

## OWEN, Sir (HERBERT) ISAMBARD (1850 - 1927), medical man, scholar, and architect of universities

**Name:** (Herbert) Isambard Owen  
**Date of birth:** 1850  
**Date of death:** 1927  
**Spouse:** Ethel Owen (née Holland-Thomas)  
**Parent:** William George Owen  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** medical man, scholar, and architect of universities  
**Area of activity:** Education; Medicine; Scholarship and Languages  
**Author:** Thomas Richards

Born at Chepstow on 28 December 1850, son of William George Owen, an engineer of note, pupil of Isambard Brunel, a more distinguished engineer, associated with the early development of the G.W.R. Young Isambard went to schools at Gloucester and Rossall, graduated at Cambridge in 1872, and became a medical student at S. George's Hospital, London, where he grew into a specialist and author, a lecturer, dean and curator of the museum, and went so far as to draft proposals for founding a new medical university in London in protest against the slow, reactionary policy at the time, of the University of London. He became very friendly with [Joseph Edwards](#) the sculptor, and with [prince Lucien Bonaparte](#); he was named as executor to the will by each of them. Very early he was deeply involved in the activities of Welsh life in the metropolis; he was in the forefront in reviving the Cymmrodorion Society in 1873, and in pushing forward the causes the Society was especially interested in, namely, to secure a more prominent place for the Welsh language in the schools of the Principality, and to deepen the idea of securing 'intermediate' education. He gave evidence on behalf of Wales before the education commissioners of 1886-7; he was the organising secretary of the Shrewsbury conference (5 and 6 January 1888) that did so much to lay down the foundations of the Intermediate Act of 1889. He was one of the more prominent members of the ' Society for the Utilisation of the Welsh Language '; that accounts for his great admiration of the work of [Dan Isaac Davies](#), and for his great friendship with him.

No man knew more about the genesis of the University of Wales than Isambard Owen, as witness the broad outline of a scheme he drew up in 1891, the much fuller memorandum of 1892, and his abundant activity at the Shrewsbury conferences of 1893 (January and February), at which the fundamental points of the charter were agreed upon (a good deal of the legal work was done by his brother Charles Maynard Owen). When the university was founded in 1894, with [lord Aberdare](#) as its first chancellor, Isambard Owen became his deputy, and, for years the main weight and responsibility for university functions fell upon him; he remained senior deputy chancellor till 1910, and no one who remembers those days can forget his dignified presence, his sonorous and penetrating diction, the cultured Latinity of the ceremonial words. He was invited to become principal of the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire after the death of [Viriamu Jones](#), and it was he (according to Sir Harry Reichel) who fathered the idea that the structure of the University College of North Wales should be adapted to the rocky ridges of Pen-rallt rather than that the ridges should be levelled to accommodate the building. In 1904 he was appointed principal of Armstrong College, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and from 1909 to 1921 he was vice-chancellor of the University of Bristol : he had an effectively honourable place in the history of both institutions. He was knighted in 1902, was LL.D. of the Universities of Wales (1911) and Bristol (1912), and D.C.L. of Durham (1905). He married, in 1905, Ethel Holland-Thomas, of Cae'r Ffynnon, Talsarnau, Meirionnydd, and had two daughters. He died in Paris 14 January, and was buried at Glanadda, Bangor, on 2 February 1927.

### Author

Thomas Richards, (1878 - 1962)

### Sources

*Bangor Manuscripts at University College North Wales Library, Bangor* 5949-6422 [10259-10267] (U.C.N.W.)

*The Welsh Outlook*, 1927, 62-6

*The Times*, 17 January 1927

*British Medical Journal*, 1927, 167-8

*The Lancet*, 22 January 1927

### Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Isambard Owen](#)

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