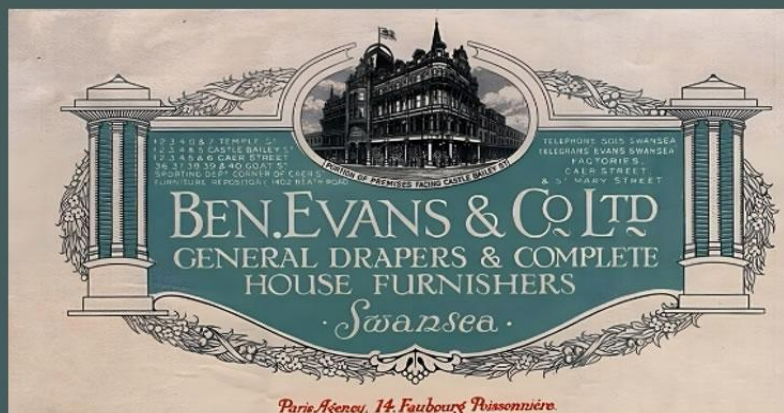


Ben Evans

The Story of a Swansea Store



Jeff Stewart



Ben Evans - The Story of a Swansea Store

For over forty years, 'Ben Evans' was a symbol of architectural magnificence, and was considered 'the finest store in Wales and the West of England'. However, this iconic building met a tragic end during the 'Three Nights' Blitz in February 1941, when enemy aircraft devastated over 41 acres of Swansea's town centre, leaving the once-grand emporium in ruins.

The legacy of the Ben Evans store endures through a poignant collection of photographs, featuring striking images of the store's impressive Castle Bailey Street frontage alongside haunting scenes of its destruction. These visual records serve as a powerful reminder of its former splendour and the devastating impact of war on the town's landscape.

Despite its significance, comprehensive information regarding both the Ben Evans store and its founder is scarce. This presents an opportunity for further investigation into this iconic establishment, and the narrative of the store spans from Benjamin Evans' initial ownership in 1866 to the store's closure over 90 years later.



Ben Evans

The Story of a Swansea Store

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Dedications

With love to my mother Pat Stewart, to my late father Ken Stewart, my wife Jan, my four children Laura, Gareth, Emma and Shaun, and last but not least, my grandson Logan.

Front cover image: Author's collection

Back cover image: Author's collection

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Foreword

When I started work in West Glamorgan Archives back in the early 1990s, one of my duties was to periodically visit old people's homes and daycare centres to give slide talks on old Swansea as it was both before and after the Second World War. The conversation in the group would inevitably centre on shopping and leisure, for there were relatively few men in the audience for whom the pictures of the old town's industries and docks brought back memories of their world of work. Always, the images of the Ben Evans building would be instantly recognised and provoke expressions of regret at its loss in the Blitz. Yet I rarely ever encountered anyone in the audience who had shopped in there. "Ben Evans was where posh people shopped" was the usual response when I asked why not, "We always went to David Evans."

The old Ben Evans' Department Store contained more than one such contradiction. Instantly recognisable as one of the most iconic buildings of pre-war Swansea, yet on closer investigation the building was something of an architectural jumble: a much-loved store at the very heart of the town but one which many townspeople felt was not for the likes of them to enter. In such respect, it was somewhat akin to the Harrods of Swansea, a flagship store the town could be proud of but more of a status symbol of Swansea's prosperity than a practical place for most ordinary working people to shop in.

One wonders, had the building survived the Blitz, how long it might have survived before closure and inevitable demolition (the town elders in the 1950s and 1960s being out of love with Victorian architecture). If by chance it had survived to the twenty-first century, like the David Evans store, it would surely not have been equipped to meet the huge downturn in the city's retail business in recent years. Without a doubt, the history of Ben Evans has been a story waiting to be told in depth, and this book provides a detailed history of the store from its genesis to its ultimate demise in its much-reduced post-war premises. I commend the author, Jeff Stewart, for taking on this task and producing a clear and coherent narrative history of the store and of the man behind it, revealing that its history was much more complex and nuanced than I for one had hitherto realised. I hope that you, the reader, find the narrative as intricate and the story as fascinating as I did.

Kim Collis, West Glamorgan County Archivist 2004-2024



The Ben Evans store, viewed from Castle Square, with the Hussey Vivian statue on the left (Author's Collection)

Introduction

For over forty years, 'Ben Evans' was a symbol of architectural magnificence and was considered 'the finest store in Wales and the West of England'. However, this iconic building met a tragic end during the 'Three Nights' Blitz in February 1941, when enemy aircraft devastated over 41 acres of Swansea's town centre, leaving the once-grand emporium in ruins.

The legacy of the Ben Evans store endures through a poignant collection of photographs, featuring striking images of the store's impressive Castle Bailey Street frontage alongside haunting scenes of its destruction. These visual records serve as a powerful reminder of its former splendour and the devastating impact of war on the town's landscape.

While the name 'Ben Evans' has been associated with the phrase 'The Harrods of Wales,' the author has been unable to find any evidence of this term being used during the store's operational years, and it is likely a modern construct used to emphasise the store's undoubted presence and importance to Swansea.

However, whilst it drew positive comparisons to other large and impressive contemporary London stores in Victorian and Edwardian London, comprehensive information regarding the Ben Evans store and its founder is scarce despite its significance. This presents an opportunity for further investigation into this iconic establishment.

Describing itself as 'General Drapers and Complete Home Furnishers', a common misconception today is that 'Ben Evans' was one enormous store. In reality, it was a labyrinth-like structure that had successfully linked together once-individual properties on Temple Street, Goat Street, Caer Street, and Castle Bailey Street, and it continued to be a 'work-in-progress' until the building's destruction during the Swansea Blitz.

In 1866, Benjamin Evans took charge of B. Evans & Co. at No. 3 Temple Street and his business soon prospered, and for nearly 30 years he maintained a hands-on approach to what was a sales-driven, performance-oriented business. In 1895, he sold the business and retired, and the store became a publicly listed company, 'Ben Evans and Company Limited', with its board of directors based in London.

Marketed as "The Premier Fashion and Furnishing House of Wales and the West", the store's reputation for quality and variety flourished. At its peak, Ben Evans boasted an impressive 42 departments.

The store offered a range of products that included, but were not limited to, home furnishings, ladies' fashions including a fur salon, children's wear, sports equipment, travel goods, and even a full-size replica horse to allow customers to try out saddlery, harnesses, and riding attire.

In-store amenities included refreshment rooms, a restaurant and a hairdressing salon, whilst customer services included the organisation of funerals and cremations via the store's 'Mourning Department', home and commercial catering, and lawn tennis and badminton lessons.

This comprehensive array of products, services, and amenities solidified Ben Evans' status as a premier shopping destination, catering to a wide range of customer needs and preferences.

Following the destruction of the store in 1941, temporary premises were established on Walter Road, however, inaction in rebuilding Swansea's town centre after the Blitz meant that the move became a permanent one. Despite its efforts, the company could not regain its place as Swansea's premier retail outlet.

To understand the company's history, its financial performance has been reviewed. However, as intricate details of the company's balance sheet, profit and loss account, share types, debentures, and dividends can be complex to the untrained eye, much of this information has been purposely omitted from the main body of text to maintain the book's focus.

While financial details are available in the appendices for those who seek them, the primary objective of this book is to bring the store's history to life in an accessible and engaging manner.

Taking this approach, the author hopes to pique readers' interest and foster a deeper appreciation of the company's remarkable journey. To achieve this, some key financial details are necessary to provide context and structure to the story, and a timeline has been woven throughout the book using the company's annual general meeting reports as well as its annually published net profit figures, as follows:

Year 1	Jan 1895-- Feb 1896	Net Profit £ 15,490	Net Profit £1,701,524 (2024)
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Based on a June 2024 equivalence, all inflation comparisons have been made using the Bank of England inflation calculator (1), and a year-on-year comparison of both ‘actual’ and ‘inflation-linked’ performance can be found in the Appendices.

These financial milestones, coupled with the prevailing economic conditions and the retail environment of the time, serve as guideposts that allow the reader to trace the store’s journey from the initial days of Ben Evans’ ownership to the sale of the business to a larger company in 1955, and its demise a few years later.

Note 1: It would not have been possible to write this book without having online access to Welsh newspapers via the excellent resources of The National Library of Wales (2) and The British Newspaper Archive. (3)

Note 2: From 1889 until 1974, the official designation of the local government in the town was ‘Swansea County Borough Council and Corporation’. Unless stated otherwise, the term ‘Council’ is used throughout this book for consistency and brevity.

Note 3: For consistency and brevity, the term ‘Annual General Meeting’ is abbreviated to ‘AGM’ after its first use.

1 - Shopping in Swansea in the Early 1800s

At the turn of the 19th century, most British town centres were, from a retail perspective, at best functional. While general and specialist shops operated by independent craftsmen and retailers provided specific items such as shoes, clothing, and household goods, it was the daily and weekly street markets—largely unchanged for centuries—that supplied fresh produce, including meat, poultry, fish, milk, and other everyday essentials. However, the shopping experience in the UK underwent significant changes between 1800-1850, marking the transition from traditional retail practices to the emergence of modern shopping formats. In the 1820s, commercial bazaars opened in cities like Liverpool and Manchester that had set up central shopping streets, whilst Britain's largest bazaar, Grainger Market, opened in Newcastle in 1835. In London, Regent Street was built as a shopping street.

In 1800, Swansea's population was approximately 7,000, and the few streets that made up Swansea's town centre were home to numerous specialised shops, as well as several markets selling produce such as meat, fish, poultry, vegetables, flowers, and the local delicacies - cockles, oysters and laverbread. John Nixon's 1793 drawing of Market Square (4) vividly depicts a melee of customers, costermongers, street sellers and hawkers, at the shambles (meat market) regularly held there in the shadow of the castle walls.

Opposite the castle were the ruins of 'Plas House', whilst only a stone's throw away stood 'Island House', separating Market Square from Wind Street, with 'Pig Street', 'Potato Street' and 'Butter Street' (St. Mary's Street) on the other three sides of the building. By 1830, the various open-air markets had moved to a new centralised location, a purpose-built facility on Oxford St, constructed on land previously known as Rope Walk Field, a site donated by Calvert Richard Jones Esq. Market Square was cleared in 1832 and renamed Castle Square in the following year. (5)

A Paving and Lighting Commission was set up by the town's Council in 1840, whilst utilities were installed across the town centre by the Swansea Gas Company and Swansea Water Works Company, as well as in some up-market residential areas. In the same year, the ruins of the old mansion 'Plas House' were finally cleared away, and various shops, warehouses and a police station were quickly erected on the site. It would take a further

forty years for Island House to be demolished as part of a road widening plan that directly adjoined Wind Street to Castle Square.

Over centuries, Swansea had grown into what had once been called a market town, built around Swansea's castle and The Strand, alongside the River Tawe. Developed out of necessity rather than designed to support the trade that a small port brings, the town was poorly laid out. Much of the land in the centre of the town was made up of burgages, plots of land that had been in the hands of some families for centuries, many of whom had migrated to Swansea from elsewhere in Britain in previous years on recognising the opportunity to make their fortune. However, the control previously enjoyed by the burgesses had been somewhat curtailed since the formation of the Swansea Council in 1835.

A considerable number of the town's burgesses were merchants and traders, responsible for the wholesaling of goods, and then selling them on to the shopkeepers, many of whom had leased their shops from the burgesses, and who focused on acquiring goods at the lowest possible cost and selling them for a profit.

The shopkeeper constantly adjusted his inventory to stay relevant, and manage his business within tight profit margins; success or failure depended greatly upon his understanding of market trends and his adeptness in accurately assessing price shifts.

Shopkeepers and their families often lived above or behind their shop premises, renting spare rooms to their shop assistants or apprentices. Most shops were poorly lit and ventilated, so it was not uncommon for their business to be conducted from a wooden counter extending onto the road or pavement outside. Most shops were owned or leased by men, with some exceptions, including widows of shop owners; indeed, in the early part of the century, women were not permitted to own property or sign contracts. Despite constraints on ownership, women did manage stores such as millinery shops, seamstress shops, and dressmaking establishments, whilst others worked as street vendors, selling items from a basket or operating shop stalls where they sold goods they either purchased wholesale or made themselves.

Fishmongers, butchers, bakers, milk sellers and the like represented a dwindling number of independent retailers who sold their goods and services. It was not unknown for traders to engage in deceptive practices

to stretch their profits. Sulphuric acid was added to beer, sawdust from ash and elder trees was added to tea, ground-up alum, peas, and beans were used to bulk up what was sold as 'pure flour', whilst used tea leaves were 'recovered' by generously sprinkling them with black lead before being resold, all in attempts to maximise their gains. Customers buying milk brought their jugs to the shop, where they would be served directly from a churn, and took their chances on whether or not it had been diluted.

It was not until after the second Swansea Cholera epidemic in 1849 (the first was in 1830), and the passing of the Public Health Act of 1849, that Swansea Council set up a Local Board of Health (in 1850). From that time, local newspapers often reported on traders being fined for misrepresenting their products to the public.

At the beginning of the 1800s, goods were typically not priced at all, so customers had to enquire about the cost, allowing room for negotiation, and shopkeepers would adjust prices upwards or downwards based on the perceived affluence of the customer to secure a sale. Furthermore, customers were not allowed to handle the merchandise without assistance from the shop's clerk. All items were kept behind the counter, in drawers, or cases, out of the customer's reach, for fear of theft.

By the 1830s, significant changes began to occur as more shop owners displayed items on counters and shelves, with clearly marked individual prices, and by the 1850s, this was the norm.

As a direct consequence of the Industrial Revolution, a flood of affordable, mass-produced goods poured forth from workshops and factories throughout Britain, Europe, and beyond. The opening of Swansea's North and South Docks meant that, in addition to receiving copper barques, the town was regularly visited by vessels laden with tea, coffee, silks, spices, oil, preserved meats and manufactured products. Goods made elsewhere in Britain were abundant in the local market, and stock could be quickly renewed thanks to the ever-growing rail links.

In Swansea, various emporiums with a plethora of offerings populated Castle Street, Castle Square, Wind Street, Goat Street, Oxford Street and other adjoining streets (the following examples are from 1835-1845):

‘The Golden Harp’ was trying to sell ‘Linen and Woollen Draper, Haberdashery, Hosiery, Silk Mercery, Hats and Gloves at a ‘full 25% under the usual prices’.

‘H. I. Jones’ offered ‘Shawls and handkerchiefs of every description, printed muslins, gingham, silks, parasols, veils etc as well as West of England Cloths and Cassimeres, and London hats of the best quality’

‘The Emporium’ offered ‘Carpeting, Moreens, Irish Linens, Sheetting, Woollen Clothes and Trousering, as well as London and Paris Hats, Caps etc

‘The Golden Key’ offered ‘Brussels, Kidderminster, Venetian, and Victoria Felt Carpets, plus West of England Cloth, Gossamer and Felt Hats’.

The neighbouring **‘China and Glass Rooms’** shop offered ‘A good assortment of Breakfast, Tea, Dinner and Dessert Services.’

‘The Foreign Wine Vaults’ was trying hard to sell French Wines from what appears to be a dubious source, and apologising for the taste of the previous stock!

‘Walton and Company’s New Tea Shop’ on Castle St, opposite the Wheatsheaf Inn, offered a ‘huge choice of Black Teas, Green Tea, Mixed Teas and Coffees’

‘J. Lyon, Clock and Watchmaker’ of ‘St. Mary (or Butter) Street - ‘Working Jeweller and Engraver, Musical Boxes repaired, Door and Coffin Plates engraved, Sword Blades and Steel Articles of every description embossed with Arms, Crests, Ciphers, etc.’

‘Eli James’ of Island House, ‘respectfully informed his Friends and the Public’ that the stock of his ‘Declining Drapery Business’ - ‘the whole of his extensive and well-assorted stock’ will be sold at ‘Very Reduced Prices’. A month later he was advertising his ‘new stock’!

At the **‘The Lounge and Promenade’**, a fancy title temporarily given to No.3 Temple Street, ‘Licensed Hawker No.2105’ Mr Barras Mier was offering ‘Rosewood Desks and Workboxes, Musical Clocks and Boxes, Old and Modern Paintings, China and Opal Ornaments, Sheffield Plated

Articles, Jewellery - Foreign and English, Berlin Iron Jewellery, Bronze and Lava Ornaments, besides hundreds of other articles.'

The Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London, held in 1851, further fuelled Britain's thirst for new and often exotic goods, with thousands of new products on show but not on sale. Whilst plate glass had been available for some years, following the 300,000 panes of plate glass showcased as part of the main structure of Crystal Palace, the now cheaper and more available product was swiftly introduced into the marketplace, and soon most local shops featured plate glass windows that brightened interiors and showed off the merchandise prominently displayed within the store. In addition, nicely painted shop fronts appeared, often with an alluring shop window designed to draw in passers-by. These changes marked a shift towards a more modern and customer-friendly shopping experience.

Many shops moved from singular offerings or services towards a more general nature, often with a peculiar assortment of products gathered under one roof, and catered to every social class. Shops had distinct layouts, yet they shared common features. Typically, a 'modern' shop would have a glass door or window to attract customers. Inside, there would be a well-lit counter area where transactions took place, surrounded by racks filled with merchandise. A staff member would be on hand to assist customers, ensuring they found what they needed in the shop's offerings. Despite differences in appearance and ambience, these shops served as vital hubs of commerce, catering to the diverse needs of society.

'By the 1850s, Britain had changed. It was now a more industrialised and urbanised society. The middle class, larger, richer, and more powerful than thirty years earlier, sought to establish itself culturally. Mass production made goods more affordable to the middle class, who forged and performed their identities partly through consumption and display. Literacy was much higher, and books and magazines were more plentiful and cheaper, thanks to the development of machine-made paper, the rotary steam press, and power-binding. Britain was now a middle-class nation.' Susie L. Steinbach (6)

Wales had become the first industrialised nation in the world, and few British towns experienced such rapid growth in population, significance, and commercial activity as Swansea did in the first half of the 19th century, transitioning from a quaint seaside resort to a bustling hub of industry.

As its importance as a leading centre of industry in Victorian Britain became ever more apparent, the town's population (including its outlying areas) rose to approximately 20,000 by 1850. To further enhance its position, the Great Western Railway Station at High Street was inaugurated in the same year, whilst the North Dock was officially opened in 1852, followed by the South Dock in 1857.

To accommodate the increased growth in both business and population, the town saw an influx of companies setting up or relocating to the area. This also led to a considerable increase in new shops, hotels and inns. All these establishments needed staff, and for the first time on such a large scale, many of those employed were women.

Teeming with a diverse array of industrial works, Swansea had rightly earned its reputation as the 'metallurgical centre of the world' or Copperopolis. Yet despite the town's remarkable progress, it lagged behind other thriving towns and cities when it came to the development of the town itself, and in particular, its main thoroughfares that, in contrast to its booming industrial sector, remained stuck in the early 1800s.

By the 1870s, there were nearly 300,000 shops in the UK, a figure that would double over the next thirty years, fuelled by a combination of factors, including the rise of the middle class, improved transportation networks, and the insatiable appetite of consumers for a wider array of goods and services.

2 - The Coming of the Department Store

Many of today's department stores have evolved into cultural institutions, but their origins are far more modest and rooted in a time when shopping bore little resemblance to today's experience.

By the end of the 1700s, clear retail markets had emerged in the larger cities of Britain and Europe. With shopping swiftly evolving into a fashionable pastime among the affluent, high-end goods were in demand. Rather than being sent from places like London or Bristol, where these establishments enjoyed regular business from a wealthy clientele that indulged in leisurely browsing for luxury items, the well-to-do were asking for such emporiums to be opened across the provinces, resulting in the opening of shops by jewellers, tailors, milliners, furniture-makers, and many others.

By the middle of the 19th century, many budding entrepreneurs recognised that their rapidly developing female customer base was interested in a wider array of goods. Keen to expand their retail empires, they acquired adjacent properties and connected them internally. This approach inevitably allowed for individual sections to be created within the premises, enabling more efficient use of existing space that often facilitated further business growth. This initiative created a completely novel retail concept: the department store.

Unlike some traditional shops that still bartered on prices, in these emporiums prices were marked clearly to provide transparency. Additionally, customers could request refunds, adding to the convenience and appeal of this new shopping experience. With the emergence of a wider array of products, including disposable goods and mass-produced clothing, stores experienced a surge in diversity and availability, however, by the 1870s they accounted for only 1% of Britain's shops. Nevertheless, this expansion prompted the need for more consumers to sustain the burgeoning consumer economy, and Britain's newly affluent middle class fitted the bill.

The owners of some of the larger shops opted to repurpose their storage and accommodation areas into additional selling spaces to offer a diverse array of goods under one roof. They often featured separate areas for ladies and gentlemen to better focus on the customers' wants and needs,

allowing for discretion while browsing. As the significance of displaying goods from outside the building became clearer, "purpose-built" department stores emerged.

Often vast in comparison to traditional stores, the new department stores offered a diverse range of goods all under one roof, organised into distinct departments, in a safe, well-lit, and welcoming environment. The Bon Marché in Brixton, established in 1877 on Ferndale Road, London SW9, is regarded as the first purpose-built department store, which included in its design 50 staff bedrooms, reflecting awareness of the requirement for staff to live on the premises.

As the number of shops in each town grew, so did the requirement for female shop assistants, and as many young women opted for shop work, by 1890, there were over 200,000 'shop girls' employed in Britain. Perceived as more glamorous than rural, service or factory work, the pay was low and hours were long, with staff expected to work 6 days a week from early morning until late evening.

A typical department store operated with a rigid, regimental-like hierarchy. Department managers, senior supervisors, floorwalkers and buyers were at the top, salespeople and clerks in the middle, and junior assistants and apprentices at the bottom. Male staff were prevalent in the furniture and hardware departments, as well as in management roles. Young and unmarried women were employed in the clothing and accessories departments that catered to the rising middle-class female shoppers. Promotion opportunities were limited, especially for female staff, who were expected to leave upon marriage. While staff did not wear uniforms as such, they were expected to dress in black or dark blue.

The use of first names between staff members was frowned upon, and many department stores used a naming system to reflect the store's hierarchy. Senior staff would use more formal titles like 'Mr' or 'Mrs', and junior staff were often addressed just by their surname, e.g. 'Thomas' rather than 'Mr Thomas'. Female staff were commonly referred to as 'young ladies' regardless of age, whilst male staff in junior roles were called 'young men'.

Many stores used alternative 'store surnames' as part of their system. For example, during working hours Mr Williams (the person's real name) may well have been known within the store as 'Mr Wallace', the name

prominently seen via the badge on his jacket. In contrast, Harrods staff were known by their number rather than name when dealing with customers. The impersonal numbering system helped to maintain a professional distance between staff and customers.

Most retail jobs were 'live in', and, according to Christopher P. Hosgood (7) shop assistants were 'absolutely powerless and helpless' as young employees that lived on the premises, often in dormitory-style accommodation, could be monitored closely.

Numerous early department stores, including iconic establishments like Charles Jenner (1838) in Scotland, John Lewis (1864), Whiteleys (1867) and Arthur Liberty (1875) in London, as well as Lewis Lewis in Swansea (1866) were established by drapers, textile merchants who possessed a deep understanding of the tastes and purchasing power of middle-class women, a demographic that would ultimately drive the department store to unprecedented levels of luxury and success across Europe and the United States.

Fortnum & Mason, established in 1707, and Harrods, founded in 1849, began as grocery stores, although before entering the grocery market, Charles Henry Harrod ran a draper's shop for 25 years.

Amidst the predominantly male ownership of the early department stores, there was one notable exception. In 1850, Elizabeth Harvey inherited her late husband Benjamin's linen shop and entered into a partnership with store manager James Nichols, who had married Benjamin Harvey's niece some years before. They aimed to sell luxury goods via their store Harvey Nichols, which occupied the entire block between Seville Street and Sloane Street. In 1889, the existing space was demolished to make way for a new, purpose-built department store, before it relocated to its present location on Knightsbridge in 1904.

In 1866, Lewis Lewis, a draper from Llanegwad in Carmarthen, took on the lease of 27 High Street in Swansea. By 1873, he had rebuilt no. 27, which he had extended by buying nos. 28 and 29. Together, these properties shared a 75-foot-long shop frontage of what in the 20th century became better known as the Lewis Lewis Department Store. To ensure his showrooms were spacious, he also leased nos. 9-15 on King Street (now Upper Kings Lane). After his death, additional space continued to be added to the store via the purchase of 90 and 91 Orchard Street.

One of the first stores in Swansea to utilise fixed pricing, Lewis Lewis introduced a 'store to door' delivery service to the houses of its Swansea customers, and a service to the Railway Station for those customers who had travelled to the store from outside Swansea.

Thought to have had the first escalator installed in a Welsh store it is also fondly remembered for its overhead 'cash railway', a system of rails, balls and canisters that moved orders, cash and receipts between departments, accounts and customers. In 'Under Milk Wood', Swansea poet Dylan Thomas's 'play for voices', he evokes his childhood memories of the cash railways used in Swansea stores, perhaps those he had heard in both the Lewis Lewis and Ben Evans stores when describing 'Mog Edwards' drapery store, 'where the change hums on wires.'

Divided into four departments, Harding, Howell & Co's Grand Fashionable Magazine, established in 1796 at 89 Pall Mall in St James's, London holds a strong claim to the title of the world's first department store, it was 'Whiteleys' department store that first claimed to be the biggest in the world.

Founded by Yorkshireman William Whiteley, who launched a drapery shop at 31 Westbourne Grove in 1863, the business had rapidly expanded to occupy an entire row of shops within four years. His new department store featured 17 distinct departments, and his motto was 'Everything from a Pin to an Elephant.' Dressmaking operations commenced in 1868, marking the expansion of the store's offerings beyond drapery.

In 1872, the premises employed 622 individuals, with an additional 1,000 workers engaged outside the store, and the company ventured into new territory adding a housing agency and refreshment room, marking their first ventures outside traditional retail. Whiteley further diversified by introducing food sales in 1875, and in 1876, a building and decorating department was added to the store's repertoire, a profitable move as local properties needed regular repainting.

Despite facing staunch opposition from smaller tradesmen as well as local authorities regarding his ambitious plans, William Whiteley, the self-styled 'Universal Provider', persevered and his business continued to thrive, bolstered by a delivery service that extended up to 25 miles from the store. Acclaimed as 'an immense symposium of the arts and industries of the nation and of the world', in 1887 it fell victim to a catastrophic fire and

was destroyed in what is regarded as one of the most significant blazes in London's history. Allegedly caused by disgruntled competitors and tradesmen, this incident marked the culmination of a series of four previous fires that had plagued the business since 1882.

A new store was soon rebuilt, and by 1890, it had expanded significantly employing over 6,000 staff members. Many of these employees resided in company-owned dormitories and were segregated by gender. They worked long hours from 7 am to 11 pm, six days a week, and were subject to strict adherence to 176 company rules. Although live-in staff had access to reading rooms and various company social groups, Whiteley's regimented work methods ensured that his business was continually in the crosshairs of the new trade union groups that had sprung up to protect workers' rights, as were the other department stores of that time. In 1899, the business went public on the London Stock Exchange, and at the turn of the century, 'Whiteleys' was recognised as the leading department store in London.

In a tragic turn of events, in 1907, William Whiteley was shot and killed in his own office by Horace George Rayner (8) who had asserted to be his illegitimate son under the alias 'Cecil Whiteley'.

Following his death the board, which included two of his real sons, made significant changes to the company's direction, allowing the leases on the various Westbourne Grove properties to expire and moving the business into a newly constructed, purpose-built store on Queens Road (now Queensway). At the grand opening of the new Whiteleys store on November 21, 1911, the Lord Mayor of London officiated an event that attracted thousands of attendees, during which it was proclaimed that Whiteleys was 'the largest shop in the world'

Today, Harrods occupies a 5-acre site with 330 departments that cover 1.1 million sq. ft (100,000 m²) of retail space. With the motto 'Omnia Omnibus Ubique', Latin for 'All things for all people, everywhere', it is styled as 'The World's Leading Luxury Department Store & Food Emporium' and is one of the largest and most famous department stores in the world.

In 1824, Charles Henry Harrod began his entrepreneurial journey at the age of 25, founding a business at No. 228 Borough High Street in Southwark. Operating under various descriptions such as a draper,

mercator, and haberdasher, he managed this enterprise until at least 1831. In 1834, he ventured into the wholesale grocery business in London's East End, establishing a presence in Stepney at No. 4 Cable Street, with a particular focus on tea. In 1849, he assumed control of a small shop in the district of Brompton, situated on the site of the current Harrods store. After seeing the opportunities presented by the Great Exhibition of 1851 in nearby Hyde Park, Harrod seized the opportunity to expand his business.

Initially operating out of a single room with just two assistants and a messenger boy, Harrod's son, Charles Digby Harrod, played a pivotal role in transforming the business into a thriving retail operation. Their store diversified its offerings, selling products such as medicines, perfumes, stationery, fruits, and vegetables. By 1881, it had experienced significant growth, acquiring adjacent buildings and employing over one hundred individuals.

The store's fortunes took a catastrophic turn in early December 1883 when it was consumed by flames and reduced to ashes. Nevertheless, Charles Harrod fulfilled all his Christmas delivery commitments and achieved record profits during that period. A new building was soon erected on the same site, and he began extending credit to the stores' most valued customers for the first time, reflecting the store's commitment to customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Following a chance meeting in London with businessman Edgar Cohen, Charles Harrod sold his interest in the store for £120,000 (equivalent to £14,110,759 in 2021) via a stock market flotation in 1889. The new entity was named Harrod's Stores Limited, marking a significant milestone in the company's evolution. Sir Alfred James Newton assumed the role of Chairman, with Richard Burbidge serving as Managing Director.

On 16th November 1898, Harrods unveiled England's first 'moving staircase,' known as an escalator, at their Brompton Road stores. This innovative device consisted of a woven leather conveyor belt-like unit, adorned with a mahogany, silver and plate-glass balustrade. Those customers brave enough to experience this novel mode of transportation were offered brandy at the top of the escalator 'to revive them after their ordeal.'

Financier William Mendel, who joined the board in 1891, was instrumental in securing funds to support the company's expansion efforts. By 1905, Harrods had become the largest department store in Europe, employing 3,000 staff and achieving an annual turnover of £2 million. In 1917, Richard Burbidge was succeeded by his son Woodman Burbidge as Managing Director. Woodman Burbidge, in turn, passed the mantle to his son Richard in 1935, ensuring a legacy of leadership continuity within the Burbidge family.

The store experienced several changes in ownership over the ensuing years, with House of Fraser acquiring it in 1959. Later, in 1985, the Fayed brothers purchased House of Fraser, thereby gaining control of Harrods. In May 2010, the store was sold to Qatar Holdings, the sovereign wealth fund of the State of Qatar, which remains its current owner as of this writing.

From 1909 onwards, Harrods faced competition from a formidable rival--Selfridges. Founded by American Harry Gordon Selfridge, Selfridges quickly became a prominent fixture on Oxford Street, boasting a magnificent baroque-style department store bearing its founder's name. Selfridges' store featured 100 departments, amenities such as restaurants, reading and writing rooms, refreshment areas, and even a rooftop garden. Selfridges also distinguished itself with its highly trained staff, whose selling and product demonstration skills further enhanced the store's appeal and reputation. In 1927, Selfridge purchased Whiteleys for £10 million.

However, it is a lesser-known department store in London—William Tarn & Co.—that will lead us to the main subject of this book.

William Tarn & Co. was a prominent department store located at Nos. 165, 167, 169, 171 & 173 Newington Causeway & New Kent Road, in the Elephant and Castle district of Southwark, London. The business traces its origins back to a drapery shop established by William Tarn around 1799.

By 1841, Tarn & Co. had evolved into a multifaceted enterprise, listed in various London trade directories as 'cabinet makers, bedstead manufacturers, upholsterers, furniture dealers, silk mercers, linen drapers, and general house furnishers.'

The expansion solidified its position as the largest retailer in Elephant and Castle, a bustling shopping area often referred to as ‘The Piccadilly of South London.’ (9):

‘In the eighties and nineties of the last century, [it] was regarded as a centre of fashion. Well-to-do residents of the South London suburbs used to drive in their carriages and pairs to shop at Messrs Tarns’, but about 1910 this store closed down.’



Postcard - Author's collection

At William Tarn & Co., the young Ben Evans acquired valuable experience in the department store business, as did two of his most trusted associates and future Managing Directors of Ben Evans & Co., John White and Meredith Thomas.

3 - Benjamin ‘Ben’ Evans and B. Evans and Co.

Benjamin Evans was born in 1838, the third son of the late Mr Thomas Evans, a farmer from Maesyrihw, Llansadwrn, Carmarthenshire, from a family of freeholders. Following his father’s untimely passing in 1842, leaving a widow and four young children, Ben attributed much of his subsequent success to the invaluable lessons imparted by his mother Margaret during his upbringing, and she remained his most trusted adviser until her passing in 1874. While he received some education from the local district, he primarily relied on self-education to forge his path forward.

He left home at the age of 12 and moved to the small village of Reynoldston on the Gower Peninsula near Swansea, where he gained his first exposure to the general drapery trade whilst apprenticed at the small store of his uncle Mr John Rees, his mother’s brother. At the age of 16, he sought to gain experience working in an urban environment, and his next move was to work for his father’s brother, Mr Benjamin Evans, who owned and managed ‘London House’ in Newport and was considered to be the largest drapery concern in South Wales.

Another move followed within two or three years, when eager to broaden his knowledge, he ventured to London and secured a position at William Tarn & Co., a notable South London retail establishment. The 1861 census documents show that Benjamin Evans from Llangadog in Carmarthenshire, aged 22, was ‘living in’ on the premises of W. Tarn & Co. in Newington Causeway.

During his two years at Tarn & Co., he dedicated himself to mastering the business, refining his skills and enhancing his knowledge of the trade. While there, he developed a strong interest in the French language. Eager to further his expertise in drapery, he relocated to Paris, where he secured a position with Messrs Arbelot, one of France’s prestigious silk firms. His commitment and skill earned him the admiration of his colleagues and superiors. After returning to Britain as a representative for one of Lyon’s prominent silk houses, Monsieur Arbelot continued to inquire about his welfare through British visitors to his store.

In early April 1861, Benjamin Evans of Newport established a branch of his business at ‘Swansea House’, No. 2 Temple Street, having taken over the business of ‘Mr King.’ The store was to ‘be entrusted to experienced

managers, and the showrooms, as before, will be under the superintendence of Mr King and Miss Baskerville'. The store reopened on April 16th 1861, trading as 'Ben Evans & Co.', a partnership made up of Benjamin Evans, Henry David John, and Ben Evans. Mr Evan Evans, the brother of the young Ben Evans, was also employed in the new enterprise. The announcement of this partnership was encapsulated in a circular issued by Mr Benjamin Evans (the uncle) which heralded the beginning of a new era for the business. (10) It stated:

'I take this opportunity of announcing my having taken into partnership Mr H. D. John and my nephew Mr Benjamin Evans, by whom the business will henceforth be managed under the style of Ben Evans and Co.'

However, the business did not run as planned. A formal Dissolution of Partnership occurred on 3rd July 1863 (11) with all outstanding claims on the business to be sent to and settled by H. D. John, who remained at No. 2 Temple Street and traded as (or at least advertised as) 'H. D. John, late B. Evans & Co.'

It is unclear if the ownership of 'Swansea House' was retained by B. Evans & Co. and the shop then leased to Mr John, or if Benjamin Evans (the elder) retained a financial stake in the business with 'young' Ben Evans. Nevertheless, the Lewis Bros. & Co. drapers shop at 'Sydenham House', No. 3 Temple Street was purchased and Evan Evans took over the day-to-day running of the store.

A Fire in Temple Street

Tragedy struck on Thursday 10th May 1866 when a devastating fire ravaged No. 2 Temple Street, claiming the lives of several individuals including Mr John, and damaging the properties on either side, namely the Queen Insurance Company at No. 1 Temple Street, managed by Watkin T. Hurndall a 'Valuer of Draper's Stock', and the B. Evans & Co. store at No. 3 Temple Street, managed by Evan Evans.

Mr John's drapery store was staffed by six female assistants, four male assistants, and two apprentices, whilst he also employed two servants. Mr John, his wife and children, four female assistants, and two servants stayed overnight at the premises, while the other staff members slept elsewhere. John Wareham, the store's cashier, mentioned that around 10:30 p.m. on

Wednesday he handed over approximately £30 to Mr John, turned off the gas in the shop at the meter, and then left.

Two of the female assistants, Miss Annie Wooton and Miss Sarah Deakin, shared a bedroom at the top of the house. Annie Wooton later stated that they went to bed around 11 p.m. on Wednesday, and she noticed Mr John at his bedroom door. She fell asleep but was awakened by Miss Deakin, who informed her that the house was on fire. She rushed downstairs until she reached the shop door, but couldn't exit the premises due to the dense smoke. Peering through the skylight at the back of the building, she noticed flames below, blocking her escape in that direction.

She then hurried into the sitting room, where Mr John appeared holding the cashbox. Mr John opened the window and called out to bystanders to bring the fire escape, subsequently brought by Police Constable Owen John, Sergeant Wilson, and Inspector Ball after 'about five minutes'. During this time, Mr John dashed up and down the stairs several times, and passed a small child to Inspector Ball, whilst Miss Wooton was rescued using the fire escape. Miss Wooton said she was unaware of any escape route via the roof.

Witness Mr David Hopkins, who lived opposite No. 2 Temple St, recounted that he could see Mr and Mrs John at the window, or at least 'I presumed the figure to be Mr John as he was in his shirt sleeves'. He heard Mrs John cry out 'For God's sake, bring the fire escape to save my child' while holding a child in her arms. After Miss Wooton and an infant were rescued, he said that he did not see anyone else at the windows, expressing surprise that no ladder was brought to the second-floor window adjacent to the one from which individuals were rescued.

He believed that if prompt action had been taken, Mr and Mrs John might have been saved. Specifically, he suggested that if the inspector had entered the room upon his initial ascent and another person had followed to assist with the rescue, the outcome might have been different.

On the street outside, there had been some discussion as to whether Mr and Mrs John had escaped the fire, as one bystander stated to the police that she knew the couple well and had seen them outside the property at the time of the blaze. confusing as to who was or was not still inside the building.

After the store was razed to the ground, it was discovered that eight souls had perished along with the shop and premises: Henry David John, together with Louisa John his wife, Esther John his young daughter, Sarah Deakin, Fanny Smith, Margaret Esther Davies, Catherine Howells, and Annie Edwards.

Whilst the source of the fire was undetermined, such was the ferocity of the blaze that in the inquest held on May 18th (12) the Coroner stated: ‘...the said Henry David John, together with the said other portions, were then and there suffocated and burnt, but the remains thereof, having been inspected by the said Jurors, cannot be individually distinguished or identified, and so the Jurors say that by the means aforesaid the said Henry David John came to his death by misfortune.’

The incident was so serious that in addition to the verdict of ‘Accidental Death’, the Jury recommended:

1. That in future the escape in this town shall be so placed that it may at once be used by the public or by the police. That a second escape should be provided, and a catch sheet, as well as a small crowbar and a speaking trumpet.
2. That the fire bell has been, and is liable to be, mistaken for other bells in frequent use in the town, and therefore a special toned bell should be substituted.
- 3: That every exertion was used by the members of the police force and that the water supply was ample; lastly, that Inspector Ball performed his duties to the entire satisfaction of the jury.

In the days before the inquest, the Swansea and Glamorgan Herald (13) noted that, due to spectator interest, the site was still guarded by the police.

Whilst the properties of Messrs Hurndall and Evans had received ‘considerable damage’, Mr Hurndall placed an advert stating that his shop, although ‘damaged by fire and water’, had reopened for business.

It also reported that Swansea’s Head Constable Allison received the following letter from Mr Evans Evans, whose premises were next to those destroyed by the fire:

3, Temple Street, Swansea,
17th May, 1866

Dear Sir,

Under a sense of deep obligation to yourself and every member of the police force on duty in Temple Street, on the unfortunate morning of Thursday last, I beg to forward you a cheque for £10, for distribution amongst your men—not for a moment deeming such a sum anything like a sufficient reward for their valuable services in saving my property from utter destruction (which I cannot but attribute to your prompt and judicious arrangements, and to the zeal and activity displayed by your men in carrying them out,) but merely as a mark of my gratitude and appreciation of your and their conduct.

I am Dear Sir, yours faithfully and obliged,

EVAN EVANS —To Mr Allison, Head Constable.

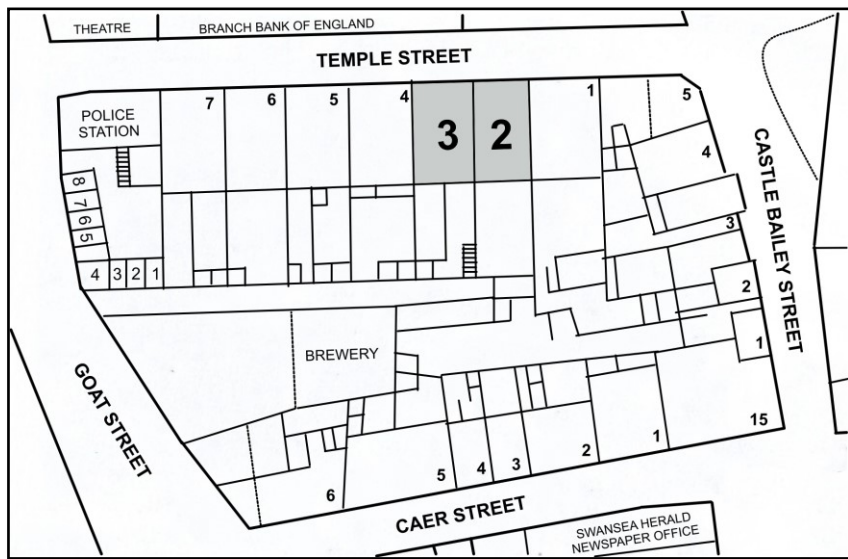
In the days following the fire, the following appeared in the local press (14):

THE GOLD FINDERS - A PROLIFIC HEAP OF RUBBISH:

The old axiom that 'It's an ill will that blows nobody good' has again been verified in our town. On Saturday last, a quantity of rubbish -the remains of the fire in Temple St - was carted away from the street by order of the police authorities, onto the beach, near the Infirmary, and early on Sunday morning, and during several following days, hundreds of people have been busy searching the debris for anything they might find, and search, in many instances was not without reward, for during Sunday, nearly £20 in coins of different value, was recovered, besides a large quantity of valuable articles in jewellery, and other small trinkets - such as are generally sold in a draper's establishment. At the time we write the search has not entirely given up.'

Ben Evans returned from France to Swansea in 1866 and assumed full control of 'Evans & Co.', soon trading out of both Nos. 2 and 3 Temple Street. In the aftermath of the fire, Evan Evans' health was profoundly affected, and at only 30 yr. old, he succumbed to his illness in 1867.

The block of properties in the diagram (between Temple Street, Goat Street, and Castle Bailey Street) shows at least 25 street-facing properties and a similar number of internal workshops and warehouses, with numerous different leaseholders and freeholders.



Ben Evans & Company - Nos. 2 and 3 Temple St

By 1869 Ben Evans had purchased substantial warehouse facilities behind his premises.

Early evidence of Ben Evans' understanding of the importance of staff welfare and morale was demonstrated in an article in the Cambrian newspaper on the 8th of July 1870, which described his employee's annual outing:

ANNUAL OUTING.-The whole of the assistants of Messrs B. Evans, and Co., the well-known drapers of No. 2 and 3, Temple Street, Swansea, yesterday (Thursday) afternoon enjoyed their annual picnic at Park Mill. Etc

The party, consisting of about twenty-five ladies and gentlemen started from the establishment in Temple Street in a large break and three horses, which had been supplied by Mr Williams, livery stable keeper, and under

an experienced Jehu the party arrived safely at their destination, the lovely scenery on the route being much enjoyed.

After an excellent tea at the pleasant hostelry, the Gower Inn, the whole party enjoyed the remainder of the day in true picnic style, some really good vocal harmony adding much to the pleasures of the day. Mr Benjamin Evans was present, and it was evident that the most kind and cordial feelings exist between the employer and the employed. Mr Evans has since his establishment in Swansea, annually given a treat of this character to the whole of his assistants, and we can only say generally on behalf of those who are so closely pent-up in establishments of this kind that we wish the example of Mr Evans was more universally adopted. Such treats are thoroughly appreciated by the employees, as it proves to them that the principal takes a deep interest in their welfare, and where this is seen and felt, good practical results are sure to follow. During the evening Mr Evans was sincerely thanked by his assistants for the treat which he had so kindly afforded them.

A report in the Cambrian in July 1881 describing the B. Evans & Co. annual outing offered clues as to the company's growth, with six large vehicles needed to transport the staff.

'For some years past it has been the thoughtfully kind practice of the Squire of Penllergare to throw open his grounds in the summer months to holidaymakers, and to place at their disposal the resources of woods and water and gardens. The members of the Working Men's Club have more than once availed themselves of this liberality, and yesterday the same courtesy was extended to the large number of employees of B. Evans and Co., drapers, etc., Temple and Caer Streets, Swansea, who were accompanied by the chief of the firm, Mr Benjamin Evans, and the heads of departments, Messrs White, Blanchard, etc.

A very large party left town soon after mid-day in six large breaks, and arrived at Penllergare Grounds in good time, where they were welcomed by Mr and Mrs Llewelyn, who considerately provided what was lacking in the way of tables, etc. In the course of the afternoon, Mr and Mrs Llewelyn placed themselves at the head of an interested group to make a peregrination to the points of greatest attraction, and to explain what otherwise would have been less enjoyed because less understood.

Before Mr and Mrs Llewelyn left the ground, Mr B. Evans proposed a hearty vote of thanks to them for their courteous reception. Into a few sentences the speaker crowded references to the scientific, the socially administrative, and the philanthropic services rendered to the country by the Penllergare family, and the cheers of the picnickers echoed their thanks for permission to see so lovely a place.'

The centre of Swansea town witnessed a high turnover of drapers' shops, cabinet makers, and furnishers, most of whom were based in or around Goat Street, Castle Street, and Temple Street, and amidst the many fake 'closing down sales' was genuine hardship. Keen to establish themselves as reputable vendors, traders relied heavily on offering credit. However, due to the terms demanded, this practice threatened to put many of them out of business within one or two years, with some shops closing within months, not even making it to the end of their lease agreements.

Falling into debt was viewed as a moral failing, and the origins of credit reporting in the United Kingdom can be traced back to 1803 when a group of London tailors began sharing information about customers who failed to settle their debts. During the harsh economic conditions of the Victorian era, many people resorted to using credit or pawning personal belongings like clothing to obtain funds for necessities such as food. These loans would then have to be repaid with interest.

Indebtedness was treated as a criminal offence, and those unable to pay their debts could end up incarcerated in debtors' prisons, where they were required to work and pay for their upkeep until the debt was cleared, either by themselves or their families. Imprisoning debtors was eventually abolished in 1869, marking the end of an era where debt was criminalised and seen as a moral transgression rather than a financial issue. This shift in attitudes towards debt and credit paved the way for more modern approaches to lending and borrowing in the UK.

In 1872, Ben Evans introduced the 'Ready-Money Principle' to his business, abandoning the traditional credit method used for many years. Neighbouring businesses doubted his logic, and his friends strongly advised him against it, believing that customers would prefer to buy from outlets that offered credit.

Within months he managed to eliminate all the debt associated with his business. This enabled him to pay his creditors more quickly and increased

his cash flow, allowing him to negotiate more favourable purchasing terms. He often bought up stock from traders forced out of, or exiting, the market at very competitive rates, while offering his stock at 'low prices with an acceptable profit margin' at a level that customers were willing to pay in cash. Seven years later, he thanked his customers for their ongoing patronage in an open letter featured in *The Cambrian*. (15)

In 1874, a warehouse behind the stores at Nos. 2 and 3 was added, accessed via 'Temple Lane', an internal alleyway previously accessed via Goat Street. After some internal changes, they were opened as part of the larger store. In the following year, the company purchased the lease and stock of Cook, Son and Co. at No. 1 Temple Street, while in 1878, No. 4 Temple Street was acquired from Mrs Roberts, mantle maker, milliner, and costumier.

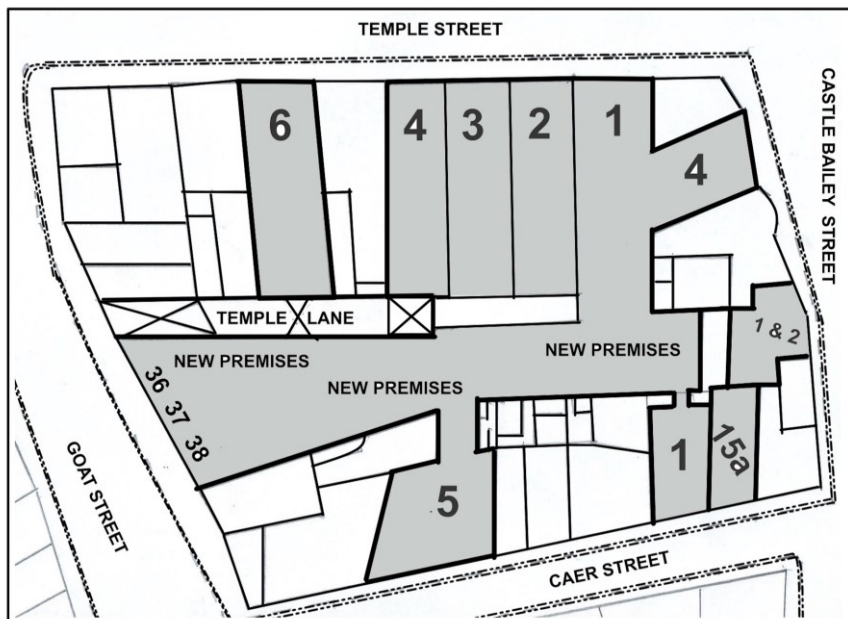
In July 1882, the firm purchased the stock and premises of Messrs Morgan William & Company at No. 6 Temple Street. Mrs Hughes' 'Millinery, Silk and Shawl Establishment', at No. 4 Castle Street (aka Castle Bailey St) was also purchased later the same year, and in 1883, Ben Evans bought 'The Sporting Depot Company' at No. 1/2 Castle Bailey St, although the store was inaccessible from the front of the building.

No. 1 Caer Street was acquired in the same year and transformed into the 'travelling requisites and fancy leather goods department'. Ben Evans continued his ambitious expansion plans by purchasing the adjacent property at 15/15A Castle Square in 1884, although this acquisition did not offer direct access to the rest of the store from the front of the building, it was a vital part of Ben Evans' plans.

On the afternoon of 17th January 1884, Temple Street was the scene of much interest, as a 'great crowd' gathered to witness the trial of 'an ingenious and simple escape' where people utilised a rope to let themselves down quickly and safely from the upper windows of Messrs B. Evans and Co. establishment into the street. A reporter for the *Cambrian* newspaper observed that 'if such simple means had been at hand when the great Temple Street fatal fire occurred some years ago, eight lives might have been saved.'

4 - The Opening of the Goat Street Store

On the 4th of September 1886, Nos. 36, 37 and 38 Goat Street were officially opened, enabling the firm to add a substantial extension to its growing Cabinet Furniture business. Linking internally to No. 6 Temple Street and No. 5 Caer Street on the ground floor, the First floor on Goat Street was utilised solely for home furnishings.



Ben Evans Store - 1886 Opening

The following description is one researched, compiled, and rewritten by the author from various reports of the day, as they included some contradictions and errors. Sketches and diagrams are added by the author for further explanation. (16) (17) (18)

The site of what was once ‘The Plas’ now hosts Swansea’s finest business edifice. Once the palatial residence of the esteemed Cradock family, this location has been transformed into the premier business establishment in the town. During the construction of Messrs B. Evans and Co.’s new premises in Goat Street, a portion of a wall that remained from ‘The Plas’ had to be dismantled, a reminder of the historical significance of the ground upon which now stands the largest drapery emporium in Wales.

Designed by the architectural firm of Messrs. Seward and Thomas of Swansea and Cardiff, the grand and imposing Goat Street store frontage dwarfs the neighbouring houses. Standing at a height of 60 feet from the pavement below, the building's silhouette is punctuated by three intricately designed freestone gables, with the central one bearing a distinctive oval panel inscribed with the building's erection date of 1885. The façade is supported by six imposing pillars crafted from Portland stone, with the same material extending to the fascia and cornice above the shop front. An ingenious touch is the inclusion of a spring sunblind, strategically placed to shield the shop windows from the sun's glare. Above, the upper section of the front showcases buff Ebbw Vale bricks, tastefully accented with red brick bands and window arches. The keystones, cornices, and window sills are meticulously crafted from face stone, enhancing the overall aesthetic.

Upon entering the building from the street, the interior lives up to the promise of its exterior grandeur, ensuring a seamless blend of form and function throughout the structure.

The Ground Floor: This newly constructed space is bathed in natural light streaming through expansive plate glass windows, showcasing an array of meticulously arranged and enticing furniture pieces. The ground floor boasts an impressive entrance framed in moulded and polished teak, complemented by plate glass panels. What was once a workshop now houses a vast array of furniture, catering to every taste and budget, from modest to opulent.

Upon entry from the street, the first shop is spacious, lofty, and well-lit. The furniture on display provides a striking contrast against the French grey hue of the match-boarding adorning the walls. Adjacent to this shop, connected by a large, lofty opening, is a space formerly utilised as a packing room but now transformed into an elegant showroom. Accessible from this area is the current Lace Shop via a well-designed pitch pine staircase. Beyond lies the expansive Show Room, now seamlessly linked to the Goat Street establishment, an integral part of the furnishing department, showcasing a curated selection of brass and iron bedsteads.

An opening in the side wall provides direct access to the Carpet Shop in Caer Street. Previously disconnected from the rest of the emporium, it now allows for a continuous stretch of Show Rooms extending over 200

feet in total depth, running from Goat Street to Castle Bailey Street. On returning to the front shop on Goat Street, one descends via a wide flight of stairs to the Basement level.

The Basement: The basement floor has been meticulously outfitted as a Packing and Receiving Room, complete with a counter, shelves, and other essentials, providing ample space for these vital aspects of the business. The floor is uniformly boarded, while the walls are clad in Portland cement, ensuring durability and practicality, and fortified against dampness.

Despite its subterranean location, lighting presents no challenge in this era of innovation. Illumination is provided via Hayward's patent prismatic lights, ingeniously installed within the pavements, and the expansive space is bathed in brilliant illumination. These lights, cleverly set within an iron frame on rollers, glide back beneath the window, facilitating the seamless conveyance of goods below. The system is self-locking and impervious to external tampering, thus ensuring security.

Goods slated for delivery are transported from the Show Rooms via a large lift, where they are expertly packed before being conveyed back up to the loading platform in the cartway, accessible from Goat Street. Incoming shipments from manufacturers are smoothly guided down a rolling way into the Receiving Room, where they undergo unpacking, sorting, and subsequent distribution to their respective departments via the lift, which aids the swift and seamless flow of business operations.

A brief passage leads to the lift, which spans from the basement floor to the pinnacle of the building. A ladder and trap are strategically positioned to enable the loading of goods onto delivery vans. We ascend a wide staircase and return to the Ground Floor retail area, where a polished pitch pine staircase provides access to the First Floor.

The First Floor: Dedicated to fine furniture, this floor is arguably the pinnacle of elegance within the entire building. Positioned at the same level as the ground floor of the Upper Temple Street establishment, it is dedicated to displaying a variety of top-tier furniture pieces. The space is flooded with natural light via eight large plate glass windows facing Goat Street, enhancing the showcase of furniture on display.

Continuity with the old premises is maintained through a brief flight of stairs to the present Carpet Room. This staircase is ingeniously designed with a well-hole that offers a view down to the ground floor. A sizable Wenham Lantern Light positioned directly above the stairs ensures ample illumination on the first floor and through the well-hole onto the ground floor.

Accessible from the carpet room, a bridge spans Temple Lane, providing direct connectivity to the first floor of the furniture shop on Temple Street. To ensure safety, a fireproof door stands at the end of the bridge. One of the most aesthetically pleasing and functional features of the entire building, the design of the stairs and balustrades leaves a lasting impression, their grandeur truly remarkable.

From the vantage point of the first floor, peering through the expansive opening onto the floor below, one gains a sense, albeit incomplete, of the scale of the recent additions. The view extends along a lengthy corridor lined with an array of valuable and exquisite goods, hinting at the vastness of the space. The floor space allocated to the furnishing department alone now approaches nearly half an acre.

Stepping back from the stairs, one gains a sense of the premises' vastness, though words may fall short of capturing its entirety. Particularly enchanting is the night-time ambience, when the space is bathed in the warm glow of the new Wenham light, offering a captivating alternative to electric illumination. Every mirror and gleaming surface reflects this light, casting a spellbinding scene.

Ascending another handsomely carpeted staircase, reminiscent of the robustness found in ancient manor houses, we climb to the Second Floor.

The Second Floor: The Second Floor welcomes visitors with a refreshment room and adjacent ladies' retiring and cloakrooms. The interior is tastefully decorated and appointed, exuding an air of luxury and charm.

The rooms are lavishly furnished to create a welcoming atmosphere. The walls and ceiling are adorned in a light cream hue, complemented by woodwork painted in a slightly darker shade of cream, accented with touches of light blue, perfectly complementing the subtle hues of the woodwork and doors. The focal point of the room is a polished walnut

chimney piece, adorned with bevelled mirror panels. A charming touch is the cosy recess, designed as an alcove shaded by a screen, housing a lift that connects to the kitchen above.

Adorning the walls are oil paintings, ingeniously hung using a simple mechanism that allows for easy adjustment. The room is impeccably appointed, offering a sanctuary where ladies can relax and rejuvenate themselves during their shopping excursions, or after a lengthy journey from the countryside. Equipped with a light dinner lift from the kitchen above, this room caters to the needs of shoppers, offering a delightful respite from the rigours of a busy day.

On the same floor is the dining room for the use of the employees, accessible from a staff-only stairway that ascends from the cartway below up to the staff dining room as well as offering access to the third floor where the store's impressive Kitchen is located. The employee's dining area is a spacious room designed to accommodate the numerous assistants employed on the premises.

The walls of the dining room feature a warm and inviting terracotta tint, whilst the two fireplaces, equipped with slow-combustion stoves, are complemented by handsome 'Rouge Royal' chimneypieces, that lend a cosy ambience to the space. A portrait of Napoleon I adorns one of the chimneypieces, while a well-curated selection of books stands on one side of the room. The comfort of the employees is a priority, and the overall atmosphere radiates warmth and brightness, a testament to Messrs B. Evans & Co.'s dedication to the well-being and comfort of their staff.

The Third Floor: As we ascend to the third floor via the staff stairway, the front windows offer a breathtaking panorama of Mumbles Head and the Bay. Positioned above St. Mary's Tower, this part of the building commands a vista over the entirety of the structures between Goat Street and the sea. The standout feature of this floor is undoubtedly the kitchen, showcasing ample provision for this crucial aspect of operations. The antiquated notion of situating the kitchen at the lowest level of a building has long been debunked, giving way to a more sensible approach of placing it as high as possible. This strategic placement aims to prevent the dissemination of cooking odours throughout the rest of the building, something particularly objectionable in large establishments, and a common issue faced under the old arrangement.

Equipped with two cooking ranges, one functioning as a standard cooking furnace, the other serving as a backup in case of emergencies, this kitchen boasts remarkable capabilities. The primary range, an impressive fourteen-foot creation crafted by Messrs Benham of London, is installed on a fireproof platform. It operates using both gas and coal fires and features a large boiler whose tubes pass through the furnace, providing steam to a hermetically sealed oven ideal for cooking vegetables, plus a coal fire oven, and gas jets for boiling saucepans. With the capacity to cater to up to 500 individuals simultaneously, this range ensures culinary excellence on a grand scale. Situated in the roof space directly above the range, a spacious lantern light maintains a consistent temperature around the food. A smaller range is positioned against the opposite wall, providing flexibility as needed.

Excellent ventilation is ensured in the kitchen, as it is throughout the rest of the building, given that the ventilation system has been meticulously planned. Tobin's Tubes are installed on each floor to facilitate the intake and circulation of fresh air throughout the building. In addition, extraction flues are integrated into the walls and positioned just below the ceiling line to remove stale air, thus maintaining a healthy and comfortable environment for occupants throughout the building.

Continuing on the same level, a passage leads to several servants' bedrooms, a housekeeper's room, and a storage area, conveniently avoiding extensive stair climbing. This centralised placement of the administrative department ensures operational efficiency without interfering with the business functions of the premises. The previously mentioned lifts offer easy access to other parts of the building.

The building contractors on the project were local company Messrs Thomas, Watkins, and Jenkins, whilst the building utilities, including the gas arrangements and the Wenham light, were installed by Mr John Legg, gas and electrical engineer, of Nelson Street.

The Quest for Shorter Working Hours

In the same month, a meeting was held at The Albert Hall, called by members of 'The Shorter Hours Movement', consisting mostly of shop assistants. In previous decades, several groups had been set up in Britain to challenge the working hours expected by employers, such as The Nine Hours Movement, as well as those specific to shop workers, with names like the Early Closing Association and The Shop Hours Labour League

hoping to get shop owners to reduce staff working hours voluntarily.

The standard workweek spanned from Monday through Saturday, closing at 9:00 pm, with a half-day off on Sunday. However, Christian reformers had advocated for the complete cessation of Sunday business activities. In practice, it was not uncommon for assistants to be expected to stay for an hour or more after closing to organise goods and ensure the shop was tidy.

In 1884 Mr Thomas Sutherst, president of the Shop Hours Labour League, wrote: (19)

‘I believe I am within the mark in stating that the majority of shop assistants in this country work from 75 to 90 hours in every week. Of that majority one-fourth work the full 90 hours per week, two-fourths 80 hours, and the remaining fourth 75 hours. ... I do not wish to make it appear that shop-keeping is an unpleasant occupation, but that which is healthy and agreeable for a reasonable time becomes irksome and injurious if continued for a too long period. . . . Stuffs, calicos, and silk cannot be continually torn, cut, or moved without throwing off clouds of minute particles which necessarily impregnate the air of the whole shop. In the evening long rows of gas-burners help to use up what little freshness is left in the air.’

Ten Factory Acts had been introduced since 1800, however, none had considered the work of the shop assistant. Then in 1873, the Liberal MP Sir John Lubbock proposed that shops be included in the next Factory Act, alas, his bill was rejected by his peers in Parliament. In 1886, he proposed a bill that restricted the working hours of children and young persons employed in shops, and this time the committee that reviewed his proposal agreed with his sentiments, stating: (20)

‘Your committee, being satisfied that the hours of shop assistants range in many places as high as from eighty-four to eighty-five hours per week, are convinced that such long hours must be generally injurious and often ruinous to health and that the same amount of business might be compressed into a shorter space of time.’

Lubbock’s Bill became law under the title of the Shop Hours Regulation Act 1886, however, it was impractical as it did not cover adult female shop workers, protecting only apprentices and child workers. The cap set on

hours allowed was unreasonably high at seventy-four hours per week, and there were no mechanisms in place to effectively enforce the law, resulting in few prosecutions initiated by private individuals, as obtaining evidence to support these cases proved to be extremely challenging.

The committee's comment that '...such long hours must be generally injurious and often ruinous to health' was a small but important recognition of what was to be a key driver to the reduction of working hours, the poor health of shop workers, and a celebrated physician of the day, Dr Benjamin Ward Richardson FRS FRCP wrote: (21)

'The effects of shop labour of the kind named on females under twenty-one, or on males under twenty-one, is of necessity injurious, as impeding their growth and the natural development of the organs of the body. To the female, the mischief is of a kind calculated to extend to the offspring she may bear. ... In my opinion, eight hours daily is the maximum time during which labour ought to be carried on in shops.'

Whilst Mr Lawson Tait, a leading specialist in women's diseases, and regarded as one of the fathers of gynaecology, stated: (22)

'I can speak of women only, and from a large hospital experience can say that the prolonged hours of labour to which young women are subjected in such operations as millinery and shop work generally are extremely detrimental to their health. ... A great many cases have come under my observation of women suffering from uterine displacements, chronic inflammatory diseases of the ovaries and tubes.'

The Shorter Hours Movement Meeting held on 19th August at The Albert Hall in Swansea (23) was chaired by The Mayor of Swansea, Mr W. J. Rees, and supported by the Rev. Canon Richards, Councillor R. D. Burnie, Dr Griffiths, and Benjamin Evans, amongst others. The subject matter at hand was why it was felt necessary to keep shops open so late in the evening, given that Swansea shops were often open until 9.00 pm and later, allowing no time for an individual to have recreation time, while at the same time being detrimental to a person's health.

One of the speakers, Mr D. C. Jones, said it had been calculated that there were 2,000 assistants in Swansea who, with public support, would be in a position to get shorter daily working hours. He hoped, 'for the sake of the young ladies employed behind the counters, that they would, ere long,

attain the object they desired. It was hard for ladies to have to work as they did—they could not stand it like men.’

After various other guests had spoken to the crowd, all endorsing the need for shorter working days, Dr Griffiths took the floor and expressed wholehearted support for the early closing movement, a cause he opined that had captured his attention for many years, dating back to his early days as a medical practitioner in Swansea. It became evident to him that a significant number of drapers’ assistants, both male and female, were suffering from various ailments directly linked to excessive work hours and confinement. Through his inquiries, Dr Griffiths discovered an alarming trend: a disproportionate number of young men succumbed to consumption annually—a trend he attributed to their demanding work conditions.

Driven by concern, Dr Griffiths engaged with the drapers of Swansea to understand why their establishments remained open late into the evening. Their unanimous response was one of helplessness—they felt compelled to keep their shops open due to public demand and fierce competition but expressed a genuine desire to close at more reasonable hours. He firmly believed that the majority of Swansea’s residents shared this sentiment, arguing that the earlier closure of shops was for the benefit of both workers and the community at large, and emphasised that successful competition did not require keeping shops open from dawn till dusk. He asserted that ‘if all tradesmen were to unite and agree to shorter working hours, they would not only accomplish their tasks more efficiently but also thrive in their endeavours.’ He vividly outlined the detrimental effects of long working hours, deploring them from social, moral, intellectual, and physical standpoints. The bleak picture he painted was a shameful reflection of the nineteenth century, an era that should have long abandoned such practices.

The remedy, Dr Griffiths contended, lay in adopting shorter working hours. What was needed, he stressed, was organisation and persistent advocacy. Only by organising and advocating for change could they effectively address this pressing issue and usher in a more equitable and sustainable approach to work. Finally, he proposed that ‘this meeting agrees with the shorter hours movement committee in endeavouring to secure the privileges enjoyed by the artisans of this country and agrees to help by every means to obtain this object, and by doing their shopping at an earlier hour.’