

David Lewis (King Crispin)

David Lewis was a prominent Brynmawr businessman who was one of Breconshire's Chartists most committed propagandists. Before presenting what is known about him, we need a reminder of what exactly the Chartists stood for and what in fact was the Charter? The movement was started by concerned intellectuals in London who formed the London Working Men's Association. They became known as Chartists after they published pamphlets and petitions to parliament demanding changes. Sadly the charter presented was ignored and further action to change the system was demanded. Chartists saw themselves fighting against political corruption and for democracy in an industrial society. The Charter had six main demands and interestingly five of the demands are now British law, they were:

- 1) A vote for every male aged twenty-one years and above, being of sound mind and not undergoing punishment for a crime.
- 2) The secret ballot to protect the elector in the exercise of his vote.
- 3) No property qualification for Members of Parliament to allow the constituencies to return the man of their choice.
- 4) Payment of Members, enabling tradesmen, working men, or other persons of modest means to leave or interrupt their livelihood to attend to the interests of the nation.
- 5) Equal constituencies, securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors, instead of allowing less populous constituencies to have as much or more weight than larger ones.
- 6) Annual Parliamentary elections, thus presenting the most effectual check to bribery and intimidation, since no purse could buy a constituency under a system of universal manhood suffrage in every twelve months.

For many years I have been interested in the Chartist uprising and the fact that an important part of the rising took place in our area and in particular the role that a Brynmawr man played in the story. David Lewis was from West Wales but all I could find about him was that he held a beer house on Boundary Street in Brynmawr named the King Crispin and he was a cobbler by trade. Some time ago I was fortunate to be able to borrow some notes that Ray Hapgood had done whilst he was looking into David Lewis's history. Using those notes, various reference books and by researching the newspapers of the day this is what I've been able to put together but I'm sure there is more still to come to light.

David Lewis, or as he was sometimes called King Crispin, was the leader of the Brynmawr Chartists. (*Saint Crispin, hence King Crispin, is the patron saint of cordwainers, an old name for shoe makers or cobblers*). He was given this nickname as he ran a beer house called The King Crispin. (*A beer house could only sell beer, no spirits. In the 1850s there was a staggering 77 places where alcohol could be bought in Brynmawr; nearly 50 of them were beer houses*)⁽³⁾. David Lewis was born on the 1st of November possibly in 1802 at Llanarth, Cardiganshire; his parents were Thomas Lewis and Mary Ann Jones. He was married (*not sure if his wife's name was Rachel*) and they had three children; Ann, Hannah and John. (Ann and Hannah had been born before the family moved to Brynmawr).⁽²⁾



The photograph shows Boundary Street today, the three parishes in which Brynmawr is situated meet here; Aberystroth, Llanelli and Llangattock.

On the far end of the road where it meets Bailey Street is a parish boundary stone and above it is a plaque to commemorate the two Brynmawr men who were killed at the Newport uprising, David Davies and his son. (See photograph later in the article).

Below is the census return for 1841 for the King Crispin, David Lewis would have been in Milbank prison in London on the date of the census and note that his wife is not recorded.

2	King Crispin	Anne Lewis	12		No
		Hannah Lewis	8		No
		John Lewis	3		Yes
		Margaret Owens	25	Miner	No
		Evan Evans	35	Rail Dresser(?)	No
		Anne Evans	25		No

He was a very successful shoe maker and employed around ten men. He certainly had a standing on the Nant y Glô market outside the Bush Inn on Market Row where he sold his goods. It's recorded that Crawshay Bailey had him thrown off his standing when he found out that David Lewis was a Chartist. *(Since reading about this I have been unable to find the reference in a newspaper again).*

David had become a strong supporter of Chartism and meetings were held at the King Crispin in Brynmawr, the Brynmawr lodge was one of the first in the country to be formed in 1838 ⁽¹⁾. He also went around other towns holding meetings to try and convert the people to Chartism. He and a colleague held a meeting in Brecon that the Monmouthshire Merlin reported on the 26th October 1839:

The respectable delegate, who has taken upon himself the mission of coming to enlighten the darkness of the inhabitants of Brecon, is landlord of the King Crispin beer house, Brynmawr near Nantyglo. In his speech, he said that Mr. Frost would, after they had formed a society, come and make a speech for them, and that Mr. O'Connor would also come to them,—he was a nice man, he had plenty of tongue and plenty of money. The delegate (i.e. David Lewis) handed a paper, on which was writing, to the chairman, to be read to the meeting. (It's not mentioned in the report who had chaired the meeting). The chairman, not finding himself competent, desired the "learned" delegate to do so, but this ignorant inciter of rebellion (for reasons which we dare say he can very well account) also declined. (According to court reports, David Lewis could read and write a little, see below the report from the

court case). *Some six or seven other gentlemen found themselves in the same predicament; but at last a person was found (one of the spectators) who read it. It comprised several resolutions one of which was, that a society should be formed, and each member to pay a penny per week that the society should use all moral force to obtain the Charter. Several of the gentlemen made anxious inquiries about the word "moral" and said that all property ought and should be equally divided that no counter-hopper or clerk should become a member. The persons who have assisted in getting up such a meeting here are entire strangers. After much coughing, the meeting was addressed by a son of Crispin, who moved that all persons who would not join the society should leave the room; upon which three-fourths rose up and left.* (There may have been another reason for their visit to Brecon in late October, there were attempts made by Chartist members to persuade soldiers to desert their regiments).

David Lewis was also present at a meeting held at the Royal Oak in Nant y Glo presided by John Frost the prominent Welsh Chartist leader who lived at Newport and had at one time been mayor of that town. This was a month before the march on Newport when John Frost urged those attending the meeting to be vigilant and he was:

"pleased to find the further he came from home, (Newport) the more peaceable the country appeared; and exhorted them as they valued the success of their common cause, not to commit themselves by any premature outbreak".

And he also said that

"the men of the Welsh hills were properly organised, and ready at any time to meet him when called upon".

The Glamorgan Monmouth and Brecon Gazette and Merthyr Guardian dated 19th October 1839 ended their report thus:

"After Mr Frost had done speaking the notorious landlord of the King Crispin beer-house, Brynmawr, acted the usual part assigned him at such meetings, by getting upon the dung-bill and proposing three cheers for the charter, &c., &c., &c., which occupied a quarter of an hour, after which the meeting quietly dispersed. Another meeting of a private nature was held the same evening at the above beer shop, and did not break up till two in the morning, when the hooting and yelling along the roads, caused so much terror in the minds of some of the inhabitants, that they left their beds and kept on the watch till day-break".

David Lewis was highly thought of by the National Chartist leaders especially Henry Vincent (a prominent leading Chartist and a great orator) who said of him: *"He is a famous fellow There is no mistake about him. He says what he means and he works hard to spread our principals"*⁽¹⁾. The meetings at the King Crispin were held twice a week, normally on a Monday and Wednesday evening. These meetings were so well attended that additional rooms were made available. When Henry Vincent was touring England and Wales during 1839 he came to Brynmawr and spoke at the King Crispin. On that night the room was packed with men and women and because of the famous speaker it would have been a high level meeting. (Prominent Chartists from around the area would have been present to listen to Henry Vincent including probably Zephaniah Williams from Nant y Glo).

David Lewis was in fact considered quite high up in the order as he attended the Chartist meeting at the Coach and Horses in Blackwood on the Friday before the fateful march on

Newport. It was at this meeting the final plans of the march were made for the Gwent men. News of the meeting spread up the valleys and at Brynmawr new and old Chartists met upstairs in the King Crispin. David Lewis warned them that they could not lose this fight and if they had to kill anyone it should be the army officers and those in authority⁽¹⁾. (This would be brought up at his subsequent trial at Brecon). David Lewis also told new recruits that if the people lost they would be slaves and if they won they would be comfortable.

Lewis was very militant and after Crawshay Bailey gave his blessing to a band of ruffians who entered the Royal Oak and tore up a copy of the National Petition to shreds and declared the Royal Oak (Zephaniah Williams beer house) out of bounds to any of his workers, David Lewis claimed that Crawshay Bailey sacked three workers for being Chartists and for reading the Western Vindicator⁽¹⁾. (*Henry Vincent, one of the original signatories of the People's Charter and a leading chartist, published the Western Vindicator newspaper for the West of England and South Wales. The Chartists published their own newspapers such as the "Western Vindicator" to attract more followers and to get their message across*).

As to the march on Newport, David Lewis had warned that the men would return "up to their shoes in blood". This enraged Zephaniah Williams who whilst waiting for the men to gather on Mynydd Carn y Cefn where the Brynmawr, Beaufort, Nant y Glo and Ebbw Vale chartists were to gather, disassociated himself from David Lewis⁽¹⁾. Zephaniah was on the side of the moral Chartists whilst David was more militant. With Ishmael Evans, (another prominent Brynmawr Chartist) in the chair the Saturday was a busy day upstairs at the King Crispin as new and old Chartist gathered to swear an oath of secrecy on the Bible. They were told by Ishmael that the Welsh and English Chartists would rise on the following day i.e. Sunday. (Ishmael Evans was the chairman of the King Crispin Chartist Lodge and it's clear that he supported Lewis's militant leaning)

On the day of the march Chartists and supporters had been gathering at the homes of Ishmael Evans and David Lewis and some of these men collected weapons and ammunition from the house of James Godwin, another Brynmawr Chartist.⁽¹⁾ There is no evidence that David Lewis actually took part in the march though it seems highly unlikely he did not.

Two of the Brynmawr Chartists, David Davies and his son, did not return home, they were shot by the militia outside the Westgate Hotel in Newport. (*The plaque to commemorate the two is shown*).



In the aftermath of the march to Newport and the killing of at least 20 Chartist by the militia; on the 5th of November (Tuesday) a company of constables and soldiers came to the King Crispin and found David Lewis hiding in a shoe chest. Ishmael Evans was also taken along with Chartist documents and a flag. Both were taken to Brecon where they were soon joined by five others⁽¹⁾. Because David Lewis and Ishmael Evans were from Brynmawr which was in Breckonshire, they were not tried at Monmouth alongside the other Chartist leaders but at Brecon and this proved to be the best that could have happened to them.

At the trial numerous men were questioned about the weekend of November 1st to 4th 1839. (As I was only interested in the trial of Lewis and Evans, I've only looked at the evidence provided against them. The court case notes are taken from *The Cambrian* April 4th 1840. Some of the evidence may be confusing). The first to give evidence was a Mr E. L. Richards:

Mr E. L. Richards is a rail cutter; lives at Cwm y Crachen remembers the night of Sunday of the Chartist riots he was coming from a public house at Brynmawr; he was stopped by Kidley know him by the name of George; Evan Davies and another man were with witness; Kidley had a pickaxe handle; he said, "You must come with us;" while witness was speaking to Kidley, his companions ran off; cannot tell if it was in the parish of Llanelly; saw many men coming out of Godwin's house with spears and other weapons; saw David Evans and Daniel Thomas with them; David Evans had a spear; Godwin came out with them; he had something under his frock; Daniel Thomas had a gun heard Godwin say, "I am going to David Lewis, -you go to Ishmael Evans's;" Lewis is the man called "King Crispin he said, "make haste and meet at Zephaniah Williams', or else we shall not be at Newport before day light;" they went to search several houses; David Evans and Kidley and the other men took witness with them. David Evans said to a man in one house he must come; "he must join this day whether willing or not;" David Evans told Thomas to shoot anyone who would run away Daniel Thomas said, "Yes, by G-d!" witness was much frightened; knows the King Crispin beer house; does not know if there is a Chartist lodge there; there was at that time; heard people say one Beddoe was chairman heard of a lodge at Zephaniah Williams'.

Ishmael Evans, 51 labourer, charged for that he on the 2nd day of November. 1839 as chairman of a certain society, called a Lodge of Chartists, held at the house of one David Lewis, in the parish of Llanelly did unlawfully administer certain unlawful oaths, with purpose of binding Charles Lloyd and Owen Williams, to become members of the said Lodge of Chartists, and for inciting the members of the said society to arm themselves to resist the laws of this realm

David Lewis, 37. shoemaker, was charged on the oaths of Charles Lloyd and Owen Williams, for that he, on the 2nd day of November, 1839, did aid and assist one Ishmael Evans, as chairman of a certain society, called a lodge of Chartists, held at the house of the said David Lewis in the parish of Llanelly, ill unlawfully administrating certain unlawful oaths, for the purpose of binding the said Charles Lloyd and Owen Williams, to become members of the said lodge of Chartists, and for inciting the members of the said society to arm themselves to resist the laws of this realm.

Mr. John Evans Q.C. appeared for the prosecution and opened the case and said the duty of addressing the jury in this case had devolved upon him; this case had arisen from proceedings connected with the memorable insurrection of November last, and the prisoners were indicted under the statute of 37 George 111, which was enacted against the administrations of unlawful oaths. The prosecution had thus adopted a very lenient course, for if the facts which he was instructed he should be able to lay before the jury were fully

made out, it would be evident that the prisoners had been guilty of offences of a much more serious nature; and though the present indictment did not involve any charge which could endanger their lives, yet it would subject them to transportation for seven years. They were not on their trial for high treason, nor conspiracy, nor as in the last case, were they tried for a tumultuous assembling. They were being tried for administering illegal oaths only. This would turn out better for Lewis and Evans when the judge came to deliver his sentence and explains why David Lewis was not eventually transported.

SENTENCES OF THE CHARTIST PRISONERS.

(This is taken verbatim from The Cambrian 4th April 1840).

The eight prisoners tried yesterday, were now placed at the bar, and his Lordship, addressing Ishmael Evans and David Lewis, said:

You, Ishmael Evans and David Lewis have been convicted on the most satisfactory evidence, the one of the offence of administering an unlawful oath to Charles Lloyd and Owen Williams, and the other of aiding and abetting in the same. This is the form which the present charge has taken, and you ought to be extremely grateful for the lenity which those who have had the management of the prosecution have shown in adopting that mode of proceeding; for it appears quite clear from the evidence, that you might have been prosecuted for the highest crime known to the law. The utmost punishment to which you are liable under the charge on which you have been convicted is very slight indeed when compared with the enormity of the crimes which you have committed and which it is difficult for me to find terms sufficiently strong to describe. You were leaders of a body of misguided wretches in a most treasonable conspiracy, and induced many of them to join in a design of the most criminal nature, and involving the most extensive schemes of mischief which have been conceived in this county, I am happy to say, for many years. It is quite clear that the oath which you administered was an oath of secrecy, admitting these men into the body of Chartists. It is also plain that on the same night you initiated a great number of persons into a combination of no common kind, and the wicked speeches which you addressed to the infatuated people whom you had succeeded in collecting together fully explain your designs of open and barefaced treason and wholesale murder. You desired them to provide arms and offered to furnish them with arms yourselves; you exhorted them to be ready to take Newport and we find by the evidence in other cases they did assemble, many of them with loaded guns, which their firing proved to have been loaded. And what were they to do with these guns? Why you told them they were to shoot the officers, and the sergeants, and the rulers; that is to murder them. That was not only your design, but, in fact, you swore them in to commit murder; for in case you had succeeded to your full intention of taking Newport, no one on reflection can doubt but that the murder of many innocent men, women, and children, would have been the inevitable result. You also told them to murder the officers and the great men and what did this mean? Why that all who by their own industry, or that of their predecessors were in possession of property the produce of that industry, were to be killed and plundered that was the design of those who called themselves Chartists. It is well-known that many persons in this country hold opinions that great improvements or alterations may safely be made in the representation; but it is remarkable that in your addresses we find nothing at all

on these subjects, they breathe nothing but murder and bloodshed. You ought to consider yourselves abettors of the deaths of those persons who have so miserably lost their lives on this unhappy occasion, for I cannot conceive anything more atrocious than your advice to the deluded wretches more ignorant than yourselves I do not know what share of the blame of your conduct may be attributed to that, as I find by the calendar, that one of you can read but imperfectly, and the other not at all. Indeed this must be matter of great regret for the degree of ignorance which could induce you to give, or others to take, such advice, must be very gross. The infatuation must be deplorable which could lead you to imagine that the troops led by officers, as skilful as they were brave, could be beaten in the manner you seem to have anticipated! Was it possible that you could suppose even if you had succeeded to the full extent of your wishes, that the lovers of, freedom and the friends of order would not have rallied around the institutions of the country? Could you suppose for one moment that your mischievous plans could have resulted in anything but terrible and general destruction, or your own severe and exemplary punishment, if the humanity of the authorities would not protect you from the just consequences of your own atrocity. The compassionate and earnest desire of the government to let off all the infatuated wretches who embarked in these proceedings with the lightest possible punishment, has induced them to try the experiment of sparing the lives of the chief leaders of the conspiracy: and I for one rejoice that that experiment has been tried, and I hope that no future tumult of the kind will render it necessary to recur to more extreme punishments. It appears that you Lewis told those men that if you failed it would be a matter of transportation only, but, in this you were mistaken, and by this you have furnished those who are opposed to the entire abolition of the punishment of death with the argument that unless you were convinced that the expectation of their own lives being sacrificed would have deterred your deluded followers, you would not have made use of such expressions. But I feel certain that if such occurrences do again take place, it will be imperatively necessary to let the rigour of the law take its course for the actual preservation of society. I hope that if there are any persons present who feel any inclination to join in scenes of the kind, they will seriously consider what I have said; for they must be very ignorant indeed if they fancy that such lawless and treasonable undertakings can result in anything but bloodshed and destruction. I have no view in addressing to you any lengthened observations, but the object of endeavouring to impress upon the minds of all such, either present or not, that it is connected with their interest as well as duty to refrain from any temptation to join in any such designs, as they have now been exposed in all their naked deformity of treason and murder, divested of the least show of liberty or reason, and plainly contrary to the law of God and man. You must now be convinced that if you had been charged with the heaviest crimes of which you have been guilty, you might have lost your lives; and as seven years transportation the extreme punishment affixed by law for the offence of which you have been committed, is in your case a light punishment and a great mercy, I shall, therefore, sentence you to that term”.

Sentence of seven years' transportation was then passed in the usual form.

David Lewis, landlord of the King Crispin Inn and the leader of the Brynmawr Chartists was eventually sent to Milbank prison in London to serve three years but he was released early due to ill health. During his time in prison apparently he taught some of the prisoners how to make shoes. Nothing (as yet) is known about David after his release but it has been suggested that when he died he was buried in Zion Chapel's burial ground in Brynmawr though this can't be proved as the burial records are missing.⁽²⁾

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⁽¹⁾ From "The Last Rising" written by David Jones

⁽²⁾ From the notes of Ray Hapgood and Roger Morgan

⁽³⁾ The Public Houses and Inns of Brynmawr in 1859. (www.brynmawrhistoricalsociety.org.uk)