

Grangetown Local History Society



Fact Sheet No. 1

Who Built Grangetown and Why?

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Preface

This is the first fact sheet on the history of Grangetown. There will be a series of them that will build into a collection. This one gives an overview of the founding and construction of the area and of its early feudal history so as to provide a context against which topics in later fact sheets may be best understood.

In all the fact sheets, the term Lower Grangetown refers to the very earliest area of housing along streets such as Hewell, Oakley, Bromsgrove, Sevenoaks, Worcester, etc. The term Grangetown is used to include the whole area south of Penarth Road, from Clive Street to Taff Embankment. North Grangetown (Taff Mead) is not included.

Early History of the Area

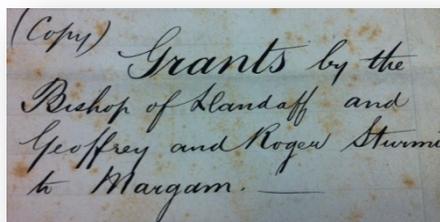
Before Grangetown was built, what was there? Who owned the land? These and other questions we can best answer by going back to the early 12th century.

At this time, a certain Geoffrey de Sturmi, a Norman Lord favoured by William the Conqueror, was given land near Kenfig at which he set up his manor, Sturmi Manor. (His surname was later corrupted and became Stormy; which remains today as Stormy Down.) The de Sturmi seal is shown here. The small hamlet of Sturmieston grew up around the manor house.



But the de Sturmi family did not stay there long; finding the land difficult to cultivate and suffering constant raids by Welsh tribes from the north. Roger de Sturmi, Geoffrey's successor, decided to dispose of the land, in return for an annual rent, to Margam Abbey. The abbey had been founded in 1147 and grew quickly to become one of the largest in Wales. At its foundation it was given 18,000 acres by the Earl of Gloucester and because of the growing number of monks, was constantly seeking to expand its land ownership to provide food for them.

Roger de Sturmi moved to Cardiff, the nearest large fortified town, which was under the protection of the Earl of Gloucester. It is not entirely clear how it happened, but he came to own the West Moore Marshes which were defined as being between the Taff and the Ely rivers down to the foreshore. It was not long before he wished to rid himself of that too. He considered it to be useless marshland and donated the land as a second gift to Margam Abbey. This occurred in the late 12th century. We should not think that the off-loading of land in this way was unique to the de Sturmis. It was occurring all along the coast of South Wales: but why?



One part of the answer is that by making gifts to religious houses, landowners gained spiritual 'brownie points'. They were mentioned in prayers as part of the deal; besides receiving small returns in rent. But perhaps the major reason the abbey wanted coastal land is that the produce of its granges could be shipped much more safely and quickly to Margam than risking ambushes on the poor roads and tracks. This became particularly so during the much later revolt by Owain Glyndwr (1412). The West Moor Marshes at Cardiff, which gave easy access to the Severn Estuary, were therefore ideal for the abbey's purpose.

The term ‘grange’ is of course a generic one, referring to a group of buildings for storing grain or, more commonly, land that provided food for abbeys or great houses. Once the West Moor Marshes came under the monks, it became a true grange.

Although much of the land was known to be marsh, this is a description that belies the existence of worthwhile arable and grazing land to the north and west of the Grange Farmhouse - which still exists on the north corner of Stockland Street and Clive Street. This good land extended either side of what is now Penarth Road down to the river Ely and followed the river northwest towards Leckwith and north-east towards what is now Tudor Road. There was good grazing along the river Ely and some arable land too.

However, the land south of the farmhouse and towards the Taff was certainly marsh, due to the constant flooding of both the Taff and the Severn. The land had a deep, underlying layer of marl clay, ensuring that water could not drain away. This was not the case further north and west, where a complex system of ancient drainage ditches carried away surface water.

After the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII between 1536 and 1541, he invited bids from those who wished to farm the granges, which had then become his land. Those who submitted successful bids were known as The King’s Stewards. These were tenants, but much later they became owners upon the payment of a sum for its freehold.

For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that the grange (now a farm) eventually passed into the ownership of the Lewis family, of Y Fan Fawr, a large and prosperous estate near Caerphilly. The family owned much land in south Glamorgan and with the assistance of the Bishop of Llandaff, bought the farm. The farm, and most of the land to the west of what is now Paget Street, as far as the River Ely, was (and still is) within the parish of Llandaff. Much of the land to the east of Paget Street as far as the Taff comes under St Mary’s catholic church.

In 1638, the Lewis family carried out a survey of their estate, including the Grange Farm. The entry for it runs as follows:

“The manor lands called the grange Marshes, bounded by the heights of Penarth in the west and the Severn shore in the south, the river Tave (sic) on the east and the common lands of Leckwith in the north, being an estate of some 300 acres, each of a yearly value of four pence.”

We can see that this, even by today’s measure, was not a small farm, although the survey included both marshland and agricultural land.

In the late 18th century the male line of the Lewis family died out. Their eldest daughter married the Earl of Plymouth and the huge Lewis estates were absorbed into theirs. At a stroke, the Earl of Plymouth owned the land within the parish of Llandaff to the west and south of what would become the site of the new town on the grange.

The land in the parish of St Mary’s was bought by the Bute family. (The third marquis is shown here.) But their land was poor and subject to constant flooding, a problem that would not be cured for some decades. He did not, therefore, begin construction there for some time after the Windsors.



We can see that the entire area of what would one day become Grangetown, was owned by two rich families: the Plymouths (the Windsor-Clives, which we shall shorten to ‘Windsor’) and the Butes. But it was to be the Windsor family that would trigger the town’s construction, followed much later by the Marquis of Bute.

There then occurred some important changes to the Plymouth family due to marriages, deaths and subsequent inheritances:

- The (6th) Earl of Plymouth who had inherited the grange from the Lewis family, died in 1833 without issue.

- His sister, Harriet, married in 1819 the Hon Robert Henry Clive, who also died - in 1854. He was 'the second son of the first Earl of Powys of the Clive branch'.
- The baronetcy was now in abeyance. Harriet was then recognised as having a senior role in the family and allowed by statute to use the surname Windsor-Clive.
- In October 1855 'Lady Harriet had the abeyance of the Baronetcy terminated in her favour and became the Baroness Windsor.'

In case we should feel that she had ended up with a comfortable life for herself, we should realise that before he died, her husband had been undertaking surveys and making plans to sell some of their estates in order to raise funds to construct a docks and a tidal harbour at Penarth. If his project were not to collapse, Harriet had to take the reins, which she did with some gusto.



She realised that building such large facilities would attract ancillary industries, such as rope making, engineering works and businesses such as chandlers. The workers in these enterprises would need somewhere to live. She therefore expanded the project to include housing not only adjacent to the docks at Penarth but also further afield in Grangetown (including North Grangetown). She also visualised creating an early form of industrial estate to attract more industries and businesses. This would be on the land west of Clive Street to the river Ely and thence south to Penarth Harbour. The industrial

zone would be accessed via Ferry Road, following the railway and passing the Railway Hotel (later the Red House pub) whence it arrived at Penarth tidal harbour.

It so happened that the Baroness owned in her own right much of the land in Cogan, most of the land on the heights of Penarth and all of the west and south sides of the grange marshes. This is where the workers at her docks, its harbour and other industries would therefore live. The Baroness Windsor Act for the creation of Grangetown and Penarth Docks was passed in 1857 and triggered the beginning of the grand project.

It may come as a surprise to learn that from the very beginning of the construction of Grangetown and well into the 1870s, the new town was not considered part of Cardiff at all. Penarth was much nearer, anyway. The Windsors fought tenaciously all attempts by Cardiff (and there were several) to absorb Grangetown until, after serious public health crises (some involving fatalities), an Act was passed in 1875 giving Cardiff Borough the power to compulsorily take over the town. In a way, it was a rescue bid to improve public health.

The Windsor family also resisted attempts by the Cardiff Waterworks Company to supply 'their' Grangetown with Cardiff water. They were so convinced that Grangetown was in Penarth, that they went as far as refusing that it be supplied with either Cardiff's water or Cardiff's gas. All utilities had to come from Penarth; but the water source they had identified was a spring at Dinas Powis, which was far too small anyway. They spent large sums on legal battles over this issue, threatening to set up their own water and gas companies. Finally, after furious encounters with Cardiff council and several legal battles, the engineering issues and the rule of law won out.

An Immense Undertaking.

That the Baroness should attempt the construction of the docks and harbour together with housing at both Grangetown (including North Grangetown) and Penarth simultaneously was very ambitious: especially when we consider that railways also had to be built, to connect with the mines of the Rhondda and the arteries of the Great Western Railway. In fact, an entire infrastructure had to be created from scratch: water supplies, sewers, gas supplies, roads, construction materials (bricks from the Windsor brick works and stone from new quarries they

opened), horse-drawn transport and its stabling; not to mention the recruitment and management of thousands of workers.

Penarth Docks alone (excluding dockside equipment, railways, etc) had an initial estimated budget (quoted in the 1857 Act) of £55 million in today's money. The eventual out-turn was almost double that. Most of the finance came from the family's coffers, notably from her late husband's will. Additional loans were, however, required and the names of those providing them gave their names to some of the streets of Grangetown. It was an early form of fund-raising: 'Donate something and have a street named after you!' In the street names of Grangetown is written the legacy of those who invested in it. [See Fact Sheet No. 2: The Origins of Grangetown's Street Names.]

Before we investigate the construction of the town, we should, however, consider why Grangetown was built in the 1850s and what made it such an apparently attractive proposition.



Why invest at this time?

The answer is simple: in the 1850s Britain was one of the best places in the world to invest. Across the channel, almost every continental country was at war, either with itself or its neighbours. Switzerland had a civil war and was also at war with Italy. Northern Italy was at war with Southern Italy. France narrowly escaped a second revolution as thousands were killed on the streets of Paris during various uprisings. Germany was at war with several countries, notably parts of Prussia. Spain and Portugal were also engaged in hostilities. If not actually at war, many countries were seeing the destruction of ancient monarchies and the installation of new political orders. The continent was certainly an unstable, risky place to invest.

Whilst this was going on, Britain was taking full advantage of the Industrial Revolution it had created in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and investing heavily in it. It was the first global superpower, its far-flung empire producing huge wealth. It was stable and on the whole law-abiding. Whilst others were fighting each other, Britain was making steam engines, steam ships, factories, railways (10,000 miles of railway had been laid by 1860). Britain was turning its back on agriculture and investing in technology. Huge numbers of people left the land and went to the factories. The country was so stable compared with others that it was playing football rather than engaging in war: the first FA Cup Final took place in 1872.

Both the Butes and the Windsors wanted to climb onto this investment bandwagon. They may have owned huge areas of the country, but their income from land was falling. It had dropped by almost 30% between 1760 and 1860 due to cheap imports, whereas the cost of

money for investments had fallen by 40% over the same period due to the success of the economy and the benefits that new technologies brought. This was a golden era for investors.

Why build Grangetown at all?

The Windsors' grand plan was not only to create Penarth Docks and Harbour, plus two towns, but also to set up industrial zones between Clive Street and the River Ely and around Cogan. Additional housing would be required for those working in these industries besides, of course, for those working on the docks, the harbour and the railways.

It seemed a reasonable plan, except for two things: firstly, Grangetown was to be built on a marsh; and secondly, would these new industrial zones and the docks be able to compete with the facilities at Cardiff? Would enough jobs be created to fill the houses of an entire town?

This matter of competition was of very real concern. We should remember that the Marquis of Bute had a virtual monopoly of some of the railways and of course had the Glamorganshire Canal feeding his docks. Cardiff docks and its industrial off-shoots (such as foundries, timber yards, coking works, warehousing, chemical works and ship building) were long established, efficient and very profitable. The West Dock was able to berth 160 ships at a time and was one of the largest in the world. The marquis, as the richest young man in the world (in 1868), had huge buying power and almost unrestrained financial and political 'clout'. His investments in South Wales alone amounted to £460 million. Indeed, so much wealth was being created for him, that he could easily undercut prices to exclude competitors.

He did this to a number of businesses trying to compete with him, not least of all to John Batchelor, a timber merchant who went bankrupt. John Batchelor's statue stands in the Hayes, where it proclaims him 'The Friend of Freedom'. He eventually became the mayor of Cardiff - the marquis did not like his liberal politics nor his success in the timber trade.

To add to these fears of competition from the Butes, there was the question of geography. Would Penarth docks and its ancillary businesses ranged along the banks of the Ely be in the wrong place? Two things in particular bothered some investors: Penarth Docks would be at the base of a cliff and hemmed in by a river (it would be impossible to expand); and secondly there was only one railway line connecting Cogan and Grangetown with the GWR lines and with the Rhondda - a problem solved by constructing other lines later.

Without delving into the detailed unrolling of these geological, geographical, financial, logistical and political problems, the reality on the ground (literally) was tough: the construction of Grangetown became a nightmare. The marsh refused to dry out and few industries were tempted to set up on the Ferry Road industrial estate. An iron works was established there by a Mr Oliver York in 1863, but it lasted barely 20 years. Except for the gas works, no other industries of any size came to the area. So the vision of establishing an industrial zone from which its workers would be housed in Grangetown, failed.

Construction

At the very start of the Grangetown project (after the Baroness of Windsor Act of 1857) it was open to conjecture whether the physical construction of the town would even be possible. Dire warnings had been issued by engineers and even by the House of Lords during the passage of the act, that the budget was inadequate and it may prove impossible to drain the marsh anyway. The wet ground was proving difficult (some thought it impossible) to



tame; some builders gave up and the solutions devised required ever increasing amounts of cash. So much so, in 1865 the Baroness had to apply to Parliament for emergency funding.

In particular, the construction of heavy stone buildings, such as schools and places of worship, required enormous foundations pushed deep into the marsh. Some buildings - for example the Forward Movement Hall on the corner of Corporation Road and Paget Street - required foundations that were over thirty feet deep! During the initial construction (in 1859) an estate agent wrote the following when visiting the building work going on in lower Grangetown (Clive Street, Hewell, Oakley, Knole, Sevenoaks, Bromsgrove, Worcester and Holmesdale streets):

“It is a dismal swamp, a stinking morass. Even the village missionary, the water wagtail and the postman would quickly pass it by on their way to the ferry. Nothing good can come of this foolish enterprise.”

In spite of the significant difficulties in constructing roads and sewers, hacking stone out of quarries by hand and transporting it - and all the other difficult tasks - the Herculean efforts of the many builders, many of them Irish, prevailed. Streets began to rise out of the mud, although none of them was to be ‘metalled’ for many years. The thin layer of rough gravel thrown onto them soon deteriorated under the shoes of horses and the wheels of carts. Mud constantly reappeared. It was a health hazard, for it often contained animal and human faeces as well as septic offal (many residents kept chickens and pigs that they slaughtered and butchered themselves) and rotting vegetables. Rainwater carried this toxic mix into wells for drinking water. It was not long before health issues arose, which were not properly tackled for decades. We shan’t examine here the effects of the marsh on the health of the people of Grangetown, but it was to prove disastrous, resulting in the town having the worst health in the whole of Cardiff.

The Phased Development

The streets were not built at the same time, but in phases:

1. **Phase 1** (1857 - 1865 = Windsors): York Place, Clive, Holmesdale, Oakley, Hewell, Knole, Sevenoaks, Bromsgrove, Worcester, Earl, Amherst, Kent.
2. **Phase 2** (1865 - 1876 = Windsors): Forrest (or Herbert) Street, Ludlow, Bromfield, Bradford, Newport, Llanmaes (west), St Fagans (west).
3. **Phase 3** (1876 onwards = Windsors): Paget, St Fagans (east), Llanmaes (east), Pentrebanne (part), Penhevad (part), Stockland (part), Redlaver (part)
4. **Phase 4** (1882 into the 20th century = Butes): Grange Gardens, Pentrebanne (east), Penhevad (east), Stockland (east), Ferndale, Blaenclydach, Coedcae, Cymmer, Llanbradach, Clydach, Bargoed, Aber, Ystrad, Abercynon, Taff Terrace, Taff Embankment.

Corporation Road had been a road since the creation of tithed land after the abolition of the monasteries. It was then known as Moore Road and was a flood barrier, protecting the land from the Taff. A track of sorts had been established on top of this.

We can see that the second phase merely continued the terraced cottages of the first phase of lower Grangetown. The third phase was triggered by a special Act of Parliament in 1876 authorising the construction of larger and more sophisticated housing centred on Paget Street. This change of house design was forced on the developers as a result of public health warnings and over-crowding that were heavily criticised in the first two phases. The fourth and final phase lasted from the 1880s and into the 20th century and was entirely on Bute land.
