

GUEST family, iron-masters, coal owners, etc.

SIR JOSIAH JOHN GUEST (1785 - 1852), iron-master, colliery proprietor and M.P.

Son of THOMAS GUEST (died 1807), iron-master, Dowlais, and grandson of JOHN GUEST (1722 - 1785), who came from Broseley, Salop, to manage the small iron-works at Dowlais in 1759, and by 1782 had obtained some shares in the Dowlais Iron Company. Thomas Guest succeeded as manager in 1785, and by his able administration the works progressed, steam power was introduced, a company's shop was opened, new furnaces were constructed which needed additional coal production, and a forge was erected. By **Benjamin Malkin's** time (1805-6), the Dowlais works produced 5,432 tons of pigiron, but they were still surpassed by those of the **Homfrays** at Pen-y-darren, and by the Cyfarthfa works.

Josiah John Guest was born at Dowlais, nine months before the death of his grandfather, the pioneer, namely 2 February 1785. He was educated at Bridgnorth and Monmouth grammar schools. He became thoroughly conversant with the details of the manufacture of iron, and alive to the improvement to be introduced by a proper application of chemical and engineering knowledge. Armed with this thorough knowledge of the work, enterprise, creative genius, and by continually adding new furnaces, forges, and mills, he raised Dowlais works from the third place at Merthyr to the first, surpassing all the others, even ousting Cyfarthfa from the position of being the largest and most productive ironworks in the world. By 1840, Dowlais had eighteen furnaces, against twelve at Cyfarthfa, eight at Plymouth (**Hill's**), while Pen-y-darren had dropped to the fourth place with six furnaces. At this time the Dowlais concern employed 1,000 colliers, 1,000 men in the iron mines, 2,500 in the works, and raised 1,400 tons of coal daily for its own furnaces, etc. The proprietors became wealthy and influential, while J. J. Guest, in addition to being the manager of this huge concern, also improved his position as a partner in the company - holding one-sixteenth at his father's death, he obtained eight-sixteenths more on the death of his uncle William Taitt in 1815. By 1849 he had become sole proprietor, and the welfare of the large population of over 12,000 people depended entirely upon the use he made of the power thus entrusted to him; in this he was ably assisted by his wife, **lady Charlotte Elizabeth Guest**. He earned a good name by his establishment of the excellent Dowlais central schools which were then considered the best in the whole country; it was at Dowlais that the plan of 'adult schools' was first tried in South Wales. He presided over a meeting at Merthyr, convened to establish a literary and scientific institution. Later, he founded a Dowlais workmen's library, and gave 180 volumes in Welsh and English to the Merthyr library of which **Thomas Stephens** was the honorary secretary. He contributed to the support of the national schools at Merthyr and Aberdare, and of the Park school ('Ysgol y Comin,' a British school) at Aberdare. He and his wife were patrons of ' Cymreigyddion y Fenni ' in 1834, and he presided over the second anniversary meeting at Abergavenny in 1835. At the 1848 eisteddfod **Thomas Stephens** won the prize for his Literature of the Kymry, a valuable work, of which Guest bore the cost of publication (1849).

Guest sat as a member of Parliament for Honiton from 1825 until 1831. It was largely through his influence that the new parliamentary constituency of the Merthyr borough including Aberdare and Vaynor) was created. He was returned unopposed in 1832 (as a Liberal and Free Trader) as the first M.P. for the Merthyr borough, and kept his seat until his death in 1852. In 1838 he was created a baronet.

Though brought up as a Wesleyan Methodist, Guest erected Dowlais church in 1827 and contributed £3,000 towards the expense, and gave £250 towards the new church of S. Davids at Merthyr. He was the chief promoter of the Taff Vale railway and became its first chairman. He and **Crawshay Bailey** were the chief promoters of the Aberdare valley railway which was taken over later by the Taff Vale Railway Company. He opened a bank at Cardiff with a branch at Merthyr in 1823, but these were closed in 1825 because of Government opposition. At Dowlais he established and continued a warm supporter of a savings bank. In 1830 he was elected F.R.S.; in 1834 he became an Associate of the Institution of Civil Engineers.

In 1837 Guest presided at a meeting of the inhabitants of Merthyr called to consider the propriety of obtaining an act of Parliament for the incorporation of Merthyr. The town had, however, to wait nearly seventy years to see this ambition realized, its first mayor being elected in 1906. Guest was elected, 1 April 1837, as the first chairman of the Merthyr board of guardians. After an inquiry at Merthyr, conducted by an inspector of the board of health into an application by Merthyr to be allowed to adopt the Public Health Act of 1848, and after seeing the disastrous consequences of the second visitation of the cholera epidemic in 1849, the Merthyr board of health (the precursor of the Merthyr Urban District Council, and, later, the Merthyr Corporation), was formed in 1850, when Guest was elected as the first chairman. Merthyr citizens held meetings to take steps to erect a town hall worthy of such an important centre of population during May 1850, canvassed the district for donations, and Sir John Guest promised £1,000 towards the funds.

During the later years of his life he removed to Canford Manor, Dorset, where his descendants have since lived, but as death approached he returned to Dowlais, the home of his birth, youth, and activities, and there he died 26 November 1852 and was buried.

Author

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Images

NLW: Masters Ivor and Merthyr Guest

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