

Brown, Lenox & Co, chainmakers – *Stephen Jones* (April 2019)

The well known firm of Brown Lenox of Pontypridd was founded in 1818 by Samuel Brown of London. He was one of a trio of innovative chainmakers, all active at about the same time, who were addressing the problem of how to produce strong, reliable and tangle-free iron chain. The solution was the 'stud' (or bridge) in the centre of each link. Brown's initial works was located at Millwall (London) but he moved to Pontypridd (or Newbridge, as it was then) to take advantage of the vacant site of an old nail works which was very conveniently located right beside the Glamorganshire Canal. It had originally formed part of the Crawshay empire before they gave it up. Brown Lenox continued to source iron from Cyfarthfa but later switched to Plymouth and finally the firm started producing its own.

Brown was joined by Samuel Lenox. He invested capital in the business but was never any more than a sleeping partner. His nephew, George William Lenox, later came to be actively involved, but initially day-to-day management was in the hands of Philip Thomas. After his death Thomas enjoyed the distinction of having two gravestones erected to his memory – one in the chapel where he was buried, the other on Pontypridd common.

Before establishing his company Samuel Brown had built a prototype suspension bridge; it met with favourable comment from Telford but nevertheless Brown failed to secure a contract for the ironwork for the latter's Menai and Conwy suspension bridges. His first major contract was the Union Bridge over the Tweed near Berwick on Tweed which was completed in 1820 and still survives. He subsequently built the chain piers at Leith and Brighton. Altogether he is believed to have proposed about 40 chain piers or suspension bridges of which only about 12 were built.

The firm won many important contracts. They supplied the chains for the Great Eastern and the huge chains shown behind Brunel in the famous photograph were all their work. They also had long-standing contracts to supply chainwork to the Royal Navy and to the navies of other countries, and also to commercial shipping lines such as Cunard. The liner *Mauritania* was equipped with their chain but not *Titanic* (despite legends to the contrary).

Chainmaking at Pontypridd continued to flourish well into the 20th century while the Millwall branch concentrated on anchors and buoys. In the 1960s the traditional wrought-iron chain made from bar iron was replaced by welded steel chain using a Swedish process. At this point Pontypridd switched to manufacturing quarrying equipment and finally closed in the 1980s. The site of the works has now been completely cleared and nothing remains to be seen apart from a former chapel, the Chain Works Mission, which has now been converted into a private house.