A study of crime and disorder in the early Victorian industrial town of Pontypool from evidence contained within *The Monmouthshire Merlin*

Student Dissertation

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A study of crime and disorder in the early Victorian industrial town of Pontypool from evidence contained within

*The Monmouthshire Merlin*

Robert Barber

6665 Words
With thanks to

All the tutors on the A329 module

Especially to Dr Matthew Griffiths for his excellent support and guidance throughout this module and A223.

This Dissertation is dedicated to my late mother Joan who sadly died this year, who never wavered in her support and encouragement during my studies.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This dissertation will investigate crime and disorder in Pontypool at a time when many similar towns were expanding rapidly due to industrialisation. The mass influx of people into Pontypool combined with an inadequate infrastructure to support them in conjunction with easy availability of alcohol provided the main elements for crime and disorder to thrive. *The Monmouthshire Merlin* newspaper which reported events in Pontypool will be used to provide evidence relating to criminality and disorder and the perception of crime its contents portrayed to the reader. Robinson wrote in relation to crime in newspapers, they ‘do contain a wealth of information, pertaining to society’s understanding, fears and responses regarding the problem’\(^1\). The newspaper will be scrutinised for evidence relating to the endeavours of the Pontypool community to stem criminality and disorder and to corroborate that institutions and organisations were being created offering residents’ alternatives to frequenting licenced premises for amusement. As Jones stated many newspapers reminded readers ‘of the presence of sin, and of the shameful consequences of giving in to temptation’.\(^2\) The evidence obtained by searching court records over a certain period will also be used to establish any discernible rise or fall in crime. Key words used in reports of crime will be searched to ascertain if this resulted in an increase in crime reporting which may in turn have added to the perception of crime in Pontypool. The dissertation will cover a period when many newspapers were being founded in South Wales from 1829 when *The Monmouthshire Merlin* was first published to 1860 when the Monmouthshire Constabulary took control of policing in Pontypool, by which time as Rees wrote ‘journalists were being accepted as responsible public men.’\(^3\) These questions are worthy of further scrutiny as they encompass several aspects of Welsh history which historians have identified as being neglected, namely the study of Welsh urban history and the history of crime within Wales, whilst concurrently evaluating the benefits and disadvantages of newspapers as sources. As Aled Jones argued in

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2002 Welsh newspapers contain an extensive amount of information and should subsequently ‘receive more intensive historical attention’\textsuperscript{4} Professor Harold Carter who wrote ‘an imposing body of work on urban geography’\textsuperscript{5} described Pontypool ‘as being the interior capital of the Monmouthshire coalfield, a position equivalent of Pontypridd in Glamorgan’\textsuperscript{6} It is therefore surprising that Pontypool along with many other towns of a similar stature have become predominantly the domain of local historians as argued by Evans.\textsuperscript{7} The limitations of Welsh urban history were highlighted by Borsay when he wrote ‘Wales [is] one of the most under researched areas of urban history’\textsuperscript{8} Borsay argues that Welsh historians have concentrated on Welsh identity, radicalism and industrialisation to the detriment of Welsh urban history which has subsequently not evolved to the same extent when compared to other parts of Britain and Europe.\textsuperscript{9} The study of Welsh urban history has however expanded since the intervention of Borsay and others to include works by Julie Light, Louise Miskell and Joe England on the lives of urban elites in Welsh towns.\textsuperscript{10}

David Jones argues that Welsh crime history has also been ignored, whilst asserting the subject provides information about Welsh society in the same way as ‘Welsh ancestors, the liberal politician, the nonconformist minister and trade union official’\textsuperscript{11}. Despite the work of Jones and Jane Morgan there is still a lack of literature on the subject as identified by Gregory in her Ph.D. thesis in 2008\textsuperscript{12} By examining accounts of Pontypool’s criminal activity in The Monmouthshire Merlin the dissertation intends to supplement the

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\textsuperscript{7} Evans, N. (2008) ‘Rethinking Urban Wales’ in Urban History, Vol 32, Cambridge University Press, p. 120.
historiography of both Welsh urban and crime history. Previous research into this aspect covers the latter part of the century including Daniel J. Robinson’s work entitled *Crime, Police and the Provincial Press: A Study of Victorian Cardiff*. The dissertation will explore the use of key words written in the newspaper as Robinson’s article did to confirm or disprove that they were utilised to draw attention to ‘depravity which littered the pages of newspapers,’ thereby demonstrating why newspapers must be treated with an element of caution as the accounts may be exaggerated and biased. This issue combined with difficulties abstracting relevant information from them will also be scrutinised thereby seeking to add to the work by J. Secker in her research into newspapers as historical sources.

Chapter one of the dissertation will demonstrate how Pontypool grew dramatically during this period. Maps obtained from sources including the Cadw website will be used to highlight this expansion. It will proceed by highlighting the proliferation of licensed premises selling alcohol to the ever-increasing population and consider how living conditions fuelled an increase in crime and disorder in the town. Pontypool, like many towns developing at such a rate would have been considered ‘frontier towns, places with few amenities, fewer traditions and a violent social life’. Chapter two will consider the growth of the newspaper industry at this time and explain the reason for selecting *The Monmouthshire Merlin* as the main source for the dissertation. It will proceed by extracting data held within the paper to ascertain if crime was declining or increasing during the period. The challenges of retrieving statistics will also be elucidated in the chapter. In addition, the chapter will analyse the manner *The Monmouthshire Merlin* reported crime and disorder and consider whether it influenced the community’s perception of crime. Furthermore, it questions if the paper was intent on providing balanced, factual reporting or sensationalising and increasing circulation and readership. The final chapter examines the information contained within the newspaper pertaining to the role played by the residents and community leaders of Pontypool in their attempts to stem the problem of criminality and disorder, including the establishment of a

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police force in the area, a mechanics institute and temperance movements in addition to attempts by local magistrates to limit the number of establishments within the vicinity licenced to sell intoxicants.

In conclusion the dissertation will highlight that newspapers are good sources to explore both the incidence of crime and disorder and how the community considered it their social responsibility to address the problem. It will provide evidence that although newspapers contain a wealth of information this information must be treated with caution due to the possibility of it being biased and not accurately reported. In addition, it will conclude that newspapers are not an easy source to work with for numerous reasons including the lack of indexing, font size and condensed format ultimately making newspapers a time-consuming resource to utilise.
Chapter 1: The Growth of Pontypool

Pontypool is located within the county of Gwent formerly known as Monmouthshire and a constituent of what was the Parish of Trevethin. It is located on the eastern edge of the South Wales Coalfield which stretches from Carmarthen in the west to Pontypool in the east and is situated on a small river called the Afon Lydd in an area abundant in the natural resources of iron and coal. Pontypool has a long history of involvement in iron making and records indicate the presence of foundries within the area since the 16th century and is believed to be the original site for manufacturing tin coated steels. William Coxe (1748-1828) a Church of England clergyman described many locations within Monmouthshire during his numerous tours of the county at the end of the eighteenth century and details of a tour in 1799 were published in 1801 in a book entitled *An Historical Tour in Monmouthshire*. In the book he describes Pontypool as being thriving in appearance, with the livelihoods of the population of 1500 dependant on work at the local ironworks and collieries. In common with many other small industrial towns in the South Wales region Pontypool’s size was about to change dramatically as its populations grew beyond all recognition. Jenkins argues this sudden expansion was due to the creation of jobs in response to the British government’s insatiable demand for metals such as copper, iron, lead, and tinplate to support the country’s war effort and help it fulfil its imperial and colonial ambitions. Consequently, more coal was required to fuel these industries. Pontypool, with its proximity to natural resources and recently improved transport links, including the Monmouthshire canal, was ideally situated to provide employment within these industries. As a result, up until 1850 Pontypool’s population expanded at a higher rate than the average population growth of England and Wales.

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combined as indicated in (Figure.1). The biggest difference in growth rate however occurred between the late 1820’s and early 1830’s.

Figure 1 Current rate: Rate of Population Change (% over previous 10 years) Source Britain a Vision Through Time

As industries expanded so too did the need for supporting infrastructure, and the resulting influx of people seeking employment to create facilities for ‘feeding them, clothing them, entertaining them transporting their product and attending to the needs of commerce’ further contributed to population growth. The community’s demographic also changed greatly because of this mass migration. This is illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 containing figures taken from the 1841 and 1851 censuses of England and Wales, respectively. They show that approximately 40% of the residents living in the Parish of Trevethin, of which Pontypool was the most populous town, were born outside the county of Monmouthshire. Information obtained from these censuses show that the population also grew by over 12.73% during this period.

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Table 1 Places of birth 1841

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of Birth</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monmouthshire</td>
<td>8731</td>
<td>58.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>2.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>5901</td>
<td>39.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14962</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Places of birth of the residents of the Parish of Trevethin in 1841 based on data from the census enumerator books on Findmypast.com.

Table 2 Places of birth 1851

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage of Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monmouthshire</td>
<td>10150</td>
<td>60.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales excluding Monmouthshire</td>
<td>2084</td>
<td>12.37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>3501</td>
<td>20.76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>4.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>398</td>
<td>2.36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>16867</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Places of birth of the residents of the Parish of Trevethin in 1851 based on data from the census enumerator books on Findmypast.com.

Although the population was expanding rapidly this was not replicated by an increase in the construction of housing. The lack of housing development is demonstrated in (Fig.2)\textsuperscript{24} and (Fig. 3)\textsuperscript{25}. The maps of 1836 and 1844 shows that no significant housing development occurred, and the population was still condensed predominately in the centre of Pontypool and two smaller pockets of developments at Trosnant and Sowhill.

\textsuperscript{24} Plan of Pontypool 1836 ‘People Collection of Wales’ Available at https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/43842 Accessed 6 May 2021
\textsuperscript{25} CADW (2012) Pontypool Understanding Urban Character
Fig. 2: Plan of Pontypool 1836. Available https://www.peoplescollection.wales/items/43842

This resulted in people living in atrocious, overcrowded conditions. G.S Kenrick the owner of a local iron works in the area referred to this in his statistical report on the population of Pontypool in 1841. He wrote that it was common for people to be living in overcrowded conditions highlighting that ‘13 to 16 persons is found occupying 1 sleeping room’, in the Sowhill area of Pontypool.26 A high proportion of those living in these cramped living conditions were single men enticed to the area by the prospects of earning good wages. Lambert argued these individuals were the cause of inadequate and insufficient housing in South Wales as they were transient, forging no bonds with the community and therefore having no desire ‘for improved living and housing conditions’ 27 Kenrick identified this group as the most ‘disorderly of the population’ arguing they had sufficient financial means to spend in licensed premises and subsequently transgressing. 28 They had an abundance of licensed premises to choose from as the implementation of the Beer Act in 1830 permitted anyone to sell beer, provided they purchased a licence at the nominal price of two guineas 29.

In 1849 The Monmouthshire Merlin reported concerns raised by the chairman of the magistrates at the Monmouth Michaelmas Session that numerous cases coming before them were associated with the beer houses, of which there were 130 in Pontypool.30 Poor housing and overcrowding combined with a transient population with a considerable disposable income were the main elements which could contribute to crime and disorder, and the expanding newspaper industry was ideally placed to record it and the endeavours made to restrain it.

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30 Monmouthshire Merlin, 20 October 1849, p.4.

This period of industrial expansion also saw the inception of the newspaper industry in South Wales. Rees wrote that between 1804 and 1855 forty newspapers were established in this area. Prior to this, residents were reliant on newspapers printed in the English border counties. Many of these papers however did not survive with heavy taxation levied via stamp duty contributing to their demise. The Monmouthshire Merlin which was established in 1829 however ‘can be said to have been commercially successful. (Table 3) displays details of the number of newspapers purchased in South Wales between 1831 and 1854.

Table 3 Sales of newspapers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual purchases by some of the larger South Wales papers were:</th>
<th>1831</th>
<th>1835</th>
<th>1840</th>
<th>1845</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1854</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambrian</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmarthen Journal</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monmouthshire Merlin</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welshman</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merthyr Guardian</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silurian</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monmouthshire Beacon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penbrookshire Herald</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swansea Herald</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The weekly sales of most of them, as may be seen, were counted in hundreds, and their net revenues from sales were proportionately small.

(Source; Rees, R.D. (1960) ‘South Wales and Monmouthshire Newspapers Under the Stamp Acts’).

It shows The Monmouthshire Merlin’s success in comparison to other papers of a similar size, particularly in 1854 when it sold 31000 more copies per year than its nearest rival. The Monmouthshire Merlin would have been read by the purchaser and numerous others as it passed from one person to another. Tory politician Henry Goulburn commented in 1836 that the employer purchased the paper, handed it to the servants who in turn handed it to the

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labourers. Therefore a large proportion of the population would have been aware of the contents of the paper, including the illiterates who had the contents read to them.

Therefore, by reporting events and activities occurring in the expanding Pontypool, newspapers influenced the residents’ thoughts and subsequently their perception of crime and disorder in their community. This perception may however have been biased as *The Monmouthshire Merlin* supported the Whig party during this period because the original proprietor of the newspaper, James Blewitt was snubbed by the Duke of Beaufort, a Tory supporter when he offered his newspaper as a platform for the Dukes’ Tory views. Having been rejected Blewitt joined forces with the Whig party and the paper established itself as the ‘organ of ‘the Whigs of Monmouthshire.” This led to accusations by other newspapers that *The Monmouthshire Merlin* was biased in it reporting with one stating that it ‘is the soothsayer ‘of the “Liberal” and “Free trading” interests.’ Unfortunately, although records of *The Monmouthshire Merlin* are available via The National Library of Wales’s database Wales Newspapers online, issues of its Conservative adversary namely *The Monmouthshire Beacon* are not currently available on this database and it is therefore difficult to validate Tory opinion on the subject. Although *The Monmouthshire Merlin* may not have provided the complete picture of events in Pontypool Jenkins argues newspapers ‘can provide quite valuable evidence of a way of life which has long since passed away’.

The largest proportion of a newspaper’s income was generated by selling advertising space to businesses and by publishing notices on behalf of the public. To be successful it was imperative a newspaper maintained a high circulation, thereby encouraging people to utilise it for advertising. As Rees wrote, ‘newspapers could pay their way only if they attracted a sufficient number of advertisers.’ (Table 3) shows that *The Monmouthshire Merlin* despite its popularity at the height of its sales was only selling 2115 copies a week, highlighting that the income generated by sales alone was insufficient to cover costs. Therefore, the newspaper’s contents needed to entice the public to purchase it, and printing accounts of

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crime was a popular means of capturing readers’ attention thereby increasing circulation. As Louis James remarked with regards to his study into literature at the time ‘Crime was the best seller’

Table 4 Words relating to crime.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1830</th>
<th>1840</th>
<th>1850</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drunk</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>728</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keys words relating to crime used in articles in the Monmouthshire Merlin. 1830-1850. Based on data taken from the Monmouthshire Merlin.

This would appear to be true in the case of The Monmouthshire Merlin as the (Table 4) shows the increase in crime reporting over the twenty-year period between 1830 and 1850. By searching The Monmouthshire Merlin for key words associated with criminality and disorder including murder, assault, and police on the Wales Newspapers online database a picture of increases in such reports is drawn. The caveat, however, is that not all incidents would have been associated with Pontypool was the paper also covered the whole of Monmouthshire. Despite this they would still influence the perception of criminality in the mind of the reader. The newspaper would also contain national news obtained from national newspapers with the editor deciding which articles warranted inclusion.

The Monmouthshire Merlin provides further evidence of criminality and disorder in its regular reports of court cases. The courts administering local justice were known as courts of Petty Sessions, and were responsible for dealing with low level crimes such as theft, common assault, and drunkenness. At the beginning of the nineteenth century these courts were held monthly. However, with the advent of the ever-expanding industrial towns they sat with

increasing frequency to meet demand and therefore were increased to ‘fortnightly and then weekly and daily Sessions.’\textsuperscript{41} These courts became known in the 1830’s as ‘police courts’ because they were held in the police headquarters of larger towns. A letter dated 27\textsuperscript{th} of September 1837 sent to the editor, subsequently published in \textit{The Monmouthshire Merlin} provides evidence that there was demand for such a court in Pontypool. The author uses the name Justitia, the Roman name for the goddess of justice as a signature, advocated the establishment of a Petty Session court in the Pontypool. The author argued that because the courts were predominately hearing cases originating within the Pontypool area it would be more appropriate and convenient to have a court located within the town rather than many miles away as was the current situation.\textsuperscript{42} Although this indicates that crime was increasing within Pontypool compared to the surrounding rural areas this information should be treated with caution. It was signed anonymously using the name Justitia which Jones argues was not only to protect the authors identity but ‘a sign of personal vanity’ on the author’s part.\textsuperscript{43} As a consequence the identity of the author and letter’s provenance cannot be adequately validated, and it is possible the author had ulterior motives in proposing the establishment of a court in Pontypool. It further illustrates the benefits of newspapers as historical sources because without them it is unlikely a copy of the published letter would be available, and the evidence contained within it would be lost completely.

Details of these courts are recorded in \textit{The Monmouthshire Merlin} newspaper under the clear heading ‘Pontypool Police’. They document details of the offences committed, names of the accused and punishment imposed in the event of a guilty verdict. The naming of offenders was intended to shame the person and living in a community such as Pontypool there was significant possibility the offender would be known to the other residents. One such example is highlighted in \textit{The Monmouthshire Merlin} dated 3\textsuperscript{rd} of October 1840 which recorded offences ranging from theft to assault.\textsuperscript{44} Other court reports are recorded in the newspaper prior to and after the ‘police courts’ were founded in Pontypool. However, details of these court are not exclusive to Pontypool as they also contain details of offences committed throughout the whole of Monmouthshire. Having titles such as the ‘Monmouthshire Quarter Sessions’ these courts have no obvious connection to Pontypool. Consequently, further study

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Monmouthshire Merlin}, 30 September 1837, p.3.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{The Monmouthshire Merlin}, 3 October 1840, p.3.
is required to locate evidence of offences specific to Pontypool embedded within these reports. However, this information is more readily accessible via ‘Pontypool Police’ court records. By 1855 the reporting of court events dramatically changed as they now included both witnesses and offenders’ details. This is illustrated in *The Monmouthshire Merlin* dated 8th of June 1855, which gave details of a drunken assault on Thomas Bevan whilst he walked home late at night. The same court recorded that several other minor offences relating to drunkenness were also brought before it, but the absence of detail indicated that offences of this nature were commonplace and no longer warranted meticulous reporting.

Table 4 Offences in the ‘Police Courts’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offence</th>
<th>1840</th>
<th>1845</th>
<th>1850</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theft</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disorder/drunken</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trespass</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table 4 Number of offences dealt with for the main offences connected with crime and disorder at Pontypool ‘Police Courts’ during the months of May and June 1840-1850. Based on data from *The Monmouthshire Merlin*.)

Therefore, a sample of court reports between 1840 and 1850 were examined to ascertain if there were any discernible trends of criminality and disorder in the community. To exclude any seasonal variations the search was limited to May and June of 1840, 1845 and 1850. The data retrieved suggests a dramatic decline in offences coming before the courts throughout this period. (Table 4) This would indicate that the community of Pontypool was becoming an increasingly law-abiding area. However, the high numbers of offenders coming before the court in 1840 may have been the result of other factors hitherto not in existence. The

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45 *The Monmouthshire Merlin* 8 June 1855, p.3
establishment of a local police, funded by the taxpayers of the Parish of Trevethin was one such factor. Crimes formerly unnoticed and unpunished were now identified and dealt with by law enforcement officers. As Burridge wrote of those committing offences in the early 1830 their ‘chance of escaping detection and/or arrest and/or imprisonment was considerable.’

The establishment of a police court in Pontypool in the late 1830’s is another example of Pontypool’s rapid expansion, particularly as prior to 1830 there was no recognisable police force covering the area. This newly created police force may however have inadvertently increased the perception of crime in the area as their activity was constantly reported in the newspaper. One such article included details of constables apprehending people for fraud and sheep rustling. Therefore, crime would once more be at the forefront of the readers’ mind. When commenting on press coverage of events surrounding the Garrotting Panic in London in 1862 Sindell argued that it was the press reports of police activity and their attempts to catch the culprits which was ‘the real cause of the “crime wave” at the time.’ These statistics however are unlikely to illustrate the full extent of crime in the area as not all offenders would come before the courts. One reason for this was that constables dealt with many offenders including juveniles, tradesmen, and petty thieves by way of cautions and pardons.

Although details of those prosecuted can be retrieved via the newspapers’ court reports the opinions of residents are harder to ascertain, highlighting their limitations as historical sources. This is compounded by lack of indexing making it difficult to retrieve information entrenched in other articles. Secker argued this when she wrote ‘newspapers by their nature, inevitably require patience and a considerable amount of time to use.’ Instances of drinking to excess particularly on Sundays can be found in *The Monmouthshire Merlin* by reading reports of Temperance meetings and letters to the editors. This however is often time-

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consuming proffering little reward as not every letter provides the required information. However, in September 1839, the paper reported that whilst at Pontypool’s Temperance Festival Reverend Thomas Davies commented that the pubs were always full and even overflowing on the Sabbath. A letter to the editor signed by Seymour Chamberlain of Pontypool in 1858 indicates that the problem in relation to drinking on the Sabbath was persisting, writing that disorder and drunkenness was still emanating from licences premises, especially on the Sabbath.

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52 *The Monmouthshire Merlin*, 21 September 1839, p.4.
53 *The Monmouthshire Merlin*, 28 August 1858, p.5.
Chapter 3: Tackling Crime and Disorder

Evidence of how the community of Pontypool attempted to deal with criminality and disorder can be extracted from within the pages of *The Monmouthshire Merlin*. However, again this is not easily achieved due to lack of indexing, the paper’s format, and print size. It is also possible to become distracted by other articles that happen to catch the eye whilst scrutinising the paper for evidence. As Secker argued it ‘could cause individuals to become side-tracked by fascinating, but nevertheless irrelevant material’.\(^{54}\) This is illustrated in Figure 4 an image of the first addition of *The Monmouthshire Merlin* with few headlines with which to assist the reader in locating articles.

![Image of the first addition of The Monmouthshire Merlin with few headlines](image)

Figure 3 Front page of *The Monmouthshire Merlin* date the 23rd of May 1829.

\(^{54}\) Secker, J. (1999). ‘Newspapers and historical research: a study of historians and custodians in Wales’ p.176
Therefore, in attempt to circumvent these potential pitfalls newspaper searches included any reference to the foundation of organisations such as Mechanics Institutions and Temperance Movements in Pontypool. Similar organisations had been instigated in other areas within the Country, with the aim of improving the inhabitant’s quality of life and by doing so reducing criminality and disorder. Many of these societies O’Leary argues were created by the middle class of both sexes to ‘demonstrate their sense of responsibility for their fellow citizens’55

A search for Mechanic Institutions in *The Monmouthshire Merlin* using the search engine contained in the Welsh Newspapers Online database divulged that a meeting held in the Charity School Rooms in Pontypool on the 27th of September 1839 proposing the establishment of a Mechanics Institution in the town was attended by approximately three hundred people. Details of the meeting were subsequently published in *The Monmouthshire Merlin* eight days later56. The Mechanics Institution Movement was founded in the 1820’s with the purpose of improving the literacy skills and scientific knowledge of workers. The movement’s creators believed this was imperative to ensure that workers were able to adopt the new technologies developed in industry at this time.57 During this meeting several influential people made speeches supporting the purpose of the institution including G.S Kenrick, a local iron work owner described as a ‘‘militant teetotal iron master’’ and who would later write a report about the living conditions of the residents of Pontypool.58 The published speeches highlighted the benefits of education and one of the speakers W.W Phillips argued that a lack of education resulted in vice and degradation, remarking that there were many young men in the area with a lot of free time and would greatly benefit from such an institute thereby occupying their time and consequently addressing the problem of disorder within the area.59

59 *The Monmouthshire Merlin*, 5 October 1839, p. 4.
The Mechanic Institutions argued Roderick, were mostly spectacularly successful until their functions were eventually taken over by local authorities, although this does not initially seem to be the case with regards to the institute at Pontypool.\(^{60}\) The Monmouthshire Merlin’s report of events at the quarterly meeting of the Institute in April 1840 stated that G. S. Kenrick had commented that only a limited number of the artisan community attended the fortnightly lectures or utilised the available facilities which included a well-lit library.\(^{61}\) One of the possible reasons for this apparent apathy is provided in a letter printed in the newspaper dated 21\(^{st}\) of May 1842.\(^{62}\) In the letter signed anonymously A. Shopman, the author argues that if shops closed earlier he and other young men employed by them would be able to attend the Mechanics Institute as they wished. This letter should however be considered with caution as the author’s identity cannot be verified, and the author may have wished to utilise the facilities provided by the institute merely as a means of working less hours.

The Monmouthshire Merlin also provides testimony of a strong Temperance Movement in Pontypool. O’Leary wrote that they ‘were established from the 1830s with the express purpose of providing alternatives to sociability that involved alcohol.’\(^{63}\) They also promoted self-control and respectability which was important to working class people and with that in mind a Temperance Society was established in Pontypool in September 1834. A multitude of people attended the Society’s inaugural meeting and orations that evening condemned imbibement of alcohol.\(^{64}\) The newspaper described events of the Temperance movement during this period including those of the Temperance Festival held in September 1839. It describes a room with a capacity for 600 people as being nearly full, and of those present 60 had signed the pledge to abstain from alcohol completely.\(^{65}\) The chairman of this meeting was G.S. Kenrick, who in all probability would be well known in the ‘face to face’ community of Pontypool, not only as the owner of a local iron works but as a consequence of newspapers’ reports of his philanthropic activities.\(^{66}\) Although documentation purports these

\(^{61}\) Monmouthshire Merlin, 18 April 1840, p.3.
\(^{62}\) Monmouthshire Merlin, 21 May 1842, p.3.
\(^{64}\) Monmouthshire Merlin, 27 September 1834, p.3.
\(^{65}\) Monmouthshire Merlin, 21 September 1839, p.3
initiatives were created for the benefit of the community at large they would have also benefited employers such as G.S. Kenrick in the running of his ironworks. Employers hoped this initiative would decrease drunken behaviour in the workplace particularly amongst the skilled workers who were unlikely to be dismissed despite their behaviour as they were deemed irreplaceable.67

These reports portray the creation of these movements and institutions in a positive light detailing the presence of influential persons in the community such as Kenrick. Many of the reports may have been provided to the newspapers for printing directly by the attendees. This was because the newspapers could ill afford to pay correspondents to attend every meeting and poor transport links further compounded their inability to attend.68 Furthermore the journalistic profession was not held in great esteem at this time and it was not until 1855 that as Rees wrote ‘journalists were being accepted as responsible public men.’69 The articles do not provide details of the correspondents who attended these meetings, but they appear to promote Liberal values, particularly the importance of respectability amongst the working classes. This highlights that although newspapers are valuable sources they may be biased and should be considered in context with other sources.70

During the 1830’s a small police force was established to combat crime and disorder in this rapidly expanding industrial area. It initially consisted of just two constables, but its numbers gradually increased to include a superintendent and five constables by 1844. Prior to this policing in the area was provided by unpaid constables appointed by local magistrates which Gregory argued was ‘to nebulous to be called a police force’71. Despite extensive examination there is little evidence relating to the foundation of the police force to be found in *The Monmouthshire Merlin*, which once again highlights the time-consuming nature of newspapers as a source. *The Monmouthshire Merlin* record of events at the Monmouthshire Quarter Sessions in the paper dated 6th of July 1839 indicated that a police force was required

in Pontypool due to escalating levels of crime. It describes an address made by the chairman Sir Digby Mackworth relating to the creation of a police force to encompass the whole of the county of Monmouthshire. He argued that this was not indicated because only places such as Pontypool required a fulltime police force, and therefore it would be unfair for the rural community to fund a constabulary which they did not require.72

The articles in *The Monmouthshire Merlin* were supportive of the officers publishing accounts of their good work in court reports and within separate articles recording positive police activity. This is evident when the newspaper praised how officers dealt with a false allegation made by a 14-year-old girl that her mother had killed her father.73 As the article was slightly damaged it made reading the contents difficult highlighting another limitation of utilising newspapers as a source. The article was issued in 1856 at a time when the paper used in the newspaper industry was of poor quality. Jenkins wrote newspapers in the second half of the century were printed on inferior paper compared to the ‘good quality rag paper’ used in the earlier part of the century.74 The only negativity in the newspapers towards the police was found in a few letters written to the editor complaining of their lack of impartiality in their dealings with the public.

The police officers and presiding magistrates repeatedly mentioned in court reports would have been known to the residents of Pontypool in this face-to-face community. The *Pigot Directory* recorded in 1842 that three of the magistrates lived in the area.75 One of the officers, namely John Roberts would have been easily recognisable. He was one of the two founding officers who prior to the establishment of the force had been the only paid constable in the area. He later reached the rank of superintendent and policed the area for over 30 years. His status in the community is evident by the action of the Pontypool tradesmen during a dinner in which he attended in 1856 when they proposed a toast to his good health.76 The following year the Monmouthshire Constabulary was formed although the Pontypool Police

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72 *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 6 July 1839, p.3.
73 *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 18 May 1855, p.2.
76 *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 1 November 1856, p.5.
force declined to become part of this new constabulary. In 1859 however, a Parliamentary report stated that the people of Pontypool were ‘at present provided with a very inefficient police force’ and they were ultimately enforced to join the Monmouthshire Constabulary despite Pontypool’s resident’s belief that their policing needs would be better served by a smaller force.

Despite the efforts made by the community and the police to reduce incidents of crime and disorder their endeavours were compromised by the easy availability of intoxicants in the area. Many alcohol related incidents emanating from the numerous beer houses established following the Beer Act of 1830 were recorded in The Monmouthshire Merlin. The Beer Act was originally intended to curb the drinking of spirits, thought to be the major cause of drunkenness, by restricting beer houses to sale of beer. However, the affordability of a beer licence increased the number of licenced premises. In 1841 Kenrick wrote the easy availability of beer houses resulted in workers spending their money in them thereby becoming acquainted with ‘dissolute company, and become familiar with bad habits and vicious companions.’ Consequently, there were demands by those attempting to enhance the lives of the population to abolish this act and introduce stricter licencing laws. A letter to the editor printed in the paper on the 21st of December 1839 provides evidence of magistrates efforts to address this problem in Pontypool evoking more proactive methods than neighbouring towns. The anonymous author Fair-play, again praises the effort of the Pontypool magistrates for immediately informing the Supervisor of Excise in the area of any offences connected with the Beer Act, thereby facilitating further action by the Supervisor of Excise who had the power to remove the licensee’s licence if required.

In 1849 a House of Lords committee was instigated with the purpose of investigating the problems associated with beer houses. As part of their enquiries, they requested reports by the clerks of the petty sessions and the chairmen of the quarter session on their views and opinions on the subject. The Monmouthshire Merlin printed the details forwarded to the

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80 The Monmouthshire Merlin, 21 December 1939, p.4.
committee by S.R. Bosanquet the Chairman of the Monmouthshire Michaelmas Session on the 20th of October 1849. In his report he stated there were 130 Beer Houses in Pontypool which were the prevailing cause of crime and demoralisation of people in the community.81 His published findings were subsequently recorded in the select committees report on the operation of beer houses and the selling of beer.82 However despite the problems associated with beer houses the Beer Act of 1830 was not repealed until 1869.83

81 The Monmouthshire Merlin, 20 October 1849, p.4.
Conclusion

In conclusion this dissertation has shown that *The Monmouthshire Merlin* provides an abundance of evidence indicating that crime and disorder was a part of everyday life in the expanding ‘frontier town’ of Pontypool, although as Jenkins wrote ‘No one newspaper will provide a complete picture of the community it serves.’ However the newspaper as a source needs to be treated with caution because of potential bias from both journalists and those penning the letters printed within. It is evident that the newspaper industry was growing in South Wales at the same time as towns such as Pontypool were expanding. It also shows that the residents of Pontypool from the whole of the community, irrespective of class and status were able to access the contents of these newspapers. Every edition of *The Monmouthshire Merlin* was filled with details not only of crime and disorder directly associated with Pontypool but also from areas wider afield as a consequence of information provided by national newspapers. The impression of an area plagued by crime and disorder is compounded by the creation of a police force to address this problem, coupled with the publication of letters suggesting that a ‘police court’ be established in Pontypool to combat incidence of illegal acts in the area. Accounts of residents frequenting beer houses on a regular basis and numerous reports of convictions for drink related offences also portrays an image of a community heavily dependent on alcohol. This coincided with a time of rapid industrial expansion in Pontypool suggesting that crime and disorder were a consequence of this growth, fuelled by a transient population and the resulting poor living conditions.

Despite the perception of escalating levels of crime and disorder augmented by an ever-increasing number of reports in *The Monmouthshire Merlin* the incidence of offences coming before Pontypool ‘police courts’ were actually declining. Examination of court records for May and June in 1840 and 1850 showed a dramatic 76% decrease in the most common offences being dealt with by the court. This would appear to indicate that the community was becoming more law abiding. However, these improvements were not conveyed in the newspaper as reports and articles about crime and disorder continued to escalate. This apparent disparity was driven by the newspaper’s necessity to expand circulation thereby

encouraging more people to utilise them for advertisements. This was their main source of income and nothing sold more newspaper to a Victorian society obsessed by crime than stories of criminal activity. *The Monmouthshire Merlin* also provides evidence of the attempts by prominent community leaders such as ironworks owner G.S. Kenrick to improve the lives of the residents. This included the establishment of a Mechanics Institute and Temperance Societies which provided alternatives to licenced premises and promoted an air of respectability within the working classes. The dissertation highlights that many residents capitalised on the opportunity to join these organisations, abstaining from alcohol, with the expectation of achieving a reputable standing in the community. Evidence relating to the local magistrates attempts to address the problems appertaining beer houses is provided, which includes a report to the House of Lords assisting their enquiry on the issue.

The dissertation adds to the historiography of Welsh urban history revealing that crime and disorder was prevalent not only in those areas such as Cardiff and Merthyr which hitherto historians have focused upon, but also in the smaller industrial towns such as Pontypool. In addition, it provides further evidence of the historiography of Welsh urban history relating to the efforts made by ‘urban elites’ in the nineteenth century to enhance the lives of the population, encouraging the adoption of a sense of respectability by all members of the community. The dissertation concurs with earlier research by Sucker that newspapers as sources, with *The Monmouthshire Merlin* being no exception, are time-consuming and problematic to work with for several reasons. These include newspapers’ formatting and condition, text size, absence of indexing and spelling errors. Furthermore, the layout of the paper can easily distract the undisciplined reader, enticing them to waste time perusing eye-catching stories in articles lying adjacent to those being examined. Reports must be scrutinised for potential bias and authenticity as many articles were written by people promoting their own agenda and even those written by journalists must be considered with caution because of the poor standard of journalism during this period.

However, despite these flaws *The Monmouthshire Merlin* contains a mass of evidence which illustrates that crime and disorder was very much a part of everyday life for the inhabitants of Pontypool in the early Victorian period. If the population were not directly affected, they would have been aware of the problem and efforts to constrain it through the many reports on the subject in *The Monmouthshire Merlin*. 
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*Monmouthshire Merlin*, various dates, 1829-1860

Secondary Sources


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