Robert Owen’s Welsh Influence on the Scottish Industrial Community of New Lanark (1800 – 1825)

Student Dissertation

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‘Robert Owen’s Welsh Influence on the Scottish Industrial Community of New Lanark (1800 – 1825).’

Leah Parris, 2021
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my incredible partner who has continuously supported me throughout my studies, and continues to inspire and encourage me. It has been a pure joy to research our favourite escape and future wedding venue, New Lanark. This work is also dedicated to my wee dog Bella, for being the snoring company beside me each day and giving me reminders for fresh air. Importantly, this piece is also a product of my tutors, past and present; and I wish to thank them for their support throughout my Open University experience, and for being a positive force during these unprecedented times.
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Introduction

In a 2004 poll, Robert Owen was named the ninth greatest Welsh hero, surpassing figures such as Saint David, Henry VII, and Gerald of Wales.\(^1\) It collected 1,621 nominations from a total of 81,323 votes.\(^2\) This poll by *Culturenet Cymru* split ballots into the categories of leaders, thinkers, performers, creatives and, ground breakers.\(^3\) Alongside being a popularity contest, this poll had educational intent, creating biographies of presented online, marking the achievements of a ‘diverse and remarkable people’.\(^4\) Suggestibly, to those who voted, Owen’s identity and achievements were distinctively Welsh, and his legacy significant to Wales’ greater history; despite his migration out of Wales in childhood and returning in 1858, making it his final resting place.\(^5\) Newtown itself is keen to connect Owen to its own collective identity, with his legacy commemorated throughout the towns landscape. This can be seen in his statue in ‘Appendix A’, and tomb in ‘Appendix B’, and the museum in Broadstreet, where he lived above his father’s shop.\(^6\) Newtown also continues to

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\(^4\) BBC News, *Hero poll countdown goes on*.


\(^6\) ‘Appendix A’, p. 43. ‘Appendix B’, p. 44.
commemorate Owen within their greater tapestry of history by the community celebrating his birthday.\(^7\)

This dissertation aims to remedy this neglect of a Welsh influence upon Owen’s reforming of the industrial community of New Lanark, a discourse greatly avoided in the historiography of his life and works. It will build upon the expertise of Robert Owen and New Lanark scholar Ian Donnachie, by supplementing the overlooked examples of a Welsh influence upon the community which may be analysed from Owen’s own memoirs. It will comparatively investigate these against Owen’s well covered influences drawn from the European Enlightenment and his partners.

It will approach the discussion further by questioning the significance of Owen’s Welshness and its perception by historians; primarily querying the extent to which there was a Welsh influence on New Lanark through Owen’s own theory of character formation. Additionally, it will investigate why the historiography discounts Owen’s Welshness and whether this is a product of English centrism. Considering these evaluations, it will discuss what Owen’s poll popularity demonstrates about his perceived Welsh identity in Wales, undeterred by the mentioned historiography.

Owen purchased New Lanark in Scotland from his father-in-law David Dale in 1799, beginning his management on New Year’s Day the following year.\textsuperscript{8} This consisted of a large cotton mill and industrial community powered by the Falls of Clyde.\textsuperscript{9} It housed around 2000 people from diverse backgrounds; including displaced Highlanders, workhouse children, and Italian prisoners during the Napoleonic War.\textsuperscript{10} Here he wrote, ‘\textit{Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character, and the Application of the Principle to Practice’} (1813-1816).\textsuperscript{11} In this he asserts that the character of man is formed by its environment and can be better moulded by rationality, promoting collective happiness.\textsuperscript{12}

“Any general character, from the best to the worst, from the most ignorant to the most enlightened, may be given to any community, even to the world at large, by the application of proper means; which means to a great extent at the command and under the control of those who have influence in the affairs of men.”\textsuperscript{13}

Arguably by his own theory, Owen’s character would have been shaped by his Welsh upbringing. Considering Owen’s accomplishments, this environment provided ideal tools in curating a successful individual. Therefore, his reforms in New Lanark should mirror these experiences, providing a distinctive Welshness to New Lanark.

\textsuperscript{8} Donnachie, \textit{Robert Owen Social Visionary}, pp. 73-77.
\textsuperscript{10} Donnachie, \textit{Robert Owen Social Visionary}, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{11} Donnachie & Hewitt, \textit{Historic New Lanark}, p. 85.
However, the wider historiography of Owen’s achievements ignores this Welsh element, attributing influence to experiences of industrialisation outside of Wales, alongside the late European Enlightenment and his associates instead.\(^{14}\) Undoubtedly, Owen’s intellectual thoughts were stirred by Enlightenment themes, but feasibly these could have overshadowed his Welsh influences due to their popular historiography. Owen shared the intellectual burden of New Lanark with his found partners who also worked within the context of the Enlightenment, some being explored in this work.

Owen is a much-researched figure with works pertaining to numerous fields of study, and reviews of his achievements and downfalls are substantial. Some include discussions on his involvement with slavery, his leadership in New Lanark and in New Harmony, the beginnings of the co-operative movement, and Socialism.\(^{15}\) While these works contain sound descriptions of New Lanark and utilise primary evidence, they avoid referencing Owen’s Welshness within activities there, with many studies failing to spotlight his younger years completely, as if his life began in England. This can be demonstrated by Frank Podmore closing a brief chapter on Owen’s childhood in ‘Robert Owen: A Biography’ (1906):

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“…the chapter of Owen’s boyhood may be said to have closed. He now began to take
up a man’s work, and his later life belongs to history.”\textsuperscript{16}

This characterises the insignificance given to a Welsh influence of Owen’s character,
presenting a legacy holding little origin in Wales, but one beginning as he enters England.

Given Owen’s own theories on character formation, attributing outside influences to his
growth could be presuming that better instruction had improved previous formations in
Wales. Historian Ian Donnachie critiques Podmore on his neglect of Owen’s Welsh
identity.\textsuperscript{17} Donnachie begins his biography, ‘\textit{Robert Owen, Social Visionary}’ (2011) by only
lightly considering the relationship between Owen’s Welshness and his work, claiming that
his upbringing is the central pillar to understanding his endeavours.\textsuperscript{18} However, after his
judgment against Podmore he avoids engaging with these Welsh experiences consistently, or
comparing a Welsh influence to that of an enlightened one towards New Lanark’s reforms.
Moreover, he avoids mentioning Wales other than it being Owen’s birthplace in his previous
work with George Hewitt, ‘\textit{Historic New Lanark}’ (1993).\textsuperscript{19} Owen’s own memoirs give
credence to his time in Wales, in ‘\textit{Life of Robert Owen by Himself}’ (1857), although he
admits a poor memory of this time.\textsuperscript{20} Owen’s memories should be approached sceptically,
with the awareness that he may be curating an origin story of sorts, selecting memories

\textsuperscript{19} Donnachie & Hewitt, \textit{Historic New Lanark}, p. 59.
relevant to complimenting his felt achievements. In addition, Podmore avoids analysing this period, merely transcribing Owen’s words, as though they are of little interest to his wider work.21

As shown, despite this lack of focus on Newtown, collectively Wales honours him as a significant Welsh hero, with a distinctive contribution to Welsh history. Pat Brandwood of the Robert Owen Museum in Newtown, gives Newtown considerable credit:

“I soon realised that Newtown was central to Owen’s vision. It was here he went to school, explored the countryside, learned to dance and run faster than any of his contemporaries. When he set up his school in New Lanark as a model for ‘universal education’ he used his happy Newtown years as the basis for the curriculum: there was dancing, sport and nature study.”22

Considering this statement from Brandwood, this dissertation aspires to root Newtown as a significant influence and an almost subconscious force in Owen’s anti-dote to poor character formation, adopting New Lanark as a case study.

Chapter one will concentrate upon Owens’s approach to education in New Lanark, firstly exploring his memories of his own in Newtown, then analysing these corresponding to his

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curriculum in New Lanark. Due to the dynamic curriculum put forward by Owen, education will also include literacy, dancing, and music.

Chapter two will take the same approach, applying it to Religion within New Lanark. This will include: practise, tolerance, language, and sectarianism. It will explore accounts of Owen’s adaptations to religious life there, connecting this to memories of religious matter in Newtown.

Chapter three explores the external influences on Owen’s work, the European Enlightenment, covered greatly by previous scholars. This will examine the success and practicality of the influential relationships with his partners, against the weight of his Welshness.

The final chapter will conclude by measuring whether Owen’s New Lanark had been influenced by Owen’s Welshness, and to what extent these influences support his own theory on character formation. It will also explore whether the greater historiography could be criticised for employing a form of English or European centrism in light of these neglected theories of Newtown’s inspiration towards Owen’s reforms. This dissertation will reconsider the popularity of Owen in Wales itself, and what this means for the perceived Welshness of his life and legacy, considering this piece’s discussion.
Chapter One - Robert Owen’s Welsh Influence on New Lanark’s Education.

The most authoritative source on Robert Owen’s Welsh childhood is his own memoirs, ‘Life of Robert Owen by Himself’ published in 1857, although its reliability is contestable.\(^\text{23}\) Owen’s account demonstrates his absorption of Welshness; and despite its minimal fifteen paged dedication much is illuminated of his own character formation by Newtown’s environment.\(^\text{24}\) These memories are to be approached cautiously as Gregory Claeys work found various errors. Moreover, the first substantial analysis by Podmore did not attempt any verification of Owen’s claims.\(^\text{25}\) No thorough effort of unpacking these memories has been made, criticised by Donnachie in ‘Robert Owen: Social Visionary’ (2011).\(^\text{26}\) Given Owen’s emphasis on environment, most commentators surprisingly fail to attach his character to Newtown; despite the vast transformation of the area in the eighteenth century which undoubtably impacted his class in Wales.\(^\text{27}\)

Owen begins by describing the basics; born in Newtown, Montgomeryshire in 1771, to a father working as a saddler, iron monger and a post-master, and his mother from a farming background.\(^\text{28}\) Owen’s first recollection of his school is that it was a repurposed mansion,

\[^{23}\text{Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, pp. 1-15.}\]
\[^{24}\text{Donnachie, Robert Owen: Social Visionary p.1.}\]
\[^{25}\text{Podmore, Robert Owen: A Biography, pp. 1–24.}\]
\[^{26}\text{Donnachie, Robert Owen: Social Visionary pp. 1–2.}\]
\[^{27}\text{Donnachie, Robert Owen: Social Visionary p. 2.}\]
\[^{28}\text{Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, p. 1.}\]
seen in ‘Appendix C’.  He remembers the classroom being in the upper apartments and
multi-purpose in nature, being sent there around four years old.  

This mirrors his decision to build a multi-use community hub in New Lanark named The
Institute, completed in 1816.  His son Robert Dale Owen in his report ‘Outline of the System
of Education at New Lanark’ (1824), illustrates two upper apartments separated into two
rooms; one fitted to the ‘Lancasterian’ plan, named after its founder Joseph Lancaster who
was in partnership with Owen at this time, further explained later. It was surrounded by
galleries and a pulpit, providing a Church and lecture hall for the community.  

Despite the beneficial biases of Owen’s son, the timing of the report shows the space had
been well established and assessed, serving as a robust account of its organisation at this
stage in Owen’s experiments.  Its description demonstrates a connection with the utility of
Owen’s Newtown mansion school and this model being implemented towards a hub for a co-
operative village. With profits, Owen had the opportunity to fund a school building, instead
opting for adaptability not unlike his childhood, with perhaps the view that it formed his own
character well, as it now would for New Lanark.

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29 ‘Appendix C’, p. 45.
31 New Lanark Trust, ‘Introducing Robert Owen’, New Lanark World Heritage Site (2021), Available at
Owen shares memories pertaining to authority and discipline. His only description of his teacher is his mistaken name and a hint of his limitations:

“A Mr. Thickness, or some such name, was the schoolmaster…it was considered a good education if one could read fluently, write a legible hand and understand the first four rules of arithmetic. And this I have reason to believe was the extent of Mr. Thickness’s qualification…”34

He details parental punishments lasting impact, recalling a whipping by his father. Rather than complying he replied, ‘you may kill me, but I will not do it’, ending the ordeal; concluding punishment useless and psychologically damaging to all parties.35 It would be impossible to verify whether Owen defied his parents to this degree under stress, but the correlation between this event and adult attitudes towards punishment is prominent.

Owen’s memory of a less-qualified instructor educating him sufficiently, and his ideas on discipline, mirror his reforms. Owen cautiously selected the Institute’s teachers, rather than seeking trained teachers, he sought out two patient villagers with affections for children. An unlikely choice, Owen selected a ‘simple-minded, kind-hearted individual who could hardly read or write himself’ named James Buchanan, and seventeen-year-old Molly Young, who were not permitted to beat a child or act abusively, instead always to be pleasant.36

34 Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, pp. 2 – 4.
35 Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, p. 15.
One may make a connection between Owen doubting his schoolmaster’s abilities with his choice of employees within the Institute. Possibly, in childhood, what concerned him more was the teacher’s temperament and ability to construct a positive learning environment. Despite not describing classroom discipline, his reactions to being punished by his father reveals learned experiences to be behind his reforms. Claiming punishment useless and damaging corresponds with the removal of this from the classroom. As he argues environment and education imperative to character formation, suggestibly he would avoid what he experienced as damaging in Newtown.

Significantly, he recalls being a bright student, asked at seven years old to become an assistant and usher to the schoolmaster, repaying his tuition: ‘…those two years were lost to me, except that I thus early acquired the habit of teaching others…’

This provides evidence to Owen’s natural intellectual talents, and a first taste of leadership under the role of monitor which was not unusual in a Welsh classroom at this time, where a more capable student would instruct others. This was well modelled in New Lanark under his management.

As already explained, The Institute was designed around a Lancasterian plan of desking, as the founder Joseph Lancaster entered a partnership with Owen, and the reforms now subject to this principle. Teaching with a rote method; one hundred to one thousand pupils could be

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taught seated in rows of ten, with schoolmasters instructing ‘monitors’ seated at the ends of rows, demonstrated in ‘Appendix D’\textsuperscript{39}. These children would then instruct the row, with other monitors taking attendance or preparing teaching materials.\textsuperscript{40}

This is a prime example of Owen positively experiencing a concept in his childhood, adapting it for success within The Institute. It also demonstrates how he gained an understanding of teaching and learning within this environment, developing his ideas on education from what was successful in Newtown. This addresses why teachers like Buchannan were not a concern, as peer participation would play a role too as it did in his Welsh classroom. Perhaps Owen saw his aid to the schoolmaster more impactful to him and his peers, explaining \textit{Mr. Thickness’} limited description, as monitoring was a more potent memory.

Owen claimed his popularity within Newtown led to the accessibility of private libraries of a ‘clergyman, physician, and lawyer – the learned men of the town’; alleging he could finish a volume often daily. Importantly, he came to have favourite reads that he kept into adulthood including \textit{Robinson Crusoe} and \textit{Pilgrims Progress}.\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{39} ‘Appendix D’, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{41} Owen, \textit{Life of Robert Owen by Himself}, pp. 3–4.
“I believed every word of them true, and was therefore deeply interested…Then I read Cook’s and all the circumnavigator’s voyages, - The History of the World, - Rollin’s Ancient History, – and the lives I could meet with of the philosophers and great men.”

One may question how at this young age, there would be time to read this many works with a basic education, considering also being a shop assistant, having dance and music instruction, and a fulfilling social life. However, it does show Owen’s appreciation for literacy through interest.

This memory is echoed in New Lanark’s curriculum, although surprisingly, Owen felt it best to avoid giving books to infant children. Instead, encouraging learning the ‘qualities of the common things around them’, which had been furnished into the rooms of The Institute, with natural objects for consideration and paintings of animals illustrated in ‘Appendix E’. Lancaster’s model required basic biblical literacy; thus, the Bible and catechism were used, but lightly. Despite Owen’s adult frosty attitude towards books, Owen carefully selected books containing adventurous voyages and travel literature, which were popular.

Evidently, Owen transferred the kind of reading enjoyed in Newtown into the curriculum. Promoting interest in these books matches with the enjoyable experience from his memoirs, perhaps even relating to children within an industrious and market environment, assuming a

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42 Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, pp. 3–4.
43 Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, pp. 1–15.
possible shared interest. His avoidance of books within the infant school may reflect his childhood appreciation for experience of books beyond the classroom. Unmistakably, his favoured reads influenced the formation of his own character with Pilgrim’s Progress and Robinson Crusoe impacting his later attitudes in life, particularly true when considering his values regarding enterprise.\textsuperscript{45} Donnachie often references how Owen saw New Lanark as his own island, as though he were Crusoe.\textsuperscript{46}

Owen provides great detail of his childhood interaction with the arts. Firstly, he notes learning the clarinet and the accidental performances he gave the village, alongside never receiving a complaint from a neighbour; mentioning his playing of ‘God Save the King’. He claims he was a favourite child of the village and, “pitted against my equals, and sometimes my superiors in age…”\textsuperscript{47}

Secondly, he gives considerable credit to the dancing instruction he received towards his development, labelling himself the ‘esteemed…best dancer of my class.’\textsuperscript{48} Owen claims it was here that he became aware of ‘the natural sympathies and dislikes or the jealousies of children’\textsuperscript{49}. He also found choosing partners a distressing process, sparking a focus on children’s suffering, arguing their emotions are rarely considered. Owen asserts that if adults concentrated upon them, allowing children to exercise expression, their suffering would

\textsuperscript{45} Donnachie, \textit{Robert Owen Social Visionary}, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{46} Donnachie, \textit{Robert Owen Social Visionary}, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{47} Robert Owen, \textit{Life of Robert Owen by Himself}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{49} Robert Owen, \textit{Life of Robert Owen by Himself}, p. 13.
reduce, and would be an enlightening experience for adults, broadening the understanding of human nature.  

The commentary of the arts activity at New Lanark is heavily emphasised in contemporary reviews. Much of the dancing and music participation was included within the curriculum, with lessons being extended to adults. Moreover, musical concerts and country-dancing were hugely encouraged for the community’s leisure, all taking part in the same learning rooms of The Institute as intended; as well as being inclusive of outside visitor’s shown in ‘Appendix F’, a flyer for a community concert. Owen believed the arts to be central to character formation, arguing that lower classes having fewer sources of pleasure than more wealthy people caused issues of outburst over gratification. He sought to remedy this in New Lanark.  

Owen’s son, noted that singing lessons were available to all children, particularly learning ‘lively national airs with merry words.’ Choral singing and orchestral practise were regular lessons; Owen believing them to foster cooperation, making them accessible to all despite factors such as social background, age, or language. Thus, the community could be united through music. His music instruction was industrial in scale, as large numbers of the

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population sung together, often one hundred and fifty singing at one time. The style of singing reported tends to be harmony choirs, performing mostly traditional Scottish pieces; and closing the school day involved pupils singing a hymn. Instrumental tuition was available, with provisions funded partly through the village store. The cashbook, *New Lanark Counting House*, demonstrates the community’s expenses between 1816 and 1825, detailing the equipment needed for running The Institute. It shows payments made for musical instruments, including Owen’s childhood instrument the Clarinet. Dance instruction was exceedingly popular, documented greatly, with Scottish country dancing for instruction and leisure, displayed in ‘Appendix E’. Children began dancing lessons at two years old, with visitors in awe of seventy couples or more surrounded by foreign spectators, performing a number of dances almost unconsciously. Owen keenly showcased The Institute as part of his broader campaigning for social reform, one reviewee being Dr. Henry McNab, commissioned by the Duke of Kent to assess Owen’s reforms in 1819. He recalls ‘Highland plaids and caps, entered playing, on the fife’, and children accompanied by a clarinet singing national songs such as *The Birks of Aberfeldy*, *The Banks and Braes of Bonny Doon*, and

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57 ‘Appendix E’, p.47.
'Auld Lang Syne'. Another visitor from Newtown in 1822 Charles Thomas Woosnam, described boys dancing Highland reels in tartan dresses.

The connections between his Newtown experience of the arts and the reforms at New Lanark are clear. Owen’s love for dancing and music was infectiously inserted into the curriculum, becoming a central pillar of the community, including his loved clarinet tuition.

During his childhood, Welsh traditional dancing was experiencing a renaissance after suppression due to its felt drunkenness by Nonconformist’s. However, it boasted security among Wales’ agricultural communities. Due to urbanisation and the improvement of travel, dancers were able to experience this activity from further afield, boosting its popularity.

This combined with national songs and dress promoted at New Lanark within its curriculum and leisure, suggest Owen had an appreciation for national heritage and culture, which Donnachie characterises as Celtic sympathy for Highlander culture within New Lanark. Its prevalence within the curriculum suggests he deemed national identity useful in forming character; after all he claimed environment to play the central role. Owen deeply encouraged the arts in New Lanark to foster discipline, assuming as his character benefited from these forms of instruction, so would others. Conversely, there were reports made by Adam Bogle, a

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59 Davidson, A Quest For Harmony: The Role of Music in Robert Owen’s New Lanark Community, pp. 243–244.
60 Davidson, A Quest For Harmony: The Role of Music in Robert Owen’s New Lanark Community, p. 244.
partner of a Glasgow enterprise, claiming workers left Owen’s community due to exhaustion from mandatory dancing after working in the mills.\textsuperscript{63}

This national aspect to reforms in New Lanark can also be found within his religious attitudes during his time managing the community, which will be explored in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{63} Donnachie, \textit{Robert Owen Social Visionary}, p. 128.
Chapter 2 - Robert Owen’s Welsh Influence on Religion in New Lanark.

In his memoirs, Owen discusses his childhood relationship with religion, describing Newtown’s shaping of his religious identity. He significantly concentrates on the interactions he had with Methodism, as Methodists had given him literature in the hope of converting him ‘to their peculiar faith’.\(^{64}\) Owen details his reaction to this material, saying he was surprised by the tension between Christian dominations and the conflict between other world religions. Owen explains: ‘…the study of these contending faiths and their deadly hatred to each other, began to create doubts in my mind respecting the truth of any of these divisions’.\(^{65}\) Owen gives this great significance, as along with his other readings he felt strongly at ten years old, that amongst all religions ‘there must be something fundamentally wrong.’\(^{66}\)

His Newtown experience of religion translated into the religious landscape of New Lanark through education, attempting to secularise The Institute. In 1823, Owen pushed for replacing the Bible with geography, claiming students would receive ‘more real benefit’.\(^{67}\) Alongside other seeming attacks against faith, this created charges of Atheism. Within Owen’s partnership agreement and the aid provided by the British Foreign School Society, there was to be non-sectarian instruction and the Bible’s promotion of literacy.\(^{68}\) Thus, these reforms caused conflicts within his partnerships, with the Quaker William Allen resorting to an

\(^{64}\) Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, p. 4.
\(^{65}\) Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, p. 4.
\(^{66}\) Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, p. 5.
\(^{67}\) Donnachie and Hewitt, Historic New Lanark, p.133.
\(^{68}\) Donnachie and Hewitt, Historic New Lanark, p. 97.
investigation of New Lanark’s religious life, to which Owen called him a ‘particularly busy, bustling, meddling’ partner.69

This highlights the influence of his upbringing in Newtown, as although he makes no recollection of his Bible instruction within the school, he mentions often that most of his learning occurred externally in his environment, achieved through his private reading; whereas religious texts, such as from the Methodist’s frustrated him. This frustration is the only space he gives Christian literature in his recollections, suggesting their unimportance to his own character formation, perhaps due to finding faults within religious writings; instilling in him a dislike of the Bible within an education system based on rational thought.

Additionally, perhaps given Owen’s uncomfortably with sectarianism that developed within Newtown, this may have inspired his want for co-operation within a diverse New Lanark.

Quite why Owen continued with his campaign against organised faith is unclear, as it caused much conflict within his partnerships, as with the Presbytery.70 In his third essay on the formation of character written at New Lanark, he attacks the Scottish Sabbath, describing it a ‘superstitious tyranny over the mind’ as well as being ‘of the most destructive intemperance’.71 Although, there is no explicit link to these concerns from his memoirs, he does express thoughts on idleness.

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While stopping from exploring the outdoors with a cousin, they both became overwhelmed by the hot weather and saw in the distance hay-harvesters. Owen realised how these men working under the sun were ‘cooler and less fatigued than when we were idle and wasting our time’; claiming that this was a lasting experience for him, finding worthwhile activity far more comfortable than idleness, marking his ideas towards productivity in his adult life.72

Conceivably, this could resemble older pejorative views of the Welsh, translated into his interactions with Scotland. Negative views upon the Welsh character extend back to the twelfth and thirteen centuries, when Wales was cultivating its own national identity against the backdrop of a conquering ‘other’. This Anglo-Norman ‘other’ looked upon the Welsh as largely uncivil, barbarous and immoral. Culture shock and a view to create compliance meant an onslaught of accusations about the morality of the Welsh. ‘Otium corporale,’ meaning economic laziness, was a rather damaging lasting stereotype largely due to the working year being more driven by agricultural season.73

Given the colonial context of Wales, this medieval view of Welshness may have been deeply embedded within Owen’s own identity, perchance unknowingly. If this concept impacted the environment of Newtown, considering his own theory of character formation, this would have impacted his own, here triggered by a practise regarding rest.

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72 Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, pp. 8-9.
The eighteenth century in Wales saw the Sabbath gaining influence due to the increasing numbers of Nonconformist’s, Calvinist’s, and Methodist’s in the population. ‘Welsh Sunday’ was increasingly popular during this time, with ‘The Calvinistic Methodist Confession of Faith’ (1823) encouraging those on Sundays to devote themselves to worship including public prayers and private readings and prayers with family.\textsuperscript{74} Given Owen’s remembrance of his failed conversion to Methodism, which he thought ‘peculiar’, it is reasonable to assume his reaction to the Scottish Sabbath mirrored the reaction to the strange Methodist practice encountered in his upbringing.

Despite these attacks, Owen promoted religious tolerance at New Lanark, as he encouraged church attendance but more as a tool for social control, according to Donnachie and Hewitt.\textsuperscript{75} This tolerance towards his community and its diverse belief’s which he claimed were ‘complied with and aided to the utmost extent’ is exemplified in his provision of Gaelic worship.\textsuperscript{76} Owen funded a Gaelic speaking preacher, even hosting Dr. John Macdonald the ‘Apostle of the North’, an exceptionally popular Highland preacher, for New Lanark’s summer communion within their parish church. During this celebration, Owen arranged for

\textsuperscript{75} Donnachie and Hewitt, \textit{Historic New Lanark}, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{76} Donnachie and Hewitt, \textit{Historic New Lanark}, p. 132.
dedicated tables for the Highlander community to come together and hear ‘the addresses in their own native Gaelic’.  

Owens actions here are revealing, linking his Welshness and New Lanark. Welsh religious identity has long been intertwined with language, with religion being a major spreader of literacy in Early Modern Wales. This helped the Welsh language from dying out, with the translation of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer maintaining literacy levels.  

Newtown’s relationship to language is complex during Owen’s childhood as the upper Severn Valley went through sufficient Anglicisation due to proximity. Welsh was spoken by many but English was the language of trade, and being a market town there was significant language dilution. English would have dominated Welsh, yet it is likely he would have spoken Welsh given his father’s saddling business and his time as a shop assistant.  

There is indeed evidence Owen used Welsh socially, as his letter shows in ‘Appendix G’, a letter from young Owen to his father in Welsh. Owen recalled his communication skills almost degradingly; claiming he spoke in an uneducated and ‘awkward’ manner, ‘speaking ungrammatically, a kind of Welsh English…the imperfect language spoken in Newtown’.  

Donnachie questions whether he may be presenting an image of a common young man,

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80 ‘Appendix G’, p. 49.
creating a more profound transformation into an elite figure. Alternatively, it could show a young man self-conscious of his communication skills while travelling up the social ladder of Britain.

Unlike Welsh, the dissemination and use of the Gaelic Bible was more gradual and less utilised. Owen was not a pioneering figure in providing lowland Gaelic worship as Highlander pulpits could be found across Scotland, particularly in urban areas from the eighteenth century onwards, largely providing Highlanders who migrated for employment.

However, this supports Donnachie’s characterisation of a Welshman sympathetic to Celtic sentiments. Before New Lanark, Owen toured the Highlands, constantly acknowledging the extent of Gaelic he heard, with Donnachie proposing Owen may have spoken it with his workforce. His importance of the vernacular is striking within these provisions, alongside his toleration of differing national culture, perhaps even alien to Lowland Scot’s and the Presbytery. Arguably, his own bi-lingual and anglicised Welsh upbringing may have influenced this, where from his childhood he has developed an appreciation of the power of language within identity. With his emphasis on character formation and using worship as a tool for moulding morality and structuring the workforce’s schedules, having Highlanders understand their sermons may have been important to him, an understanding grasped from

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82 Donnachie, Robert Owen Social Visionary, p. 4-5.
84 Donnachie, Robert Owen Social Visionary, p. 6
Wale’s historic link between soul salvation and literacy. After all, it could be difficult to mould characters without their vernacular.

This underlying tension between religious truths and progress creates a complex picture of Owen’s religious attitudes yet it is also characteristic of the European Enlightenment, favouring rationality over superstition. Owen’s connection to this movement will be investigated in the following chapter.
Chapter Three - Robert Owen: The Enlightened Reformer.

As discussed, most commentary on Robert Owen’s attitudes and reforming of New Lanark attribute his ideas to the European Enlightenment. Owen did come into contact directly with this movement and its debates through his involvement with the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, prior to New Lanark. Donnachie gives great consequence to this, as here concepts of environmental influence promoted by Rousseau were often discussed. However, this fails to recognise Owen’s access to intellectual material from an early age in the libraries of learned men of Newtown. Whether not Owen had the capacity to absorb such literature is unknown; but in the works of fiction he adored, we can picture a young boy attentive to allegories depicting the struggles between social order and individual personhood found in the character of Crusoe.85

Owen’s life played out within a period marked by great change, the European Enlightenment. This intellectual campaign transformed much of Europe in the eighteenth century, challenging The Church’s authority and promoting rational thought, aided by the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. It spotlighted knowledge improving societal progress, with optimistic notions of equality and liberty.86

86 Anna Plassart, ‘Ideas and the Enlightenment’ in States, Commerce and Ideas (A223), Amanda Goodrich and Deborah Brunton eds. (Milton Keynes, 2016), The Open University, pp. 280–309.
Owen’s contacts within this movement shared his sentiments over social reform; some becoming partners with Owen at New Lanark. These relationships are important in measuring the extent of influence the Enlightenment had on Owen’s activities, particularly the influences of Joseph Lancaster, William Allen, William Godwin, and Jeremy Bentham.

Joseph Lancaster, as previously described, founded the Lancasterian method; otherwise recognised as the ‘monitored’ approach to education, where higher achieving children taught those less bright. His pamphlet ‘Improvements in Education as It Respects the Industrious Classes of the Community’ was published in 1803, well known to Owen and popular enough to encourage the founding of schools. This system founded the British and Foreign School Society (1810), which developed and supplied teaching aids which later managed to support around 30,000 pupils being taught within ninety-five Lancasterian Schools, likewise with The Institute. Classroom activity constituted mostly learning the curriculum by drill and memorisation of rote sequences.\(^{87}\) Owen invited Lancaster to visit Scotland in 1812, chairing a dinner for Lancaster’s lecturing to churchmen and university elites. Undoubtedly Owen was impacted by this, having Lancaster’s approach adopted at New Lanark and being subject to a partnership agreement through Quakers and Lancasterian followers, such as William Allen.

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Thus, it is understandable some would contribute significant impact on Owen’s educational attitudes to the wider educational progress during this period and Lancaster’s work.  

However, Owen’s relationship with monitoring can be recognised in his earliest lasting memories, where he gives significance to becoming monitor himself under his schoolmaster. Attributing his educational influences in New Lanark to Lancaster, together with the wider push for educational progress during this period, overlooks that Newtown in Wales had also been touched by this system. Owen was schooled under a similar model where importantly his character had been formed. Moreover, one could argue that Owen’s attitudes had only been partly influenced by Lancaster. Even in borrowing the method, he adapted it to be more original, which is clearly seen in his curriculum. The monitoring method relied on military precision which created a vacuum of creativity where there was little room for independent thought.  

This defies Owen’s encouragement of curiosity through literature and the heavy presence of the arts. There is also evidence within the expenses of painting being part of learning, taught without rote methods.  

Lancaster’s associate, William Allen, was heavily involved in the organisation of New Lanark, with his contribution and connections to the British and Foreign School Society. However, this relationship consisted of intense scrutiny, as seen in Owen’s previously

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89 Barker, ‘The essays in context’.
90 Davidson, A Quest For Harmony: The Role of Music in Robert Owen’s New Lanark Community, pp. 238-239.
mentioned meddling description of Allen. Rather than positively impacting Owen’s
curriculum, which he attempted to run within the confines of the systems principles, it
ultimately attributed to Owen’s departure from New Lanark in 1825. Arguably, Allen
influenced Owen’s practises negatively, abolishing features which he passionately advocated
for in response to his own well-formed character. Allen and his associate Quaker’s saw to it
the end of dancing instruction, with singing lessons only to be carried out under psalmody,
the removal of national dress, and the replacement of all teaching staff by those under
Lancasterian principles.91 Thus this influence, threatened what Owen held dear, The
Institute’s curriculum and the memories it was founded upon.

William Godwin features greatly as an influence upon Owen during this time. Godwin
advocated for self-run communities; believing institutions ultimately fail from imposing mass
standardised ideas which obstruct true knowledge.92 Perhaps more radical than his other
associates, he promoted societal co-operating without a centralised government. Owen met
Godwin at a dinner in 1813, with Godwin’s diary divulging Owen’s constant dining with
Godwin while writing his essays. Owen went on to list Godwin as a literary companion, with
Podmore’s work naming him Owen’s master. Much of Owen’s work does bare a resemblance
to phrasing found in Godwin’s, ‘Enquiry Concerning Political Justice’ (1793), hugely
noticeable when Godwin describes how characters are formed by their circumstantial

91 Donnachie and Hewitt, Historic New Lanark, p. 133.
environments. They both agreed on rational education, with Godwin praising Owen’s model of a self-sufficient village, being New Lanark.\textsuperscript{93}

However, this relationship contains conflicting attitudes. After contributing a significant portion of inspiration from Godwin, Donnachie explains Owen never acknowledged Godwin’s work as influential, believing he never even read it.\textsuperscript{94} Godwin advocated strongly for the abolition of institutions for solving tensions between national identities and social classes. Contrastingly, arguably New Lanark had contained institutionalised activity based on national identity, where the population participated in national dance, song, dress and Gaelic; all promoted through The Institute. Another critique could be found potentially in Godwin’s religious beliefs, being a dedicated Nonconformist and Atheist in 1792. A connection of influence could be drawn between Owen’s attacks on sectarian issues and the role of the Bible in education, as Godwin throughout his career questioned the reliance on religion by the individual and the role it played in social control. Godwin could appear similar to Owen in his attacks on the Sabbath, as he argues Christianity consisted of, ‘imaginary terrors, gloomy ideas, and black inquietudes’.\textsuperscript{95}

Yet, there is considerable evidence Owen was religious and encouraging worship in New Lanark through its facilities. Writing in his memoirs, Owen highlights his religious identity in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{93}Donnachie, \textit{Robert Owen Social Visionary}, pp. 115–116.
\item \textsuperscript{94}Donnachie, \textit{Robert Owen Social Visionary}, p. 116.
\end{itemize}
Newtown, being nicknamed ‘little parson’, when in his youth he wrote three sermons, which he regretted burning on a fire after fearing plagiarism.96 His nephew publicly defended him to be religious, ‘as a boy Robert Owen slept alone, because his elder brother was always beating him for saying his prayers upon his knees at the bedside: and afterwards when a youth he was very remarked for his strict attention to his religious duties’.97 Moreover, according to Dr. Henry Macnab 1819, within Owen’s home religious observance was duly kept by what he described as a moral family.98 Although this cannot outrightly discount any form of religious dissent from Owen, compared to Godwin, he arguably valued religion within childhood and his management to an extent which Godwin did not.

Another leading association at New Lanark was Jeremy Bentham, known for the concept of Utilitarianism, promoting ‘the greatest happiness for the greatest number’. Bentham thought education should provide ‘appropriate rewards and sanctions, [to] induce the naturally self-interested individual; to subordinate his own happiness to that of the community’.99 Bentham believed education to be the prime vehicle in his efforts to maximise happiness, leading a learner to true happiness through expanding intelligence so they could understand the order of nature. As happiness was for the greatest number, all should be educated under the same principle. Inescapably, this matches the ideals set out in Owen’s essays, where he deems the

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96 Robert Owen, Life of Robert Owen by Himself, p. 4.
97 Donnachie, Robert Owen Social Visionary, p. 11.
98 Donnachie and Hewitt, Historic New Lanark, p. 132.
government responsible in creating happiness by rational methods; made popular by Bentham in ‘An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation’ (1789).  

In contrast to this optimism was the threatening tension of the period which served as a backdrop to Owen’s reforms. The Enlightenment can be critiqued for its imagined progressiveness, subject to certain limitations on liberty and freedom, particularly concerning race and gender. Much is to be said about Owen and the Enlightenments understanding of ‘happiness’ in this respect. It is important to acknowledge the domestic scene in which Owen was reforming characters and for what reason. There were major historical conflicts transpiring in the background as Owen formed his thoughts and his writings, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, the beginning of Napoleon’s Continental System (1806), and war with the United States between 1812-1815. Among this, the Industrialisation of Britain and Europe was leaving in its wake mass societal unrest despite economic and technological advances, with the numbers of the poor rising in agricultural and urban areas. With this turmoil there was a fear of the poorer orders of society being affected by political radicalism, damaging property in popular protest and upsetting the social ranks of society, as seen with Luddites being a threat to mill management.  


102 Barker, ‘Politics: Radicalism and reaction’.
fearful of such activity, that there may be a method of re-shaping these societal classes, perhaps educationally, to reduce volatility and restore a status-quo.

Bentham’s writing exemplifies this attempt, as he saw the poor as a considerable threat to society with charges of idleness and drunkenness, concerned they may align with ‘foreign notions of liberty’. He argued education the solution, where a system could instruct the poorer to be ‘content with their lot’ in order to protect perhaps the more civilised classes from losses.103 Arguably, Owen suffered the same fears and remedied them through his corrective system of character formation at New Lanark. Although regarded as an early Socialist, and coming from a modest background, Owen had now become associated with the world of Scottish elites, with high-valued connections globally too, benefitting from capitalism and slavery.104 Owen’s time at New Lanark had involved community policing, involving supervision of the population, a regimented work programme, as well as leisure activities being carefully organised in avoiding immoral idleness and promoting sobriety.105 Thus, where Owen claimed happiness, he also meant docility. Through New Lanark’s somewhat holistic and artistic curriculum and almost mandatory leisure program, Owen argued it was necessary the lower classes receive the same outputs of ‘intellectual gratification’ as the

104 Donnachie, Robert Owen Social Visionary, p. 117.
105 Donnachie, Robert Owen Social Visionary, p. 81.
higher classes, arguably this corresponds to the opinion of those like Bentham, that solving societal tensions involves indoctrinating the lower classes to be content with its order.

Arguably Bentham and his Enlightened Utilitarian approach to social conflict does demonstrate a clear influence in Owen’s work. Moreover, these sentiments are not found within Owen’s recollections of Newtown. Thus, this could be seen as a sound Enlightenment influence found within New Lanark, compared to the previous relationships that could remain strong echoes of Welsh impact. This is seen in his borrowing of these Enlightenment concepts yet adapting them further, imitating his own fruitful development in Newtown.
Conclusion: Robert Owen’s Welshness - A Subconscious Force in New Lanark.

As discussed, the previous historiography of Owen’s life and work presents him as largely a product of intense change across Europe, with his activities analysed within the contexts of Industrialism, Urbanisation and the Enlightenment. This has excluded Wales from his development, which is at odds with his own theory on character formation.

Ian Donnachie’s work has been well utilised in this investigation, being a more current and thorough commentator. Considering his contributions, his neglect of Owen’s Welsh boyhood leaves his work conveying a stronger external influence. Therefore, this gap in analysis deserves addressing.

As seen with Lancaster, the model of education suited the community of New Lanark, yet Owen imposed a curriculum dedicated to individual expression and creativity, something Lancaster’s system did not provide. What it did provide was the successful use of monitoring which Owen spoke of fondly from his own education in Newtown, to which in his mind formed his own character.

William Allen’s ‘meddling’ leading to Owen’s departure demonstrated his destructive influence, damaging Owen’s vision, removing what Owen adored in childhood and what was fundamental in his development as well as New Lanark’s. His spiritual accusations alongside Godwin’s influences provided examinations of Owen’s religious experience in Newtown.
This unique religious atmosphere to Wales presented ideas of tolerance and sectarianism, perhaps alien to others, seen in Owen’s recollections of Methodism.

Bentham’s Utilitarianism echoed similar motivations and concerns of Owen, marked by social unrest; fuelled by poor living and working conditions of the labouring classes. Owen’s mouldable workforce and systemic safeguards against conflict are not ideas explicit in Owen’s Welsh recollections yet supports that perhaps his environment was ideal in avoiding this.

The memoirs provided distinct links between the fondness of his youth and the development of an ideal environment for forming characters. Despite the memoir’s weaknesses, they highlight an influential early life built from the surroundings of Montgomeryshire, subject to unique experiences. This period of change in the late eighteenth century provided Owen an uncommon boyhood for his class, influential to his later life. Within education, he promoted a curriculum that encouraged the learning he had derived outside the classroom environment, from reading tales of voyages, dancing and music. His reforms concerning attitudes towards the treatment of children echoed his own wishes of treatment as a child, observing punishment was damaging and futile; as it was within his family. Owen saw the arts central to forming happy characters, as it had been a fundamental outlet for an active and determined young self. Owen’s childhood attitudes matched his provisions of worship and spiritual thought in New Lanark. His experiences of Methodism and Nonconformity in Wales translated well into the co-operative landscape of a diverse community, avoiding sectarianism.
unliked from childhood by tolerating all sects in New Lanark. Reducing Bible instruction mirrored what he found to be impactful to his own learning, differing genres of literature over religious material.

Regarding his theory, these memories will have shaped his attitudes deeply, profoundly moulding his character. Romanticising his origins with little critique showcases his felt success of his shaped character, recreating these Newtown experiences in Scotland with a subconscious blueprint deriving from Owen’s Welshness.

Moreover, present throughout these accounts, and Donnachie’s, are sympathies held by Owen towards a Celtic identity; where his promoting of traditional Scottish culture demonstrates a man who through his Welshness saw the importance of shaping happy characters nationally. This was illustrated in his encouragement of tartan and national dress, traditional music and dance, as well as Gaelic.

Considering these conclusions, it is questionable why past scholars have avoided this Welsh element. Perhaps this is representative of Owen’s memoirs, with minimal focus on Wales in comparison to accounting for the rest of his life. With little information, scholars have possibly explained his successes by the progressive atmosphere, allowing a humble beginning to reach elitism. Additionally, Enlightenment history may be perceived more prominent than Wales’, attracting more scholarship, diminishing the Welsh influence. Furthermore, the concept of identity is complex itself, which combined with Owen’s lack of interest in
addressing his national identity creates complex debates and danger of assumptions.

Moreover, commentators like Podmore could perhaps be found guilty of anglicising Owen, as with celebrating his legacy commencing in England. However, this mirrors the history of Newtown too, with urbanisation and proximity to borderlines contributing to an anglicisation of its culture, seen in its dominant use of English. Ignoring Owen’s Welshness within the vast changes sweeping across Europe suggests Wales was untouched by these transformations, when indeed Owen was accessing the fruits of its labour in private libraries, attending a school utilising Lancaster’s principle, and coming into contact with ideas such as religious tolerance.

The Culturenet Cymru poll calling Owen the ninth most valued Welsh ‘hero’ certainly characterises the figure as outwardly Welsh. This could be at odds with the histographies collective narrative, suggesting his Welshness is greater recognised by the people of Wales rather than by scholars. Contemporary Newtown is deeply steeped in the image and legacy of Owen, with landmarks dedicated to him, blending together the Newtown identity with Owen’s life and works. Thus, to Wales, Owen could be characterised as a figure representative of a Welsh identity, which is missing within the past scholarly work despite being recognisable within this dissertation.

Brandwood’s comments upon Owen’s inspirations for New Lanark coming directly from his childhood in Newtown, are feasibly biased given Owen’s prevalence in Newtown’s own identity. Yet, throughout this dissertation, her statements have been supported as true. In this
same interview she importantly highlights Owen’s return to Wales, despite having lived his life outside of Wales since he left around the age of ten. According to Brandwood, it was important to Owen that he should ‘lay my bones where I derived them’.¹⁰⁶ This move for Owen’s death could be symbolic of his own sentiments over his character formation, returning home to the foundations his legacy was created upon, asserting his Welshness after becoming a citizen of the world.

In conclusion, despite scholarly efforts to commemorate Owen as a broadly European, somewhat Anglicised figure, which spent a short and less important period of his youth in Wales, this piece has found an innate Welshness in Owen’s attitudes, showcased in his memories of Newtown and echoed in practise within New Lanark. In light of Owen’s own theory of character formation, there are explicit examples of Owen’s management of New Lanark and the attitudes he experimented upon being developed early in his child self, which was a product of a unique environment to Newtown in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Ultimately, Owen’s universal principles may be justly characterised as having an origin in the parochial Welsh landscape of Newtown.

Appendices

Appendix A

Description: Statue of Robert Owen designed by Gilbert Bayes (1872-1953) and erected in the Robert Owen Memorial Garden, in 1956.

Here, Owen is depicted comforting a young girl, representing the view of the paternal figure reducing suffering of the labouring class through his work place reforms. There is a replica of this statue that has been gifted to the co-operative society headquarters in Manchester.

Appendix B

Description: Robert Owen’s Burial Place, St. Mary’s Church, Newtown.

This is a photograph of the well-maintained burial of Robert Owen within the gardens of St. Mary’s Church in Newtown, which features a portrait of Owen’s face above the railings. St. Mary’s Church was the Church were Owen and his family worshipped, although not specified in his own memoirs.

Appendix C

Description: The Mansion House, ‘Newtown Hall’.

This is where Owen recalled going to school within the upper apartments, in Newtown. This was once also the residence of Sir John Powell Pryce.

Appendix D

Description: An example of the monitorial system.

This illustration demonstrates the model used across Europe and by Owen in New Lanark; where pupils were seated in rows, led by a monitor at the end of each row, who had been instructed by the Schoolmaster. It also showcases how large numbers of students could be taught at once, cheaply and quickly.

Description: Illustration of inside The Institute.

This illustration well conveys the mixture of activity the Institute provided accommodation for, here in one of the two upper apartment rooms. Around the floor space are spectators to the reforms at New Lanark, who commonly visited to marvel at Owen’s experiment. On the far wall there are paintings of animals used in the learning and teaching, as well as a map on the right wall, which were suspended in rollers. To the right is the described gallery which allowed for musicians, spectators, preachers and lecturers. Central to this illustration is a dancing recital by the children taught in the Institute, although this space also often held the adult populations dances also. Adjacent to this room in the illustration is another room, much the same in layout but surrounded by galleries on each side with a pulpit.

Description: Poster advertising a concert and children’s ball held in the Institute in 1821.

This poster is a sound example of one of the many concert or lecture nights hosted by Owen in the Institute, in New Lanark. This particular concert is to help fund a school in a nearby village, independent from any of Owen’s work. This was extended to the village of Lanark to attend, and further afield. It involved instrumentals from bands taught within the institute as well as guest performers, and children’s choirs. It also features singing hymns with audience participation and national airs.

Appendix G

Description: A Letter sent from Owen to his father.

This letter sent from Owen to his father, possibly from within Wales, is written in Welsh. This is evidence of Owen’s use of Welsh within his social and familial relationships before moving to England and then Scotland; despite living in a bi-lingual Newtown which was dominated by English during this period.

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Accessed 13 May 2021.