

## POWELL, THOMAS (1779? - 1863), coal-owner

**Name:** Thomas Powell  
**Date of birth:** 1779?  
**Date of death:** 1863  
**Spouse:** Ann Marples (née Williams)  
**Spouse:** Ann Powell (née Hardwick)  
**Spouse:** Mary Powell (née Pearce)  
**Parent:** John Powell  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** coal-owner  
**Area of activity:** Business and Industry  
**Author:** Walter Thomas Morgan

Born 6 January 1779 (says [Bradney](#)) at Monmouth, son of John Powell. He began as a timber merchant at Newport, but afterwards extended his activities to the coal trade. His first venture in coal-mining was the purchase of a small colliery between Llanhilleth and Aberbeeg. In 1829 he sank two shafts at Gelligaer, proving a vein of coal nearly six feet thick. In 1833 Powell applied to [Sir Charles Morgan](#) for leave to work coal under the Place Bedwellty farm, adjoining his own colliery at Buttery Hatch, but they failed to come to terms. This application had its sequel in 1841, when [Sir Charles](#) was awarded damages at the Monmouthshire assizes against Powell for trespass and working coal under the aforesaid farm from his Buttery Hatch pit without permission. In 1833 Powell together with his close business associate, [Thomas Prothero](#) of Malpas and John Latch of Newport, founded the short-lived Newport Coal Association to control prices, the first coal ring in South Wales. In 1840 he resolved to exploit the steam coal in the Aberdare valley, sinking his first pit at Tir Founder; in 1842 he struck the famous four-foot seam. He followed up this success by sinking the Plough, Lower Duffryn, Middle Duffryn, and the Upper and Lower Cwm Pennar pits. Through the agency of John Nixon he secured a ready sale for his coal in France, but characteristically fell out with Nixon over the payment of commission. The increasing dominance of steam over sailing ships and the preference shown by the Admiralty for the South Wales smokeless steam coal provided Powell with rapidly expanding markets. He appreciated early the value of railways as an outlet for his trade and was one of the chief promoters of the Taff Vale and Monmouthshire railways. At a time when it was rare for one coal-master to own more than one pit, Powell stands out by the vast scale of his undertakings. Not content with his phenomenal success in the Aberdare valley, where he sought to gain a monopoly, he opened a series of small pits at Llantwit Fardre for the house-coal trade, and later sank a large pit at New Tredegar. He finally owned sixteen pits and, in 1862, when he exported over 700,000 tons of coal, he was probably the largest coal exporter in the world. He died at his home, the Gaer, near Newport, on 24 March 1863. According to the Bassaleg bishops' transcripts he was then aged 83; if this was so, [Bradney](#) is wrong. Powell was married three times.

In 1864 [Sir George Elliot](#) formed the Powell Duffryn Steam Coal Co. with a capital of £500,000 to take over Powell's steam colliery undertakings in the Aberdare and Rhymney valleys and the house-coal level called White Rose at New Tredegar.

## Author

Walter Thomas Morgan, (1912 - 1990)

## Sources

Bradney, *A History of Monmouthshire*, iii, 201

Elizabeth Phillips, *A history of the pioneers of the Welsh coalfield* (1925)

W. W. Price, 'History of the P.D. in the Aberdare Valley' (in *P.D. and G.L.M. Review. A magazine of the coal trade activities of Powell Duffryn Associated Collieries, Ltd., Guéret, Llewellyn & Merrett, Ltd., and allied companies*', 1942-3)

*Tredegar Manuscripts at the National Library of Wales* in N.L.W.

Bassaleg Bishops' Transcripts in N.L.W.

1851 Census Returns for Newport in P.R.O. (HO 107/2452/3)

J. E. Vincent, *John Nixon pioneer of the steam coal trade in South Wales, a Memoir*  
*The Times*, 31 March 1863)

J. Henry Morris and L. J. Williams, *The South Wales Coal Industry, 1841-1875* (Cardiff 1958)

## Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q18530852](https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q18530852)

**Published date:** 1959

**Article Copyright:** <http://rightsstatements.org/page/InC-RUU/1.0/> 

The Dictionary of Welsh Biography is provided by The National Library of Wales and the University of Wales Centre for Advanced Welsh and Celtic Studies. It is free to use and does not receive grant support. A donation would help us maintain and improve the site so that we can continue to acknowledge Welsh men and women who have made notable contributions to life in Wales and beyond.

Find out more on our [sponsorship page](#).

