

Portland House Captains



The oldest known photograph of Aberaeron (pre-1871) with Portland House on the far left

I have recently been researching the history of Portland House and those who lived there. I was delighted to discover that it has been home over the years to three sea captains; a little summary about them follows.

I would like to thank Eddy Bayton, Elinor Gwilym and Nick Sawyer for their meticulous research and resourcefulness. They helped me to solve mysteries about these men that are covered in my more detailed writing. I hope to publish that in due course.

In the meantime, if you wish to see a little more about the people who lived here and about our restoration work on the house, please see my Facebook page:

Portland House, Aberaeron: Restoration and Memories.

Sian Stewart
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1. Captain Benjamin Davies (1829-1874)

Ben Davies was born in 1829, the son of Aberaeron's first Harbour Master, Lewis Davies, and his second wife Jane. In April 1866 Ben married Jane Evans, youngest daughter of Benjamin Evans, Portland House's first owner. There was much celebration in the town, *"flags were stretched across the streets, the shipping in the harbour were covered with their gayest bunting."* Ben then sailed off *"almost immediately"* to Corsica.

An experienced Captain by this point, his first vessel was the *Bessie*. He later took over *the Glenara of Aberystwith* after it had been wrecked off Malta and where he oversaw its extensive repair. Ben's subsequent voyages on this ship included taking coal to Alexandria in 1865, returning with cotton seed to England and a journey to Constantinople in 1867.

Captain Ben Davies and his wife Jane



The logs show that he liked having local men around him, especially a Ceredigion or Pembrokeshire born mate, bosun, carpenter and cook.

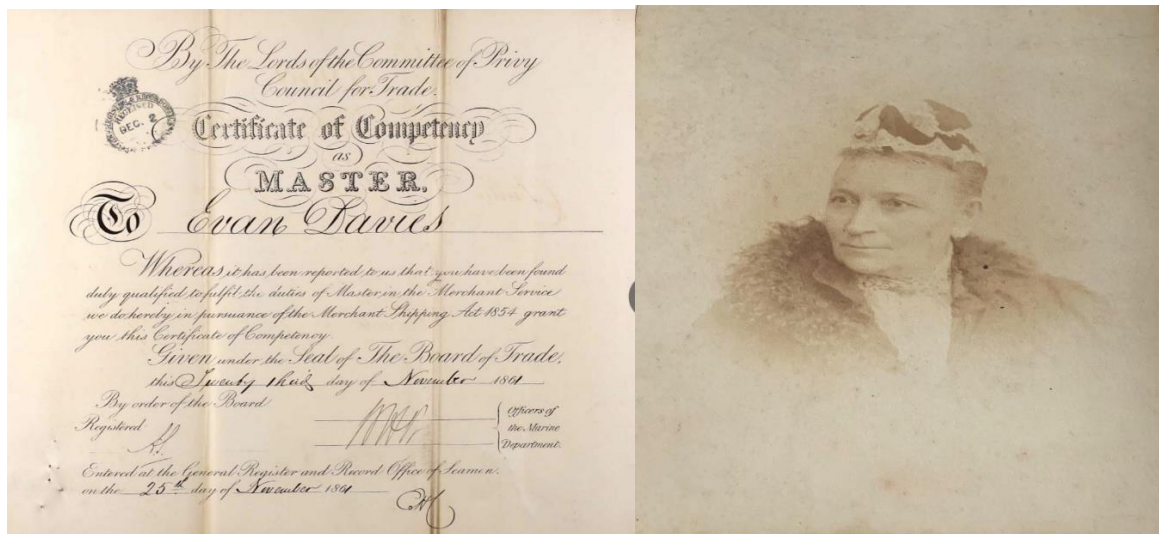
Ben's final voyage was in 1874 as Captain of the barque *Olivia*. She left Cardiff Docks for Quebec on 11 July. The ship's log records how he was ill from the time the ship sailed, informing the crew he *"had been troubled with dysentery for some time."* The Chief Officer writes that at 8pm on the evening of the 15th, *"Poor Captain Davies desired us to lift him out of bed which we did just after and put him in a chair in his room - soon after he starts a sudden fit and died immediately"*. At 7am the next morning *"we committed his body to the deep,"* the entry ends. Benjamin was 44 years old. The epitaph (Isaiah 55:8) on his gravestone in Hen Fynyw is an unusual one:

*"For my thoughts are not your
Thoughts, neither are your ways
My ways, saith the Lord."*

2. Captain Evan Davies (1834-1872)

Evan Davies was born in 1834, the son of Elinor and James Davies, Mariner of Newfoundland, Aberaeron. His father died when he was only a year old, his mother when he was eleven. He followed in his father's footsteps, gaining his Master's certificate in 1861. He clearly became a capable and respected transatlantic captain, being called to East Anglia "with no expense spared" to collect the schooner *the Telegram of Greenock* from Boston. In May 1864 he married Margaret Evans, Benjamin Evans' 3rd daughter.

Evan's Master's certificate & his wife Margaret



Evan's epitaph in Hen Fynyw tells us that he died in 1872 traveling from Baltimore on board the *Lanercost*. He was serving as Mate rather than Captain. A mystery surrounds both the journey and Evan himself. The *Lanercost* left Baltimore in February 1872 and then nothing is heard of her after she passed Fort Monroe. As a result, she was then signed off as lost with all hands in November of that year. It is likely that, with her cargo of 16,939 bushels of maize, she was overladen and that this was the cause of the ship's demise.

The *Lanercost* ship's log initially describes both Evan's conduct and seamanship abilities as "very good." This was soon to change. The log goes on to detail how on the 19th April he was found on board "drunk and quite incapable of attending to his duty in which state he has continued up to yesterday the 9th May being only service sober part of the times, arrested twice, in prison once". A similar pattern was seen, in May, when he went on shore without leave in Cette.

Evan's death is also rather shadowy. The log entry for 29 January 1872 records: "Deserted" against his name. This entry was subsequently amended, months later, to read "Supposed to have been lost with vessel." The formal investigation into the loss of the ship implies that Evan may actually have resigned his commission before the *Lanercost* left on its final journey. So there remains some doubt as to whether he boarded at Baltimore at all.

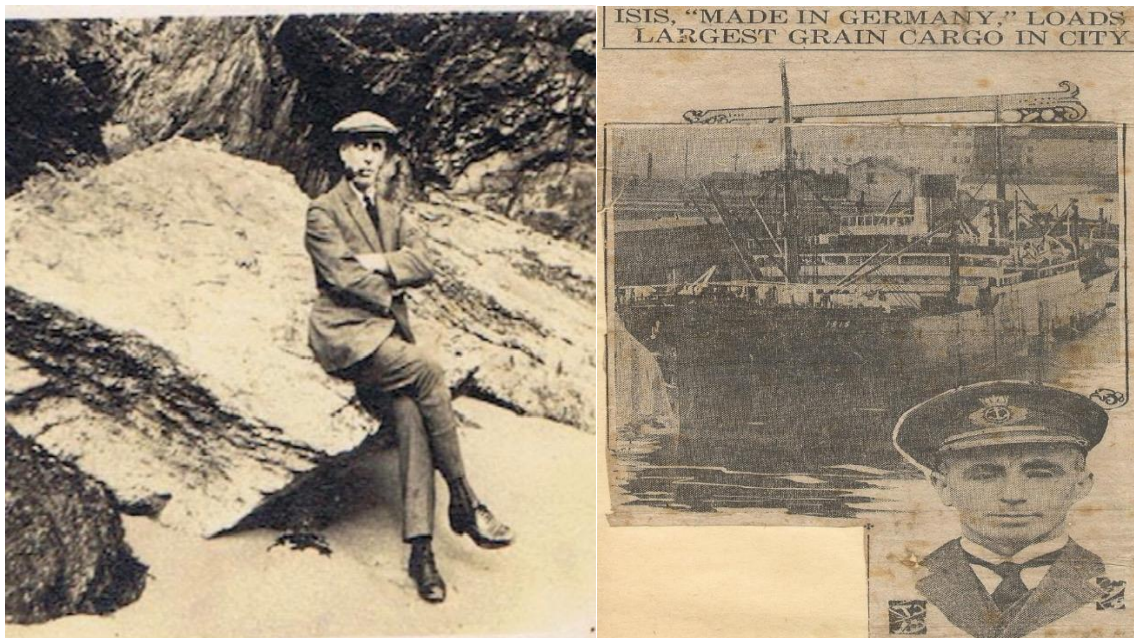
Back home in Wales though, both Margaret and Evan's family clearly thought he had drowned on his journey back, as his gravestone testifies.

3. Captain David Poulgrain

David Poulgrain was born in Llangranog in 1882. His father, New Zealand born Frederick Jamison Poulgrain, was a multiple bigamist with four “over-lapping” wives: David’s mother Sarah in Llangrannog, Lilian in Sydney, Elizabeth in Poplar and finally Celestine in New South Wales. In July 1923 David married Nesta Howell, great granddaughter of Benjamin Evans, who had inherited Portland House from her father, J.M. Howell.

David had a distinguished career with the British & Commonwealth Shipping Company, rising in rank to Steamship Captain and Commodore. He travelled far and wide, with destinations including Auckland, New Zealand, when serving as an Able-bodied Seaman aboard *Auckland Castle*, New York in 1928 and Ceduna, South Australia in 1931.

David Poulgrain & right with his ship the Isis



During World War 1 he was Captain of the 5,115-ton steam merchant ship *King Idwal*. The ship was torpedoed and sunk by a U-boat on 23 November 1917, 158 miles west of Rockall. While 12 crew members were lost, the Captain and 27 of the crew survived. They were picked up and landed at Liverpool on 27 November. In the second World War, David was captain of the *King Egbert* until that too was sunk by a mine in 1939 when carrying coal from the River Clyne to Port Said.

After the war David took over the massive 494 foot long, 9000-ton *Isis*, with its cargo capacity of 1200 tons, reported to be the largest of any ship afloat at that time. His journeys included one to Columbia and one to Portland, Oregon. He left active service in 1942 and then supervised the building of ships for the King Line in Belfast until he retired eleven years later. He died in Aberaeron in 1961 at the age of 78. His simple gravestone in Hen Fynyw just records the words “Master Mariner.”