

Something of the Story of John Lloyd Vaughan Watkins 1802-1865

William Gibbs



John Lloyd Vaughan Watkins as a boy
Artist unknown, c.1810

Currently in the store of Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery is this striking portrait of the young John Lloyd Vaughan Watkins, shown here as a boy holding a cockerel. He is as self-assured as is the cockerel, presumably his pet. This article aims to tell you something about him, his family, and what he became.

His grandfather was the successful attorney, Penoyre Watkins, who had acquired estates in Carmarthenshire and settled near Battle outside Brecon. Among his articulated pupils was Theophilus Jones, who would later describe the Watkins' family home of Penoyre "*From the windows of this house are three most beautiful views (and) that from the south is sublime*".

This house was built by Lloyd Watkins' father, the Reverend Thomas Watkins, who Theophilus refers to as a man of "*learning and persistence*". Early in life, between 1787 and 89, he had been on the Grand Tour, and travelled through Switzerland to Greece and Constantinople. His collection of letters written to his father were later published, and ran to a second edition. He was both a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and of the Royal Society.

Thomas Watkins married Susanna Eleanora Vaughan, half-sister of John Vaughan of Golden Grove near Carmarthen, who became god-father to their second son named in his honour: *John Lloyd Vaughan Watkins*. On John Vaughan's death Thomas Watkins and his wife expected to inherit the estate. According to Frances Jones, historian of the Vaughans of Golden Grove, on hearing the news of Vaughan's death, Thomas drove over to Golden Grove and collected all the jewels and tried "*to secure the illuminated family tree*". *However, the box containing it was too big to go into his*



Rev Thomas Watkins
(1761- 1829)
John Evan Thomas

carriage, and after fruitless attempts he reluctantly had to abandon the effort". As it turned out, John Vaughan had left the estate, which was deeply in debt, to Lord Cawdor, the hero of the defeat of the French at Haverford West. Over the next 20 years Thomas maintained a persistent campaign through the court of chancery, "conspiring" with other dissatisfied relatives to fight for his wife's inheritance, however diminished.

Late in his life, Lloyd Watkins commissioned the Brecon-born artist, John Evan Thomas, to commemorate his family in a spectacular display of monuments in the Priory Church of St John in Brecon, now the Cathedral. Among them is a substantial memorial to his father, the Rev Thomas Watkins, which includes a touching panel showing Thomas arriving in heaven to be greeted by two of his children who had predeceased him: Lloyd's 12-year-old sister Julia and his older brother, Penaur, who had drowned at the age of 16. Lloyd Watkins was left as the oldest surviving son, which perhaps explains why his parents arranged for his portrait to be painted.



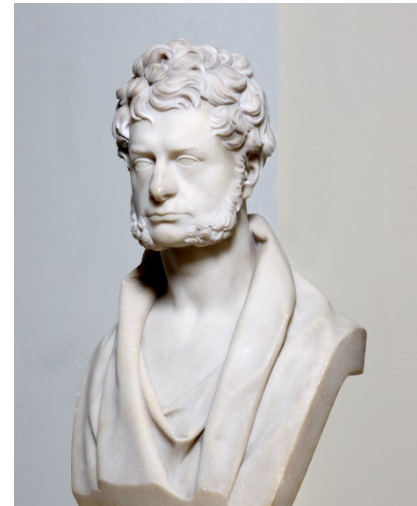
Memorial to Rev Thomas Watkins
John Evan Thomas, Brecon Cathedral



Lloyd Watkins as Lord Lieutenant
Charles Couzens. NLW, 1840

Lloyd Watkins went to Harrow and then to Christ Church, Oxford and, in 1829, on the death of his father, inherited his extensive estates in Breconshire. Two years later, at the age of 29, he stood for Parliament in the Breconshire Constituency as an "*advanced liberal*" against the conservative Colonel Thomas Wood, who was supported by the Morgan family. This was a volatile period in both local and national politics. Troops were sent to Merthyr to suppress the riots and both supporters and opponents of the Reform Act were involved in violent demonstrations. Watkins was defeated in this election by 282 to 183 votes but the following year he stood for the Brecon Town Seat. Due to the Reform Bill the franchise had been increased from 14 to over 242.

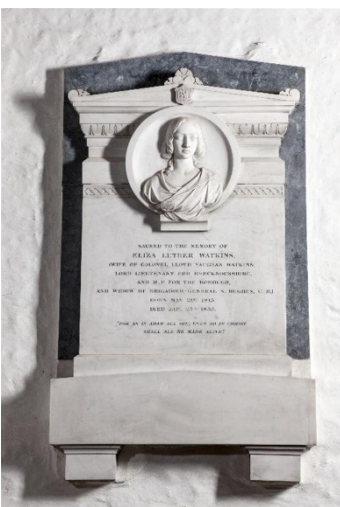
According to the Cambrian Newspaper on the day of the election, his supporters met him *“on his road from Pennoyre, and after taking the horses from his carriage, drew him into town, preceded by music and appropriate banners”*. At the hustings, he told the electors that the election *“appears as the dawn of a new era, as if the golden wings of liberty were at last expanded over us, as if the long smothered spark of our constitutional rights was about to burst into a flame”*. He pledged to *“devote his earnest attention to ameliorating the heart-rending condition of the slave, to a just and salutary commutation of tithes, to triennial Parliaments”*. The result was a close-run thing, with Watkins narrowly defeating the sitting member, Charles Morgan, by 110 votes to 104. Over the next 50 years, the constituency oscillated between Liberal and Conservative, with Watkins representing the borough from 1847 to 1852, and again from 1854 until his death. When not in Parliament, he took an active and leading part in local affairs being a magistrate, Colonel of the Loyal Brecknock Militia Rifle Regiment, Mayor of Brecon, High Sheriff in 1836, and Lord Lieutenant of Brecknockshire from 1837 to 1847.



John Lloyd Vaughan Watkins
John Evan Thomas, y Gaer



Sophia Louisa
John Evan Thomas



Eliza Luther
Brecon Cathedral

Lloyd Watkins married twice and there are monuments to both wives by John Evan Thomas in Brecon Cathedral. His first wife Sophia Louisa Henrietta died aged 49 in 1851 and, a year later, he married Eliza Luther, who died within two years. There were no children from either marriage.

In 1846 Lloyd Watkins started to completely rebuild the family home and created one of the grandest houses in Breconshire. Designed by the architect Anthony Salvin in the Italianate style, it

was built out of Bath stone with dramatic entrance tower and an orangery. The cost was enormous, about four million pounds in today’s reckoning. Watkins’ diaries record in detail the progress of the building, even to the number of bricks used. The grounds were extensive with terracing, fountains, and wonderful views over parkland stretching down the Usk Valley.

However, the editor of the 1909 edition of Jones' *History of Brecknockshire* was to exclaim "Alas! In a few years the owner of this palatial residence, by the vicissitude of fortune, was compelled to seek asylum in one of the inns of Brecon, the old Bear Hotel in Ship Street, where he died bereft of the bulk of his fortune, but carrying with him to the grave the affectionate regard of the people of Brecon".



Pennoyre House, Seat of Colonel Watkins c.1860

Three years after Lloyd Watkins' death, a notice appeared in the press announcing the sale of "a valuable and important FREEHOLD ESTATE, known as PENNOYRE, suitable ... for a Private Lunatic Asylum, Sanatorium, or Hydropathic Establishment." After passing through the hands of several private owners, the house was bought by Merthyr Education Department and run as a special school. It is now divided into apartments and is surrounded by the Cradoc Golf Club.

Nothing of the family remains except the splendid memorials in Brecon Cathedral and the decaying mausoleum at Llandefaelog Church. There were no heirs, at least, no legitimate heirs. In 1886, a certain John Holden published *A Wizard's Wanderings from China to Peru*, a remarkable collection of reminiscences of his life as a magician performing, for among others, Queen Victoria and the Emperor of China. In the introduction, the author writes "At sixteen, I found myself under fire, fighting under a foreign flag for some quixotic craze they called Liberty..... instead of returning to England and entering Her Majesty's Navy, as my pater, who was Lord Lieutenant of his county and Member of Parliament, had intended me to do".

John Holden was in fact the son of Lloyd Watkins by Emma Holden, as is stated in the record of his baptism on the 8th March 1844 at Claines in Worcestershire. In fact, Lloyd Watkins had two children by Emma Holden; the second, George Watkins Holden, becoming a professional photographer. In honour of his father's family, he took the trade name *Pen aur* and named his home in Castle Street, Swansea *Pennoyre House*. George specialised in photographing children and I am sure he would have appreciated the portrait of his father as a fair-haired child. After all, the family motto "*pen-aur-y-chalon wir*" means "*a golden head and a true heart*".



Trade Card for George Watkins Holden