

SAMUEL HOMFRAY II OF BEDWELLYTY HOUSE AND TREDEGAR IRONWORKS.

By T. Eric Davies.



Samuel Homfray II was the son of Samuel Homfray of Penyardarren and Tredegar Ironworks whose life was described in our last issue. Samuel II, full name Samuel George Homfray, was born on September 7 1795 at Penyardarren, his mother being Jane, daughter of Sir Charles Morgan of Tredegar Park near Newport. As such Samuel was connected to the Morgans of Tredegar Park and the association with this family was to continue throughout Samuel's long life.

Samuel's father left Penyardarren in 1813 for Tredegar and for the next forty years Tredegar was to be the home for Samuel II. Following the dispute with the Ebbw Vale Company over the Sirhowy ironworks in January 1818 and the subsequent transfer of the Sirhowy works to the Ebbw Vale partners, there were major changes in the management of the Tredegar ironworks and Samuel II became active in the management of the works at the young age of 23. This is not surprising as his father had brought him up in the iron trade and even at 23 he had acquired considerable experience of the industry and of the commercial scene. By the time of his father's death in 1822 Samuel II was the principal manager at Tredegar, residing at Bedwellty House, and under his father's will he inherited half his father's shares in the Tredegar ironworks partnership, his brother, Watkin, having the other half. Under his leadership the Tredegar ironworks prospered and iron sent down the Monmouthshire Canal by the works increased from 8,102 tons in 1822 to 15,288 tons by 1840¹. This was achieved partly by the expansion of the ironworks with the number of blast

¹ Harry Scrivenor, *The History of the Iron Trade*, London, 1854, pp 127, 258.

furnaces increasing from five in 1823 to seven by 1841² but also by increases in efficiency in general and in particular by an increase in output by each blast furnace.

As an ironmaster, Samuel was fairly pragmatic in common with many of the other Monmouthshire ironmasters of his time.³ In July 1839 none of the Tredegar blast furnaces were utilising hot blast, the invention of James Beaumont Neilson in 1828.⁴ Hot blast was to be adopted as the standard by the mid nineteenth century but some of the masters in South Wales were rather slow to take advantage of the process, taking time to be convinced that the hot blast process was sufficiently superior to the traditional cold blast to justify the cost of its introduction. However this tendency to be pragmatic does not mean Samuel was slow to innovate. In 1824 the Tredegar works took out a patent in connection with puddling furnaces⁵. In fact the Tredegar works had had a forge with puddling furnaces very early in the nineteenth century and was the first to introduce a guide mill, in 1834⁶, and the works built a huge new mill in 1849, the opening of which in March that year was an occasion of much celebration in the town.⁷ Samuel was most innovative with the use of locomotives. He led the way in the area by purchasing one of Stephenson's engines in 1828⁸, the intention being to carry iron from the Tredegar works right down to the docks at Newport⁹ and the locomotive, named 'Britannia', succeeded in this on 17 December 1829. The Tredegar Company had a second locomotive in service in about 1832 and a further nine by mid century.¹⁰ Samuel's enthusiasm for locomotives was surely the result of his father's influence. Samuel Homfray I was, of course, famous for Richard Trevithick's locomotive's journey from Penydarren in 1804.¹¹

In December 1822 Samuel married Charlotte, daughter of Admiral Stabel. They settled at Bedwellty House and Samuel had the house restructured to its present form in about 1825. They lost a child, a daughter, in 1826 but had another daughter three years later and also had five sons. Through the ironworks and the associated coal and iron mines Samuel was the principal employer in the Tredegar area and he had the respect of the people. On one

² Philip Riden and John G. Owen, *British Blast Furnace Statistics 1790-1980*, Cardiff, 1995, pp 1-31.

³ T. Eric Davies, 'The Ironmasters, Ironworks and People of the North West Monmouthshire Area, 1780 to 1850.' MPhil thesis, Swansea, 2008, p 113.

⁴ *Monmouthshire Beacon*, 6 July 1839.

⁵ Gwent Record Office. D.2472.2. The Ebbw Vale Letterbook for the years 1824-1827, Letter to Tredegar Co., Bristol, 31 July 1824.

⁶ David Morris, *The History of Tredegar from the Beginning of the Iron Works up to the present day*, (unpublished), winning entry in the Eisteddfod of the Cymrodorion of Tredegar in 1862, p 21.

⁷ *Monmouthshire Beacon*, 17 March 1849.

⁸ W. Scandrett, *Old Tredegar. Volume 1*, Newport, 1990, pp 85-6.

⁹ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 26 December 1829, Tredegar Ironworks.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Hill and Gordon Green, *Industrial Locomotives of Gwent*, London, 1999, pp 115-6, 154.

¹¹ T. Eric Davies, 'Samuel Homfray of Penydarren and Tredegar Ironworks' in *Blaenau Gwent Heritage Journal*, Dec 2010.

occasion in the summer of 1831 when he returned to Tredegar after a spell away he was welcomed by a deputation accompanied by bands playing. He was seen as a moderate and prudent person who saw it as his obligation to look after the security of the people.¹² His moderating influence must have been a factor in the refusal of the Tredegar workmen to become involved in the troubles that took place at Merthyr in 1831. In fact Samuel was credited by the local press in August 1834 for the fact that there had been no disturbance in Tredegar for ten whole years to that time.¹³

He was also popular with the tradesmen of Tredegar. He erected a market place in the town in the early 1830s ensuring that there were no monopolies to exploit the working people and he was rewarded for this by the tradesmen of Tredegar in March 1838 when he was presented with a splendid silver waiter, valued at 140 guineas. The inscription on this said "Presented to Samuel Homfray Esq., by the tradesmen of Tredegar, as a token of grateful respect for the concern which he has always manifested in promoting and advancing the trade and interest of the town."¹⁴ Samuel was involved in the planning for a church to be built at Tredegar as the population of the town had increased enormously and the parish church at Bedwellty was some miles away. The project got underway and in June 1835, after a procession to the site by the principal inhabitants of the town, Samuel's eldest son, Samuel George Homfray, laid the foundation stone.¹⁵

Like many of the ironmasters, Samuel was a magistrate and served for Bedwellty for many years. The major issue of concern for the magistrates in the area in the late 1830s was the Chartist movement. In July 1838, at Monmouth, Samuel was on the Grand Jury that found Henry Vincent guilty.¹⁶ A year later there was a mass Chartist meeting at Dukestown where it was estimated that over two thousand people may have attended. Samuel was present at this meeting to observe and John Frost, addressing the crowd, stated that he believed Samuel Homfray to be an honest man and one possessed of much good sense compared with the majority of our legislators; he thought the Chartists ought to return Samuel as their first member for the county, after passing the Charter, not before. If elected before the Charter was put in force Frost feared that Samuel would become as bad as the rest before his term had elapsed, as many others had become. It is clear that Samuel was not sympathetic to the Chartists' cause but Summers Harford, a fellow magistrate and one of the Ebbw Vale Ironworks masters, was believed by the local Chartists to be more understanding and at the end of the Dukestown meeting there were cheers for Harford, "the Chartists' friend."¹⁷ Following the Chartist uprising at Newport a Grand Jury was appointed to try the Chartist leaders and Samuel was on the list of jurors in company with Joseph Bailey, M.P., of Nantyglo ironworks and other prominent men of the county. It may be significant that the list did not include Summers Harford.

¹² *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 16 July 1831

¹³ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 30 August 1834.

¹⁴ *Monmouthshire Beacon*, 10 March 1838.

¹⁵ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 4 July 1835.

¹⁶ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 3 August 1838.

¹⁷ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 17 August 1839

In February 1841 Samuel was sworn in as High Sheriff of Monmouthshire and he continued to be one of the most prominent men in the county throughout the 1840s. On the business side he was on the committee of some of the railway developments and his reputation was such that he was a natural choice to arbitrate when disputes arose. For example, in January 1845, he mediated in conjunction with Sir Benjamin Hall, in the dispute which arose when the Monmouthshire Canal Company strongly objected to a proposal for a new rail link between Nantyglo and Newport. In Tredegar, Samuel gave his patronage to the school set up under the National system and he encouraged the growth of friendly societies for the protection of the workers and their families, insisting to make a £5 contribution each year to the widows and orphans fund.¹⁸ He was also equally understanding of all religious beliefs.

For a number of years Samuel had been the chairman of the South Wales Ironmasters meetings and it was decided to present him with a splendid piece of plate to recognise his efforts for the group. The plate was inscribed as follows:¹⁹

PRESENTED
BY THE IRONMASTERS OF SOUTH WALES
TO
SAMUEL HOMFRAY, ESQ, BEDWELTY HOUSE
MONMOUTHSHIRE
IN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE ABILITY AND COURTESY
WITH WHICH HE HAS ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS
PRESIDED AS CHAIRMAN
AT MEETINGS OF THE WELSH IRON TRADE
1847

The plate was not actually presented until late July 1848, at a dinner held on his behalf at the Castle Hotel in Tredegar. The main meal, the dessert and the wines were of the finest quality and many of the most influential men in the county attended with Crawshaw Bailey in the chair. The chairman's speech included the following words about Samuel:²⁰

The integrity, uprightness and intelligence of Mr. Homfray were so well known throughout the county of Monmouth, that they needed but slight comment from him; for all classes of the community united in testifying their esteem and regard for him; he was a good master, a sincere and intelligent adviser, and a warm and sympathising friend.

As mentioned above the great event in Tredegar in 1849 was the opening of the new rolling mill which was believed to be one of the largest in Europe. To commemorate the opening there were great celebrations in the town. A procession formed in the market place headed by a band and senior men from the ironworks. Tradesmen, members of clubs and friendly associations, many carrying banners, followed behind walking six abreast. The procession moved on to Bedwellty House to meet Samuel and others who joined the procession as it made its way to the new mill. Samuel then made a speech thanking everyone for their attendance and stating that he believed the new mill would be a benefit to all

¹⁸ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 18 September 1847

¹⁹ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 25 March 1848

²⁰ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 5 August 1848

connected with it, to the proprietors and to the tradesmen and workmen of the town. Later there was a dinner for 260 guests. At the dinner Samuel was accompanied by many of his fellow industrials of the district including Crawshay Bailey and Richard Bailey of Nantyglo, J. Powell of Clydach, William Wood of Abersychan, Mr. Partridge of Beaufort, Mr. Evans of Dowlais and Mr. R. Johnson of Blaenavon.²¹

In late summer of 1852 Samuel's wife died and on the day of the funeral the shops were closed in Tredegar and many tradesmen and others attended the funeral. Mrs Homfray was buried at Bassaleg Church, the church attended by the Morgan family of Tredegar Park. In February 1853 there were changes in the ownership of the Tredegar Iron and Coal Company and though Samuel remained as manager,²² more of his time was spent at Newport where he rented a mansion, Glen Usk. Samuel was still active locally in Tredegar, he was chairman at the elections of Guardians of the poor for the parish of Bedwellty in April 1853.²³ However it was probably no surprise that later in 1853 it became known that he was to leave the Tredegar Company after thirty five years and to move to Glen Usk permanently. On his retirement a banquet was held in his honour and he was presented with a magnificent service of plate and a beautiful gold inkstand. Samuel's friends and many of the Tredegar workmen contributed and the people of Pillgwenlly, Newport, gave about £100. Thomas Brown, of Ebbw Vale Ironworks, took the chair at the banquet and there were many other prominent men present such as Crawshay Bailey, Mr. T. L. Brewer of Coalbrook Vale, Mr. R. P. Davis, the new manager of Tredegar works, and William Adams of Ebbw Vale.²⁴ Samuel was showered with complements from speakers but perhaps the most telling statement came from the Oddfellows of Tredegar a short time later. The statement began:-

“TO SAMUEL HOMFRAY, ESQ., BEDWELLY HOUSE, TREDEGAR.

“Esteemed Sir, - We have learned, with sincere regret that this town and neighbourhood, which owe so much to your fostering care for thirty-five years, are about to lose both your presence and your invaluable connection.

“We, the Oddfellows of the Manchester Unity, residing at Tredegar, cannot refrain from availing ourselves of the present opportunity of thus expressing our unqualified approbation of your upright conduct as a man, and ever-consistent performance of the duties of an employer, together with your inviolate integrity as a gentleman- therefore, we join in the public expression of sorrow, that ties, which have been knitted so closely, and with so much advantage to the interests of the town, are now about to be broken.....²⁵

Samuel became a very prominent figure in Newport and was active in a number of organisations. For example he was the Chairman of the Tredegar Wharf Company for a time and had been president of the Newport Cricket Club. He was an alderman and in 1854 he was the Mayor of Newport. In 1868 he attempted to become the Member of Parliament for the Monmouthshire Boroughs when Crawshay Bailey retired from politics but failed. He polled

²¹ *Monmouthshire Beacon*, 24 March 1849

²² *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 25 February 1853

²³ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 29 April 1853

²⁴ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 2 September 1853.

²⁵ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 9 September 1853.

1,449 votes but Sir John Ramsden, a wealthy Yorkshire baronet, polled 1,618. Samuel was also chairman of the Harbour Commissioner of the Newport and Pillgwenlly Water Works Company and, from 1871 to 1877, of the Newport School Board. He continued to live at Glen Usk, which he rented from the Digby Mackworth family, for the rest of his life. The house which was a few miles from Caerleon and overlooked the River Usk, had more than twenty rooms and was connected by a corridor to a delightful classical building which acted as a picture gallery.²⁶ Samuel died on the 16th November 1882, aged 87, after a short illness. He was survived by his daughter and three of his sons. Samuel was buried at Bassaleg church and on the day of the funeral the shops in Newport had shutters up during the day, and the flags at the Town Hall, the Newport Dock Office, and the Harbour Office, were at half-mast. Muffled peals were rung on the bells of St. Woolos and Bassaleg churches.²⁷

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Tredegar Iron Works – latter half of 19th century.

²⁶ Sale document, Glen Usk. Newport Library Ref. pxMooo910. (1904.)

²⁷ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 24 November 1882.