

Ninety Years in Chepstow

Building a Picture of Life in Chepstow in the 18th and 19th Centuries

On three consecutive Sundays in November 1788, the banns of marriage for John Brew (ca 1765-ca 1805) and Mary Taylor (ca 1766- 1831), were read out in the parish church of the town of Chepstow, in the southeastern Welsh county of Monmouthshire. This is the earliest documented evidence of my family's existence.

Yet why John and Mary settled in Chepstow, and more particularly, where they came from, are two questions we are unable to answer. Finding no proof for either circumstantial or anecdotal evidence, we set about learning more about them. By researching what they must have experienced, and how they were affected by society around them, we have attempted to build a picture of their lives.

The town of Chepstow is built on the side of a hill, enclosed on three sides by a natural boundary formed by a bend in the River Wye. It lies only a short distance from where the Wye joins the Severn River at the head of the Bristol Channel.

In John and Mary's day, Chepstow was a thriving market town, and the waterfront brimmed with seagoing craft of all sizes. There was constant activity as vessels headed out into the Channel, or arrived with loads of timber and bark from mills further up river. A market boat ran on a regular schedule to Bristol, and a dry-dock was built in 1759 which could hold vessels of up to 500 tons.

The foreshore was lined with wharves. Boatloads of timber stacked high upon them hindered the view from the water of the noisy activity behind them. Brickyards, shipyards, timberyards, and inns dominated the waterfront for some distance down the river in both directions.

On the eastern side of the river bend, a short walk beyond the Boat Inn, was the town's 'rope walk', where ropes were constructed for rigging, by stretching and intertwining lengths of imported hemp. On the western side of the river bend, overlooking the lower town, stood Chepstow Castle. Perched proudly above a cliff, which fell away into the Wye, it was commenced by the Normans just a year after the Battle of Hastings. The fortification was the first stone castle ever built in Wales, and possibly the first in the entire Kingdom. Before her walls, houses, shops, and inns appeared to prop each other up as they climbed the winding, cobbled streets to the town gate.

Today, the land beyond the town is primarily rich, grassy farmland occupied by herds of grazing cows and sheep. However, as John and Mary prepared to marry in 1788, much of the area was still covered in thickly wooded forests. These woodlands would supply the British Government with almost half the timber it needed to build the Royal Navy's ships during the Napoleonic Wars.

The Wye Valley was home to a dozen paper mills and umpteen timber yards, the latter being some of the largest in the Kingdom. Between them, they produced a number of commodities essential for the success of the country's foreign policy, namely wood, rope and sails, and substantial amounts of these were shipped to the Royal Navy Dockyards in Portsmouth, Plymouth, Deptford and Woolwich. The paper produced in the valley was considered of such high quality that some was used by the crown for printing banknotes. A thick, blue, lightly waxed paper was also produced for carrying sugar.

According to the town's parish register, John Brew and Mary Taylor's wedding banns were announced in the parish church on the 2nd, 9th, and 16th of November 1788. John is listed as a

Ninety Years in Chepstow

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bachelor and Mary a spinster, but their entries indicate they were not educated people: both signed their names with wobbly X's. Following the obligatory reading of the banns, the couple were married five weeks later, on Christmas Eve 1788.

The register records both as having been 'of this parish' but no trace of John's previous existence in Chepstow survives. In fact, there is no evidence that Brews were present anywhere in Wales before this date. This is perhaps not surprising when one considers the surname is not native to Wales. It has its origins on the Isle of Man, a small independent kingdom located in the Irish Sea between England and Ireland.

The name appears there in records as early as 1406, originally in the forms McVriw, McBrew and McBrew. It evolved significantly over the ensuing 230 years, most notably losing the prefix 'Mc', and the first documented evidence of the form 'Brew', as it is known today, appeared in 1635. The name's evolution appears to have ceased at that time, as it has maintained this form ever since. The names Brewer and Brewster are not related.

Although the surname has been prevalent in areas of Ireland and western England since the 1600s, it appears that the name was first introduced to Wales by my 5x great grandfather sometime in the 1780s. Whilst this is a bold claim to fame, I do not consider it the end of the story – nor, indeed, the beginning! Where did John Brew come from, and why did he settle in Chepstow? Did he travel by sea from the Isle of Man or Ireland, or did he perhaps journey overland from Liverpool? Despite a great amount of in-depth research, it has thus far proven impossible to establish John's origin.

The couple had two children in Chepstow, John jnr. (1790-1843) and Thomas (1791-1840), and thus began a dynasty, which today stretches from Wales to England, Northern Ireland, Australia, and the United States. The fact that there were only two children, however, suggests John senior probably died young (We know Mary did not die until 1831), but neither date nor place of death have been established. Despite this, circumstantial evidence suggests that John was dead by 1805, although judging by son Thomas' birth date (1791), he possibly died up to fourteen years earlier.

Gwent Record Office holds a draft apprenticeship indenture for Thomas, which shows the boy was apprenticed to a Chepstow ropemaker from 1805. Here lay the clue: The 14-year-old lad obtained the consent of his mother to enter into the agreement, not of his father. It states "*...wh'as by Ind're bearing Date the 2d Day of July 1805...it is witnessed that the sd. Ths. Brew with the Consent of his mother Mary Brew of Chepstow afsd. widow did put himself apprentice to Saml. Brookman of Chepstow afsd. Ropemaker....*". There are no records of his father's death in the parish registers; the word 'widow' is the only hint.

The twenty-five years following his sons' births would prove to be an exciting and yet dangerous period in England's history. The boys would have grown up to stories of the young colony in New South Wales and heard all about the rebellions in Ireland. However, at a time when foreign policy was governed by gunpowder, talk in the town would have often been dominated by the subject of aggressions between Britain and her belligerent neighbour, France.

Ninety Years in Chepstow

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In February 1793, France declared war on Britain. Within just three years, engagements between the two countries cost Britain some 40,000 lives, many of them in the West Indies. Unfortunately, however, this was barely the beginning, and sporadic but fierce clashes with France and her allies would continue on land and sea for another twenty years.

In 1797, in a terrifying and unexpected escalation, France audaciously sent several armed raiding parties to England and Wales. On one occasion, the French landed near Bristol, on both sides of the Channel. They were frighteningly close to Chepstow and caused widespread panic in the area. That same year the rest of Europe made peace with France, and Britain felt very alone.

There is little doubt, then, that the Brew boys were caught up in the excitement and xenophobia of the “Rule Britannia” genre, which accompanied a succession of courageous British naval victories in the wake of the Bristol raids. The first of these was Admiral Jervis’ defeat of the Spanish off Cape St. Vincent in 1797, when the latter’s force outnumbered the British by 2-to-1. This was followed by Admiral Duncan’s defeat of the Dutch off Camperdown before the year was out. Horatio Nelson then dealt Napoleon’s fleet a crushing blow at Aboukir Bay in 1798, and just three months later, off Donegal, Rear Admiral Warren destroyed or captured seventy percent of a French squadron sent to land troops in Ireland to aide the revolutionaries there.

There were further clashes in the first years of the new century, but it was the Britain’s battle against the combined French and Spanish fleets at Trafalgar in October 1805 that was the most spectacular. Within just three hours, Nelson’s fleet destroyed 21 of the 35 vessels amassed against him. The Admiral was killed but the country was jubilant – Britannia ruled the waves! It captured the nation’s excitement and became a legend in British history.

However, it would take another nine years before Napoleon seemed beaten and was forced to abdicate. He fled to exile on the Island of Elba but, not a year later, surprised Britain when he escaped, returned to France, and once again reunited the nation. Alas, it was only a matter of months before the emperor once again faced British troops across a battlefield. In a short but bloody campaign at Waterloo in June 1815, Napoleon met his final and decisive defeat at the hands of the Duke of Wellington. With the help of Prussia, the French were crushed, and another major victory was written into the annals of British history.

Britain rejoiced as her victorious troops came home and the United Kingdom commenced a lengthy period of relative peace on the international stage. Indeed, it would be a full century before Britain’s superiority on the seas would again be questioned, but sadly, in the aftermath of Waterloo, the joy was short-lived.

The introduction of new technologies in the form of farming machinery, steam-powered weaving looms, and cylinder printing presses, amongst other recent inventions, had already caused extensive unemployment. The situation was only aggravated after Waterloo when armies were disbanded, and men returned to their villages and towns looking for work. These factors, coupled with low wages and long working hours for those who did have work, only led to further disgruntlement amongst the population. With the economy in recession, the frustration reached boiling point and riots broke out across England and Wales.

Ninety Years in Chepstow

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There was also a great deal of discontent in the Wye Valley near Chepstow. The demand for timber had caused massive depletion of the woodlands around Chepstow and great tracts of land had been laid bare. The once over-abundant supply had been exhausted and natural regrowth could not compete with demand. Whilst much of this area is today's farmland, at the time the loss of this natural resource caused a great deal of unemployment as the mills began to close down.

Local men rioted and mobs damaged or destroyed several mills. The Militia was sent out to arrest the ringleaders, who were duly tried at the Assizes, and sentenced to death. The men were held for some time in the prison hulk 'York', but their sentences were later commuted to seven years transportation to Australia. They left England for Tasmania aboard HMS Proteus in April 1831, and arrived in Hobart four months later.

This episode in Chepstow history is recorded on a plaque that can be seen today on a wall on "The Back", on the Chepstow waterfront. "The Back" is the name of the very street the Brews lived on at the time of the riots and arrests. There is no evidence they were involved in any way, but there is no doubt these events made a great impact on the family.

Life in Chepstow, however, was not always this exciting, and the townsfolk were usually pre-occupied with the chores and goings-on of everyday life. Each Saturday, a food and produce market was held in the town, accompanied every second week by a livestock market. Town fairs were held on the market day closest to 1 March, on the market day prior to Whitsunday, on Horses Birthday (1 August) and on the Friday preceding 29 October. An additional annual Wool and Pleasure Fair was also held each year on 22 June.

The town's first bank was opened in 1787, and by 1829, the Chepstow Savings Bank had over 300 depositors. An interest rate of 4% per annum was offered, and the ledgers showed deposits of more than £11,000. Postmen first appeared in Chepstow in 1800 but it was another thirteen years before a daily postal service to London was introduced. A letter to Cardiff cost sixpence, and to London 10 pence, but postage was paid by the recipient. By 1833, Chepstow had two postmen for the town and a further eight for rural deliveries.

During all of this, John jnr and Thomas Brew became young adults. They remained in Chepstow, married local girls, and soon began their own families. During the hard years that followed Waterloo, they fathered almost twenty children between them. The world was quickly changing around them; education for children was not yet compulsory, but new coal-burning and steam-powered industrial innovations, such as the railways, were just being introduced.

Like many other folk at the time, though, they were also affected by disease and poverty. Three of Thomas' daughters died young; one was just nineteen, the other two under four. One of his brother John's children also died, aged just under one year old, whilst a second was born deaf. Chepstow's Workhouse minute books are also testimony to the hardships the family sometimes endured. The ledgers expose one of Thomas' daughters, Mary Ann, as a vagrant who gave birth to two illegitimate children. Both died before they reached six months of age, and the informant on each occasion was the Master of the Workhouse. Each of Mary Ann's admissions and discharges are

Ninety Years in Chepstow

Building a Picture of Life in Chepstow in the 18th and 19th Centuries

listed within the pages of the surviving minutes, as are the 26/6 she was granted to enable her to bury her children.

Thomas Brew died of Tuberculosis in 1840, aged 48. All but one of his children were still under twenty years old at the time. We can only marvel at the resourcefulness and achievement of his widow Honor (nee Perry), who then brought up the children single-handedly. There existed barely a skeleton of today's social security; there was no financial assistance to fall back on and she had to find work.

In fact, just a year after Thomas' death, she is shown in the 1841 census as a shopkeeper in Chepstow with eight children at home. Later censuses indicate she was a green grocer, who also had lodgers in the house to supplement her income. Nonetheless, Honor managed to have all of her children educated. Each learned to read and write, whilst the four boys additionally completed an apprenticeship.

By the 1840s, railway tracks criss-crossed Britain. Sometime around 1845, members of the family began to move away from Chepstow, the family's hometown for some sixty years. Of Thomas and Honor's four sons, the two eldest moved to London, where work was more plentiful, whilst the youngest son joined the Royal Artillery and was posted overseas. On his discharge, he also settled in London. Although the remaining son also moved away from Chepstow, he was the only one who stayed in Wales. He joined the railways, and, in the ensuing years, all of his own sons followed him.

In time, each of the girls married and moved away with their own families. Some even crossed the Atlantic to a new life in America. On the eve of the new century, the first of Thomas and Honor's descendants reached the shores of Australia.

On her death in 1875, Honor was the last remaining Brew in Chepstow. Thus ended my family's almost ninety-year relationship with the town. Since that time, the only Brews who have returned have been her descendants seeking clues to their origins. The houses they lived in, and the Workhouse they spent time in, no longer exist, but the family's small mark on Chepstow's history lives on through the pages of the parish registers.

We owe our existence particularly to Honor Brew. It is largely due to the efforts of this courageous, hard-working woman that hundreds of her descendants are spread across the globe today. And all of them can trace their earliest origins to a small town in Wales.

Bibliography

Saga of the Brews, © John Brew, 1997

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