

HOMFRAY family, of Penydarren, Merthyr Tydfil, iron-masters, etc.

FRANCIS HOMFRAY (1726 - 1798)

of Wollaston Hall, Worcestershire, having attained ample means by his success as an iron-master in the counties of Stafford and Worcester, and having two energetic and capable iron-workers as sons, Jeremiah and Samuel, sought an outlet for their further perseverance and enterprise by leasing from **Anthony Bacon**, Cyfarthfa, a mill for boring cannon, a foundry, forges, etc. (September 1782). The sons arrived with a number of workers from the Midlands and for a time all went well and their works were prosperous. But on account of a quarrel with **Bacon**, they transferred their lease to David Tanner in 1784. The same year the brothers together took a lease of one of the richest iron-ore deposits in the district, and with the financial assistance and advice of their father, and with another brother, THOMAS, as a partner in the undertaking, they erected their furnace and other necessary works at Penydarren, on the banks of the Morlais brook. They turned out from their works, over many years, manufactured iron in large quantities, and of the best quality. A mansion called Penydarren House was built on high ground on the opposite bank of the brook for the use of the partners.

But the brothers had to face many handicaps and inconveniences. Their whole taking was small compared with the huge area of the adjoining Dowlais ironworks. The latter, being built higher up the same stream which supplied water to both, and being the older-established concern, had the first call and command of its use, a most important factor during dry seasons. The Penydarren works had very little coal, and had to take a lease for coal from the Dowlais Co. In another case, on the same plot of land, the Dowlais Co. worked the coal while the Homfray brothers worked the iron-ore. Constant quarrels ensued which led to fierce and costly lawsuits, in which the Penydarren partners were generally the losers.

After many years of co-operation the two brothers, Jeremiah and Samuel, as managing directors of the Penydarren iron-works, sought new fields of enterprise for their superabundant energy.

JEREMIAH HOMFRAY (1759 - 1833), ironmaster

The third son of Francis Homfray, and the elder of the Penydarren brothers, in 1789 (with two others), started the Ebbw Vale iron-works, which became famous. He continued to be associated with the Penydarren works, but gave up his share of the management to his brother, Samuel, who thus became the sole managing director.

Jeremiah Homfray married (1787) Mary, daughter of John Richards of Llandaff, and for many years resided at Llandaff House. After a few years, he complained of his brother's arbitrary management. This led to a quarrel between the brothers (1796) and to legal action. About the same time Jeremiah quitted the Ebbw Vale iron-works, of which for a few months he was the sole owner, until Messrs. Harford, Partridge & Co. joined him as the more responsible managers, employing him as the salaried superintendent of the works.

We next hear of him at Aber-nant, in the Aberdare Valley. With Birch as a practical engineer, he commenced arranging leases of mineral lands at Aber-nant, Cwm-bach, and Rhigos (1800) which he transferred to the Tappendens. By 1803 he had become a partner in the Hirwaun iron-works, but again soon quitted this field of operations. He ' was ... a great prospector in the South Wales mineral field. He arranged leases of mineral properties, and then sought partners; and after helping to establish the respective iron-works, and set them going, he retired ... ' He was entitled to an annuity of £2,500 payable during his life (probably from Penydarren), and £10 from the Aber-nant iron-works. But having a large family, and living in style (especially during the period when he was high sheriff of Glamorgan in 1809-10 - he was also acting high sheriff in 1810-11) and taking up costly leases of coal-mining properties and farms in the neighbourhood of Pontypridd, he soon got into financial difficulties. In 1813, Sir Jeremiah Homfray, then cited as of Cwm Rhondda, coal-merchant, dealer, and chapman, was declared a bankrupt. In November 1813, his dwelling-house at Cwm Rhondda was sold together with its contents. He then left for Boulogne to avoid paying all his creditors and to live on his reduced income, and it was there that his wife (1830) and he (1833) died and were buried. His son, JOHN HOMFRAY, bought Penllyn castle.

SAMUEL HOMFRAY (bu farw 1822), iron-master

The younger brother of Jeremiah, became, after 1789, the sole manager of the prosperous Penydarren works. About the year 1793 he discovered the method of making the 'finers metal,' the leading feature in the manufacture of bar iron, by improving the quality and increasing the quantity made. He was one of the chief promoters of the Glamorgan canal, which proved so convenient for the transit of the heavy manufactured iron to the port of Cardiff instead of by the mule and pack-horse method. This was opened in 1795 and cost £103,000, of which he subscribed £40,000. He then became the chief promoter of the tramway from Penydarren to ' Navigation,' (today Abercynon) a distance of nine miles, on which **Richard Trevithick** accomplished the wonderful task of hauling five wagons, carrying ten tons of iron and seventy men, at a speed of five miles an hour. This was the first locomotive engine to run successfully upon a railway, and won the 1,000 guineas bet made by Homfray against **Richard Crawshay**, 21 February 1804. Homfray was the chief instigator of the suit, at Hereford Assizes, 1795, of the commoners against the Dowlais Company, when the defendants again won. Homfray incurred £300 damages in the libel action brought against him by William Taitt of the Dowlais Company in 1807. In 1811, at the Hereford assizes, Homfray and his partners in the Penydarren iron-works again sued the Dowlais Company for fouling and choking the Morlais brook with cinders and slag.

Samuel married Jane, daughter of **Sir Charles Gould Morgan** (see **Morgan of Tredegar family**), 1st bart., of Tredegar Park, and this enabled him to obtain a lease of mineral land of about 3,000 acres upon very cheap terms at Tredegar, in conjunction with **Richard Fother-gill** and Matthew Monkhouse (1800). Here again, as his brother did at Ebbw Vale, he was able to work off some of his superabundant energy by establishing the Tredegar iron-works with such success that during 1809 the Monmouthshire canal carried 9,105 tons of iron from their works, a quantity greater than that of any of the other dozen or so of the Monmouthshire iron-works except that of Blaenavon. In 1806 he issued an address as a candidate for a seat in Parliament for Brecknock, but withdrew before the election day. He became high sheriff of Monmouthshire in 1813 and, in June 1818, M.P. for the borough of Stafford. He died 22 May 1822 in London and was buried at Bassaleg. His eldest son, SAMUEL GEORGE HOMFRAY (born 7 December 1795, died 16 November 1882) was high sheriff of Monmouthshire in 1841 and alderman of Newport (and mayor 1854-5).

Author

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Sources

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The Times, 19 December 1882

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monument in Bassaleg churchyard, and the burial registers

David Jones Manuscript in Cardiff Library

Western Mail, 23 May 1877, 12 October 1946

personal research

Further reading

Cofflein: **Penydarren House, Merthyr Tydfil**

Coflein: [Penydarren Ironworks](#)
Wikipedia Article: [Francis Homfray](#)
Wikipedia Article: [Jeremiah Homfray](#)
Wikipedia Article: [Samuel Homfray](#)
Wikipedia Article: [Penydarren Ironworks](#)

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