

What brought Rebecca to Carmarthen? To what extent should we blame poverty and the New Poor Law for the 1843 attack on Penlan Workhouse?

David Irwin

A329: 'The Making of Welsh History' Dissertation

The Open University

May 2024

7,317 words

Table of contents:

Introduction.....	4
Chapter 1 – Poverty.....	8
Chapter 2 – The New Poor Law.....	17
Conclusion.....	27
Bibliography.....	30

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank my tutor Matthew Griffiths and fellow A329 students for their helpful and constructive comments during the course of this module. My Mom, Dad and younger sister for bearing with me during a prolonged spell at the family computer. And finally all the participants of the Carmarthen Cheese Riots – whose valiant actions in an earlier cost of living crisis always gave me a smile during proof-reading.

Introduction:

The Rebecca Riots were a series of popular protests which swept West and Mid-Wales between 1839 and 1843.¹ Reflecting on the unrest, historian Geraint Jenkins describes a period in which aggrieved farmers donned women's clothes to stalk “the countryside at night” while property owners lived in fear of a midnight visit from the insurgents.² Such evocative images are, perhaps in part, why what started with an attack on a solitary tollgate in Pembrokeshire³ still captures the public imagination today. Inevitably the disturbances, which over the next four years would encompass more than 200 incidents⁴, have also been the subject of fairly extensive academic study. However, the tendency has been to examine the riots as a whole rather than take a more detailed look at the individual outbreaks of disorder. This dissertation will aim to address that by considering in depth what has been described as being among the “most spectacular” episodes of the riots⁵ - the attack on the Penlan Workhouse in Carmarthenshire. Before looking in more detail about what could be learned from a focus on a particular case study, it is perhaps worth considering the successes and shortcomings of the scholarship to date.

The first comprehensive analysis was by the University of Wales’ David Williams, whose mid-twentieth century book drew extensively on Home Office records to shape its conclusions on the causes of the riots.⁶ If officials at the time had found it expedient to focus

¹ John Davies, *A History of Wales*, (Cardiff, 2008), p.730.

² Geraint H. Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales*, (United States of America, 2008), pp. 173-174.

³ *People’s Collection of Wales – Rebecca Riots*. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3fpzanu7>. Accessed 14 April 2024.

⁴ Pat Molloy, *And They Blessed Rebecca: An Account of the Welsh Toll-Gate Riots 1839-1844*, (Llandysul, 1983).

⁵ T.H. Lewis ‘The Rebecca Movement in Carmarthenshire’ in *The Carmarthenshire Antiquary, Vol I, Parts 3 and 4* (1943/44). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/nxu9ze26>. Accessed: 12 April 2024.

⁶ David Howell, 'The Rebecca Riots, 1838-1844' in a *Reader's Guide to British History* (2003) Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/25bcvasj>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

in particular on the anger caused by toll-gates and turnpike trusts⁷, Williams argued the unrest stemmed from a far wider set of economic pressures - including church tithes, spiralling rents and the New Poor Law (NPL). In a blunt assessment of what incited the Rebeccaites to launch their campaign in early-Victorian Wales, Williams is emphatic. The riots were in large part due to “intolerable conditions of life, to extreme discomfort and to the recklessness born of despair”.⁸ The consensus that severe poverty had sown the seeds for the unrest has held firm in the almost 70 years since the historian published his landmark study. Subsequent works by David Jones and David Howell, published in the late 1980s, came to similar conclusions about the varied pressures which pushed people to action. Howell warned against understating the extent of anger at tolls, while nonetheless acknowledging that other cost of living considerations played into the trouble. The riots were ultimately, he argued, the “product of a dire poverty”.⁹ More recent research by Rhian Jones has sought to narrow the scope of study to focus on the role of cultural history and the “gendered aspect” of events she felt had been glossed over in earlier studies.¹⁰ Her 2015 book *Petticoat Heroes* reflects shifts in the study of popular protest in more recent decades but in terms of timeframe and geography the title still favoured wide-ranging coverage.

In many respects these works were a necessary precursor to any attempt at more focused case studies and provided an important challenge to a narrative heavily promoted by authorities at the time that much of the disquiet would be drained from communities simply by endorsing changes to the toll systems. But if other factors had indeed stirred resentment, it is of course

⁷ Rhian E. Jones, *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, (Cardiff, 2015), p. 23.

⁸ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.97.

⁹ David Howell, ‘The Rebecca Riots’ p.6 in T.Herbert and G.E. Jones (eds) *People and Protest: Wales 1815-1880* (Cardiff, 1988), p. 1.

¹⁰ Jones, *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, p. 5.

worth considering what more can be learned by looking more closely at specific flashpoints in isolation. Choosing appropriate case studies is obviously complicated by the dearth of detail available for many of these incidents. As Jenkins' summation suggests, in many instances the rioters struck at isolated facilities and, coming in disguise under cover of darkness, the perpetrators remained both figuratively and literally in the shadows.¹¹

Moreover, while the early nineteenth century had seen the emergence of a growing number of newspapers in Wales itself,¹² interest in the unrest within the wider UK or central government was more limited in the first few years of the struggle. It was likely the scale of events in the county town of Carmarthen, culminating in a clash between protestors and soldiers sent to restore order, which finally drew the full attention of the London press.¹³

What is striking about the events of 19 June 1843, is how different they were from the nocturnal raids on rural roads which had defined the protests up until that point. Thousands of protestors marched in broad daylight, passing shops which had shut in anticipation of trouble.¹⁴ And the attack when it came was not this time directed at the property of a privately-owned turnpike trust, but a state building in a town which was home to almost 10,000 people.¹⁵ A direct assault on a workhouse was rare in Wales and in actual fact Britain more widely.¹⁶ *The Quarterly Review*, the London-based political periodical, was seemingly correct in its assessment that Rebeccaism had entered “a new stage”.¹⁷ In the “midsummer madness” that followed the protests became more unpredictable and prone to violence.¹⁸ This

¹¹ Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales*, pp. 193-194.

¹² Davies, *A History of Wales*, p. 615.

¹³ *The Story of Wales*, Episode 4 – Furnace of Change (2012).

¹⁴ Joyce and Victor Lodwick, *The Story of Carmarthen* (Carmarthen, 1995), p. 146.

¹⁵ Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 425.

¹⁶ Megan Evans and Peter Jones, ‘A Stubborn and Intractable Body’: Resistance to the Workhouse in Wales in *Family & Community History*, Vol. 17/2 (2014), p. 109.

¹⁷ Jones, *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.210.

dissertation will, however, concern itself with the causes rather than the consequences of the violent scenes in Carmarthen. As the backdrop for a major escalation in the riots it was perhaps understandably chosen as the first venue of the subsequent public inquiry, which got underway in the autumn. These hearings, not to mention a criminal trial the following year and the aforementioned media interest, provide a much larger than usual collection of sources to try and make sense of what had occurred. It is this material which clearly adds to Carmarthen's value as a case study.

Another possible advantage of analysing the riots at community level, rather than on the scale of a county or even the wider country, is that there may be the potential to see the people and the way they reacted to their circumstances in a more tangible way. Earlier studies have acknowledged what Williams described as a “welter of confused beliefs and emotions”,¹⁹ but it has often proven hard to unravel them. If the magistrates and military commanders at the time searched in vain for a single mastermind behind the movement, there remains a danger today of fixating on an amorphous mass of agitators at the expense of the ordinary individuals caught up in events. Yet in Carmarthen the NPL was represented not by political debates about the appropriate response to poverty but a visible landmark; the new workhouse opened its doors just a few years before the riots.²⁰ And the crowd who stormed the building was made up of groups and individuals with often varied backgrounds. It could be argued that trying to establish a clearer understanding of who these were offers the single best chance of establishing why they acted.

¹⁹ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p. 118.

²⁰ Peter Higginbotham, ‘Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire’ at *The Workhouse: The Story of an Institution*. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2yk7sasr>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

This dissertation will focus on two of the potential triggers that existing historiography has identified for the riots as a whole and examine what role they may have played in the specific case of Carmarthen. Considering the extent to which poverty has been emphasised as a driver of discontent, this is perhaps the most obvious starting point for investigating what brought about the attack on 19 June. The first chapter will thoroughly assess the socio-economic conditions in the town in the lead-up to the violence and whether they add weight to the assessment of Williams and Howell and others that crippling financial pressures had forced a public response. Further to this, it is clearly significant that events came to a climax with the attempted destruction of the workhouse building, an outcome perhaps only averted by the timely arrival of the 4th Light Dragoons.²¹ As mentioned above the NPL has been named as among the more specific policies which had drawn the ire of Rebeccaites and given the protestors' eventual destination it would appear a relevant focus for the second chapter. This will explore local opinion of poor relief at the time of riots and the circumstances surrounding the attack on the workhouse itself.

Chapter 1: Poverty

The banner held aloft by the crowd passing through Carmarthen carried a single vivid inscription – “Cyfiawnder, a charwyr cyfiawnder ydym ni oll” – which in English translates to “Justice, and lovers of justice are we all”.²² Perhaps in this wording we might start to consider what had brought Rebeccaism to the heart of what is often considered Wales' oldest town.²³ On this particular day the simplest answer, as far as can be ascertained, was an appeal

²¹ Evans and Jones, ‘A Stubborn and Intractable Body’: Resistance to the Workhouse in Wales, p. 109.

²² Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 146.

²³ Dr Russell Grigg, *The Little Book of Carmarthenshire*, (Cheltenham, 2022), p. 11.

to magistrates to return a couple of fines imposed for the non-payment of charges at a nearby toll-gate in Water Street.²⁴ But the struggle was, as the introduction suggests, far larger and far more complicated than that. Carmarthen's size and status would have made it an ideal backdrop for a statement of intent by protestors, but the same dense network of streets was also rife with the sort of hardship to which Williams attributes the disturbances. It is important of course to establish the difficulties and iniquities the poor faced during this period. Secondly, what were the trends and events which may have caused these pressures to grow in Carmarthen in the lead-up to 1843? And finally is there evidence within that community of anger increasing the appetite for protest and violence?

The tragic case of the "industrious" Carmarthen weaver David Jones, which attracted a flurry of press coverage and a Parliamentary petition, provides us with a named victim of poverty often overlooked when dealing with the struggle of social groups across a wider area. In 1837, the textile worker had been appointed as a local churchwarden but when he subsequently admitted he could not afford to pay the cost of bread and wine for the sacrament he was accused by the parish vicar of failing to discharge his duties. In early 1839, the *London Dispatch* condemned the ecclesiastical courts for pursuing legal proceedings and revealed that, as a result of the dispute, Mr Jones had been "sent to rot in gaol".²⁵ Although eventually released, a separate report in the *Southern Star*, published almost a year later, revealed that – reputedly fearing an imminent visit from a bailiff - he had fallen ill and died shortly afterwards. The article claimed the stress of his financial predicament had hurried Mr Jones "to a premature grave",²⁶ leaving a widow and several children behind.

²⁴ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p. 205

²⁵ *London Dispatch*, 3 March 1839, p.129. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2696f99h>. Accessed: 28 May 2024.

²⁶ *The Southern Star*, 23 February 1840, p. 1. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/mx65pcmd>. Accessed: 28 May 2024.

The fact the case was dramatic enough to attract media attention, including titles some distance from Wales, highlights the double-edged sword of what journalists today might call a human interest story.²⁷ It undoubtedly provides a more intimate look at the possible consequences of poverty. However, there are also dangers in seeing a particularly contentious case as representative. Obviously the working class sympathies of the *Dispatch*²⁸ would also have provided a particular incentive for the publication to frame the events as an abuse of authorities' powers. The coverage swiftly cited the handling of the dispute as a clear reason for reform. Nonetheless, a sense that ordinary people were victims of indifference from those with power - be they Poor Law commissioners, toll-road operators or indeed the church – is arguably central to the narrative around the Rebecca Riots.²⁹ From this perspective then Mr Jones' experience is useful as, although it appears to have been an especially extreme example of where penury might lead, it does speak to wider concerns of officials apparently unmoved by the suffering they were causing.

Of course poverty manifests in more than a lack of money and in focusing on a physical place it is important to consider where people lived. Carmarthen, in common with many of Wales' old county towns, had its share of claustrophobic slums notorious for “conditions of wretchedness”.³⁰ Many of the buildings in the most crowded neighbourhoods have since been pulled down; this follows the broader pattern of sub-standard housing being cleared across

²⁷ ‘Human Interest Story’ at Dictionary.com. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2wk4mx7u>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

²⁸ *London Dispatch* profile at The British Newspaper Archive. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/mvy5tfsw>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

²⁹ Jones, *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, p. 23.

³⁰ Jones, *National Library of Wales journal* Vol X/3 Summer 1958. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/yesu48hr>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

the UK³¹ and inevitably makes it harder to compile a comprehensive picture of the area almost 200 years on. The exact size of these communities – and by extension the numbers in poverty - is also difficult to quantify, even at a time when statistical analysis was becoming an increasingly central part of government.³² It was recorded - for instance - that in 1840, nine per cent of the population in the wider county of Carmarthenshire were considered paupers and received poor relief.³³ However, as will be explored in the second chapter, fear and loathing kept many away from the workhouse – meaning official data is likely to severely underestimate the levels of destitution within the community.

Research by local historians Joyce and Victor Lodwick suggests the miserable conditions described by Williams cut across numerous neighbourhoods and occupations in Carmarthen. The coracle men - so named because of the small, round boats in which they fished the river³⁴ - were a not insignificant workforce in the nineteenth century. Indeed at one time around 400 vessels worked the River Towy.³⁵ But it was a life dependent on “precarious, seasonal” work and the quayside homes where many dwelt were small and crowded.³⁶ This was of course an era when many relied on the so-called “economy of makeshifts” - snatching paid work as and when they could - to make ends meet.³⁷ Although the coracle men would have also faced competition from others in the area often living hand to mouth. The hobblers, the colloquial

³¹ Almost 56,000 homes were demolished in Wales in the 30 years to 1985. Figures from ‘Incidence of Slum Clearance in England and Wales 1955-1985’ in *Urban History*, Volume 27, Issue 2 (2000), pp. 234-254.

³² Paul Lawrence in (ed Paul Lawrence) *Ambition and Anxiety, 1789-1840* (Milton Keynes, 2017), pp. 35-36.

³³ *Bury and Norwich Post*, 24 March 1840, p. 1. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdzndj4n>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

³⁴ ‘About the Coracle’ at The Coracle Society website. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/ypj773kd>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

³⁵ Nation Cymru, 7 November 2018. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2ayphe6r> Accessed: 27 May 2024.

³⁶ Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 186.

³⁷ Alannah Tomkins and Steven King, *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003), p.1.

term for a group of riverside labourers, also eked an existence in the neighbourhood as did a number of migrant communities. Although Irish peasants fleeing the potato famine would not start to arrive until a couple of years after the riots subsided.³⁸

Many of those employed at the town's industrial premises often occupied the narrow alleys and back streets to be found in the commercial quarters. And it would appear they suffered the same lack of space as those accommodating traditional trades such as fishing. The Lodwicks describe lodgings as "tiny, damp and unsanitary" - with up to five families sharing some cottages, with little by way of furniture or bedding.³⁹ They identify the Priors Street area as a common address for those employed at the town's iron and tin-plate works, while St Catherine Street and Water Street, to the north west, housed many employed at nearby iron foundries and mills. There is a risk, of course, of seeing the locality at this time only through the prism of the poorest neighbourhoods. Thomas Campbell Foster, *The Times* correspondent who spent six months filing reports from Carmarthen in the wake of the workhouse attack, actually refers to the town as "picturesque and beautifully situated" in his first report.⁴⁰ Meanwhile the Georgian townhouses, some of which have survived to the present,⁴¹ serve as a reminder that here also was the home of many local gentry. But when the Lodwicks' breakdown of street names is cross-referenced with an 1834 map, drawn by the prolific land surveyor John Wood,⁴² it demonstrates that the districts in difficulty were by no means confined to one corner of town. Quayside streets now since vanished, but whose former

³⁸ Susan Forbes, 'Ireland and the Famine' in (ed Donna Loftus) *Confidence and crisis, 1840-1880* (Milton Keynes, 2017), pp. 62-63.

³⁹ Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 188.

⁴⁰ *The Times*, 26 June 1843, p. 6. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yujuufut>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁴¹ For example, Grade II-listed 12 Guildhouse Square. Cadw listed buildings report. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3wtjt66a>. Accessed: 27 March 2024.

⁴² Wood produced a series of Welsh town plans during the 1830s and 1840s. The National Library of Wales. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2kh64h94>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

presence is hinted at by the modern-day Coracle Way⁴³ are shown clustering the river. While the roads favoured by the likes of factory workers take prominent positions in and around the town centre – through which the Rebeccaites would ultimately wend their way.

In terms of trends which may have placed further strain on already struggling communities, it seems clear that rapid population growth would have been hugely disruptive in Carmarthen. Census figures show that the town's dramatic expansion had closely tracked the national trend, which had seen the population of England and Wales approximately double between 1801-1841.⁴⁴ From 5,500 at the start of the new century the town had grown to more than 9,500.⁴⁵ It is true that this increase was outstripped by nearby Swansea and Llanelli, which - in the space of just a few decades - had become established as industrial centres.

Carmarthen, by contrast, retained its traditional role as the administrative centre and “regional capital”,⁴⁶ perhaps providing some sense of continuity. However, these comparisons should not detract from the pace of change in the town; in just 30 years the number of people living there surged by almost 80 per cent. With growth effectively flatlining in the second half of the century⁴⁷ and the population still only around 14,500 today⁴⁸, it is important to note the town had experienced nothing like that rate of expansion before or since.

While on one hand the shift from the countryside to conurbations is what drove the “bustling new economy”⁴⁹ the population density posed various dangers. Public health records reveal the clear risk posed by infectious diseases at around this time, a cholera epidemic in 1849

⁴³ ‘Coracle Way at Carmarthen’. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2b228znb>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁴⁴ ‘1840 Population Act’ at UK Parliament. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/msw5k39u>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁴⁵ 1801 and 1841 Census data quoted in Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 425.

⁴⁶ Jones, *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Census data quoted in Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 425

⁴⁸ 2021 Census figure. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3j7xfzwh>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁴⁹ Jenkins, *A Concise History of Wales*, p. 174.

claimed 102 lives in Carmarthen⁵⁰. Notably the likes of Priory Street and Alltynap, both known for their cramped accommodation, suffered severely during the outbreak. A report issued in response to the 1849 outbreak suggested it had been made worse by “the presence of foul open ditches in the suburb, by a want of proper dustbins and of proper paving in the courts”.⁵¹ While obviously a few years after the riots had subsided it speaks to the long-standing issues many neighbourhoods would have endured. In the early nineteenth century Carmarthen was noted for having an adequate water supply and gas lighting,⁵² infrastructure all but absent in many other Welsh towns of that time. However, it is clear that even approaching the halfway mark of the 1800s many residents still lacked basic amenities – with serious detriment to their lives.

If population growth was a long-term trend likely to have exacerbated both poverty and inequality in the town, other problems emerged in the years immediately preceding the workhouse attack. The early 1840s - The Hungry Forties as they are often known - was characterised by a severe drop-off in trade, a succession of poor harvests and spiralling unemployment.⁵³ The harsh realities of the economic upheaval during this period were hammered home by one of Foster's regular “The State of South Wales” updates. The reporter revealed that men employed at various nearby copper works were in a state of “much apprehension” after learning their wages were to be slashed by more than twelve per cent.⁵⁴ The blame was placed on the “very great depression” which had engulfed the industry. The economic turmoil also impacted on household bills. This was an era in which food prices

⁵⁰ Jones, *National Library of Wales journal* Vol X/3 Summer 1958. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/yesu48hr>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁵¹ 1849 Report quoted in Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 194.

⁵² Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.100.

⁵³ A Dictionary of World History online. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/4prct2ba>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 2 August 1843, p. 7. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/tmuud6pz>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

were vulnerable to rising “to disastrous heights”, forcing many of Carmarthen's poor further into difficulties.⁵⁵

What contemporary evidence is there for Carmarthen's poor voicing their anger at the conditions that confronted them? A report in *The Operative*, from January 1839, notes that at least 4,000 people had attended a meeting of the Working Men's Association of Carmarthen. Addressing the crowd - who had gathered at the Picton Monument, in the town centre - a Mr Evans said they come together to seek freedom from destitution. In a scathing attack on the current state of affairs, he questioned why so many had to contend with “disease without remedy, wretchedness in rags, and even slow starvation”.⁵⁶ Contemporary press reports of this sort can provide a valuable insight into attitudes of the working classes at a time when literacy rates, while improving, were still a bar to many ordinary people setting their thoughts on paper.⁵⁷ While this particular piece appeared in a London-based newspaper it was an abridged version of coverage originally carried in *The Silurian*, a regional title in Wales. This would tend to suggest it is based on a first-hand account of the meeting, even if *The Operative*'s links with the growing trade union movement⁵⁸ raise the possibility of bias. Mr Evans' rather fiery rhetoric does seem to indicate significant anger at what working people were having to endure. This may only have grown as the economic situation deteriorated over the next few years.

⁵⁵ Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 189.

⁵⁶ *The Operative*, 27 January 1839, p. 5. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2e4uddwv>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁵⁷ Around a third of men and half of women in England and Wales remained illiterate in 1840. Figures from Amy. J. Lloyd, *Education, Literacy and the Reading Public*. (Cambridge, 2007). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2s4zc5ad>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁵⁸ David Stack ‘The Operative’ in *Lives of Victorian Political Figures, Part II, Volume 4*, ed Denys P Leighton, (London, 2009),

It seems certain that when faced with what *The Times* described as “an intolerable load”⁵⁹ many of those struggling would have felt frustration and resentment. And there were precedents for the townsfolk mobilising during periods of economic distress. Twenty five years earlier, in September 1818, the so-called “Cheese Riots” saw disorder over the intention to ship the dairy produce abroad at a time when tariffs were pushing up food prices.⁶⁰ It would be wrong, however, to assume public anger at hardship led inexorably to protest. Many of Carmarthen's poorer residents were said to have “escaped the realities of life by drowning their sorrows in drink”.⁶¹ Furthermore, even those who saw a need to take action had many options aside from violence. The copper works employees facing pay cuts responded by calling for strikes,⁶² while resolutions passed at the Picton Monument meeting a few years earlier had pressed the case for democratic reform. The Rebecca Riots nonetheless demonstrate that, for some at least, more forceful interventions were the way to secure change.

The extent to which any given group, including the Rebeccaites, could be said to speak for Carmarthen's poor more generally is important in considering how much of a role hardship had to play in the events of 19 June. Messages dispatched to landowners and newspaper editors are often loaded with references to grievances which, if they truly reflected wider opinion, do suggest poverty led many people to march. Take for an instance an anonymous letter, signed only Rebecca, which was sent to the Carmarthen-based *Welshman* newspaper in 1843. “The masses to a man throughout the three counties of Carmarthen, Cardigan and

⁵⁹ Quoted in Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p. 118.

⁶⁰ Grigg, *The Little Book of Carmarthenshire*, p. 104.

⁶¹ Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 332.

⁶² *The Times*, 2 August 1843, p. 7. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/tmuud6pz>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Pembroke are with me,” insisted the unknown author.⁶³ The message went on to list Rebecca’s children, a coalition said to include “hard worked and hard fed” coalmen and farmers’ wives struggling to market. Of course, the larger they believed the movement amassed against them the greater the pressure on authorities to consider concessions. It is worth noting, however, that had Rebeccaism commanded the breadth of support implied in this letter it is less likely they would have had to rely on threats and coercion. In reality, often dire warnings accompanied the notices that circulated ahead of the procession, urging people to attend. “Non-compliance will bring vengeance upon your head,” read one delivered two days prior.⁶⁴ Even if many may have shared the organisers’ anger and even sympathised with their cause, it is important to be mindful that not everyone who flocked to the banner being paraded in Carmarthen did so willingly.

Chapter 2: The New Poor Law

It was a sunny summer’s afternoon when the noisy procession of protestors swarmed into the yard of Carmarthen's workhouse and into the building beyond. A contemporary account describes how the crowd had set about ransacking the premises with the apparent intention of continuing until it was “razed to the ground”.⁶⁵ Furniture was smashed, bedding tossed from windows and children in the on-site schoolroom were reduced to tears at the unfolding violence.⁶⁶ It was only with the timely arrival of cavalrymen from Cardiff that the rioters

⁶³ *The Welshman*, 1 September 1843, p. 2 Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3day6zv2>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p. 206.

⁶⁵ *The Cambrian*, 24 June 1843, p.3. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/yv54u2hc>. Accessed May 28 2024.

⁶⁶ *The Cambrian*, 23 March 1844, p.3. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/2srsfnsu>. Accessed May 28 2024.

appeared to lose their nerve; many fled in fear although dozens more were captured and order finally restored.⁶⁷ Such a frenzied attack on the building appears to give credence to the broad academic consensus that the workhouse regime and the legislation which underpinned it was a major source of resentment. To test this suggestion more fully it is first worth establishing the arrangements in place in Carmarthen to provide poor relief. From here it is important to investigate what contemporary evidence can tell us about public opinion in the town and whether this matches the general view that the system was hugely unpopular. And finally if it is possible to ascertain why exactly the workhouse became the centre of the disorder that particular Monday.

The imposing stone building where the trouble would come to a head had been completed just a few years earlier, with work having commenced in 1837.⁶⁸ Located in Penlan Road, a short distance from the town centre, it was intended to cater for the poor of 28 parishes across the surrounding county⁶⁹ and according to a contemporary edition of *Kelly's Directory* had capacity for up to 140 inmates.⁷⁰ Poorhouses were not an alien concept in Carmarthen and several similar institutions had previously served the town. Indeed the new, two-storey premises were an expansion of an earlier building erected in around 1805.⁷¹ But these sites were operated under an earlier network of poor relief, which had its origins in the late sixteenth century.⁷² The enlarged facility was, by contrast, intended as the local lynchpin of the NPL, imposed across England and Wales in 1834 with the expressed aim of making the

⁶⁷ *The Cambrian*, 24 June 1843. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/yv54u2hc>. Accessed May 28 2024.

⁶⁸ Higginbotham, 'Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire' at *The Workhouse: The Story of an Institution*. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2yk7sasr>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁶⁹ Carmarthen Poor Law Bastille or Penlan Road Workhouse at Coflein website. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3uxvrwd6>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁷⁰ Published in 1837. Quoted in Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 192.

⁷¹ Higginbotham, 'Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire' at *The Workhouse: The Story of an Institution*. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2yk7sasr>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁷² 'Poor Law' – British legislation at Britannica encyclopedia. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/24t2wc77>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

welfare system more efficient. Conditions were designed to be as “harsh and unattractive as possible” to discourage people relying on charity, with family members kept separate in often overcrowded accommodation⁷³. Able-bodied men were set a daily quota of breaking up a ton and a half of stone,⁷⁴ while single mothers were targeted by a controversial “bastardy clause”.⁷⁵ Food rations for inmates of both sexes – almost entirely consisting of bread, potatoes and soup - were less than those doled out at nearby Carmarthen County Gaol.⁷⁶ For the scheme's supporters the harsher approach to paupers was a necessary means of curbing costs and promoting self-reliance,⁷⁷ for critics however the legislation was based on fundamentally flawed assumptions about the causes of poverty.⁷⁸

Newspaper coverage in the immediate aftermath of the riots suggests there was indeed deep anger in Carmarthen at the operation of the NPL. It is significant that Foster identifies it as one of the chief causes of public discontent within just a few days of arriving in the town and many of his initial dispatches make specific reference to widespread fury at the way the system was administered. Indeed, in the very first of his “State of South Wales” pieces, published on 24 June, he notes that “the whole country is suffering the effects of [the law] against which there appears to be a universal feeling of detestation.”⁷⁹ This early observation is followed in later articles by more detailed examination of this particular grievance and local feeling is conveyed in even stronger terms. In a separate article, printed the following

⁷³ Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 188 191.

⁷⁴ Carmarthen Museum image of iron grill for grading rocks. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/44vauyr9>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁷⁵ Lewis ‘The Rebecca Movement in Carmarthenshire’ in *The Carmarthenshire Antiquary, Vol I, Parts 3 and 4* (1943/44). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/nxu9ze26>. Accessed: 12 April 2024.

⁷⁶ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, pp. 144-145.

⁷⁷ Poor Law reform at UK Parliament. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc48njb8>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁷⁸ Donna Loftus and Samantha Shave, ‘Work, poverty and the new Poor Law’ in (ed Donna Loftus) *Confidence and crisis, 1840-1880* (Milton Keynes, 2017), pp. 114-115.

⁷⁹ *The Times*, 24 June 1843, p. 7. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4t5zp5k4>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

month, he explains the roots of people's frustrations. "They abhor it for its tyranny and for its unchristian operations," he says, in reference to the poor relief. "They say their poverty, which they cannot help, is treated as a crime".⁸⁰ The fact that Foster travelled to Wales to report on the situation first-hand arguably give his accounts a greater sense of authenticity. However, using his coverage as a measure of public mood in Carmarthen is somewhat complicated by his tendency to sometimes attribute comments to broad groups such as "the poor" or unnamed individuals. It also should be noted that *The Times* had been an outspoken critic of the more stringent approach to poor relief following its adoption almost a decade earlier,⁸¹ which may have informed their correspondent's commentary. Nonetheless, the general tone of the comments he includes, even those where the providence is not entirely clear, is broadly consistent with the evidence available from another important source.

Fierce criticism of the NPL is a frequent feature of witness statements made during the public inquiry into the Rebecca Riots, which included a 11-day session in Carmarthen itself.⁸² The formal proceedings, which got underway on 24 October,⁸³ were the first of a series of stop-offs in Welsh communities which had seen outbreaks of disorder in the months and years prior. Given the Royal Commission report which would result from this evidence gathering, fuelled perceptions of the riots as a "single-issue" protest against toll-roads,⁸⁴ it is perhaps surprising that the NPL is brought up so often in the evidence itself. Speaking at Carmarthen Town Hall, one local farmer, John Rees, argued that "the people look upon the workhouse the same as they look upon a gaol".⁸⁵ The direct comparison with the prison system undoubtedly

⁸⁰ *The Times*, 29 July 1843, p. 7. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3acreyku>. Accessed May 28 2024.

⁸¹ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p. 210.

⁸² Report from Commissioners 1844 – South Wales Inquiry, p.37. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y8k4nfv4>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁸³ Jones, *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, p. 120.

⁸⁴ Jones, *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, p. 120.

⁸⁵ Report from Commissioners 1844 – South Wales Inquiry, p.57. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y8k4nfv4>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

has striking parallels with the comments picked up by Foster during his discussions with residents during the summer. The commissioners' report obviously has the advantage of comprising verbatim comments, each attributed to a named individual. Conversely the setting may have left some witnesses feeling inhibited or even actively discouraged from broaching certain topics. While many questions were more open-ended than other inquiries held around this time,⁸⁶ it is apparent some witnesses were advised to restrict their representations to specific subjects.

It is worth noting however that, irrespective of any attempt to narrow the scope of discussion, the sense of public anger was still articulated by a range of people who were called to answer questions. One of the most damning indictments came from a Captain Lewis Evans, a county magistrate who suggested that fear of the workhouse was such that some would sooner starve than be admitted. In a further comment on the extent of opposition, he added that the changes in poor relief “created more dissatisfaction and disaffection in this country than any law that has been enacted this century”.⁸⁷ As a local dignitary there are undoubtedly questions about the extent to which Evans could speak for the experiences of those living on the breadline. Indeed the prevalence of evidence from “gentry and magistrates” gave historian David Howell cause to question the intrinsic value of the Royal Commission's papers⁸⁸. But the captain's testimony does suggest he was well-connected in the area and his social standing may have allowed him to speak more freely than those whose concerns he was claiming to highlight.

⁸⁶ Jones, *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, p. 124.

⁸⁷ Report from Commissioners 1844 – South Wales Inquiry, p.201. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y8k4nfv4>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁸⁸ Howell, 'The Rebecca Riots' p.6 in T.Herbert and G.E. Jones (eds) *People and Protest: Wales 1815-1880* (Cardiff, 1988) p. 279.

Taken together Foster's interviews and evidence from the inquiry seem to support the view that the NPL was the source of considerable animosity in and around Carmarthen. They certainly casts doubt on a claim by Poor Law official William Phillips the following spring that he was "not particularly aware of any widely spread dissatisfaction respecting the workhouse".⁸⁹ That said, it does seem the cause of concern was not the same in every instance. It is clear many were incensed by the inhumane treatment of paupers by a legislation they considered "arbitrary, partial and cruel".⁹⁰ However, it is apparent that at least some objectors were also unhappy about the financial burden that the system laid on them. One farmer argued that the Old Poor Law, unlike its successor, had allowed them to offer work to those applying for relief and thus get "their pen'orth out of [the pauper]".⁹¹ The new arrangements, by contrast, meant having to "support their poor without any return", whilst contributing to the cost of the workhouse. The thorny issue of operating costs appeared also to underpin objections made at the inquiry about the size of the salaries paid to the officials who administered the system.⁹² When the commissioners published a report into their findings the following year the opening pages acknowledge the NPL had been the "subject of many complaints" but also suggest that the range of opinion was "extremely various and conflicting".⁹³ It is tempting to see this assessment as an easy way for the report's authors to avoid making any firm recommendations on poor relief. But regardless of whether the conclusion came with an agenda, there is seemingly some truth to the assertion

⁸⁹ *The Cambrian*, 23 March 1844, p.3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2srsfnsu>. Accessed May 28 2024.

⁹⁰ *The Times*, 29 July 1843, p. 7. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3acrcyku>. Accessed May 28 2024.

⁹¹ *The Times*, 29 July 1843, p. 7. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3acrcyku>. Accessed May 28 2024.

⁹² Report from Commissioners 1844 – South Wales Inquiry, p.577. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y8k4nfv4>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁹³ Report from Commissioners 1844 – South Wales Inquiry, pp. 28-29. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y8k4nfv4>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

that objections took a number of different forms. This seems a relevant consideration when returning to the events which unfolded on 19 June.

It is undeniably the case that there was a flurry of activity among Rebeccaites in the lead-up to events in Carmarthen, although whether what ultimately occurred is what was intended is a much harder question to answer. Threatening comments made during disturbances in the preceding weeks suggested at least some locals had the Penlan building in their sights. A special constable called to deal with an earlier outbreak of disorder, on 12 June, would later claim some of those present had threatened to “pay the workhouse a visit, and take it down”.⁹⁴ However, a meeting held at nearby Conwil two days earlier, where it is likely the imminent march on Carmarthen would have been planned, does not appear to have discussed the workhouse.⁹⁵ It is also noteworthy that Carmarthen’s Mayor William Morris, in writing to the Home Office to warn of the looming demonstration, does not mention it either. Instead, he warns that a crowd of “many thousands” would assemble “for the purpose of intimidating the magistrates by a display of physical strength”.⁹⁶ The intended aim, he suggests, was to have fines imposed for refusing to pay tolls at the town’s Water Street Gate repaid. Had a planned attack on the workhouse been seen as a serious prospect by local authorities there seems no conceivable reason this would not have been mentioned in what amounted to an urgent appeal for government support. Around the same time Rebeccaites were circulating their own letters, intent on rallying as many people as possible to the protest. Their pledge to walk “in the face of the sun” suggests a very deliberate departure from the night-time raids they were known for.⁹⁷ Although a rather more ambiguous warning that the authorities would

⁹⁴ *The Cambrian*, 23 March 1844, p.3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2srsfnsu>. Accessed May 28 2024.

⁹⁵ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, pp. 204-205.

⁹⁶ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.205.

⁹⁷ *The Cambrian*, 24 June 1843, p.3. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/yv54u2hc>. Accessed May 28 2024.

“know [Rebecca’s] grievances” leaves some uncertainty about precisely what was planned. That said, given the decision to start the march at midday and a specific instruction that people should not come in disguise, it is perhaps somewhat less likely that they would have risked a direct attack on a public building.

Accounts from the day itself also paint a somewhat contradictory picture of events, adding to the challenge in trying to unpick whether the workhouse attack was pre-arranged or a result of the protest spiralling out of control. Newspaper reports agree that a sizeable crowd convened at The Plough and Harrow pub, outside of town, before setting out at 12noon – much in the manner that the Mayor had warned of. But in several respects the reports diverge. An article in the *Monmouthshire Merlin* acknowledges, for instance, disagreement about the turn-out. Accounts, the newspaper admitted, “vary considerably in the details”; some sources estimated attendance at 2,000 people while others quoted double this number.⁹⁸ Similarly, while several reports suggest a group had defied instructions and donned women’s dress, *The Welshman* maintained that only a single horseman arrived in the traditional disguise.⁹⁹ The most crucial point of contention is what happened once the procession reached Guildhouse Square. *The Merlin*’s correspondent claimed at this point “the Rebeccaites immediately directed their course towards the Union Workhouse”,¹⁰⁰ suggesting no hesitation or change of purpose. In contrast another report in *The Cambrian*, published on the very same day, makes specific mention of the fact that the crowd had been joined by “the bad boys of the town”, who had led the assault on the gatehouse¹⁰¹. Several historians seem to agree that a local

⁹⁸ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 24 June 1843, p.3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/mujh4ptd>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

⁹⁹ *The Welshman*, 23 June 1843, p. 2. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/584nae7w>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

¹⁰⁰ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 24 June 1843, p.3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/mujh4ptd>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

¹⁰¹ *The Cambrian*, 24 June 1843, p.3. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/yv54u2hc>. Accessed May 28 2024.

contingent with its own agenda had seized the opportunity to divert the procession. The Lodwicks concluded that “Rebecca had lost control of her followers to the notorious Carmarthen mob”.¹⁰² Williams suggests the new arrivals had “poured out of congested back alleys and slumhouses along the quay”, many of them fishermen who had suffered at the hands of workhouse officials.¹⁰³ It is obviously impossible to agree on a definitive version of events, although the circuitous route of the procession does suggest there would have been ample opportunity for townsfolk to join the crowd. And from the previous chapter’s descriptions of some of Carmarthen poorest districts a deep-seated hostility towards the NPL in these quarters does not seem implausible.

Legal proceedings, while ultimately limited in number, offer some of the most intriguing insights into the protest’s violent conclusion. Perhaps surprisingly given the consternation the Carmarthen incident caused – Welsh-language publication *Seren Gomer* dubbed it the worst incident to befall the town since the days of Oliver Cromwell¹⁰⁴ – only a handful of men were brought before the courts. While the military took scores of prisoners, who had found themselves cornered by the mounted troops within the workhouse precinct, the majority escaped criminal charges with only a handful of the ringleaders facing trial at the Carmarthenshire Spring Assizes the following year. Six local men – aged between 19 and 50-years-old – faced an indictment for their part in the “disturbance of the peace.”¹⁰⁵ The accused were from a range of rural and urban trades, reflecting a broader pattern of craftsmen, labourers and agricultural workers convicted during the course of the riots.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Lodwicks, *The Story of Carmarthen*, p. 146.

¹⁰³ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, p.207.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in T.H Lewis ‘The Rebecca Movement in Carmarthenshire’ in *The Carmarthenshire Antiquary, Vol I, Parts 3 and 4* (1943/44).

¹⁰⁵ *The Cambrian*, 23 March 1844, p.3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2srsfnsu>. Accessed May 28 2024.

¹⁰⁶ Lowri, Ann Rees, ‘Paternalism and Rural Protest: The Rebecca Riots and the Landed Interest of South-West Wales.’ *The Agricultural History Review*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2011), p. 43.

During the proceedings several witnesses offered evidence which indicated different groups, perhaps with different agendas, were present on the day. John Ray Evans, master of the workhouse, had reportedly seen a hundred men and women loitering outside the premises before the arrival of a much larger crowd. While Captain Evans, who had tried to dissuade the march from departing The Plough and Harrow, had been told they only wished to state their grievances. He had replied with the warning that there were “many idle fellows in town [who] would get them into mischief.”¹⁰⁷

Potentially the most significant intervention came from a Mr Evans, a solicitor acting for two of the accused – fisherman John Lewis and teenage tailor Isaac Charles. While he acknowledged the pair had entered the workhouse in “the excitement of the moment” he said there was no proof they had taken part in the procession.¹⁰⁸ “It was evident,” he had informed the court, “that on the day in question there was both a town and a country mob.” He counted the accused among the first group but, in a perhaps understandable attempt to defend his clients’ interests, laid the greater blame on those who had arrived from outside of town. Notwithstanding the rather different framing of who authorities should have in their sights, here was an important contemporary acknowledgement that the crowd was made up of different contingents and these groupings need not have “the same objects in view.” Unfortunately *The Cambrian*’s report of the trial suggests neither Lewis nor Charles addressed the courtroom directly and notes none of the other four men in the dock made any representations at all. All six were found guilty and were sentenced at a subsequent hearing and no further trials were to follow. This denies historians the opportunity to read what could

¹⁰⁷ *The Cambrian*, 23 March 1844, p.3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2srsfnsu>. Accessed May 28 2024.

¹⁰⁸ *The Cambrian*, 23 March 1844, p.3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2srsfnsu>. Accessed May 28 2024.

have been highly valuable testimony from the rioters' themselves, but nonetheless Evans' comments during the one trial that did occur offer a way to reconcile conflicting information about precisely what was planned in advance.

Conclusion:

Both the accounts from the time and analysis since demonstrate that both poverty generally and the NPL had a very real impact in Carmarthen. Honing in on a single place does not dispel the conclusion of existing historiography that those at the bottom of the social hierarchy were facing an intense struggle. On the contrary, focusing on one community brings into sharp relief some of the realities of navigating economic hardship and a more rigid set of support mechanisms. It is evident that poor quality housing, insecure jobs and heightened risk of both hunger and serious illness were part of day-to-day life for the town's poor. The unprecedented population growth in the first few decades of the nineteenth century and the economic volatility in the early 1840s¹⁰⁹ would have only added to the numbers struggling by the time the Rebecca Riots intensified. These factors would also have had the inevitable consequence of adding to the demands on a system of poor relief which was already the source of immense acrimony.

As this dissertation had set out in its opening paragraphs, one advantage of gauging public feeling is that what is now regarded as a key "turning point" in the history of the riots¹¹⁰ has a relative abundance of contemporary sources. Although it is important to acknowledge that the

¹⁰⁹ A Dictionary of World History online. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/4prct2ba> Accessed: 27 May 2024.

¹¹⁰ Lowri Ann Rees, 'Why men in 19th century Wales dressed as women to protest taxation'. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/mtyhp78e>. Accessed 14 April 2024.

voices of ordinary people at this time often still arrive mediated by others. Foster left London to embed himself within a local community and apparently gained their trust,¹¹¹ but his accounts of poverty are still filtered through the perspective of a professional reporter. A Royal Commission spent almost a fortnight hearing evidence in Carmarthen itself but there are still lingering doubts about how much proceedings really gave a platform to those whose protests it was investigating.¹¹² And at the Assizes where six of the rioters were at last asked to account for their actions, there was silence from the dock and a brief defence from a solicitor whose distance from events is perhaps betrayed in his depiction of a town where two “mobs” converged.¹¹³ While imperfect, these accounts are nonetheless useful illustrations of the differences in background and belief, sometimes subtle and sometimes more stark, that existed among an obviously sizeable share of the population.

As was argued in the introduction, answering the question of what the Rebellaites wanted could well be helped by a better understanding of who exactly they were. The study of Carmarthen, and the sources set out above, possibly makes it easier to understand those who otherwise risk being enveloped into vague collectives; “the poor” when toiling at home or at work, “the rioters” or less sympathetic descriptions when public unrest turns to violence. It is clear those thousands who marched through Carmarthen would have been drawn from multiple backgrounds. This was an assembly of both fishermen and factory workers and a distinct “town” and “country” contingent.¹¹⁴ Some marched because they wanted to send a clear message to those in authority, others turned out in fear of what might happen if they did

¹¹¹ Davies, *A History of Wales*, p. 340.

¹¹² David Howell, ‘The Rebecca Riots’ p.6 in T.Herbert and G.E. Jones (eds) *People and Protest: Wales 1815-1880* (Cardiff, 1988) p. 279.

¹¹³ *The Cambrian*, 23 March 1844, p.3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2srsfnsu>. Accessed 28 May 2024.

¹¹⁴ *The Cambrian*, 23 March 1844, p.3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2srsfnsu>. Accessed 28 May 2024..

not. And as attentions turned to the workhouse, some would have seen a building which traduced and ill-treated paupers, others a place whose maintenance came at an unacceptable cost to them. These divisions inevitably complicate coming to any unequivocal conclusions about the exact motivations for the attack on 19 June and thus the confusion of opinion and emotion cited by David Williams is not entirely cleared. Equally there is still enough common ground to suggest a substantial number of people laid low by poverty and with reason to be aggrieved at the institutions which were ostensibly there to help them through.

Were these circumstances decisive factors in the unrest which came to a head with the chaotic scenes at Penlan Workhouse? In the years prior there is certainly no shortage of examples of public indignation at specific injustices – like the David Jones case – or inequalities more generally, as evident from the Picton Monument demonstration. As the Hungry Forties took hold and calls to reform or repeal the NPL went unheeded it is not implausible that the local population's willingness to show their anger in more drastic ways grew. Sources ranging from Carmarthen's Mayor¹¹⁵ to the anonymous Rebecca letters demonstrate there was a clear intention to have a public show of strength on June 19. However, interpreting the events is complicated by often contradictory accounts. Was the crowd's dramatic assault on the workhouse a spontaneous act of anger or a pre-agreed plan? It seems plausible it may have been both, with a procession initially intended to intimidate town officials diverted by a smaller group who had identified an opportunity to strike a blow against an institution they despised. In the very same way the Rebecca disguise could be adopted by protestors across a large span of Wales, it appears that there were several different ideas about the sort of justice being sought in Carmarthen. This means the question of what

¹¹⁵ Williams, *The Rebecca Riots*, pp. 204-205.

brought Rebecca to the town may well have solicited a different answer depending on whom from the very many who had assembled had been asked.

Bibliography:

Primary Sources:

‘Carmarthen Spring Assizes’, *The Cambrian*, 23 March 1844, p.3. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/2srsfnsu>. Accessed May 28 2024.

‘Clerical murder of Mr David Jones’, *The Southern Star*, 23 February 1840, p. 1. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/mx65pcmd>. Accessed: 28 May 2024.

London Dispatch, 3 March 1839, p.129. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2696f99h>. Accessed: 28 May 2024.

‘New Poor Law’, *Bury and Norwich Post*, 24 March 1840, p. 1. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/bdznjd4n>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

‘Public meetings – Carmarthen Radical Demonstration by Lantern Light’, *The Operative*, January 27 1839. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2e4uddwv>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

‘Rebecca Avowing Herself’, *The Welshman*, 1 September 1843, p. 2. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3day6zv2>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

‘Rebecca at Carmarthen’. *The Cambrian*, 24 June 1843, p. 3. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/yv54u2hc>. Accessed May 28 2024.

‘Rebecca Riots’, *The Welshman*, 23 June 1843, p.2. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/584nae7w>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Report from Commissioners 1844 – South Wales Inquiry, p.37. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/y8k4nfv4>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

‘Riots at Carmarthen’. *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 24 June 1843, p. 3. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/mujh4ptd>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

‘The State of South Wales’, *The Times*, 24 June 1843, p, 7. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/4t5zp5k4>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

‘The State of South Wales’, *The Times*, 26 June 1843, p. 6. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/yujuufut>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

‘The State of South Wales’, *The Times*, July 29 1843, p. 7. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3acrcyku>. Accessed May 28 2024.

'The State of South Wales', *The Times*, 2 August 1843, p.7. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/tmuud6pz>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Secondary Sources:

Croll, Andrew, 'Reconciled gradually to the system of outdoor relief': The Poor Law in Wales during the 'crusade against out-relief' c.1870-1890 in *Family and Community History, Volume 20, 2017 – Issue 2* (2017), pp.121-144.

Davies, John, *A History of Wales*, (Cardiff, 2008).

Evans, Henry Tobit, *Rebecca and her Daughters*, (Cardiff, 1910).

Evans, Megan and Jones, Peter, 'A Stubborn and Intractable Body': Resistance to the Workhouse in Wales in *Family & Community History, Vol. 17/2* (2014), p. 109.

Forbes, Susan, 'Ireland and the Famine' in (ed Donna Loftus) *Confidence and crisis, 1840-1880* (Milton Keynes, 2017), pp. 57-107.

Grigg, Russell, *The Little Book of Carmarthenshire*, (Cheltenham, 2022).

Howell, David, 'The Rebecca Riots' in Herbert, T. and Jones, G.E. (eds) *People and Protest: Wales 1815-1880* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1988) pp.113-38.

Howell, David, 'The Rebecca Riots, 1838-1844' in a *Reader's Guide to British History* (2003) Available online at <https://tinyurl.com/25bcvasj>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

Jenkins, Geraint. H, *A Concise History of Wales*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Jones, David J. V, *Rebecca's Children: A Study of Rural Society, Crime and Protest* (Oxford, 1989).

Jones, Rhian, *Petticoat Heroes: Gender, Culture and Popular Protest in the Rebecca Riots*, (Cardiff, 2015).

Lawrence, Paul, 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive' in (ed Lawrence, Paul) *Ambition and Anxiety, 1789-1840* (Milton Keynes, 2017), pp. 35-36.

Lewis, T.H, 'The Rebecca Movement in Carmarthenshire' in *The Carmarthenshire Antiquary, Volume I - Parts 3 and 4* (1943/44).

Lloyd, Amy. J, *Education, Literacy and the Reading Public*. (Cambridge, 2007). Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2s4zc5ad>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Lodwick, Joyce and Victor, *Story of Carmarthen* (Carmarthen, 1995).

Molloy, Pat, *And They Blessed Rebecca: An Account of the Welsh Toll-Gate Riots 1839-1844* (Llandysul, 1983).

Loftus, Donna and Shave, Samantha 'Work, poverty and the new Poor Law' in (ed Donna Loftus) *Confidence and crisis, 1840-1880* (Milton Keynes, 2017), pp. 109-167.

Rees, Dylan, *Carmarthenshire: The Concise History* (Cardiff, 2005).

Rees, Lowri Ann. 'Paternalism and Rural Protest: The Rebecca Riots and the Landed Interest of South-West Wales.' *The Agricultural History Review*, vol. 59, no. 1 (2011), pp. 36–60.

Tomkins, Allannah and King, Steven, *The Poor in England 1700-1850: An Economy of Makeshifts* (Manchester, 2003).

Williams, David, *The Rebecca Riots: A Study in Agrarian Discontent* (Cardiff, 1955).

Yelling, Jim, 'Incidence of Slum Clearance in England and Wales 1955-1985' in *Urban History*, Volume 27, Issue 2 (2000).

Other Sources:

A Dictionary of World History online, 'Hungry Forties', Available at <https://tinyurl.com/4prct2ba>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

BBC, *The Story of Wales*, Episode 4 – Furnace of Change (2012).

Cadwr, listed buildings report, Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3wtjt66a>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Carmarthen Museum image of iron grill for grading rocks. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/44vauyr9>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Dictionary.com, 'Human Interest Story'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2wk4mx7u>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Higginbotham, Peter, 'Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire' at The Workhouse: The Story of an Institution. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2yk7sasr>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

'Human Interest Story' at Dictionary.com. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2wk4mx7u>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Mansfield, Mark, 'How I got to grips with the dying craft of making a Welsh Coracle', Nation Cymru, 7 November 2018. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2ayphe6r> Accessed: 27 May 2024.

People's Collection of Wales – Rebecca Riots. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3fpzanu7>. Accessed 14 April 2024.

Rees, Lowri Ann, 'Why men in 19th century Wales dressed as women to protest taxation' (2023) Available online at <https://tinyurl.com/4p755pt2>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

Richardson, MJ, Geograph - 'Coracle Way at Carmarthen'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2b228znb>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Stack, David, 'The Operative' in *Lives of Victorian Political Figures, Part II, Volume 4*, ed Denys P Leighton, (London, 2009).

The British Newspaper Archive, 'London Dispatch' profile. Available at <https://tinyurl.com/mvy5tfsw>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

The Coracle Society, 'About the Coracle'. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/ypj773kd>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

The National Library of Wales, 'John Wood's Welsh town plans', Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/2kh64h94>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Tikkanen, Amy, 'Poor Law – British legislation', Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/24t2wc77>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

UK Parliament, '1840 Population Act', Available at <https://tinyurl.com/msw5k39u>. Accessed: 27 May 2024.

Wiles, John, 'Carmarthen Poor Law Bastille or Penlan Road Workhouse', 19 October 2007. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/3uxvrwd6>. Accessed: 27 May 2024