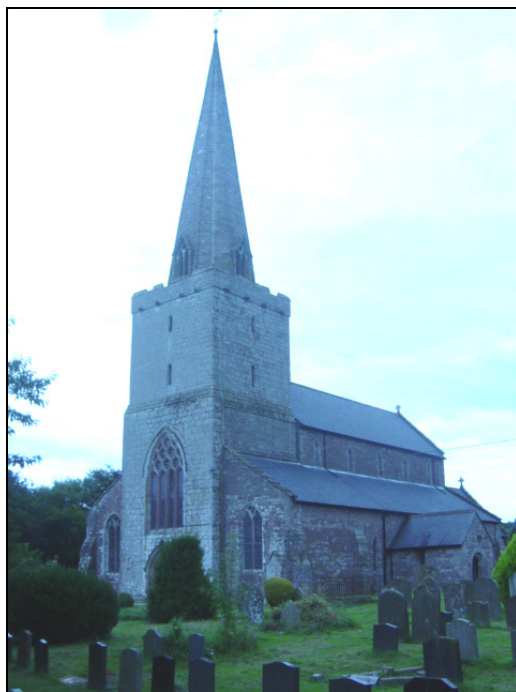


# Notes on the Lewis Family in Wales, 1783-1868

provided by  
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The following observations and photographs with respect to the history and points of interest associated with the William Lewis family in southeast Wales were based in part upon information gathered during a visit with my wife Suzanne to Monmouthshire in August 2005. Data from several officially transcribed British birth, death, and marriage certificates, plus a fairly concise family tree – all provided by my aunts through my mother – proved essential as we planned our very brief passage through the area. These documents also aided in rounding out the story through subsequent research. Due to constant drizzle, during which I regrettably did not properly protect my point-and-shoot camera, the photography shown here is rather substandard.

The places we visited were associated with three individuals, each named William Lewis (which sometimes makes it confusing). Keeping with their designations in the family tree cited above, these three men – grandfather, son, and grandson – will be referred to as *William I, II, and III*, respectively (although William I's father was also named William). William I (1783-1867) lived near the town of Trelleck, in the northeast corner of the county, near the city of Monmouth. William II and his son William III (my great-grandfather on my mother's side) lived in the following three places before the family emigrated to the United States in either 1868 or 1869: Shirenewton (located about eight miles south of Trelleck), St. Woolos (16 miles to the west of Shirenewton near the seaport of Newport), and the village of Mynyddyslwyn (ten miles northwest of Newport).



1828 Map of County of Monmouth, Wales, by James Pigot

Monmouthshire (or the County of Monmouth) is situated in the southeast corner of Wales, defined on the south by the River Severn and the Bristol Channel, on the east by the River Wye (which marks Monmouthshire's boundary with the English county of Gloucestershire), and in the northwest by the *Brecon Beacons*. During part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Monmouthshire was administratively combined with the County of Glamorgan to the west. Since the time of the Norman invasion, and mainly through the Middle Ages, this portion of southern Wales traditionally has been referred to as *Gwent*.

Due to its geographical accessibility and the attractiveness of its port towns, Gwent was the first part of Wales subdued by the Normans after they invaded Britain in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. While it took the Normans and their successors nearly two centuries to subdue the entirety of Wales, this southeast corner of the country assimilated relatively quickly

into the new Anglo-Norman culture of the Middle Ages. Since then, it has remained as the most “Anglicized” portion of Wales. The Briton-based language of *Cymraeg* (Welsh) never completely died out; however, Wales did not become officially bilingual until the 1990s. Today, one can observe road signs everywhere in both English and Welsh. However, Welsh is spoken mainly in the more isolated northern and central villages of the country, and less than 10 percent of those residing in Monmouthshire today claim any fluency with the language, although it is taught in the schools. Based upon the historical orientation of Gwent toward England, there is little evidence to suggest that the Lewis Family of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, though clearly Welshmen, spoke any language other than English, or considered themselves as culturally distinct from any other subject of the British Crown. Also of note, Lewis is an extremely common surname in Wales, perhaps following Smith and Williams, in terms of numbers.

During the lifetimes of William I and II, the County of Monmouth experienced significant growth in population, employment opportunities, and squalor due to the advent of the industrial revolution and the discovery of coal and iron in the mountains to the northwest of where they lived. Judging from their signing of marriage and birth certificates with an “X,” one has to assume that both William I and William II were illiterate. However, both were skilled craftsmen who worked with their hands in the plentiful forests of the region and the village workshops or local factories to create wooden objects required of the rapidly expanding economy.

William Lewis I is identified as a “Hoopmaker,” when in 1848 he married a widow named Susan Hemmans [perhaps “Hemmings] – William himself having been widowed sometime earlier. At first, I thought that a hoopmaker was merely a tradesman for making wooden hoops for women’s dresses of the period or possibly for making barrels for shipping. However, the flared dresses one usually associates in the U.S. with the American Civil War period, while popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, tended to use whale bone not wood, and barrel makers were usually referred to as “coopers” (although hoopmakers in more specialized enterprises did provide the wood components used by the coopers in their barrel making). Hoopmakers were also distinct from carpenters.

Researching the term “hoop maker” a little further on the internet, I then came across some sites explaining the importance of wooden hoops for hoisting and attaching sails to ships’ masts and the craftsmanship required to make these intricate devices. Evidently, between 1750 and the 1870, a hoopmaker (or “hoop shaver” and “woodman,” as noted on documents referencing William Lewis II’s occupation) was a highly sought-out trade, which required precision in selecting, cutting, shaving, and bending oak and other Welsh hardwoods through the use of steam or heat in order to produce the mast hoops for ships. I also recalled reading that Admiral Horatio Nelson insisted that British warships be outfitted with wood from the forests of Monmouthshire, as the source for the sturdiest of the accessible timber in Britain at that time was in south Wales. (The only other major European source for ship masts were in the region of the modern Baltic states.

Evidently, well-made hoops were in great demand during the Napoleonic wars, and Newport, located approximately 15 miles away, was a growing port city with an

expanding shipbuilding capability. Given his age at the time, this begs the question: Could the young artisan William Lewis I have fashioned with his own hands some of the mast hoops used by Nelson's fleet during the battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and subsequent engagements by the Royal Navy?

Evidently, the skill was important enough to be passed on to his son, who was listed as a hoopmaker on a census fifty years later. Regardless, however, of whether William I and William II crafted intricate wooden devices for ocean-going ships, buttresses for the coal mines, or wooden inserts for women's dresses, their skills with wood were evidently in high demand throughout the last 100 years of the family's residency in southeast Wales.



Road Map of Southeast Wales

Suzanne and I began our brief passage through Monmouthshire from the Cotswolds in neighboring Gloucestershire, and our objective was to get as far west as possible that day toward our final destination at St. David's on the extreme southwest coast of Wales. As such, we had only the afternoon of one rain-swept day in August to visit several of the villages associated with the Lewis Family.



Circa 1924 British Survey Map of "Trelleck Town"



Satellite Photo of Trelleck from "Google Earth"

Heading south from the city of Monmouth, we first stopped in the town of Trelleck, where William Lewis I, a widower, married the widow Susan Hemmans in the parish Church of St. Nicholas. Evidently, William and his new bride lived approximately three miles southeast of town in a locality written on the wedding certificate and his subsequent death certificate as “White Leigh.” William I’s home, which one suspects was a very humble dwelling, was located either on a landed estate or in very small hamlet by that that same name, spelled today as “Whitelye.”

In the past, Trelleck was spelled as “Treloch,” which means “Three Stones.” Located in a field outside of the town, Suzanne and I did not have the opportunity to visit the monument. According to several references, however, these monoliths were a recognizable feature as travelers approached the town from the south by horse, foot, or cart. Sometimes called “Harold’s Stones” after the last Saxon king who was killed during the Battle of Hastings, the stones were most likely erected as a small astrological calendar and temple by the same pre-Celtic culture that built Stonehenge, situated approximately 60 miles to the southeast. Archaeologists have now determined that these prehistoric builders transported the famous “bluestones” of Stonehenge from modern-day Preseli park in Wales, located 90 miles to the west of Trelleck to the Salisbury Plain. The monoliths which William I routinely passed by as he came to town on business or to worship may have come from this same source. The presence of the monument suggests that the area around Trelleck has been continuously inhabited since 2500 B.C.



**"Harold's Stones" by Photographer Francis Frith**



**Bluestone in Preseli National Park**

**(Represents a clearer view of what one of Trelleck's *Three Stones* might have looked like)**

According to a brochure available in the Church of St. Nicholas, the town of Trelleck has been in existence since at least early part of the Saxon period. During the 13th Century, the town was larger than Newport or Chepstow, but it was largely destroyed in 1291 as a result of a raid following a dispute over deer poaching. Its population and importance diminished further as a result of the Black Plague, which descended upon the town in 1350, and as a result of a Welsh revolt for independence 50 years later led by fabled Welsh freedom fighter Owain Glydwr. Today, it is a sleepy little hamlet situated in the middle of humbly maintained farmland, with less than a hundred maintained structures.



**Lion Inn Pub in Trelleck**



**The Church of St. Nicholas, Trelleck**

The Gothic-style Church of St. Nicholas, where William I and Susan Hemmans were married in 1848, was mainly constructed between 1225 and 1272, although the remains of an old Saxon church built during the 7<sup>th</sup> Century no doubt served as part of its foundation and furnished some of the stonework. Today, St. Nicholas' is considered an "Established Church," meaning that it is affiliated with the Anglican denomination of the Church of England. As was the case with a majority of churches in England and Wales, St. Nicholas' was no doubt forcibly converted from being a Catholic house of worship to Protestantism by Henry VIII during the early part of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. St. Nicholas' probably settled into its current Anglican conventions of worship following the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, after the English Civil War.



**West Entrance to Grounds of St. Nicholas'**





**Cemetery, North Side of St. Nicholas'**



**Cemetery, South Side of St. Nicholas'**

Walking through the church-side cemetery during a bit of a drizzle, we were unfortunately unable to locate any headstones with the Lewis surname on them. Most of the headstones were so weather-beaten that their inscriptions were no longer legible.



**Interior of St. Nicholas' Facing the Altar  
(Note the Norman-built stone pillars, still standing after 750 years)**



**Stained-Glass Window Located Behind Altar**



**Interior of St. Nicholas' Looking Toward the Rear of the Church**



**Baptismal Font Located at the Rear of the Church**



***Tump Terret Castle Mound, Trelleck***

Another point of interest in Trelleck is “Tump Terret” (not to be confused with “Trump Tower”), a forty foot-high mound located about a quarter of a mile south from the church, which contains the remains of the local “motte and bailey” castle. Built by the town’s Norman overlord in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century, it featured a wooden fortification on the top of the mound, and soldiers’ barracks, enclosed by a fence and a moat, around the bottom. Situated on the west side of the main road leading north into town, the “castle” served the Normans for about 100 years until it was destroyed by a Welsh attack. It wasn’t too difficult for Suzanne and me to negotiate the weeds and thistles to get to the top of Tump Terret to take several pictures of the surrounding area. The mound has obviously been left untouched for centuries; and according to an information brochure in the church, there is a local legend that calamity will overtake anyone who attempts to excavate it.



**View of South End of Trelleck from the Top of Tump Terret, Looking East**



**View from Tump Terret, Looking South**



**Heading Home After A Picnic in the Pasture  
(We saw more cows in Trelleck than people)**



**Suzanne and Pasture Land, Trelleck, Looking West**



**Satellite Photo of Whitelye (or White Leigh) from “Google Earth”**

Due to time constraints, Suzanne and I were unable to visit the tiny hamlet of Whitelye, located approximately 3 miles southeast of Trelleck, where William Lewis I actually resided.

After wandering around Trelleck for several hours, Suzanne and I headed south down scenic Welsh roads to reach the town of Shirenewton, where we know from the records that William Lewis II lived – at least between 1849 and 1855. The town is also the birthplace of William Lewis III (1855).



**Satellite Photo of Shirenewton from "Google Earth"**

Today, Shirenewton today has a much larger population than Trelleck. Though clearly a bedroom community for nearby cities, such as Newport, Cardiff, and Bristol, the town appears also to serve as a location for upscale restored summer cottages, given the maintenance of its neatly laid out buildings and lovely gardens.



**Shirenewton's Main Thoroughfare with Lovely Stone Cottages**

According to the town's website, *Shirenewton* means "Sheriff's New Homestead," and the locality was formally established by Walter Fitzherbert, the Sheriff of Gloucester, around 1100 A.D. The town's Welsh name is *Trenwydd Gelli Fach*, which means "New Homestead in the Little Grove." Other ancient names for the village include *Nova Villa*, which suggests the presence of some wealthy Romanized Briton's villa in the area.



*Shirenewton's Church of St. Thomas a Becket*

According to a marriage certificate, in 1849, William Lewis II married Anne Highley (also spelled "Heyley") in the parish church in Shirenewton, which was and remains *St. Thomas a Becket's*. William Lewis III having been born in the town in 1855, he was most likely christened in the church, as well. The building is dominated by an excellent example of a Norman fortified tower. According to the town's website, the church was built at the end of the 13th century by Humphrey de Bohun, the Norman overlord. Situated in the centre of the village, the tower commands an elevated position overlooking the Bristol Channel. A census taken in 1851, when William II lived in Shirenewton, indicates that the town's population numbered 933 inhabitants.



*Interior of St. Thomas a Becket's*





**Bridge Crossing the River Usk From St. Woolos to Newport**

Sometime after William III's birth in 1855 and before 1859, William Lewis II and his family moved to the town of St. Woolos (spelled St. *Woollos* on birth certificates of subsequent children), which was a bedroom district for laborers working in the factories and docks of Newport across the River Usk. While we don't know where William II was employed, the above contemporary sketching suggests what the city of Newport might have looked like, as he crossed the river on his way to work from St. Woolos. Given the rapid expansion of mines, factories, and shipyards in south Wales during the Industrial Revolution, one wonders what sort of Dickensian conditions the members of the Lewis Family may have experienced during this period of uncertainty.



**Mynyddislwyn and Nearby Towns, the *Brecon Beacons* in the Background**

For some reason, prior to the birth of their son Jim Lewis in 1867, William II and his family resettled in the village of Mynyddislwyn, located in the foothills of the Brecon Beacons, approximately 9 miles northwest of St. Woolos. This district of rapidly growing settlements housed the workers employed in the nearby coal mines and steel factories. The story of the family's long presence in Wales ends here, as within two or three years after this, William II and William III (and perhaps other members of their family) emigrated to the United States, where they first settled in Pennsylvania.

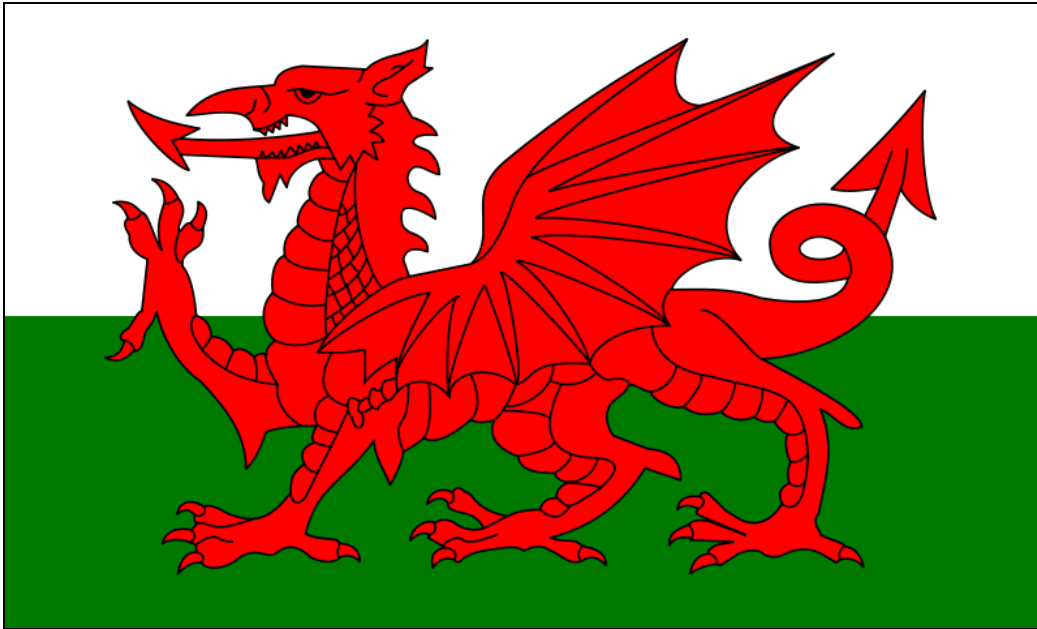
Our brief journey in August 2005 to several of the geographical points of interest associated with the Lewis Family during their last century in Wales also ends at this point, as we had to head out that evening towards our destination at the cathedral town of St. David's, located on the spectacular and rugged extreme southwest coast of Wales.



**St. David's Cathedral**



**Southwest Coast of Wales**



## *Cymru am byth*

A fascinating country with gorgeous scenery, a long history, and friendly people experiencing a proud revival of their ancient language and heritage, we hope to visit again this enchanting land of the Red Dragon and the Lewis Family's origins.



**Bruce & Suzanne Slawter**  
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