

Portland People:

A snapshot of some of the remarkable residents of Portland House



Bensha: The early days & political intrigue

Benjamin Evans (1800-1874), known as Bensha, was forced off his farm, Llety Shon in Aberarth, by his Tory landlords for voting liberal in an open election. He moved to Aberaeron to set up a timber & slate business which the local estate boycotted for the rest of his life and beyond. In spite of this, by 1855 he was successful enough to build Portland House, one of the largest and most prominent houses in the town, for himself and his family.

On his death, politics came to the fore once more due to Tory intervention. Bensha was also the Post Master with the Post Office located in Portland House. All had expected the office to transfer to his daughters, who had run it on his behalf. There was an outcry in the town but public meetings and petitions were to no avail. The office of postmaster transferred to a local carpenter and the post office moved out of Portland House. The arguments for and against the move became main features in the National press of the time with passionate letters supporting each side.

Bensha's daughters: Feisty women & deaths at sea



Three of Bensha's daughters were ahead of their time; successful career women in their own right. All 3 ran the post office at various points for their father. Ann (1835-1915, left) went on to become a grocer on 6 Market Street and then took over the family ironmongery shop just up the road in no 6 Market Street. Margaret (1837-1927, centre) became the first Matron of the University at Aberystwyth and then had the

same role at Bangor College. For 8 years she was chief housekeeper at Llanover Hall for Baroness Augusta Hall, better known as Lady Llanover, the well-known patron of Welsh culture. Margaret was also a published poet and in recognition of these talents was inaugurated into the Gorsedd of the national Eisteddfod in 1904.

Sadly, Bensha's daughters were not so successful in love. At the age of 19, Ann eloped with Henry Lewis Howell (b 1825) following a holiday romance here in Aberaeron. She returned home to West Wales a few years later with 2 young children. Locally people thought she was a widow, in fact her 'Gentleman' husband later surfaces as an omnibus conductor in London.

Margaret and Jane (1840-1919, right) both married sea captains. Jane's husband, Ben Davies (1829 -1874), son of Aberaeron's first harbourmaster, died of dysentery on his ship, *The Olivia*, outside Quebec. The ship's log records his agonising last hours in detail. More intriguing is Margaret's husband, Evan Davies (b 1834). Back home in Wales everyone believed he died in 1872 in the shipwreck of *The Lanercost* off Baltimore. This is recorded on his gravestone. The investigation report of the shipwreck, however, suggests he didn't get on the ship at all, having resigned before it left port. Being part of a devout Calvinist and no doubt abstemious family at home the ships logs describe his drunkenness whilst on board.

Margaret and Jane both remarried in time, and both to successful businessmen Margaret to Thomas Jones, a tea-merchant & post master from Rhyl, Jane to David Evans, a cabinet maker in Llanelli.



J.M.H: Renaissance Man & Victorian Philanthropist

Bensha's grandson, John Morgan Howell (1855-1927), (known as J.M.H) later took on the ironmongery business and lived in Portland House. He was an active Liberal politician, with Lloyd George's visit to the house the subject of detailed press coverage. His story covers virtually every aspect of Victorian civic life.

An advocate for social reform, he did much to improve life for the poor in the town, holding a number of offices in education. A regular newspaper correspondent, he did much for the Arts too, establishing a library and various cultural societies. Like his ancestors he was a pillar of the local chapel, holding several offices there. On top of this he

was a magistrate, JP and Registrar, and even somehow had the time to describe fishing as his hobby!



Frisky Fred: Sex & Deceit

John's daughter, Nesta (1882-1961), became the next owner. Her father-in-law, Frederick Poulgrain (1861-1945) a ship's steward then hotelier, was a multi-bigamist. He had 4 "overlapping" wives; one in Wales, one in London and 2 in Australia. Each time he remarried he described himself as a widower when all his previous wives were very much alive.

Elizabeth, his wife in Poplar even engaged the Australian police to try and track him down. He had been writing to her to say he could not come home as he had brain fever when, in fact, he was on his honeymoon with his fourth wife, Celestine!



Phyllis: Bravery & Idiosyncrasy

The house moved out of the hands of family who had built it for the first time in the 1950s. The new owner, Phyllis Sewell (or Warden Brown), was a remarkable woman. She nursed on the front in WW1, gaining an MBE for her role as administrator of a field hospital in Boulogne. After that she had a career in Hong Kong as a teacher and later an administrator in Canada, before coming to Aberaeron where she bought up property for rent.

Phyllis put Portland House into multiple occupancy, living in one floor herself. She was known for walking about town in a fur coat over her nightie, with sandals on her feet stuffed with bloodied tissue between her toes. There are many tales about her time here in Aberaeron where she is remembered equally with fear and trepidation.

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