

The Wellington and Picton Memorial, Brecon

William Gibbs



Wellington Statue,

By John Evan Thomas, Brecon, bronze, 1856



Wellington saluting Picton
Wellington Statue, Brecon

The statue of Wellington that stands in the Bulwark, Brecon was given to the town by its creator John Evan Thomas. Born in Brecon in 1810, he learnt the initial skills of sculpting at his father's stone yard near Castle Bridge. Showing much talent, he was sent to London aged 14 as an apprentice to Sir Francis Chantry, one of the most fashionable sculptors of his time.

During a successful career in London, he created statues of many of the most eminent men in Wales including Vivian in Swansea, Bute in Cardiff, Morgan in Newport and the Prince of Wales in Tenby. John Evan Thomas retired to a house, Penisha'r-Pentre, at Llanspyddid near Brecon, becoming Deputy Lieutenant of the county of Brecknock and serving as High Sheriff in 1868.

The monument in the heart of Brecon is both a memorial to Wellington and to Sir Thomas Picton, who was considered to be the most important Welsh general fighting alongside Wellington at Waterloo. On the plinth are engraved on one side the name of Wellington and on the other that of Picton. On the two other faces are bronze plaques by John Evan



John Evan Thomas

By William Meredyth Thomas
y Gaer, Brecknock Museum



Death of General Picton
Wellington Statue. Brecon

Thomas, one showing Wellington greeting Picton, the other recording Picton's death. A man of undoubted bravery, Picton had already been badly wounded at the battle of Quatre Bras. At a crucial moment in the battle of Waterloo his biographer describes how "*Picton ordered General Pack's brigade to advance . With the exhilarating cry of "Charge ! Hurra ! Hurra !"* he placed himself at their head , and led them forward. They returned his cheer as they followed him with a cool determination Picton was looking along his gallant line , waving them on with his sword , when a ball

struck him on the temple , and he fell back upon his horse - dead. Captain Tyler, seeing him fall, immediately dismounted and ran to his assistance: with the aid of a soldier he lifted him off his horse; but all assistance was vain — his noble spirit had fled." (Heaton Robinson, 1835) This moment of violence is caught in John Evan Thomas' energetic rendering of a battle in action, an image of tragedy but also a celebration of heroism.

However, such an image needs to be contrasted with another. In 1803 while Picton was Governor of Trinidad he was accused of ordering the "torture of a young woman of colour", Louisa Calderon, who was being tried for stealing from her "master" to whom she had been sold as a concubine at the age of 11. Outrage at her treatment led in 1806 to Picton being summoned to appear back in London before the King's Bench. The case was prosecuted by a remarkable lawyer, William Garrow, who in a dramatic twist

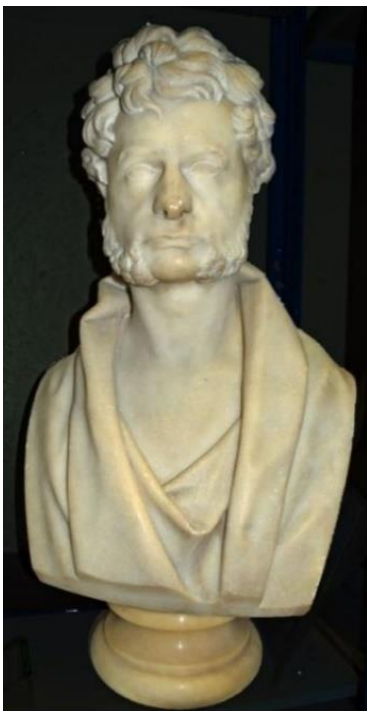


General Picton's Torture upon Louisa Calderon, 1806, NLW
Rare Book Collection, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School.

produced in court this image of what he called “Pictoning”, showing the prisoner suspended over a spike to force a confession.

The published transcript of the trial reports how Garrow showed Louisa Calderon *“a drawing in water colours representing in striking manner her situation with the executioner and his attendants during the application of the torture.”* She confirmed that it was an accurate representation. Calderon told the court that she had twice fainted on the piquet: *“I was totally insensible”*. She was twice revived with the application of vinegar by the executioner and between sessions of torture she was put in irons

Picton’s defence was that Trinidad operated under Spanish law which allowed torture and although he was declared guilty, a subsequent re-trial failed to convict him. Picton is listed on the UCL data base of slave owners and as Governor of Trinidad would have played an active role in supporting the slave trade and of sanctioning the maltreatment of slaves. At the same time, Wellington needed soldiers of Picton’s experience and calibre and although he thought him *“a rough foul-mouthed devil as ever lived”*, he also said of him *“no man could do better in the different services I assigned to him.”* Picton was called back into service to serve in Portugal in the Peninsular War and to fight his last battle at Waterloo.



John Lloyd Watkins,
John Evan Thomas
Brecon Museum

In trying to discover how the monument came to include Picton I have been searching the newspapers using *Welsh Newspapers Online* for reports of the building of the monument. In 1852, *The Welshman* reports the Brecon Town Council Meeting held on Tuesday the ninth of November where Colonel Watkins *“remarked that there was a native of the town, a talented sculptor, who had made a most handsome and liberal offer to his townsmen, and he hoped for the encouragement of native talent that his offer would be accepted. Mr. J. P. de Winton fully concurred in the sentiments propounded by Col. Watkins, and handed in a letter from J. E. Thomas, Esq., Sculptor, of Belgrave Place, London, proposing to place a statue of Wellington, with alto relievo's of General Picton on the sides of the pedestals—the work to cost £1,200, out of which he (the artist) had made the liberal offer of contributing £700. Mr. de Winton said he had much pleasure in seconding Col. Watkins's motion. After some further discussion as to the site for the erection, a subscription was entered into, and names put down for sums amounting in the*

aggregate to £300. Mr. Alderman Thomas in a very complimentary manner proposed a vote of thanks to Mr. J. E. Thomas for his liberal offer and 'the kind feeling exhibited by him towards the inhabitants of his native town'."



J P de Winton ,

John Evan Thomas, marble

It would seem likely that the suggestion for a Wellington Memorial and the inclusion of plaques celebrating Picton would have been agreed between Watkins, de Winton and John Evan Thomas before the proposal was put to the Council. The inclusion of Picton may well have been at the urging of Watkins whose grandfather had been a close friend of Picton. Both de Winton and Watkins were active patrons of John Evan Thomas. In Llanfrynach Church are de Winton family memorials by Thomas and in Maesderwen, the family home, stands his bust of J P de Winton. Elaborate family plaques and memorials of Lloyd Watkins's ancestors, commissioned from Thomas, now fill one complete wall of the North Transept in Brecon Cathedral.

For several years the Council put off paying their contribution for the statue and I can find no evidence that it ever met its promises or organised an inauguration ceremony before John Evan Thomas died in 1873.

Now at a time of scrutiny of public monuments, the people of Brecon will need to decide how best to balance the need to preserve one of the most iconic features of Brecon and still stand strong for human rights and dignity.

Wellington Statue,
John Evan Thomas,

Brecon

