

The Davies Family of Tenby

This is the story of the Davies family of Tenby, who like so many of their counterparts never rose to local or national fame, but left a lasting legacy through their work as masons and builders .

The mid-to-later C19 Davies's were typically of good working-class stock, Liberal in their politics and nonconformist in their religion, being members of the Calvinistic Methodist Chapel in Lower Frog Street and later, the Congregational Chapel, now St John's. Perhaps it is not simply chance that as a descendent of the Davies', my role as building conservation officer for the National Park Authority involves me in conserving their buildings, many of which are now listed. I spent so much happy time with my grandparents and family in Tenby and loved to hear the stories of their forebears - it is a pleasure to be able to share some of these memories and subsequent research.

To avoid accusation of claiming too much glory, other prominent Tenby builders left their indelible mark too. Douglas Fraser has shed some light on John Smith, builder of Lexden Terrace and the Fish Market. John Thomas of Crackwell Street was busy in the 1860s, followed by the prolific James Rogers, builder of the cemetery chapel in 1854, the Congregational Chapel in 1867, Nyth Aderyn in 1883 and several terraces in town including Warren Street and Clareston Road. Other Victorian builders included John Sheldon, John Henton, and the Beyons of St Johns Hill. In true Pembrokeshire fashion, there are several natives in Tenby who claim that their 'family built half of Tenby!' However, research indicates that the Davies and Smith families were among the earliest of the masons in Tenby, pre-dating the influx of builders from other parts of the county and beyond to satisfy the massive building boom in the early C19.

The lack of parish records predating the early C18 has left a gap in the records of family births, deaths and marriages, but several references to medieval Davies' suggest that the family was one of old standing. The Hearth Tax records of 1670 name Thomas and Jasper Davies as residents. By the later C19, the various branches of the family were given nicknames in the good Tenby fashion - in our case, we were called the Brocks for some reason long forgotten - perhaps we looked like badgers! Still, that was a far more polite sobriquet than some other Tenby families. Research shows that the majority of Davies' still in and around Tenby belong to the same family.

The picture becomes clearer after 1700 where the story starts with Henry and Grace Davies. For two generations, the surname was double-barrelled to Hughes-Davies, almost certainly due to the predominance of Davies's in town rather than reasons of grandeur, as well as marriage into the Hughes family, in 1765. The association of the family with the building trade is first recorded with three sons of Erasmus and Jane (nee Gwyther) Davies, George (b. 1793), Erasmus (b. 1797) and John (b. 1806), who were all recorded as masons and builders. Erasmus and John both resided in Tor Lane with their families in 1841, suggesting this was their home street.

In 1841, George Davies was living in the new suburban street of Chimney Park (now Trafalgar Road), and perhaps he was involved with its construction. Research has yet to shed light on what the three brothers actually built.

George's son, William, born in 1830, started his career as a mason at a time when areas of derelict medieval Tenby were still being cleared and rebuilt and there must have been plenty of work for him and his contemporaries. According to advertisements in the Tenby Observer, William Davies established his business in 1853. Frustratingly, we know little about his early works, but he seemed to have been involved with the building of the High Street block of Tenby Market in 1860, the main contractor being John Thomas of Crackwell Street. This was clearly a plum job - and needless to say, built to the highest standard, as evidenced by the fine ashlar limestone. His status in town as a councillor is depicted on the commemoration plaque within the entrance to the market.

His career was catapulted however when the Tenby and Pembroke Railway was opened in 1863. With the need to accommodate the arrival of visitors en-masse, the town needed to expand. The most convenient area for development was the South Cliff area, where the level ground enjoyed fine sea views towards Caldey. The area also happened to be on the doorstep of William's home in Chimney Park.

In 1864, the fields in the Southcliffe area where William Davies spent his childhood were laid out on a grid plan of roads by J.H. Shipway, engineer to the Whitland and Milford Railway. The Tudor estate had sold off the land for development the previous year, the new developer being Dr John Maule Sutton, who sold off the undeveloped bits in 1868.

Building soon started, with a clear hierarchy of high-class boarding houses and hotels along the Esplanade, of lesser scale in the streets between here and Southcliffe Street and lesser again beyond. Within a stone's throw of home, Culver Park was built around 1868 and William Davies was almost certainly its builder, the street remaining the home to four generations of the family right up to the death of my grandmother. Some plots were sold off freehold, others offered on 99-year leases - either way, this was a great opportunity for speculators and builders.

The rapid need for expansion provided ample work for a young and energetic mason. By 1871, he was employing 17 men full-time, residing at 3 Culver Park and then Gumfreston House in that street, so named after his building of Gumfreston Rectory in 1873. A typical Victorian builder such as William Davies could undertake building works in a number of ways. Of least risk was simply providing a tender to an architect, and if producing the lowest tender, simply carrying out the work and claiming stage payments. Of greater risk was speculative building, undertaken on leasehold plots, as at Somerset Houses, later the South Beach Hotel on the Esplanade. The freehold was offered back to the family in the 1930s for the princely sum of £300, by which time the family fortune was much depleted, alas. My late aunt, Gwyneth Batchelor wryly recalled that 300 pence would have run the coffers dry at the time. In some cases, William did purchase the freehold of leasehold properties as at Nos 28-29 Victoria Street, the corner building formerly the Hallsville Hotel - the prominent date of

1879 a commemoration of the birth of my great grandfather Sydney Davies, deliberately sited to face down Culver Park.

Despite William Davies' role as a Town Councillor, he did have the odd skirmish with the Town Corporation. Indeed, he once called for the formation of an entirely new corporation due to the poor re-paving of Culver Park. In the case of Hallsville, Victoria Street, the family tradition was that it was intended as a public house, evidenced by the typical angled corner. Apparently the Corporation refused to allow any pubs in the south cliff area - and there still aren't any in the strict sense of the term - which thwarted a nice little earner. This was confirmed around 8 years ago when the property was re-rendered - the work revealed the big pub windows, blocked only by a skin of lath and plaster - suggesting that William intended to revisit the matter at another date. The corporation records however suggest that William was a steady hand, much relied on for general advice, along with his fellow councillor, the talented builder James Rogers of Warren Street.

Exactly how much of the South Cliff area besides that mentioned above was built by William Davies is not known, although his obituary confirms that he built the majority of Victoria Street, the first ten houses of which were being built in 1872. His obituary also confirms that he built the Old Rectory in 1878 for £2500. The grand plan of framing its driveway with a double-crescent of houses was alas never realized - the economic downturn at the time resulted in undeveloped gaps in the South Cliff area, now occupied by the Rectory Car Park and the Bowling Green - and of course the famous Aces Garage, since replaced by Hanover Court.

Confusingly, another William Davies - nephew of our William - was also busy building in the area, his obituary of 1914 confirming that he built Nos 5&6 the Esplanade (prior to the remodelling for Warren de la Rue) - as well as incidently Sparta House in Crackwell Street.

William Davies gained several other commissions in Tenby, mostly providing tenders for architects. Recorded works include the Town and County Club (of 1877, costing £2000), the demolished Wesleyan Chapel of 1881 costing £2890 - a sad loss, the extensions of the Belmont Houses and Imperial Arch of 1862, the old Lifeboat Station of 1895, St Julian's Church of 1873 and the adjacent Fishermen's Rooms of 1874. The latter cost £800 and Davies extended it two years later for £310. Other works included Gunfort Mansions, Lorne Chambers (St Julians Street), 5 St Julian's Terrace, Lancaster Buildings (High Street), the Cottage Hospital of 1871 and the long-demolished parochial schools on Park Road. On the North Cliff, William Davies built the terrace now forming the Park Hotel, begun in 1878. Incidently, this area of town was also laid out for post-railway development, much of which wasn't realized until well after the Second World War. He also laid out the Wreck Field area of town, building houses in Harding Street, owning Nos. 1-4.

The family also built and owned Ruabon House on the South Parade (so-called because it is mostly built of Ruabon brick) and the adjacent Saltwood House, 1-2 South Parade where the builders yard was situated, and Nos 1-4 Harding Street.

William Davies was unusual among Tenby builders in that he was prepared to travel beyond the Bell's Corner for work. He built the fine Board Schools at Whitland and St Clears . He built rectories at Gumfreston in 1873 and Jeffreyston in 1892. He built the Co-operative Stores in Pembroke Dock and several buildings in the Dockyard for the War Department, holding the repairing contract for the War Department from Pembroke Dock to Ferryside, building several large stores in the former place, and a gun battery at the latter. By this time, William's grandsons Bill and Tom had settled in Pembroke Dock, setting themselves up as builders, based at King William Street. Bill's grandson, Derek Davies of Pembroke Dock remembered tales of William cycling out from Tenby to check on the works. The Pembroke Dock Davies were prolific builders, their works including the barracks at Pennar and the Royal Naval Hospital, now South Pembrokeshire Hospital. Bill Davies gave up work during the last War - his yard, which was bombed out - is now occupied by the police station.

In Fishguard, William Davies was employed to remodel Pentwr Calvinistic Methodist Chapel in 1889-90. Goodness knows what brought him all the way to Fishguard, but by this date, many of the family belonged to Lower Frog Street chapel, which was of the same denomination as that in Fishguard.

With the sudden death of William Davies in March 1898, the building firm was continued by his son William and son-in-law John Griffiths, trading as Davies & Griffiths from both the South Parade premises and King William Street, Pembroke Dock (the site of the present police station) until 1907, when after the death of William's widow, Mary, the family property was either divided among the four sons and four daughters, or sold off. William's eldest son David, my great great grandfather continued in the building trade in a much smaller way, until his death in 1901, aged only 51. He lived at Southwinds, Culver Park, where they also kept an apartment house and a shop.

Davies and Griffiths garnered one major commission - the building of the vast Abbey for the Cistercian Order at Caldey Island, begun in 1907. When funds started flowing in from wealthy anglo-Catholics for the first revived monastic order within the established church, building gathered pace and some work was done in shuttered concrete, quite an early use of this material, including the Abbot's Tower. Credit for the design of one of the most outstanding Edwardian buildings in Britain is due to its designer, John Coates Carter, but the little Tenby firm of Davies & Griffiths coped admirably with the demands of the meglomaniac Abbot Carlyle and his wealthy donors. The original fittings in the Abbey Chapel were of outstanding quality and richness, all destroyed in a fire of 1940, including the altar which was made by Sydney Davies, son of David and grandson of William.

Sydney Davies, my great grandfather - 'Granfer Davies', was a monumental mason and sculptor. His work largely concerned the manufacture of gravestones and memorial tablets, usually signed 'S.D' . His workshop was situated in Lower Park Road. The more valuable materials, notably Sicilian marble was stored in the old housekeeper's room at his home at 'Rebleen', Southcliffe Street in large blocks. His eldest son, my great uncle Dai recalled visits to various churches and chapels including Penally and Cresselly, delivering and erecting gravestones, the means of conveyance being a horse and cart, the latter procured from Mr

Nowell of The Green. Such long journeys, true Tenbyites not liking to stray beyond the Bells Corner often involved an overnight stay with Aunty Jane Jenkins at Collinsford, near Cresselly.

One of Sydney Davies' more prominent works included the inscribed tablets of the War Memorial of 1923, undertaken in conjunction with the Beynon family, the overall design apparently suggested by Granfer Davies' Uncle William from Weston Terrace, an alderman of the town. Despite having little involvement in the large projects of his forebears, Granfer Davies had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the buildings, streets and drains of Tenby, along with his friend Charlie Herman Thomas. Both took great pride in chalking out the position of historic drains and gulleys - Granfer Davies took this even further by walking home backwards after his occasional visits to the pub. His knowledge of every drain, gully and kerbstone ensured that he never fell over - or so we are told! Clearly, the churning out of endless gravestones played on Granfer Davies's mind, because on his death in 1960, he was cremated, which in those days meant a trip all the way to Pontypridd.

With the death of Granfer Davies, the long tradition of building and monumental mason work in the family came to an end. My grandfather, Len, enjoyed a more steady career with the West Cambrian Electric Company, latterly the South Wales Electricity Board as a senior joiner, and with my grandmother Linda ran Rebleen in Southcliffe Street as a popular guest house, until they retired to live almost directly opposite the house in which he was born (Number 19), some 20 yards away in Culver Park, itself built by his forebears.

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