members of the public were not allowed into the court but sat in the gallery which has a separate entrance from outside.”

Usk Town Council- website



“Portraits of quarter sessions judges adorn the walls, which are painted in their original red. The interior photo shows the judge’s seat on the right, facing the witness box and lawyers’ bench, with the jury box facing the open space in between.”

History Points

The building was used as a magistrate’s court until June 1995. After this the building remained empty and began to deteriorate until it was purchased by Usk Town Council in 1999 (to mark the millennium). Extensive refurbishment works were undertaken at a cost of £200,000 and the building was re-opened in 2011. It is now used for meetings of Usk Town Council, as space for several local businesses and as a community facility.



Usk Civic Society

8: Health and Wellbeing

The Victorian period was an era of change in many ways, often fast-paced compared with other times in history. There were developments in medicine, in society, in legislation, and in technology, all of which impacted the lives of people at the time. Victorian influences shaped future generations and are still evident in our lives today. Usk was a rural area, and as such, some changes took time to reach here — but they got here in the end and improved the lives of many.

Some of the aspects of life at the time, and their effect on the health and wellbeing of the residents of Usk, are explored below.

Caring for people in the community

In 1825 the Duke of Beaufort donated land near St Mary's Church, for the purpose of the erection of new almshouses for the poor of Usk. Also known as the poor house, with rooms as small as 6ft x 8ft. The old almshouses on Bridge Street were in a ruinous state and were sold for £235, with the proceeds from the sale used to help fund the new build. (Clark, 1896)

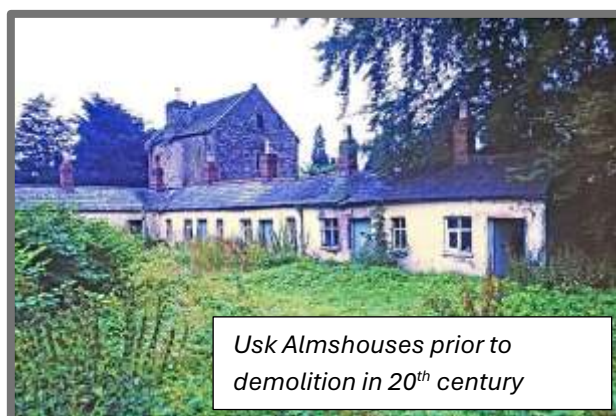
To qualify for an alms-house, you needed to be of good character and have resided in Usk (or approved locality) for not less than three years. Strict rules were in place including no alms person shall be absent for a period exceeding 24 hours without written consent. (Clark, 1896)

One of the almswomen was appointed a matron for an additional stipend of £5 a year and a medical attendant would be employed by the charity to cover any treatment deemed necessary. (Clark, 1896)

It fell upon wealthier people within the town to offer support to those less fortunate.

When Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, 150 of the poor townspeople enjoyed a meal in the market under the old town hall (now the British Legion). (2025, 2025)

This was also exemplified by records showing that on Christmas Day 1859 – Michael Parker Smith Esq of Cefn Ila, Usk distributed 4-6lb of beef, a plum pudding and a gallon of beer to all his workmen. (Clark, 2018)



In 1878 a Mrs Jane McGowan (nee Pritchard)- former proprietress of The Three Salmons bequeathed £3000 to sustain 12 poor respectable aged females of Usk. (Clark, 1896)

A similar bequest was also made to the poor of Usk from Miss Hannah Barnard Davies. In 1885 concerns were recorded about the poor state of the sanitation at the almshouses, despite the Public Health Act of 1875. Sanitation in Usk had improved by this time and no-one wanted to go back to times where raw sewage ran down the surface of Maryport Street. (Clark, 1896)

Under the **Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834**, The Poor Law Commission was given the power to unite parishes in England and Wales into Poor Law Unions. Each Union was to be administered by a local Board of Guardians. According to the act, relief was only to be given to able-bodied paupers through the workhouse. (Higginbotham, 2025) The way in which **relief** was managed changed quite dramatically. Prior to 1834 the eight/nine thousand parishes or so across England and Wales were responsible for raising money and then spending that money on the management of their local poor. From 1834 onwards that changed. Under the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, a new administrative body came into being based at Somerset House in London. This was the first time there was any form of administrative oversight in the care of the poor. (Carter, 2026)

Usk fell under the **Pontypool Poor Law Union** the administrative area created to manage poverty and relief in Monmouthshire, South Wales.

The **Irish potato famine** (1845-1852) forced almost 30,000 Irish people to flee to Wales by 1861, making them the largest immigrant group at the time. They were often in a destitute state and settled predominantly in the industrial heartlands and port towns of South Wales, which would have included Usk. Most Irish immigrants were Roman Catholic. (gwegogledd.cymru, 2025)

Medical Care and Home Remedies

Advances in medicine during the Victorian period made significant changes to the survival of people. Although death rates remained high, improvements were seen as a result of scientifically based medicines and vaccination programmes began. Home remedies and folklore still played an important part in the homes of people of the time, Smallpox, a disease which killed many up until the mid-19th century, was diminishing as a result of a vaccination programme started in the 1840's. Usk had a Public Vaccinator living in New Market Street (Henry Greatwood). In 1851 Census he was a 46-year-old widower living with his two sons and a servant.

The Clerk to the Guardians of the Pontypool Union issued a poster advising parents that not vaccinating their child between the second and third month of their birth, was putting their child, and their neighbours and children at risk. (Lewis, 1982)



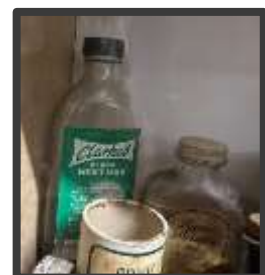
In 1872 it was stated at a meeting requesting that Usk should have a local health board due to concerns around continuing defective drainage, smallpox and scarlet fever were still prevalent in the town which they believed was due to poor sanitation.

It was proposed that a sewage system be constructed in Porthycarne Street for the residents of Usk so that cesspools were no longer required. Concerns were raised about overflow (after heavy rain) was being discharged into the River Usk. As a result of the resident's concern, the River's Pollution Act was passed, and overflow pipes had to be removed. (Clark, 1896)

In 1835 there were two doctors listed in Usk: John Davies and Robert Woollett. (Barrow, 2004) By 1851, the census records four doctors in Usk, all males. (Lewis, 1982) Henry W Ross Greatwood was a surgeon who lived in Usk, he died in 1885.

Bridge Street, Usk was the centre of **pharmacy trade** with the following traders listed. (Barrow, 2004).

- 1836 – Samuel & Wyndham Jones – druggists and grocers.
- 1834-1851 – John Edwards – Pharmacy next to Cross Keys on Bridge Street.
- 1851 John & Thomas Wigginton – druggists, grocers, wine & spirit merchants.
- 1884 – Thomas Edwards – chemist & druggist – advertised in the Medical Hall in Bridge Street.
- 1891- Mrs Mary Edwards



Artefacts displayed in Usk Rural Life Museum

38 13/04/26

Priory Church of St Mary, Usk
History Day 9th May 2026

Taylor's Lung Linctus – *The Great Cure for coughs, colds, asthma, bronchitis, influenza and all afflictions of the chest, throat and lungs. Prepared by Chemist Fred Taylor, 32 Splott Road, Cardiff.*

Stemco Liquid Paraffin - *Stemco (Standard Esso Marketing Company) distributed and marketed health and home products. Medicinal Liquid Paraffin was primarily used for constipation as it is a lubricant. (Direct S. , 2026)*

Clarke's Blood Mixture: *It was claimed to be a certain cure for numerous and varied complaints, including sores, glandular swelling, skin complaints, scrofula, scurvy, cancerous ulcers, bad legs, rheumatism, gout, sore eyes, dropsy, pimples, blackheads and piles.*

It was advertised as 'The Finest Blood Purifier that Science and Medical Skill have brought to Light'. However, like the multitude of other 'cure-alls' on the market at the time, it was of questionable medical benefit to the countless thousands of people who bought it.

The British Medical Association analysed Clarke's product in 1909 and revealed that the contents were mainly water, a little sugar, a minuscule amount of alcohol and traces of chloroform and ammonia. It was also calculated that the cost of the ingredients of a standard bottle was around one old penny, but the product was being sold for almost thirty times that amount. (Clarke's Blood Mixture, 2026)

There was still some folklore when it came to medicine and cures. For example, a bite from a rabid dog apparently could be cured by '9 dips in the River Severn!' (Lewis, 1982)

By 1849 there were twice yearly visits by a dentist to The Three Salmons for those who could afford it and an advert in Monmouthshire Merlin (17th Feb 1849 edition) shows the dentist in Usk to be a Mr Mosely of Oxford Street London. (Lewis, 1982)

The Illustrated Usk Observer and Ragland Herald, 30th November 1861, posted an advert for **The Usk Homeopathic Dispensary** where advice and medicine is administered to the poor, so healthcare was available to all in the community. Turpentine was thought to be beneficial for many ailments including rheumatism and sore throats. (Burge, Accessed 2025)

Employment and Leisure time

The 1851 census tells us that most males in Usk were labourers and females were servants/housemaids. (Lewis, 1982) This gives an indication of the socio-economic status of the residents of the town. The town had two distinct groups- those with wealth and those who were significantly impoverished.

Little was known of the risks to health posed by certain environmental factors, including those linked to employment.

Usk is well known for its Japanware factory, in New Market Street (where the Abbeyfield home stands today). Up to 20 workers were employed there. Ironmonger Evan Jones bought it in 1826 and moved the factory to his premises (now Bunning's yard) where it operated until its closure around 1860. The process of making Japanware required use of strong chemicals and heat. The health risks of using these chemicals were unknown at the time and workers, who were not protected, were impacted by their use. Risks associated with use of heat during production also impacted workers' health and wellbeing. (History Points)

Health Problems

Sickness

- Diseases that could be caught from using contaminated water and by poor sanitation included scarlet fever, tuberculosis, typhus and typhoid. Respiratory diseases like Farmers' Lung were common and were caused by breathing in spores in wet or rotting hay, straw or grain in barns and other closed storage spaces. Farmer's Lung was not recognized as a specific disease until the 1950s and in the 19th century would have been diagnosed as dust-induced bronchitis, catarrh or pneumonia. It is a serious disease that can be managed but not cured and mortality can be up to 20% of cases.
- Zoönotic diseases – those spread by, and caught from, animals, like foot-and-mouth, were prevalent then as now.
- Nutritional deficiencies were also seen, though not so much amongst farm workers as with industrial workers, since farm workers could grow their own vegetables and keep animals for food.

Injuries and Accidents

- Animals could cause injuries in various ways. They could stampede and crush workers underfoot; they could bite or attack adults and children; they could accidentally stand on toes and break them; horses being ridden could panic and throw the rider.
- Horse-drawn wagons and carts with their heavy iron-shod wheels could cause serious injuries to people if the driver lost control of them.
- Farm machinery and tools were and are a potential danger to users, particularly when they were first introduced in the early 19th century. Belt-driven machines always had to be treated with respect; otherwise, severe injuries and/or maiming

could be caused when body parts and limbs were caught up in failing or flailing belts.

- Falls from high on farm buildings could cause serious injuries and/or death. The river and its many tributary streams and brooks offered hazards, more so in winter when fast-flowing water deepened water courses, carried flotsam like fallen trees and made fords dangerous. Drownings could easily happen along the course of the river.,
- Long hours of work, often in darkness, brought fatigue which in turn caused accidents through carelessness.
- Children at work on farms were at greater risk than adults from the above dangers, but neither age group was protected by any Health and Safety regulations.
- Medical care was scanty or entirely absent when disease or accidents struck.
- Examples of the above misfortunes are seen in 1868 issues of the County Observer And Monmouth Central Advertiser, which on September 19th recorded that Mr Richard Lucas, tiler and plasterer of Usk was stripping a building at Cwm Farm, Llangibby when a portion of the eaves gave way and he fell to the ground 18-20 feet below, landing on his shoulder on rough stones. This family suffered two more blows that year, as on April 11th the newspaper reported that a son, Leslie Lucas, whilst fishing with a friend, nearly had his eye pulled out by a large fish-hook when his companion was throwing a line into the water. On July 11th, also reported by the paper, another son, five-year-old Arthur, was run over by a pony and trap when crossing the road near Usk Bridge and had his thigh fractured when the wheel of the trap went over him, leaving him with a permanent limp.

Markets

Usk, historically a market town, had several markets and fairs which were of benefit to the community. The 1848 Directory records weekly Friday markets; a cattle-market on the first Monday in each month; and fairs which took place on April 20th (a large fair for wool), June 20th, October 29th, and the Monday before Christmas-day. (Freeman, 2026)



Twyn Square;
People's Collection Wales



Bridge Street during Relief of
Mafeking Celebrations, May
1900;



*Usk Fair 1902;
People's Collection Wales*

Fishing on the River Usk was significant in the lives of local people. Up to the year 1854



*Usk Recaptured 100 Years in
Pictures, David R Lewis*

many inhabitants of Usk gained their livelihood a great portion of the year by netting and angling in our river. During the season, ten or a dozen fishermen were to be seen carrying their coracles on their backs. The shape of the coracle resembled a section of walnut shell. You could often see them – when not in use – hanging at the doors of many a cottage. (Clark, 2018)

The salmon of Usk were prized. A fish called a sewen (type of trout) was also prevalent. Usk salmon were documented and celebrated as early as 1587 by poets particularly. The fishing season was from the 1st of March

to the 14th of October and Sunday Fishing was prohibited. In 1855 tickets started to be issued for rights to fish on the river Usk. However, by 1873, it had become apparent that many outside Usk took up these limited tickets and the residents were not able to enjoy what was on their doorstep. The Duke of Beaufort stepped in and for a short time, this alleviated the grievance. However, problems continued. (Clark, 1896)

Mechanisation was moving apace in farming and here too James Henry Clark, a prominent local figure, recognised the advantages of a farmers' club. With typical boldness he applied his skills as secretary of the Usk Farmers' Club formed in 1844, a post he was to hold for 50 years. He organised ploughing matches and encouraged

agricultural shows with Lord Raglan later offering land for a permanent showground. (Davis, 2026)

In 1860 The **Usk Rifle Volunteer Corps** were formed. However, there was just one slight disadvantage: recruits had to pay for their own uniforms and rifles! (Clark, 1896) Many of the famous creative artists of the time were drawn to Usk with Edward Trelawny living in the area for around 20 years. Recognition for this can be seen around the town in the form of 'Blue Plaques' (Usk Civic Society). The Royal Hotel, Cefn Illa and Tywn Bell were all significant locations. Trelawny was good friends with the poet Shelley who upset many locals at the time with this nude bathing in the Usk! (Society, 2026)

James Henry Clark was a printer, bookseller & stationer based in Woodbank House on Bridge Street. Local people could be informed of news, events and public information through his publications.

He published the *Usk Gleaner and Monmouthshire Record* (1875–1878) from the "County Observer" office in Usk and printed local books such as his *History of Monmouthshire* (1869). His business was therefore a focal point for buying and obtaining printed material in Usk. (Lockie, 2026)

Circulating (lending) libraries became a major route for fiction and middle-class readers. Nationally big firms such as Mudie and WH Smith dominated, but smaller local shops sometimes supplied or ran lending services too. This made novels affordable to the general population. (Bassett, 2026)

The railway and expansion of postal services in the 19th century widened distribution of book parcels to country stations and bookstalls. Printers/publishers in towns could sell their local books around the county and beyond, again allowing more access to printed materials. (Barrett, 2026)

Usk had long been a town visited as part of tours and pilgrimages. Tourism increased during the Victorian era with people visiting to enjoy the views, the location, hostelryes and hotels and all that the town had to offer.

Readership

People in Victorian society were avid readers, particularly of novels. Published books were hardback and expensive so only available to those who could afford them. Literacy improved after the introduction of compulsory education in 1880. By 1900 a much larger proportion of the population were literate. Cheaper printing methods followed and the 'Penny Library' began to offer reprint editions of popular novels at a price of 1 penny, making books accessible to a wider audience.

Infrastructure/Sanitation

1834 Gas lights in streets replaced old oil lamps, improving safety for local residents. (Clark, 1896). When the gaol was opened in 1844, gas lighting was installed in each cell.

1856 it was documented that the streets in Usk had been much improved from a sanitation perspective (the laying down of culverts for example) but Sanitary Inspectors still found 'foul open ditches' of concern in Church Street. (Lewis, 1982).

Improvements continued to the drainage system with significant works taking place in the 1870s. Pavements and roads were improved, cobbled pavements changed for tarmacadam and railings erected around properties and gardens.

Transport

Developments in transport links supported the development of the town, for trade as well as personal travel. 1854 saw the cutting of the first sod of the railway coming to Usk (proposed to connect Coleford, Monmouth, Raglan, Usk with a junction with Hereford, Abergavenny, Pontypool and Newport.). Great celebrations in the town on this day included coracle racing on the Usk river, donkey and mule races (referred to as a Jerusalem Pony Race), climbing a slippery pole and chasing a pig with a greased tail. (Clark, 1896)

James Henry Clark was a key motivator in establishing the GWR link from Little Mill to Usk in 1854 which continued to serve passengers until it closed in May 1955. (Davis, 2026)



People's Collection Wales



*Usk Railway Station early 1900s;
People's Collection Wales*



Religion

The Catholic chapel, Porth-y-Carne street, dedicated to St. Francis Xavier, was opened in 1847. It is in the Gothic style and was erected from designs furnished by the late Mr. Hansom. At the back of the chapel is a small burial-ground. The chapel provided 120 sittings for Catholic worshippers in the town.

St Francis Xavier Church was opened in Usk by clergy closely connected to **Prior Park** and the **Bristol-Bath Catholic circle**. Such ceremonies commonly attracted high-

profile Catholic lay people, benefactors and friends of the clergy and continental aristocrats in exile.

Present at this opening was the émigré Prince Czartoryski, a Polish prince from the Czartoryski family who were prominent Catholic patriots in exile (Wales, 2025). Prince Czartoryski was exiled from Poland due to the tri-partition of his homeland by Prussia, Austria and Russia. The exiled Catholic Prince would have mixed with prominent local Catholics (many of which were also clergy or parliamentarians who supported his call for an independent Kingdom of Poland). Thus, his presence at Usk is best understood as part of the social life of elite 19th-century English Catholicism, showing solidarity with Catholic revival in Britain and the Polish émigré effort to maintain visibility among Western Catholic elites.

The Baptist chapel, Old Market street, having sittings for 300 persons, was erected in 1842. The Congregational chapel, Twyn Square was erected in 1862, at a cost of £1,200. It is a stone building, also in the Gothic style, with a turret for one bell and had sittings for 400 persons. The Wesleyan chapel, Maryport street, was erected in the year 1817 and in use for worship during the Victorian period with sittings for 350 persons.

During this time, churches played a significant role in the physical wellbeing of their parishioners as well as their spiritual wellbeing. With limited access to public information, ministers would play an important part by sharing guidance and information to educate and support the congregation. Messages about temperance, health concerns (eg vaccinations) and healthy living would be shared during services to better the lives of those who attended.



Children from the of the Congregational Church before their Sunday School outing, 1910

Law and order

The Chartist movement was the first mass movement driven by the working classes. It grew following the failure of the 1832 Reform Act to extend the vote beyond those owning property.

In 1838 a People's Charter was drawn up for the London Working Men's Association (LWMA) by William Lovett and Francis Place, two self-educated radicals, in consultation with other members of LWMA. The Charter had six demands:

- All men to have the vote (universal manhood suffrage)
- Voting should take place by secret ballot
- Parliamentary elections every year, not once every five years
- Constituencies should be of equal size
- Members of Parliament should be paid
- The property qualification for becoming a Member of Parliament should be abolished (Parliament, 2026)

The Chartist riots, famously, took place in Newport in 1839, with men travelling to Newport from the South Wales Valleys. In 1840 following the riots in Newport, John Frost and other alleged ringleaders were tried in Monmouth.

Less important participants went on trial in the upper rooms of **Usk Town Hall** (now the Royal British Legion Club). (Society, 2026)

In 1842 Usk Gaol was opened and housed both male and female prisoners. Although home to hardened villains and career criminals many of Usk's inmates were simply tragic figures who were down on their luck and struggling to survive in a world and time where being poor was seen as a punishable offence. (Butters, 2026)

From 1857 the ground floor of the old town hall was the first headquarters of **Monmouthshire Constabulary**. There were police cells in the building. The northern section was home to the town's fire station. (Points, 2026)

The building was used as the court room for Quarter Sessions and Assizes until the opening of the new Court House (Sessions House).

The Court House was completed and opened on the 16th of October 1877, at a cost exceeding £15,000. The Quarter Sessions were held, and county business was transacted. (Lockie, 2026)

An underground passageway led directly from the courtrooms to the prison next door.



*Usk Police Station, early
1900s*

People's Collection Wales

Statistics

Usk Death Statistics were covered by analyses relating to the Pontypool Unions (Death tables were not issued for areas smaller than the Poor Law Unions) (Lewis, 1982)

1850 Tables show:

1: 23% of those dying - under 1 year old (National rate 24%)

2: 43% of those dying - under 5 years old. (National rate 41%)

3: Under 5's particularly susceptible to Scarlatina, Whooping Cough, Measles, Typhus and Cholera/Dysentery. (Lewis, 1982)

1886 death rate in Usk was 14 per 1000 population. (Clark, 1896)

The population of the parish of Usk in **1891** was 1,417. (Lockie, 2026)

9: Victorian Education in Usk

There has been much research completed over the years to celebrate the work of Roger Edwards in Usk and the work completed through a number of charities set up by deed following his death in 1624. This research looks at the education of the wider Usk population, acknowledging that the funds available through the charity supported not just the grammar school but the writing school and girls elementary schools established in Usk during the Victorian period.

Much of this research has been focused on the published works of J.H. Clark a local businessman during this time who captured the work and decisions impacting the town and people living locally. His book 'Usk, Past and Present' is still published and available.

(CLARK, 1891)

Background (Lewis, 1982)

On census day 1851, it was noted that Usk had a Grammar school and Writing school (both supported by the Roger Edwards charity) together with a Catholic School, two private boarding schools and two private day schools.

In the 1850's there were around 200 children attending one of the schools in Usk.

Grammar School (CLARK, 1891)(and others as noted)

The principal charity set up by deed following the death of Roger Edwards included a free school, which he directed to be established. Under the trust, the free school was maintained, to ensure there was a learned master, and for the education and teaching of children. The extent of the learning of the master, and the character of the teaching to be given in the school, were indicated by a provision for the payment by the trustees of £5 yearly, to be paid to "one poor scholar who should be ready to depart from the said free school, and fit to go to study at the University of Oxford, to help him for his admittance and charges thither."



Details of Roger Edwards and the work of the trust today can be found on their website. (Roger Edwards Educational Trust, 2024)

Teaching was originally carried on in Usk church; the schoolmaster lived at in Maryport Street. (Mein, n.d.)

This research is intended to summarise the period during the Victorian era starting in 1826, when the Rev. Thomas Williams was appointed master of the grammar school, an appointment he held for about fourteen years and the publisher J.H. Clark noted that the school was flourishing, and there were twenty boarders.

In 1835, the trustees became aware that the annual expenditure considerably exceeded the annual income, they met to examine the different items of annual expenditure, and resolved to reduce the costs including the salary of the Master.

In 1836 the school was moved to Maryport Street and between 1843 and 1862 was enlarged and rebuilt, with the main body of the building on two storeys operating as the school and the smaller building to the north serving as a self-contained master's house. It is now a Grade 2 listed building. (Mein, n.d.)

1843, a new schoolhouse was ordered to be erected according to a plan and estimate by Mr Daniel at a cost of £477. With the view of extending it to benefit of the Free School by affording elementary instruction as detailed by the National School plan. In addition, the school would offer tuition to all male children within the parish from the age of five.

In 1843, following the failed attempt to unite the grammar school with the writing school, the Rev. J.P. R. Shepard continued as master of the grammar school. In 1850 the Rev. W. H. Wrenford was appointed master of the grammar school, receiving an income of £60 a year together with a house.

In 1860 there were changes to the Roger Edwards trust and it was agreed that the Trustees would divide annual income into ten equal parts or shares, towards the support or benefit of any school or schools, for the education of children of the labouring and industrial population of Usk, subject to the provisions of the Endowed Schools' Act, 1880, for securing the admission of children of all religious Denominations to the benefit of such schools.

At this time the school building that had been described as 'cold, ill-furnished and wanting in every accommodation' was replaced. The new building was described as a 'neat building, containing a very good room capable of holding 50 boys and well furnished'. (Lewis, 1982)

This scheme was acted upon until the year 1877, when a public meeting was called by the Portreeve and was presided by the author and publisher JH Clark. During this meeting it was concluded that the school, for many years, was a very excellent one, and many of the ancestors of the present generation received a good classical and commercial education therein, there being two masters, one for the teaching of the Latin Grammar and the other for teaching writing and the rudimentary branches of the English language.

However, for the past forty years the school had not been conducted to the satisfaction of the parties interested and the meeting had been arranged 'to endeavour to get the school put upon a better footing.' A new master was to be appointed, and in 1862 fourteen new trustees were to be appointed, who were to be fit and competent persons, resident in the parish of Usk or within five miles of the town.

On the 27th day of November 1878 a scheme for the future administration was agreed by the 'Queen's Most Excellent Majesty in Council'. It was interesting to note that the

scheme reflected changes in the wider society as non-conformity was growing including the role of religious leaders as follows:

'Religious opinions, or attendance or non- attendance at any particular form of religious worship, shall not in any way affect the qualification of any person for being a Governor under this Scheme.'

'No person shall be disqualified for being a Master in the School by reason only of his not being: or not intending to be, in Holy Orders.'

'There shall be a Head Master of the School. He shall be a graduate of some University in the United Kingdom'

The grammar school was to be open only to boys from the age of eight to the age of sixteen. The boys were to be admitted following an examination to include reading, writing from dictation and sums (in the first four simple rules of arithmetic and the multiplication table).

The school was to teach on the following subjects

- Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic.
- Geography and History.
- English Grammar, Composition and Literature.
- Mathematics.
- Latin.
- At least one Foreign European Language.
- Natural Science,
- Drawing and Vocal Music.

In 1888 the Roger Edwards charity was inspected by the charity commission, and it found that three-tenths of the income of the Charity, which had been given in aid of the National School. Mr Hiley, a Governor, said it occurred to him that the money would be more properly applied to the Grammar School, which was short of funds at the present time, to provide a second master.

The Inspector pointed out that if the scheme directed that one thing should be done with the money, it must not be put to other uses. The scheme read that the Trustees should divide it into ten equal parts, and that one of such parts should be applied for the support of a school, or schools, for the education of the children of the labouring and industrial population of Usk ; and that they should be at liberty to continue the gifts of money doles to such poor persons then receiving the same to the extent of other two parts, after the decease of whom it should be applied by the Trustees, at their discretion, to other charitable purposes. It was true that the Trustees at their discretion could do as Mr. Hiley wished, but it would be a hard thing to cut off annuities.

The school continued to have financial concerns during the Victorian era, it was agreed by the charity commission in 1890 that the scheme was re-written again to be able to offer just three scholarships to the Grammar School.

Writing School (CLARK, 1891)

There was also a 'writing' school' in Usk at this time also funded by the Roger Edwards Trust. The number of boys educated was up to forty elected from the several parishes of Usk, Llangeview, Gwernesney and Llangwm, and in the absence of candidates those parishes they could take students from neighbouring parishes.

In 1828 Mr George Holmes was appointed as master to succeed the late Mr John George. However, the school was not without problems, In 1830, Mr Thomas Williams, of the Rhadyr, was appointed to perform the duties of Writing Master for the next three months in the place of George Holmes, who had been suspended for that period for ill treatment to the children and other irregularities.

George Holmes was re-instated until the Christmas vacation, in the hope that he would during that period conduct himself in a way that was satisfactory to the trustees of the Charity. However, in May 1831 George Holmes, was dismissed, being considered by the trustees unfit to be intrusted with the Writing School.

In 1833, the Rev. Mr. Darvel explained to the trustees that the boys under his care in the Writing School were unable to afford pens, the sum of £3 was given to help cover the cost.

In 1837, Mr Darvell tendered his resignation as master of the Writing School, and having proved that a separate Grammar School had become almost useless, and chiefly resorted to as the means of obtaining instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic, it was decided to unite the Grammar and Writing Schools, and place them under the care of one master. The Rev. J. P. R. Shepard was appointed master, at a salary of £120 per annum, with the house and garden in Middle Street, rent free, and out of such salary he was to provide and pay an usher or assistant.

This attempt to unite the writing school together with the grammar school failed and in 1843 it was agreed that the two schools would be separated.

Following the separation, the writing master (Mr. William Whitmore) was to instruct in reading, writing, and the elements of arithmetic in the school room previously used as a National School. The school room, was noted as 'cold, ill-furnished, nasty and wanting in every accommodation.' It had every defect of ventilation and comfort which the most ingenious architect could have contrived for the punishment of the children. The writing school master received also £60 a year.

Mr Sidney Stone was appointed in 1861 as Writing Master and the school continued to operate as a National Elementary School.

Girls Elementary School (CLARK, 1891) (Lewis, 1982)

During this time there was a girls' school, and the mistress would appear to be the wife of the master of the writing school. The mistress of this school received no fixed salary, and depended on the pence of the girls, and a voluntary subscription of the inhabitants of the town of Usk, for her support. This subscription varied in amount, from £10 to £24 in each year.

In 1851, Mr James Cormick and his wife were appointed master and mistress of the Writing School. The number of boys in the Writing School was limited to eighty and the same rule to applied to the girls.

Boys Elementary School (Lewis, 1982)

No national school was recorded until 1869, but a boys' elementary school was on the site opposite the Grammar school. Parliamentary returns showed it catered for around 50 boys and similar number of girls. The rules published showed the discipline was hard and a dispute regarding the status of the school with the arrival of the Rev SC Baker in 1859 who was distressed to see members of his flock attending a non-denominational school.

The vicar started a church infant school initially hiring a room in 'The George' inn and later moving to the vestry and later in a private house in Old Market Street.

In 1869 the dispute was resolved with a new school being built yards away from the Grammar school and non-denominational school. The Elementary school closed following another dispute in 1875.

Usk was gaining a reputation as becoming the most 'quarrelsome place in Monmouthshire' as a result of these disputes.

Roman Catholic School (Lewis, 1982)

Records show in the 1850's just one boarder and 20 children attending the school in Porthycarne Street in the building previously used as a church.

Private Schools (Lewis, 1982)

Little is written about the private schools, at this time, with the largest showing just 5 boarders

Mechanics Institute (CLARK, 1891) (Lewis, 1982)

In addition to educating children there we an opportunity for adults to be a member of a Mechanics Institute, formed in 1850 and supported by subscriptions of members of 2s. 6d. per quarter to gain admission to the room, which was supplied with newspapers and there was a library.

By 1851 it had recruited 47 men and 6 women as members. Local gentry donated books and letter in the press refer to 120 titles added to the collection in 1851.

However, the funds were in arrears and in 1857 there were 'soirees' including music, dancing and plum caked organised at the castle to raise funds, however, the room was eventually closed and the books sold to cover debts.

By 1870 some of the functions of the mechanics institute had been taken over by the YMCA.

Influences on Victorian Education in Wales

National Society for Promoting Religious Education (ParadoxUK Ltd, 2011)

The National Society for Promoting Religious Education is a Church of England body in England and Wales for the promotion of church schools and Christian education.

It was founded on 16 October 1811 as the "National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church in England and Wales". Its aim was that "the National Religion should be made the foundation of National Education and should be the first and chief thing taught to the poor, according to the excellent Liturgy and Catechism provided by our Church." One of the principal founders was Joshua Watson.

Historically, schools founded by the National Society were called National Schools. At ground level these schools were implemented by the local vicar and members of the Church of England

Welsh Education

'The Victorian Era is canonised because it is the era in which the glory of modern Welsh Nationality began to shine, in which politics came into education, and education into politics, for the first time, and ever since they have been inseparable.' (MORGAN, n.d.)

Royal assent was given to a Bill giving a statutory recognition of the Welsh language in civil affairs; Welshmen were 'permitted for the first time to take their degrees at Oxford and Cambridge.

Despite the poverty in the area, it is interesting that visitors to Usk in 1809 noted:

'The lower class of people possess much native civility, and we received a courtesy or a bow from every passenger. I was surprised to hear the English language spoken with more purity in Usk than in any provincial town I ever visited in England. The poor are wretchedly clothed, as well as extremely dirty, and very indolent. The children are chiefly without shoes and stockings.' (Usk, n.d.)

In 1881, two Welsh Acts were passed 'The Sunday Closing Act and the 'Intermediate Education Act'. There was a general desire for better education and spread of non-conformity led to the formation of schools and seminaries; the process of political and educational evolution continued until it culminated in the formation of a Welsh University with three constituent colleges. These were established before secondary schools came into existence, but they gave Wales the benefit of cultured and trained experts in developing and perfecting that system. (MORGAN, n.d.)

The Welsh Intermediate Education Act, 1889 (BBC, 2013)

Compulsory elementary education in Britain had arrived after the passing of John Forster's Education Act in 1870.

This was a revolutionary piece of legislation where, for the first time in British history, education was to be offered to all children, regardless of their economic status or ability.

School boards were set up, each of them with the responsibility of first or primary level education for all children. The school leaving age was set at 10 and no-one was to be exempt from school attendance.

Pre-dating similar legislation in England by a dozen years, the Welsh Intermediate Education Act was passed on 12 August 1889.

The intention was simple. As the opening paragraph of the Act read: "The purpose of the Act is to make further provision for the intermediate and technical education of the inhabitants of Wales and the county of Monmouth."

The school boards were swept away, and joint education committees were established in every Welsh county. It now became their duty to submit to the charity commissioners a scheme for the implementation of intermediate (between primary and further education) and technical education for the people of their areas.

These intermediate schools were designed to cater, mainly, for children of the middle classes who, because of their financial situation and social status, had little or no prospect of moving on to one of the independent public schools.

10: Food Production

The Historical Context

After the Norman Conquest, the borderlands between Wales and England- the Welsh Marches- were given into the hands of the so-called Marcher Lords by William the Conqueror. These lords were members of noble families and were allowed almost complete independence of the government in London and could set their own laws and social conditions; they claimed the rights of the usurped Welsh rulers and were not made responsible to the English Crown until 1354.

In Gwent, Walter Fitz Richard probably founded Usk Castle and town, to control and subjugate the area in and around Usk. It then passed through the de Clare family, including Richard (Strongbow) de Clare, who gave the town its Founding Charter, William Marshal and Elizabeth de Burgh and was in royal hands from the early 15th century. In 1485 Henry VII gave the town to his son Arthur, Prince of Wales. The Benedictine priory was established in 1135 and Usk Borough received its charter in 1176. Between 1536 and 1543 the Act of Union was passed, its legal framework settled and the Marcher Lords were abolished.

The county of Monmouthshire was created with three boroughs- Monmouth, Usk and Newport- and was divided into six “hundreds” – Abergavenny, Caldicot, Raglan, Skenfrith, Usk and Wentloog- each hundred was sub-divided into parishes. In the 19th century the county stretched north-to-south from Crickhowell to Rumney and east-to-west from Bedwelty to Chepstow. Nowadays the area of the former Usk Hundred is administered by the local authorities of Torfaen, Newport and Monmouthshire. The Herbert family, Earls of Pembroke, ruled from the mid-16th century and then the Dukes of Beaufort followed from 1750. In 1899 the Duke sold off all his estates to consolidate his property at Badminton.

The Marcher Lords created two types of agricultural settlements – Englishries and Welshries, the former in the east of the Marches and the latter- mainly in the west. Englishries were “nucleated” villages, consisting of housing, church and farm in a compact space, thus more easily defensible against rebel incursions, with communal land and fields; they were often situated near a castle, which offered protection. Welshries, on the other hand, were more dispersed and featured individual farmsteads with enclosed fields, reflecting a different tradition and culture. In Gwent, two examples of Englishries are Redwick and Magor, possibly Kemys Commander. Examples of Welshries include Welsh Newton, Kilpeck and Pontrilas in Herefordshire.



Farming in the Usk area

The land around Usk lies in a glaciated valley with a flood plain surrounded by low hills. The River Usk is a key feature of the countryside, which forms channels with associated wetlands and floodplains, enhancing biodiversity. The underlying geology is Devonian Red Sandstone and Mudstone; soils are rich, silty and alluvial, making ideal conditions for pastoral and arable farming with sheep farming on the hillsides. The diverse geography supports traditional mixed farming now as in the Victorian age. The landscape in the valley is typically regular-shaped fields bounded by hedgerows.



Dreamstime.com

Farms in the Victorian Age

Most farmers in the Usk area were tenant farmers who worked the farms under annual agreements with the landowners, who were members of the aristocracy or gentry, such as the Glanusk Estate, founded by the Bailey family in 1826, the Williamses of the “Great House”, the Herbert family and the Dukes of Beaufort. Some large farms had tenancies based on longer-term agreements.

There were a large number of farms in and around Usk in the 19th century and they gave employment to 48% of the families in Usk Hundred. They varied greatly in size, from 5 to over 300 acres, though most were between 20 and 200 acres. The actual number and size of farms is hard to calculate for various reasons. For example, in surveys and censuses in the Victorian period farm buildings were often conflated with actual farms, thus increasing the count. Also, the term “rough grazing” is significant.

“Rough grazing” meant land that was not currently being used for pasture or arable purposes and therefore was not included in the number of acres on the farm. It was, however, not a fixed amount: a farmer could decide to change the rough grazing land into arable or pasture when it suited him and thus it would be included in his acres and the official size of his farm would be increased. Alternatively, if the farmer decided that some land was no longer needed for animals or crops, it reverted to rough grazing and the farm’s acreage would seem to shrink.

19th Century Progress and Development

From 1800 to about 1840 farming was carried out on traditional lines but in 1844 the Usk Farmers’ Club was established with its aim to encourage excellence in agriculture and this body organized weekly, fortnightly and monthly markets; it also promoted the use of scientific knowledge and techniques to modernize the ways of carrying out agriculture; with this in mind the Club organized ploughing matches to encourage better methods of crop growing. Wernhere, Cwm and Whitehouse farms were amongst the venues for these matches. Also, new

Usk Rural Life Museum: Exhibition of hand drawn ploughs





*Usk Rural Life Museum:
Engine Driven Winnower*



*Usk Rural Life Museum: Exhibition of
cheese making artefacts*

- Farmers could purchase large, engineered pieces of equipment from nationwide firms like John Fowler & Co, Ransome's and Sims & Jeffries.
- Smaller tools, implements and components could be made and repaired locally in forges, foundries and blacksmiths' workshops. There was an industrial facility in Baron St in Usk, with a timber yard, blacksmith, forge and workshops.
- Farmers were also supported in Usk by town traders like ironmongers, cheese makers, maltsters and cordwainers or shoemakers – the unmade roads and lanes were very hard on footwear. The Usk Rural Life Museum is an ex-malt barn and this activity was also carried out in the Old Brewery in Bridge Street. On the 1846 Tithe map Thomas Dunn is shown as owning a malthouse in Baron Street. Malting declined in the mid-to-late 19th century because of the rise of the Temperance Movement.
- There was a slaughterhouse in 4 Ash St, now a private home, and a bakery on the corner of Twyn Square and Four Ash St.

Mills in Usk

There had been mills in the Usk area since medieval times, mainly sited on the River Usk and its tributaries. In the 19th century there were several important mills in operation. Llancayo windmill was built in 1813 but burned down in about 1830; Prioress Mill, which used water from the Berthin Brook and may have dated from the 16th century; Llanbadoc corn mill; Gorrats Mill in Trostrey; Forge Mill in Bettws Newydd, which used a 200m long weir; a three-storey stone mill in Llangwm, now a private residence; and the key industrial site at Glangrwyney in Usk Vale near Crickhowell which included corn and woollen mills – later altered to a paper mill - and a forge; there was a sawmill at Little Mill. The mill that used to stand in Mill St in Usk has not been identified but was probably a grist mill.

In the late 19th century small rural mills declined, owing to a reduction in the local agricultural population and also because imported flour made home-produced flour uneconomic. Water-powered mills were gradually replaced by roller mills, as at Monnow or Queen's Mill in Monmouth, the Newport Star Flour Mills and at Redbrook in the Wye Valley.

Communications and Transport

Roads

As in any industry, farming needs good transport and communication links to other towns, cities and villages. Decent road surfaces were provided by the turnpike trusts which appeared in the mid to late 18th century. Before then, roads were sometimes impassable in winter for wheeled vehicles and in South Wales horse-drawn sledges were used on farms. It is more than possible that these were used in Usk before the turnpike trusts improved matters. Valentine Morris from Piercefield, a local landowner, promoted several Acts of Parliament in order to improve Monmouthshire's roads; he described road travel in Monmouthshire in the late 18th Century as akin to "travelling in ditches". There were five turnpike toll houses in Usk: on Porthycarne Street (demolished in 1880), Four Ash Street, Monmouth Road (now Ty Basket), Pontsandpit (now Maryport Street) and the Bridge Toll House, which, built in 1837 opposite the western end of Usk Bridge, still exists. Turnpike Trusts were charged with the maintenance and improvement of roads and raised money via the imposition of tolls, which were unpopular but necessary. Some farmers did try to avoid paying the tolls by taking a short cut across a neighbour's land. The Illustrated Usk Observer reported on May 14th in 1859 that Henry Crump of Glascoed was prosecuted by William Constance, surveyor, for doing just this. He was fined five shillings and warned as to his future conduct. Very ironically, Mr Crump appears in court on other days acting as a prosecutor! One important structure funded by the Usk Turnpike Trust was the bridge over the River Usk at Pant-y-goitre, which became a vital link between Usk and Abergavenny. In 1880, however, the tolls were abolished and included in the highway rates; the toll houses and gates were sold off.

Railways

A crucial development in the Victorian era in Usk was the railway, which arrived on June 2nd, 1856, with the opening of the Coleford, Monmouth, Usk and Pontypool Railway, which was originally envisaged as a means of transporting minerals from the Forest of Dean to the ironworks of South Wales. Stations were opened at Usk, Llandenny, Dingestow and Troy in Monmouth with a junction station at Little Mill and a stop at Raglan.



People's Collection Wales: Usk Railway Station. Early 1900s

Unfortunately, this operation was not a success but the railway transformed Usk's agricultural economy and enabled farmers to have their products transported to markets in South Wales and beyond. On the other hand, later on in the 1870s the railways at home and abroad made global competition possible, as the mass importation of cheaper farm produce from the USA, Argentina and Australia began. Until the 1950s, when it was closed, the Usk Valley (CMUP) Railway was essential for carrying livestock and crops from Usk to other parts of Britain.

Farming Products- Arable

- Wheat was an important crop for the first half of the century and was grown for example in the fields surrounding Llandcayo windmill, which ground the wheat grain

into flour; heritage grains like Hen Gymro, known for its resilience and nutritional value, are still used today.

- Barley and rye were grown locally and produced coarse flour. Like wheat, they were processed in water mills and the flour then sent for sale in Newport and Cardiff.
- Potatoes were, and still are, a staple crop in and around Usk.
- Turnips and swedes were grown for winter fodder; mangel-wurzels were cultivated for feed for dairy cows.
- High-quality grass and hay for animal fodder were grown on the Usk Flats.
- Hops were grown for local inns in sheltered spots, though this practice was more common in the area between Monmouth and Ledbury. The Old Brewery in Usk was also supplied with hops and this benefited from the “tower” semi-gravitational system of brewing, with mashing done on the upper floors, whilst fermentation and racking were done below. John Biggs was a significant figure in brewing in Usk at this time.

Cidermaking

Cidermaking was an old tradition in Monmouthshire, as it was in Herefordshire. Every farm had its own orchard, so orchards were far more widespread than today and produced cider apples and perry pears, as well as other types of these fruits. The cider apples would be pressed in a cider mill, often with a horse pulling a heavy “runner” stone around a round trough and the resulting pulp was layered in stacks known as “cheeses” in horsehair cloth. These cheeses were then squeezed in heavy wooden or cast-iron screw presses. The apple juice was then siphoned off into wooden casks or vats for fermentation, which was commonly aided by the addition of meat or bacon. The cider could then be sold by the farmers to local pubs, as in the case of Pencarreg and Lanusk farms in Llanbadoc, which sold cider to the Bridge and Bell pubs.

Cider was extremely important as a drink for farm workers, particularly during the harvest, when farmhouse cider, “rough cider” or “scrumpy” was issued in gallon (4.5 litre) or half-gallon jars. In Monmouthshire it was common for farmworkers to be paid with large quantities of cider in lieu of cash. This practice was prohibited in 1887 by a clause in the Truck Act. In the mid-to-late 19th century travelling cider makers with portable mills and presses visited farms and allowed farmers to produce cider without the expense of purchasing heavy machinery. After the arrival of the railway in Usk, production of cider began to move to Monmouth and Hereford and at the end of the 19th century many local farmers ceased to make cider. Those still owning cider apple orchards sent apples to Bulmers in Hereford.



*Usk Rural Life Museum:
Exhibition of cider
making*

Farm Products – Livestock

The main types of cattle in the area were Herefords, Ayrshires and Shorthorn cattle, all favoured for improved meat production but North Devon and Glamorgan breeds were

also prized. There was a tannery in Usk in the early 19th century but this ceased between 1835 and 1851, because changes in agriculture meant that farmers no longer provided suitable cattle hides. Also, the water supply to the tannery was diverted to the new railway station in Usk.

Sheep were typically of the Ryeland variety and mainly kept on the upland areas; they were used in mixed arable farming as a strategic measure to tread ploughed soil and provide manure for crops e.g. turnips and wheat. Before the advent of railways, animals were driven on foot to markets. In the 1861 Census Thomas Lloyd of Maryport Street was a drover who took sheep from Usk to Caerleon Pier.



*People's Collection Wales:
Sheep dipping in River Usk at
Llanbadoc. Early 1900s*

In the 1851 Census there were four bakers and six butchers recorded; these numbers increased as the century wore on.

There was a slaughterhouse in Four Ash Street in Usk, but most slaughtering was done on private land or in small yards attached to butchers' premises. There was of course no refrigeration, and animals were kept in pens until slaughtered to keep the meat fresh.

Fishing



Capel Hanbury-Leigh

Fishing rights in the River Usk in early-to-mid Victorian times were owned by the Lord Lieutenant of Monmouthshire 1835-1861, Capel Hanbury Leigh. The people of Usk had been traditionally allowed to fish in the river, mainly using coracles, 5-6 feet long by 4 feet wide, which could be carried on one's back to and from the water. Fishermen would often be seen on the river with an oar in one hand, a net in the other and the string of the net in their mouth as they fished. The fish they caught comprised chiefly salmon but also trout, sewen, dace etc. This gave them a living in summertime and they would display and sell their catches on the banks of the river.

In 1851 a salmon of the record weight of 34 pounds was caught and this caught the attention of sports fishermen, mainly gentry, who began to come to Usk from far and wide, especially after the opening of the railway.

In March 1855 Hanbury Leigh leased the fishing rights to the Trostrey Weir Association for the length of the Usk from Trostrey Weir to the town bridge. Only Association members were permitted to fish in this part of the river, which angered the town's fishermen, who mostly continued their activity, nevertheless. Some were taken to court and prosecuted but the courts never really backed up the ban and the fines that were handed out were trivial. Still, by the 1870s local fishermen were losing their fishing rights and livelihoods and in 1873 a complaint was made to the Duke of Beaufort, the Lord of the Manor of Usk, that only members of the Associations, who were often visitors to the town, were being permitted to have tickets to fish. Subsequently local residents were allowed to have tickets also and the fishermen

allowed to become members of the association and continue their traditional practices. By 1891 the town had its own fishmonger, Charles Nelson Doubleday, in Bridge Street.

Markets

Naturally, farmers and fishermen had to sell their products and catches. This was arranged by means of markets and fairs. Traditionally, Friday was the weekly produce market day in Usk, which took place originally in Twyn Square but changed in the 1590s to the junction of Old and New Market streets. Here, farmers' wives and daughters would sell meat, poultry, butter and eggs. From 1842 James Williams introduced market facilities in the old House of Correction on Bridge St, which at first aroused anger from the other traders.

On the first Monday in each month there was a cattle market, which was scattered throughout the town: there are still some buildings in and around Twyn Square that possess iron hooks on the outside walls for the attachment of animal harnesses. In addition, there were fairs four times a year: on April 20th for cattle, horses, sheep and pigs; on the Monday after Trinity Sunday for cattle, horses and pedlary, on the 29th of October for sheep, pigs, cheese and pedlary; and a fair for beef on the Monday before Christmas, though this was changed to the penultimate Monday, to allow for more time for preparation for Christmas. Criers were used to advertise wares in both markets, the old House of Correction and Old/New Market Street. Both produce markets, however, had disappeared by 1891 and were replaced by the increasing number of shops.

From the 19th century there was an annual agricultural show, organized by the Usk Farmers' Club. This has of course continued to the present day.

Farm Workers' Housing and Wages

Farm workers mainly lived in cottages rented from the landowners. The rent amounted to about 3 shillings, though in Monmouthshire many employers provided accommodation for workers with tied cottages and a portion of ground. Because of growing industrial competition for labour, farm workers were paid slightly more than those in Southern England. The latter received 9s/6d per week, whilst in Monmouthshire rates in the mid-19th century varied between 9s-12s per week; for instance, the Evanses' farm in Llangybi paid 12s. In the Abergavenny Hundred a First Ploughman earned 8s per week with meat, drink and lodging.

By the 1880s and 1890s rates for farm labourers were up to 15s in summer and 12s in winter, though possibly not with food or drink. Pay for women and girls went from 8s/8d in 1861 to 9s/3d in the 1890s. An Upper Dairymaid earned between £6 and £8 per year. Children aged between 9 and 14 years were paid from 4d to 6d per day for light work. Farm pay was seasonal and in winter was lower; at harvest time pay went up by 3-4s a week, but of course the working hours increased also. Drink, usually cider, was provided during harvest. It should be noted that cider was often a healthier drink than water, which could be polluted from various sources.

Farming in the later 19th century

The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 led to increased imports of grain from abroad and caused many farms to cease corn and wheat growing, shifting to pastoral farming or

putting their land to industrial use instead. Grain production dropped by about 11% in Britain. Overall, the switch to Free Trade benefited the bottom 90% of earners in that food bills reduced slightly but landowners saw a drop in their rental income. Another Act was to have a different effect, however.

The passing of the Homestead Act in the USA in 1862 had severe consequences for British farmers. Any American citizen of 21 years or over had the chance to buy and farm 160 acres of land on the Great Plains. In total, 270 million acres of land were sold to 1.6 million homesteaders. As a result of this and the transport revolution initiated by the arrival of the railways and steamships, American wheat was able to undercut the price of home-grown wheat and imports of wheat from the U.S.A shot up from 24 % in the 1860s to 65% in the 1880s. The British Government refused to impose tariffs and insisted on the policy of Free Trade. Farmers in Britain stopped growing wheat and turned to producing root crops instead, which were not imported, or changed to dairy farming, poultry or livestock. The number of male agricultural employees dropped by a third between 1871 and 1901 as many migrated to industrial centres in search of work or even emigrated to the USA in order to take advantage of the Homestead Act themselves. Unemployment amongst the rural population in Usk also increased sharply.

Depression in Farming

The Great Agricultural Depression of the 1870s-to-90s occurred partly because of this cut-price competition.

Another cause of the Depression was the dreadful weather that was periodically the case in Britain. An extraordinary succession of extreme weather conditions in the twenty years after 1874 over the whole country, combined with an upsurge in foreign competition and low prices paid for produce, had a significant impact on harvests. The years from 1875 to 1878 were notable for cold, wet summers, poor harvests, and shortages of hay for livestock. In 1879 rain began in early spring and persisted until September, having a dreadful effect on barley and wheat crops. The following winter proved to be extremely cold and huge numbers of sheep were lost. Severe winter conditions were experienced in the next year, 1881, also, followed by a wet summer. 1882 had a very wet autumn, badly affecting the sowing of wheat. By way of contrast, there were droughts in the summers of 1885 and 1887.

In 1877 there were 479 farm bankruptcies in England and Wales, and they had increased five-fold by 1890. In Wales, including Usk, however, this misfortune was less prevalent, partly because of the widespread practice of mixed farming, in which losses on the livestock side could be balanced by better performance on the arable side. Despite this, employment in agriculture fell in Usk during the Depression, even though landowners like Lord Tredegar reduced farm rents (by 30% in Lord Tredegar's case in 1896) in response to complaints of hardship amongst farm workers. The towns of Usk, Abergavenny, Monmouth, Chepstow and Caerleon grew significantly less than the rest of Monmouthshire as a whole, partly because of the lack of coal and mineral deposits and industrial development. Workers migrated to industrial towns to find employment and Usk's population actually declined between the 1851 and 1891 censuses from 1452 to 1417, though it rose again to 1476 in 1901.

Llanbadoc, as a further example, saw a decrease from 452 in 1861 to 386 in 1891 but then a recovery to 441 and positive growth by 1901.

11: Food

Victorian cooking was hard work without the labour saving devices we have today. Cooking could be physical and time consuming. Even so, most of the food was healthy and wholesome and worth waiting for. Cooking was an important domestic need and would have to fit the budget of the family, in terms of ingredients that could be afforded. It was a full-time job, preparing meals and ensuring everyone was nourished. The skills of the women (who did the cooking generally) and their knowledge of baking should not be underestimated.

The Range

Cooking would be done on a 'Range'-usually coal fired. Gas ranges did not come into fashion until the late 1800's. The range was made of cast iron with two ovens either side and an enclosed fire in the middle with hot plates on top. Great effort would be made to get the optimum oven temperature. At the time there were no temperature controls. The temperature of the oven was tested by placing a piece of brown paper in the oven.



The oven could encompass a range of temperatures for different cooking purposes. If the paper in the oven burnt it was too hot. Light brown paper indicated temperature was perfect for pies, dark brown indicated the temperature was suitable for pastries, yellow showed it was good for cakes, light yellow for puddings, biscuits and small pastries. The kitchen was sometimes thought of as a laboratory.

Weights and Measures

One of the most important pieces of equipment was the weights and scales. They were normally available from $\frac{1}{4}$ oz to 7lb.

Keeping food fresh

Without any form of refrigeration a well-ventilated larder, which was dry and shaded, was essential in households. There would have been slate shelves and a series of hooks for hanging joints of meat.



Exhibitions and artefacts on display at Usk Rural Life Museum

Utensils and Equipment

Saucepans, frying pans, patty pans, moulds and tartlet pans were very important and made from copper, tin or iron. A 'bain-marie', a tray containing individual small pans, was used at the top of the range to keep sauces warm. There was kitchen equipment and utensils, commonplace and essential at the time, but not commonly used today such as: Dripping pan and stand, toasting fork, flat irons, sugar nippers, bottle jack, cinder shovel and sifter, tea kettle, candle box, boiling copper, gravy strainer, meat screen and salt box.



Food and Ingredients

Meals would be planned using seasonable provisions. For example, lamb would be available from March-September, pork- September to April and beef would be available throughout the year. Chicken was only in season between February and October, turkey from October until March.

Fruit and vegetables fared the same. The only produce available throughout the year would be foreign grapes, oranges, broccoli, carrots, cabbage, onions and potatoes.

Flour was an important ingredient and was used a lot. Baking powder, cream of tartar and bicarbonate of soda were used as raising agents. **In 1846 a Monmouthshire man, Henry Jones, invented self-raising flour.** Rice flour was also used in many recipes.

Sugar was sold in rock hard conical loaves (sugar loaves) or large lumps requiring special sugar cutters or nippers to break into smaller usable pieces for tea.



Butter was used in many recipes that required fat. Tins of sardines and anchovies were a convenience food. Suet was a common ingredient. Traditional suet was made from the fat surrounding the kidneys of cattle and sheep. An alternative suet was also made from palm and sunflower oils and rice flour.

General recipes



Many cakes, pies and puddings were created. Stews were also a common meal. Other typical meals include baked apples, omlettes, soups, apple snow, fruit jellies, baked macaroni and chicken broth with rice. Turkey and goose were common as part of Christmas feasts.

Drinks

Tea and homemade lemonade were popular, along with apple tea and- of course- gin.

Cider, beers were consumed. More details in **Food Production**.

12: Other religious buildings built during the Victorian era

Architecture of St David Lewis and St Francis Xavier, Usk

The church was built in 1847 by the architect Charles Hansom (1816-188). Hansom and his brother Joseph (inventor of the famous “patent safety cab”) were Roman Catholics and produced many of the churches made possible after the Catholic Emancipation Act of the early 19th century.

Charles Hansom was based at Bristol where his best-known building is Clifton College.

The church, in Usk, was funded and built on land given by Francis McDonnell JP of neighbouring Plas-Newydd.

The church is a good example of a small rural church in approved “Middle Pointed” style. The north tower was added by the same architect in 1865.



The building is designed in the gothic style and is constructed from old red sandstone with bath stone dressings and slate roofs. A gabled porch with diagonal buttresses and stone benches leads through a narrow gothic doorway into the church. Inside, the original rood screen has disappeared and been replaced by an altar rail, said to have been carved by inmates at Usk Prison.

The Nave roof has thin scissor braces and wall posts and octagonal piers in the south aisle. There is a wagon roof to the chancel.

The church has two Caen stone altars. The high altar has been separated from its original reredos. It has pierced quatrefoils on the frontal carved with the Pelican in her Piety, Agnus Dei etc. The frontal of the Lady altar in the south aisle has a carving of the Coronation of the Virgin.



There is a small choir gallery overlooking the north side of the chancel, and a larger organ gallery overlooking the nave. A brass plate below the organ gallery records that the organ was presented in 1916 in memory of Iltyd Edwin Maitland Watkins of the 2nd Monmouthshire Regiment, killed in action near Ypres in 1915. The organ was built by the Sweetland Organ Company of Bath; it was restored in 1994.



A small shrine to St David Lewis can be found in the south aisle, with a reliquary and historical display. A small octagonal stone font, painted, is in a baptistery area at the west end of the south aisle.

In 1901 a new bell, Sancta Maria, cast by Messrs Byrne & Co. of Dublin, was consecrated and installed in the tower.

The church has a good collection of stained glass, dating from time of construction. The three-light east window is by John Hardman, 1857. It depicts Christ flanked by saints, a cardinal and a bishop. A two-light window on the south side of the chancel shows a boy presented to the Virgin Mary, in memory of Henry Montonnier Hawkins, 1851-62, also by Hardman, c.1862. The two-light Annunciation window in the south aisle, over the Lady altar, is in the manner of William Wailes, 1850s. In the south aisle, a two-light window depicting St George and St Thomas of Canterbury, in memory of the Rev. Thomas Croft, priest-in-charge 1873-1898, d. 1908, signed H. Beiler of Heidelberg, Germany. Towards the west end of the south aisle, a modern two-light window depicting St Francis Xavier and St David Lewis, signed Christian) Ryan, 2002.



Architecture of Usk Baptist Church

The Baptist Church, built in 1842, is a Grade 2 listed building. It was built in the Simple Round-Headed and Sub-Classical style, with a gable-entry plan and tall flat-headed windows.

The church retains many of its original internal features. These include wall plaques to the memory of persons associated closely with the history of this church.

Pews are arranged beside the two aisles, a traditional layout in Baptist churches. The pulpit is raised and in the centre front and on the wall behind is a scrolled inscription from Psalm 46, *'God is our refuge and strength.'*



John Ball, 2016

There is a balcony, accessed by an old stone staircase, and which provides more seating.

The pipe organ was built to design in 1928 by Charles Gill of Cardiff Organ Works and has been repaired and renovated and regularly used in services, as well as other more modern instruments.

The Schoolroom at the rear of the building is used for church-based activities and by groups within the community. The Chapel House adjoining the building was formerly used as the Caretaker's house and then the Manse for Ministers.

There is early history of Baptists locally, dating back to 17th century. From this time it is clear that any place of worship, used by local Baptists, was established, cared for and maintained by the people who worshipped there. In late 18thC/ early 19thC the Baptist Minister, Mr Edmund Watkins, purchased a house to use as a meeting place for the benefit of Usk Baptists. However, upon his death in 1808 with no will or deed in trust – the house was lost by the Church. In 1812 The Revd. Thomas Evans received a licence for another dwelling house for the Baptist cause – Nantytwr, Gwehelog. This was later sold in 1830.

The Baptist Church in Old Market Street originates from 1839 when Mr Henry Phillips, JP (Newport) moved to Usk, rented a room and started preaching. The 1841 Census records him as a Bank Manager, residing in Bridge Street Usk. The room was used for temperance meetings, singing practice, night school and a Sunday school.

A piece of ground was eventually purchased from a Mr John Edwards - 87 feet in length and 39 feet in width – close to the room that was being rented. The schoolroom was erected at the rear of the land so the Church could be on the road. The Church was completed in 1842. The first minister was a Revd. John Frize.

Mr Phillips is later mentioned in the Monmouthshire Merlin (1861). He was the Secretary of the Newport Branch of the Ragged Schools which were important prior to The Education Act of 1870.

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Appendices

Recipes based on original Victorian baking

Little Orange Cakes

3 egg whites
5oz/ 150g caster sugar
6oz/ 175g flour
tsp baking powder
1 lemon
2 small oranges

For the icing:
2oz/ 50g icing sugar
tbsp orange juice

Heat oven to 180° / gas mark 4

Prepare a dozen small baking cases on a baking tray. Mix the egg whites with the sugar till thick and smooth. Add the flour, baking powder and the grated rind of lemon and oranges. Mix well and pour into the baking cases. Bake for 20 minutes. Gradually mix enough orange juice with the icing sugar, to obtain the right consistency. Pour over the cooked cakes, whilst still warm.

Potato Currant Cake

1lb/ 450g mashed potatoes
1lb/ 450g flour
8oz/ 225g shredded suet
4oz/ 110g currants
4oz/ 110g brown sugar
tbsp water or more if required

Heat oven to 180° / gas mark 4

Grease several baking trays. Mix all the ingredients together to form a dough. Cut into small pieces and form into buns. Bake for 20 minutes. Cut in half and spread with golden syrup or honey to eat.

Queen Cakes

4oz/ 110g butter
4oz/ 110g flour
6oz/ 175g caster sugar
3 eggs
2 tbsp lemon juice
tsp baking powder
a few currants

Heat oven to 170° / gas mark 3

Butter patty tins or line with baking cases. Sprinkle a few currants into the bottom of each one. Cream butter and sugar together. Drop in the egg yolks one by one, beating thoroughly. Add the flour, baking powder, lemon juice and mix together. Beat the egg whites to a froth and fold into the mixture. Divide mixture into the tins or cases, filling to $\frac{3}{4}$ of their depth. Bake for 30 minutes.

Sponge Gingerbread

8oz/ 225g self-raising flour
4oz/ 110g butter
8oz/ 225g golden syrup
2 medium eggs
 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz/ 10g ground ginger
 $\frac{1}{4}$ oz/ 5g bicarbonate of soda

Heat oven to 180° / gas mark 4

Line a baking tray with greased paper. Melt the butter over a gentle heat with the syrup. Add the flour and ginger and stir thoroughly. Add the beaten eggs, and lastly, the bicarbonate of soda. Spread on the baking tray and bake for 30 minutes. Cut into slices when cooled.

Tea Cakes

1lb/ 450g flour
2oz/ 50g butter
1 egg
¼ tsp salt
7g sachet easy bake yeast
7fl oz/ 200ml warmed milk
1 level tbsp caster sugar

Heat oven to 200° / gas mark 6

Grease several flat baking trays. In a warm bowl mix the flour, salt, sugar and stir in the yeast. Rub in the butter. Add the beaten egg and then the warmed milk and mix to form a smooth paste. Knead for 10 minutes on a warm floured board then cover and leave to rise. When the dough has well risen form into cakes (3oz/ 75g) and place on the baking trays in a warm place and allow them to rise again before putting in the oven for about 20-30 minutes.

Victoria Buns

2oz/ 50g caster sugar
1 ½ oz/ 40g rice flour
2oz/ 50g plain flour
2oz/ 50g butter
1½ oz/ 40g currants
1 egg

Heat oven to 180° / gas mark 4

Grease a 6-part bun tin or line with baking cases. Whisk the egg, stir in the sugar and beat well together. Cream the butter and add the egg and sugar. Blend in the flours. Add the currants and mix till smooth. Spoon the mixture into the tins and bake for 15 to 20 minutes.

Victoria Sandwich

4oz/ 100g flour
4oz/ 100g butter
4oz/ 100g caster sugar
4 eggs
2 tsp baking powder

Heat oven to 180° / gas mark 4

Line a 7" / 18cm sandwich tin with greaseproof paper. Cream the butter and sugar, slowly add the beaten eggs. Add the flour and baking powder. Mix well, pour mixture into the tin and bake for about 20 minutes. When cool, sandwich together with whipped cream and strawberries or jam.