

The Cowbridge Stocks

Letter from Mr Daniel Owen of Ash Hall, Ystradowen - to the editor of the 'Weekly Mail', 12th August 1893

Dear Sir,

For some time past I have been requested by many of the inhabitants of Cowbridge to inspect the old stocks. I have done so – at the town hall – and also had a look at the dark and dingy cells in the old bridewell at the same place. They were very unsuitable places for human beings to live in. Fortunately, in this progressive age, even prisoners, when incarcerated, have better quarters now than they had in the days of old. The members of the corporation have done a good deal in improvements in the town of Cowbridge, but they have something more to do in connection with this old town hall, which and its surroundings, are in a deplorable state. I am informed by the oldest man in Cowbridge, namely Mr Thomas Nicholas, that this town hall was built in 1808; and I am similarly informed by Mr N. Bird, who has a place o business opposite the town hall, he and his father having lived in that house for 96 years. Prior to that the celebrated lolo Morganwg, who died in 1826, lived in the same house and kept a bookseller's shop there. When he was so occupied Tom Paine's works appeared. Whoever sold his works was subject to a penalty or imprisonment, and there were detectives all over the country endeavouring to fid out who sold Tom Paine's works. Old lolo had a paper in the window on which was written – “The Rights of Man' sold within”. One day, two gentlemen walked in and said to lolo, “We see you have 'The Rights of Man' for sale”. He answered “Yes”. There is no doubt lolo had Paine's works, but he guessed that the gentlemen were detectives, so produced the Bible, which he offered to them for sale. Thus they were done.

To come back to the old stocks, Mr N. Bird tells me that they were right in front of the town hall. Both Mr Bird and Mr Nicholas say that the last man placed in the stocks was Jim Knapp, 31 years ago. He was a very peculiar character and well known in Cowbridge. I knew him well. We cannot call him the missing link, but he was only slightly removed from the beast. When he was in the stocks the boys teased and jeered him, and poor Jim, when quite helpless, said, “D..... you! I'll remember you when I come out of this”. But Jim was quite harmless and inoffensive, and when he got his freedom he never molested the boys. I have seen one of those boys this week; he is now a middle-aged man. Mr Bird remembers a tramp being in the stocks prior to Jim Knapp. Mr Bird's brother William happened to come to Cowbridge at the time, and, seeing this an in the stocks in the scorching sun – it was a matter of some difficulty to keep him from smashing the instrument – he released the poor man from his misery.

Those stocks were made 45 years ago by the late Mr. Morgan Williams, who died a few weeks back at the age of 85. I knew him well for more than 30 years, but did not hear of his death until last Sunday. He was a good old man, and I was grieved to hear of his death.

I find that the stocks were made of beech and the supports of heart of oak. I have in my possession a splinter, about 19 inches long, of the former which was given to me. The length of the stocks is 6ft 1inch, depth 16 and a half inches, bound all round with one quarter inch iron 3 inches wide, and fastened by a massive padlock. The benches on each side are 8 inches wide and 14 inches from the ground. There are six holes, the dimensions of which are as follows :-

1st hole.....3 and three quarter inches; 2nd hole.....3 inches; 3^d hole.....2 and three quarter inches; 4th hole.....3 and a half inches; 5th hole.....2 and a half inches; 6th hole.....3 and a half inches.

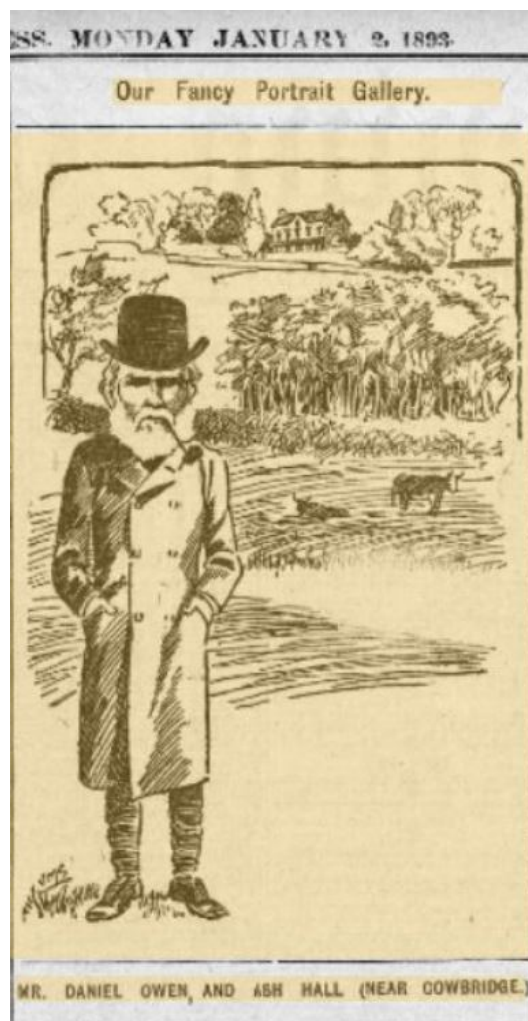
It will be seen that the largest hole is big enough to take the ankle of Daniel Lambert, but I doubt if the smallest hole is small enough to secure Tom Thumb – of course it depends on the size of his foot.

To extricate himself from his position he would have to take his foot out through the hole.

The stocks were moved from place to place on wheels 7 and a half inches in diameter, made of wood with an iron band under the supporters alluded to. Although Mr T. Nicholas and Mr N. Bird stated that Jim Knapp was the last who appeared in those stocks, they were mistaken. It is very singular that on Sunday last I paid a visit to a friend of mine, and told him I was going to see the old stocks the following day. He is a gentleman of means and owns an estate. I asked him if he had ever seen the old stocks. He said, "Yes! And I have been two hours in them". He explained that some five and twenty years ago he was at the Cowbridge Grammar School, and when he and some of his old schoolfellows went to see the stocks they pounced upon him and placed him in, and then went away. Mr Rees, having missed him, went in search, and, as the gentleman told me, "hearing my howling, he came to my rescue and released me from captivity after being there two hours".

There was a brother of Jim Knapp in Cowbridge called Johnnie, who fought in some of the battles of England, and in one of which he lost his arm. He was a very decent fellow, and was looked upon as a very clever poacher. Both have joined the majority long ago.

– I am etc., DANIEL OWEN, Ash Hall, near Cowbridge, Aug 1, 1893



Notes from Brian James, May 2020 :

There is a short piece in John Richards's 'Cowbridge Story', p. 70, about the stocks. Richards says that James Knapp was the last man put in them – in 1852. However, Owen says '31 years ago', i.e. 1862.

Morgan Williams was a carpenter & wheelwright who kept the Royal Oak at 20 High Street ('Old Inns & Alehouses, p. 48).

James Knapp was still in Cowbridge in 1881, enumerated in a stable loft. He was clearly one of life's unfortunates.

Thomas Nicholas was a timber merchant living in Eastgate in 1851 aged 45, and a retired builder still living in Eastgate in 1881 aged 76.

It is interesting that Daniel Owen criticised the condition of the town hall & told the corporation to do something about it. They must have listened, since the town hall was extensively restored & enlarged two years later.

Typed by B. Alden 2020