

The Old Brecon Jail: A New Acquisition and an Old Controversy

by William Gibbs

Early in 2020, the Brecknock Art Trust made a gift to y Gaer of a small picture by William Payne. It shows the old Brecon county jail beside the two-arched bridge over the Tarell river. This paper describes the picture and gives an account of the artist and his other work in Wales. It then describes a controversy over the conditions in the jail at the time the picture was painted.



Tarralt Bridge and the Jail near Brecon
by William Payne, watercolour, c. 1803
Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery



Detail

The picture shows the Tarell bridge in the middle distance with the Beacons in the background. A partial rainbow gives some life to the muted colours of the painting and in the foreground are a woman and child. The mother is carrying two pails that she has filled with water taken from the river. The stone building behind them is the county jail, built in 1781 by Andrew Maund, a builder and carpenter of Brecon, at a cost of £200.

The artist William Payne was born in London in 1760 and worked for the Board of Ordnance as a surveying artist. He moved to Plymouth in 1782 where he helped to design new fortifications for the port at a time of growing fear of a French invasion. In Plymouth he also prospered as a painter of landscapes for local estate owners and as a teacher of their sons and daughters. His skill and mastery of using Payne's Grey (see below) grew as he structured simple techniques for his pupils to follow.



William Payne
Self Portrait, oil

In 1789 Payne returned to London, establishing himself as a professional watercolourist and teacher. A piece by William Henry Pyne in the Somerset House Gazette reported:

Mr. Payne's drawings were regarded as striking novelties in style. His subjects if small, were brilliant in effect and executed with spirit they were no sooner seen than admired, and almost every family of fashion were anxious that their sons and daughters should have the benefit of his tuition...in the noble mansions of St. James's Square and Grosvenor Square and York Place and Portland Place, might be seen elegant groups of youthful amateurs manufacturing landscapes, a la Payne.

When and how he travelled to Wales is not certain. There are dated pictures of west Wales from 1791 and a **View on the Usk** with the Sugar Loaf in the distance is from 1803.

The Brecon jail picture probably dates from his visit in 1791 when he painted other local views including the Ely Tower and bridges at Brecon and at Pantysgallog near Trecastle. He visited Wales again in 1806 and the National Library of Wales has his sketchbook of 28 grey washes of west Wales done on this trip.



A View on the Usk, William Payne, 1803



Cilhepste Falls, William Payne, watercolour and ink

Payne was ever in search of the picturesque. This lively watercolour and ink sketch by Payne is of Cilhepste Falls near Ystradfellte, famous for its pathway behind the curtain of falling water. Payne never gained great fame, but his innovations such as dragging the paint with a split brush and his use of Payne's Grey, a colour he invented to enhance the rendering of sunlight, were used by later artists such as Turner and Girtin.



James Nield, Self Portrait, oil

About the time Payne was painting his picture of Brecon jail it was visited by James Nield, a Quaker prison reformer. He wrote about his visit in *The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1803:

At my visit, September 1803, the prisoners complained to me of being cruelly treated and half starved; they were literally half naked; and two women, with-out shoes or stockings, heavily loaded with double irons. The Keeper, who is a weaver and dyer of worsteds, told me he had to support the prisoners committed to the House of Correction, for which he received the whole of their earnings. The countenances of all the prisoners bespoke neglect and oppression.

Theophilus Jones, historian of Brecknock and fierce critic of English visitors and their reports on their travels in Wales, was horrified by what he saw as meddling interference from a visitor to Brecon who knew nothing of the true circumstances. He wrote a lengthy retort in his *History of Brecknockshire* of which this is an edited version.

Mr. Neild, in his report of his visit to Brecon gaol describes it as the habit in Breconshire to half starve, half clothe and double-iron female convicts.

He will permit me to state the facts and circumstances which made it necessary to put irons on the women he saw in this gaol; one of the viragoes, whose sufferings he so pathetically deploras, was a woman of great bodily strength, desperate in her determinations, old in iniquity, and who had been convicted of house breaking, accompanied with very aggravated circumstances.

A day or two before Mr. Neild's visit, this amazon, assisted by another female prisoner, whom she contrived to corrupt, effected the escape of a male convict and a deserter; she also threatened to set fire to the prison and to murder the gaoler.



Theophilus Jones by Thomas Price,
watercolour c. 1810
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Mainly as a result of Neild's report the jailer, William Watkins, was dismissed by Justice Harding at a meeting of the Grand Jury in Brecon Assizes, much to the dismay of Theophilus Jones who reports that Watkins died a broken man.

The position of the jail is shown on this Tithe Map of 1840, close to the Tarell Bridge in Llanfaes.



Tithe Map, Tarell Bridge and Gaol, Brecon
1840, ©National Library of Wales



Brecon County Jail 1850, Brycheiniog, Vol 25

Often flooded, the jail was rebuilt in 1850 and part of this building still remains, converted into apartments.

Much useful information for this article came from Dewi Davies' article ***The County Gaol in Brecon*** in Brycheiniog Vol 25, 1992-93 and from ***William Payne 1760 -1830*** by David Japes and John Spink.