
LEWIS, Sir WILLIAM THOMAS (1837 - 1914), first BARON MERTHYR of SENGHENYDD, coal magnate

Name: William Thomas Lewis
Date of birth: 1837
Date of death: 1914
Spouse: Anne Lewis (née Rees)
Child: Katherine Mary Green (née Lewis)
Parent: Thomas William Lewis
Gender: Male
Occupation: coal magnate
Area of activity: Business and Industry
Author: Robert Thomas Jenkins

Born 5 August 1837, son of Thomas William Lewis, engineer to the Plymouth iron-works (Merthyr Tydfil), was at school under [Taliesin Williams](#), but at 13 was articled to his father.

In 1855 he became assistant-engineer in the service of the Bute estate, and in 1864 mineral agent to that estate. In the same year he married Anne, daughter of WILLIAM REES, owner of Llety-Shenkin colliery, Aberdare (she died 1902).

Her grandfather, ROBERT THOMAS (a west Wales man) took a lease on Waun Wylt (Abercanaid) in 1824, and opened in 1828 what seems to have been the first level for marketing household (as opposed to smelting) coal. By 1830 he had formed business connections with London. He died 19 February 1833, and his widow, LUCY THOMAS ('mother of the Welsh coal trade'; 1781-27 September 1847) carried on his work, and later (with her son WILLIAM THOMAS) initiated the sale of Welsh steam coal in London. William Thomas opened the Llety-Shenkin colliery in 1843, and his brother-in-law, William Rees, afterwards took it over.

W. T. Lewis now, in addition to managing the Bute pits at Treherbert, launched out on his own account; between 1870 and 1880 he acquired control of the pits (later known as 'Lewis Merthyr') in the lower Rhondda; he also prospected in the Rhymney valley, and sank a pit at Senghenydd in 1895. In 1880 he became acting trustee to the Bute estate, and greatly expanded its docks at Cardiff. He grew to be a dominating force in the South Wales coal and allied trades. A tentative association of Aberdare coal-owners set up by him in 1864-5 developed, in 1872, into the 'South Wales and Monmouthshire Coalowners' Association,' in reply to the growth of trade unionism in the area and the frequent strikes. He himself claimed to have originated the famous 'sliding scale' method of fixing wages, but this claim has been disputed on behalf of [H. Hussey Vivian \(lord Swansea\)](#) and others - see Elizabeth Phillips, *Pioneers of the Welsh Coalfield*, 256-61.

Granted his principles, Lewis may be called philanthropic; and though regarded as a hard man, he was frequently invoked as a mediator in industrial disputes. A member of numerous royal commissions on matters concerned with coal-mining, he

also took part in the local government of his county and of the towns of Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare. He was knighted in 1885, made a baronet in 1896, and raised to the peerage in 1911.

He had two sons and six daughters, one of whom married [C. A. H. Green](#), later archbishop. He died 27 August 1914.

Author

Emeritus Professor Robert Thomas Jenkins, (1881 - 1969)

Sources

Who was who?

Elizabeth Phillips, op. cit., especially chapter xxv

Further Reading

ODNB: [Thomas, Lucy](#) (bap. 1781, d. 1847)

J. Austin Jenkins, W. T. Pike (ed.), *South Wales and Monmouthshire at the opening of the twentieth century: Contemporary biographies* (Brighton 1907), p.200

Wikipedia Article: [William Lewis, 1st Baron Merthyr](#)

Wikipedia Article: [Lucy Thomas](#)

Additional Links

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Published date: 1959

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