

The Portland House Post Office Scandal

Aberaeron had its very own Post Office scandal in 1874. It is a complex story of confused identity and conflicting reports so this article is just a potted version of what I untangled.

Benjamin Evans (Bensha) of Portland House was appointed Aberaeron's first Post Master in 1859 and he held the role for nearly 20 years, right up to his death in 1874.



Bensha

Two of his daughters had actually been running the post office for him on a day-to-day basis and it was widely thought that one of them would now be appointed Post Mistress. In fact, the role was given to a local carpenter and cabinet maker, Tommy Davies, of Compton House. Not because he was a man; my own great-grandmother was a Post Mistress twenty miles down the road in Llechryd at this very time.

The appointment was most probably a political one. Technically a crown appointment, this was in practice delegated to the local MP: in this case, a Conservative, Thomas Edward Lloyd. He awarded the role to one of his supporters, and not to someone from a staunchly Liberal family; a "radical" as they were known at the time.

The decision became the talk of the town and well beyond. It was hotly contested, with strong views both for and against. There were public meetings, petitions and deputations with increasingly hostile and personal allegations played out in public.

This led to widespread press coverage, not just in the local press but nationally, with leading articles and detailed letters in the South Wales Daily News and The Western Mail who took strongly opposing positions on the matter.

The South Wales Daily News was in support of the “Portland House position”. Amongst their arguments:

- that Bensha’s daughters had carried out all duties of the office on behalf of their father’ faithfully and efficiently for years’ so they had the right to the appointment.
- that the 2 women were destitute widows with little children so humanity was also on their side.
- that giving the role to Tommy was ‘the abuse of public appointments’ as he had canvassed for the MP in the previous election.
- that Tommy Davies was unacquainted with the duties of the role so unsuitable to take on the office.
- And that public opinion was absolutely in support of Bensha’s daughter, Mrs Davies as demonstrated by a petition of 1,700 signatures and numerous letters in her support.

On the other hand, the counter claims against the Portland House side in The Western Mail were:

- that not only was Bensha a political appointment by the then MP Col Pryse but
- that Bensha himself was also guilty of inappropriate patronage, appointing’ ‘extreme radicals’ to the sub-post offices in his control, in Talsarn, even giving the role to a farm labourer who ‘could not read hand writing’,
- that the petition in support of Bensha’s daughters was rigged, as it included “the names of babies & children’ and of people who were absent from the town at the time,
- that the sympathy card for widows having little children was “moonshine” – these children had never been seen and were not believed to exist,
- that the whole thing was actually a ruse by William Griffiths, (Bensha’s son-in-law, a pharmacist in Bridge Street) so he could get his hands on the role himself,

- that the opening hours and access to the post office were not acceptable. And this is where I discovered that the post office was actually located in Portland House! Customers reportedly had to bang the knocker in the main house to get attention and then go down a flight of steep external slate steps to a dark cellar,
- and finally, that a post office inspector, Mr Freeling, had come to Aberaeron, held a public meeting to hear the arguments and had confirmed Tommy's suitability and his appointment.

Both sides, hotly denied the arguments put forward by the other. Where the truth lies, we will probably never know. What we do know is that the outcome was unchanged. The Post Office moved across town to Compton House bringing to the end an important chapter in Portland House's history.



Compton House

Whatever the other arguments, the prominent position on Alban Square as we can see here was undoubtedly a better one, the opening hours were extended, and it was fully staffed.

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