

The Rhondda Soap And Candleworks 1875 - 1913 - Llwynypia

John Royle

Thomas Davies was born in 1846 on a farm in Trelech, Carmarthenshire. As a young man he found work in Pontypridd in a small candle-making factory. He worked there for a few years until the owner decided to retire. As neither of the owner's sons were interested in candle-making, he made up his mind to close the factory. However, he told Thomas Davies and another of his workmen that he wanted them to set up a candle-making factory in the Rhondda Valley, and that if they did he would set them up with most of the necessary machinery. He gave them a day off and sent them up the Rhondda Valley to find a suitable place to start. When the other man saw the Rhondda, he decided that he could not stay there, so back they went to tell the boss who said the deal was off and they could go their own ways.

Thomas returned to the Rhondda Valley, and chose what seemed to be a good site for his factory, which he started in 1875. It became known as The Chandlery. One thing that was essential was plenty of running water, and in those days there was a good sized stream running down from the mountain, across the area which became known as Partridge Square and down into the river. There was no road over the bridge to Sherwood, no houses, and no hospital, just a road coming up from Trealaw, with a steep slope down to the river, and an equally steep slope up the other side. There were a few scattered farms and a few shops in Tonypandy.

There were two ways of crossing the river; one by going down a steep winding path to cross a narrow plank thrown across the river, and then up a steep winding path which came up onto the road from Sherwood to Tonypandy. The other way which had to be taken by the carts, or when the river was very high, was to take the road up to the Partridge Hotel and cross the river there where there was a bridge, and return through Sherwood.

When the factory started it was little more than a shed. There was no path of any kind down to the road, and for some time Thomas Davies was not allowed to make one. During the winter the land between the factory and the road was a sea of mud. Eventually he was given permission by the land agent to build a road, and this he and his workmen did in their spare time. They brought cinders from the colliery yards, carting them all the way round by the bridge and gradually made a fairly firm cinder path down to the road. At the place where a church now stands there was a deep hollow, so a man was employed for two years simply to fill it in. Thomas and the other men he employed also helped when they had a spare hour.

When the factory started, life was very hard. The candles were tallow candles or as they were usually called 'tallow dip'. They were all made by hand. The wicks were made on a primitive frame like a kitchen table. At one end was a drawer containing 28 balls of cotton. The end of each ball was drawn through a piece of slotted wood and fastened to a rod. The rod was pulled to the end of the frame where the cotton was cut with a knife. The lengths were then twisted to make them into wicks which were hung on sticks on a circular frame called a roundabout ready for the dipping.

The tallow was prepared in large iron boilers. First of all the offal was collected from the butchers and slaughter houses and boiled to extract the tallow. The tallow was then strained and the sediment pressed into flat cakes. These were called 'graves' and were sold to the farmers as food for their cattle. The pure tallow was kept warm in large iron vats and one man slowly dipped the wicks into the tallow. Some of the tallow would adhere to the wicks and this stick would be returned to the roundabout to dry. He continued with this procedure until all the wicks had been dipped and then start dipping them all over again until the candles were of the required thickness and weight. The workman was paid a penny a stick, and he could not work when the weather was hot as the tallow would melt. So they made as many candles as they could during the winter, sometimes working through the night, including Thomas and his wife Anne.

Thomas and Anne had twelve children, who as soon as they were old enough had to help with the work. It was generally the boys who helped in the factory, twisting the cotton, bundling or pounding the candles, and packing them for delivery to the shops. The girls were needed for nursing the babies and helping in the house. The eldest daughter Edith, recalled taking a baby up the mountain where later a hospital was built, and after putting the baby to lie on the grass, she would crochet lace edging using balls of cotton from the factory. In the springtime she would gather bunches of primroses which were growing all around.

When the children's hands became rough or chapped with working, they dipped their hands into the warm tallow which soon soothed them. Sometimes they would beg the man in charge of the boiler to give them a kidney when he was boiling down the offal, and they would enjoy eating them.

When enough candles were ready, Thomas would load up the horse and cart and drive around delivering them to his customers. During the winter the demand was very high, as tallow candles were the only means of lighting. The colliers used them while working the coal levels before the mines were sunk. When the tunnel was cut through the mountain to Abergwynfi the tallow candles used for lighting were supplied by the Rhondda factory. The factory also supplied most of the grocers, although some of them made enough for their own needs in their sheds or cellars, but these were very few, and for a number of years The Chandlery was the only one of its kind in the area. Eventually the demand for tallow candles reduced as the composite candles came onto the market. So in about 1890 Thomas changed over to the making of composites.

This meant a complete reorganisation of his factory as the composites were made by machine. Tallow was no longer used, and the chief ingredient was paraffin wax. This was obtained by refining crude paraffin oil and was known as scale. At that time it was imported from America and came in large hard blocks that had to be melted in wooden vats. Iron vats could not be used as metal changed the colour of the wax and people would not buy the candles. Because of this, steam heating had to be introduced. Into the melted wax a substance called 'stearine' was added to make the candles hard and white otherwise they would have melted at a very low temperature. Thomas bought

his stearine from Belgium, as this was the best available at the time. When the wax was ready, it was drained into iron vats which were lined with enamel and kept warm in readiness for pouring into the moulds.

At about the same time as changing to the production of wax candles, Thomas began making soap. He started by making rough soap for scouring and housework and later refined his technique to make toilet soap, which he called Sweetheart soap. A sample of this is at St. Fagans Welsh Folk Museum together with other items from the factory.

The children continued to help with the work and were paid twopence each Saturday for their weeks work. When time allowed they enjoyed playing on the mountainside, coming home with sticks carrying dead snakes or bunches of wild flowers.

Each Good Friday they and other families would visit the well of Mair Sant at Penrhys and picnic with buns and pop. The older children first went to school when it was held in the front room of a cottage in Treallaw. Later, when Archibald Hood built the Scotch School for the children of workers, they went there. To get to the school they had to go down a steep path, cross a narrow bridge, and climb a steep path on the other side. They took with them the money for their education; a penny a week for Standard One, twopence for Standard Two, threepence for Standard Three and so on. When the weather was wet and the path was slippery, they sometimes fell and lost their money. This would result in a letter from the school, so eventually an arrangement was made for their father to pay the school quarterly for all his children.

The School Inspector came once a year to examine the children, and this was a great event. Every child wore their best clothes and there was great anticipation of moving up a class if they passed their tests. They were given a certificate to show that they had passed. The best knitters amongst the girls knitted socks for the owner of the colliery. These were always in bright colours with contrasting heel and toe.

The nearest shops were in Tonypandy, so most items were bought in bulk. All the vegetables they ate were grown in their garden, and they also kept chickens, ducks and goats. At Christmas time Thomas would give a duck to his best customers, which meant plucking and dressing about forty birds.

Thomas collected money from his customers on horseback and usually carried a gun with him. Indeed when he first set up the factory, he slept with a revolver by the side of the bed.

The house was lit with candles until oil lamps came into use. Thomas bought one, but did not allow the children to touch it, and it was kept out of their reach on a chest of drawers. They were also told not to look at it when it was lit in case it exploded in their face, perhaps this had happened elsewhere.

Despite all this hard work and enterprise, Thomas Davies found time to write poetry and compete in Eisteddfodau. He died in 1904 at the age of 59 years, and is buried in Glyn-taff cemetery. The factory closed in 1913.

's memories are shaped by two things. The first being events, and being people who cause these events. I thank both Helen Ford and the Editor of the Journal for awakening the events and people of memory, and with them bringing back to me my own childhood memories.

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New GFHS Booklet Publications

We have 3 miscellaneous publications this quarter. First is **Female Case** Angellton Asylum, near Bridgend. These cover the admissions registered 1865 to 1902, and are indexed by surname, then forenames, the date of admission, whether they were married, widowed or single, some have a date of discharge listed, the date of admission or readmission, and which of the three they're expenses, and then what happened to the ladies when they were ready for discharge from the asylum, either to go home or to another asylum. For many it was just a short stay, as the asylums was used as a hospital, as soon as they recovered, they were released, never to return. Some others, it was readmission after readmission, until they stayed permanently or died, in the last column is the volume and page number for each patient. There is also a **burial register**, surname indexed for both Male and Female patients for the 2 asylums of Angellton and Parc Gwylt, and covering the years 1865 to 1926, most were buried in the Chapel that was in the asylum grounds, with a few exceptions in a public cemetery.

PLEASE NOTE:- these registers are kept in an outside repository and are not ordered in, (usually they are brought in on a Monday). please phone the Morgans Record Office in the first instance. (There is a 100 year closure on these records)

The 2nd publication is a Merthyr Tydfil Union, "**Abstracts and Lists of Paupers**". The Union covered a very large area and the old parishes, including Merthyr Tydfil, Aberdare, Hirwaun, Gelligaer, Penderyn, Rhigos, and Vale of Glamorgan. These have been surname indexed, with the Permanent Poor, (in their own homes), In-door Paupers, (in the Workhouse), Casuals, Orphans, Lunatics, the Aberdare Training School and a list of officials who looked after the affairs of the Union, e.g. the Medical Officer, Overseers, the Registrars etc.