

# A NEW ACCOUNT OF GEORGE SHELL AND THE NEWPORT RISING

by Malcolm Chase

The one great event which I can recollect was the Newport riots in November 1839. George Shell, the brave youth who was shot in the Westgate Hotel, lodged with us, or in the same house, I forget which. He often used to take me on his knee at meal times and would dance me up and down as I sat astride of his foot. On the very morning before he left on his fatal expedition he kissed me tenderly as if I were his own. He never returned; his loss was mourned by all the neighbours.

It was on the very day that the miners and workmen set out for their march on Newport. The long procession passed our door. I was taken out to see the men as they marched by, I think from [blank in the original] I afterwards heard that mother expected to find father in the procession, for some of the men were pressed into it unwillingly. But no he was not there. George Shell was, however, and he stepped out of the ranks to kiss me and to shake hands with old friends and neighbours.

Onwards they went in that ill-considered, badly conceived, and recklessly planned march, many of them to meet death, amongst whom was the youthful George Shell, beautiful as a woman, they say, although I can scarcely remember his features. They had staves, crude weapons, a few muskets, some miners took tools &c for they meant mischief. Later in the day Father arrived safe at home; he said perhaps it was best that he was not at home. Mother knew what he meant.

On the following day as I came home from school I heard the news, for I saw George's brother (so I was told) crying and raving like a madman at the news of George's death. I cried too, many cried, it was an ill-starred day for many in that place. (George Howell, 'Autobiography of a Toiler')

## Who was George Howell?

Aged just nineteen, George Shell was the youngest of those killed in the Chartist attack on the Westgate Hotel on 4 November 1839. He had managed to force his way into the building where he was shot several times. He took an agonising three hours to die and his body was one of ten that the authorities then buried under cover of darkness in unmarked graves in the churchyard of Newport's St Woolos church.<sup>2</sup> But who was this other George who left such a vivid – and until now unpublished – description of the fatal march on Newport?

George Howell was only just six (he was born 5 October 1833) at the time of the Rising. His father, a stonemason, had recently moved from Somerset to South Wales to work on the construction of a reservoir in the Afon Lwyd valley. Educated entirely through evening classes from the age of ten, George worked successively as a farm boy, shoemaker and from the age of twenty-two, having moved to London, bricklayer. He then rose quickly to prominence in London and national politics. He first achieved public prominence as the secretary of the London Trades' Council; he then became the secretary (1865-69) of the Reform League, the organisation that spearheaded the campaign for parliamentary reform that culminated in the Second Reform Act of 1867. Subsequently Howell was secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress and from 1885 until 1905 the 'Lib-Lab' MP for the East London constituency of Bethnal Green North-East. He was also a prolific and influential author on industrial relations and the history of trade unionism. He died in 1910 and his extensive personal library and archive are now housed in the Bishopsgate Institute in the City of London.

George Howell was a politically astute but controversial figure. His avowed stance as an 'Advanced Liberal' (his self-description on arrival at Westminster) meant that his career was often out of step with the growth of labour militancy and socialism in the decades either side of the turn of the century.<sup>3</sup> Historians emphasise that he never outgrew 'the cautious radicalism of his early years'.<sup>4</sup> Biographical accounts of Howell routinely note that he had been a Chartist, in 1848 joining the branch in the Somerset village where he worked as a shoemaker. However, the significance of this for his later career has never been teased out. 'No more than an adolescent fancy', his biographer called it.<sup>5</sup> Howell himself barely discussed his involvement in Chartism in his published work.<sup>6</sup> Even in 1848 Howell seems to have had little sympathy for the politics of direct action. Instead he was to be drawn to the example of William Lovett and the London Working Men's Association (the historian of which he later aspired to be).<sup>7</sup>

Howell's acquaintance with Wales was brief. He recorded a family tradition claiming descent from the 'Hoels of Carnarvon Castle ... in direct line from the Bards of old Briton [*sic*]' – perhaps a mangled reference to the twelfth-century poet prince Hywel ab Owain Gwynedd. But George speculated no further, emphasising instead that both sides of his family 'were all obliged to earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. If there was not positive poverty there was certainly no affluence'.<sup>8</sup> It is unclear even if he ever visited Wales again after his parents moved to Bristol in 1840. However for about twelve months prior to that their home was one of a handful of houses facing onto the Monmouthshire Canal between Pontnewynydd and Pontypool.<sup>9</sup> It was from here that the six-year old George Howell witnessed the Chartists' march on Newport.

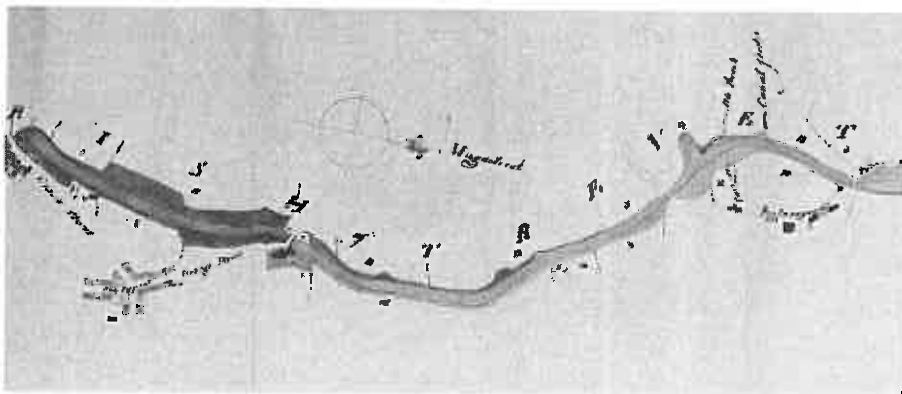
Howell never published his autobiography, but writing it was a project that occupied much of his time in later life. He left accounts of the events of November

1839 in no less than five separate manuscripts. The earliest, from 'Autobiography of a Toiler', is reproduced above. Although undated, Howell based this version of his autobiography on transcripts of letters he had written to a friend in America, 1870-1875.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent versions omit the reference to Shell living in the same house as the Howells and it should be noted here that Shell's much quoted letter of 4 November to his parents, was written from Pontypool and mentions he lodged with a Mr Cecil.<sup>11</sup> We should note too that although Shell had a younger brother (Edwin, aged about eight in 1839) he was presumably living with his parents in Bristol where the family had moved a year or more earlier, leaving George in lodgings.<sup>12</sup>

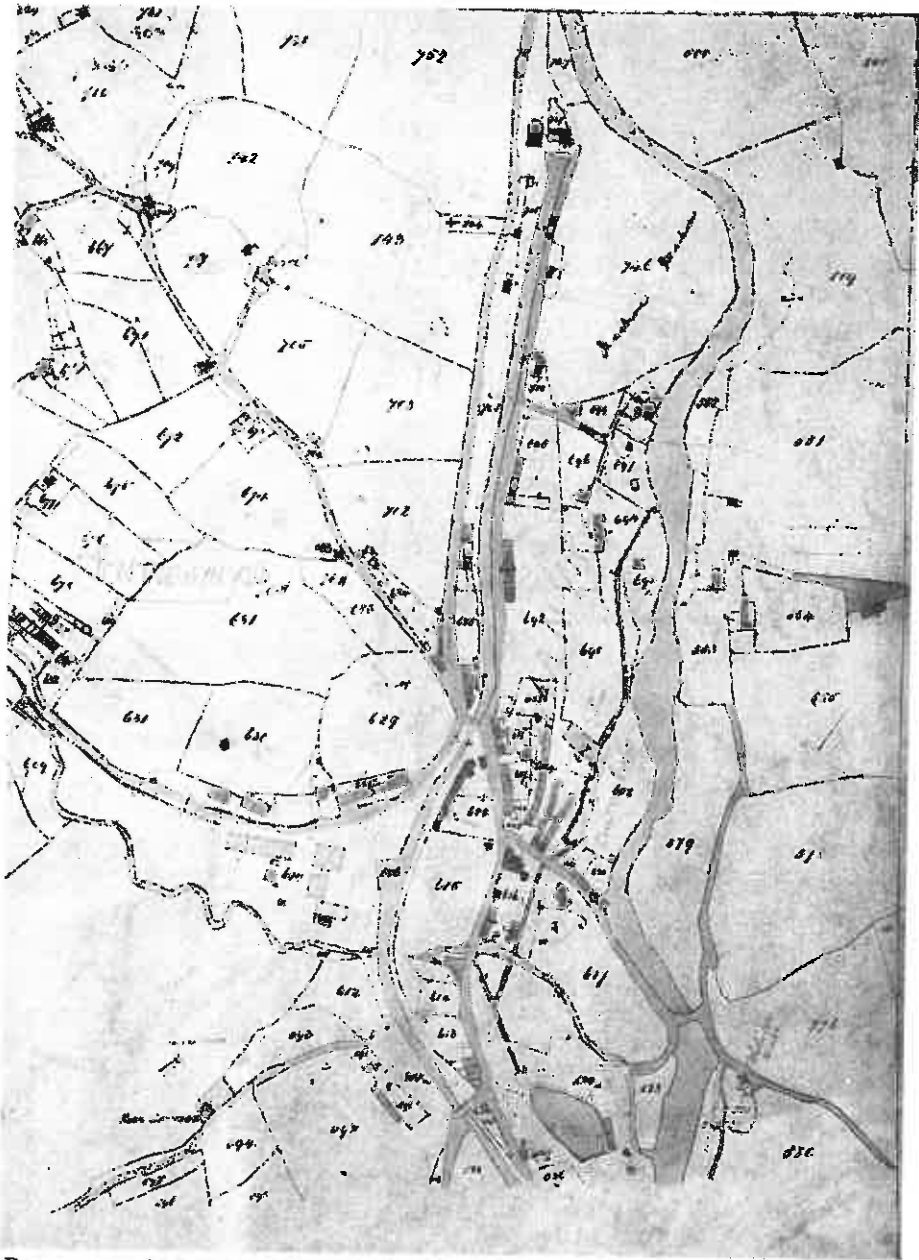
All, however, include the vivid account of how Shell paused at the Howell's home as the march headed out of Pontypool. In the second-oldest version (written around 1890), Howell recalls his mother, Mary, lifting him up to view the marchers. Shell 'stepped out of the ranks and took me in his arms, and ardently kissed me. As he did so, hot tears fell on my face, and I said to my mother, "What is George crying for[?]" ... From the fact that I knew George sufficiently to be able to call him by his Christian name, he must have been known to my parents, as I subsequently learned he was, and a visitor to our home.'<sup>13</sup> In a third version Howell speculates that not only his father but two of his uncles were lost on the mountain on the night of 2 November, and adds this detail:

When the tidings came of George Shell's death, I remember seeing strong men, as well as women, weep, the former swore also, great oaths the import of which I could not understand. Shell was well known, and had often dropped in to take a cup of tea at our house when he took me on his knee – hence I knew him'.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in 'Memoirs of Busy Life', a version of the autobiography dated 1896 and which was prepared with publication in view, Howell added that the adult men of his family were not just lost in the hills but that 'they were in general sympathy with



The Monmouthshire Canal between Pontypool and Pontnewynydd in 1825 (Gwent Archives, Q/PANBR/49. Courtesy Gwent Archives).



Pontnewynydd from the Trevethin Tithe Map in 1840. Running down the centre is the Monmouthshire Canal and to its right, the Afon Lwyd river. (Gwent Archives, D4893. Courtesy Gwent Archives).

the Chartist cause, but were not in any sense active politicians'. This version also specifies that the men of the Howell family were working on building 'water-works for the supply of Newport'.<sup>15</sup>

Geography, however, suggests that this cannot have been so, and it seems likeliest that the men were working on one of the many reservoirs in the district, that provided water to the Blaenavon ironworks complex. Given his personal reputation for political caution, it is hardly surprising that the mature Howell was much exercised by the possibility that his father was caught-up in Newport. In his earlier accounts of Newport, Howell relates that Edwin Howell was working on a reservoir at Blaenavon. As he made his way home across the hills late on Saturday 2 November the fog came down and he became lost. He did not return until late on Sunday the 3rd. George was adamant his father would never have willingly joined the marchers and that coercion alone would have persuaded him to do so.

Not enough is known about Edwin Howell to help us assess the veracity of his son's interpretation. Edwin and Mary Howell's apparently warm friendship with George Shell suggests that they shared much in common. George Shell was not incidentally caught up in the Newport Rising. He was clearly a Chartist of advanced radical views.<sup>16</sup> Even the precise location of the reservoir where Edwin Howell was working cannot be identified. He may have been employed repairing the Cwmavon reservoir, situated three to four miles north of Pontnewynydd in the Afon Lwyd valley. First built in 1804 to supply water to the Cwmavon works, it was subsequently converted to supply water to the Pontypool district (and survives, now managed by Dŵr Cymru). If this were so then Edwin Howell's personal networks may well have included the Chartists of Abersychan, the Varteg/Cwmavon works and Blaenavon. This might explain his mysterious failure to come home on Saturday 2 November. Few men in the upper Afon Lwyd reached Newport. Some marched via Pontypool on to the Usk Road, waited near its junction with Mamhilad and then dispersed when news of the disaster at Newport reached them. Men from Blaenavon are said to have assembled on the Varteg Road and, faced with heavy rain, drifted home perhaps by the parish road, now a track way, across the valley and over the top, from where they could head either to Llanover or Mamhilad. This parish road is situated immediately north of Cwmavon Reservoir.<sup>17</sup>

Almost every account of 3-4 November mentions driving rain, so the reasons Edwin Howell gave for his prolonged absence may well have been genuine; equally the weather may have been a convenient excuse to lie low while the marchers assembled, as his son seems to have suspected. It is conceivable, though, that Edwin joined the marchers (voluntarily or coerced) but subsequently turned back later on Sunday. We can do no more than speculate.

Assessing the veracity of George Howell's memories of November 1839 is challenging and his draft autobiographies offer little else by which to form a judgment. The remaining Welsh material is purely anecdotal. Coal wagons ran from

the pits along the canal embankment and the drivers would sometimes give the six-year old a ride, even taking him 'in to the "levels" as they were called, from which the coal is cut from the hill sides. I used to get home all besmeared with coal-tar and as grim as a pitman or a collier. The drivers were very kind and careful of me, and would bargain with mother that I should not be beaten as it was not my fault'. On one occasion, seeing a silver coin among the stones at the bottom of the embankment, he scrambled down, slipped, fell and cut his head, resulting in a permanent scar. He also recalled fishing for minnows in the canal and falling in and nearly drowning.<sup>18</sup> And there his recorded memories of Wales run dry.

It is possible that Howell imposed a false memory of Shell upon his account of November 1839. From his extensive reading in adult life, as well as his interest in history, he cannot have been unaware of how Shell's death had met an outpouring of grief and poetic eulogy that extended far beyond his native Pontypool. We know that he read Robert Gammage's *History of the Chartist Movement* almost as soon as it appeared in 1894, and which portrays Shell as breathing 'the purest aspirations for liberty'.<sup>19</sup> However, given Howell's reputation for political caution and opposition to direct action, there was nothing to be gained (and perhaps something to lose) from emphasising any close association with one of the heroes of Newport.

It seems reasonable to suggest that this episode was the root of Howell's lasting anxiety about (and antipathy to) the efficacy and consequences of any industrial protest that originated outside the disciplinary framework offered by trade unionism. He was first and foremost a trade unionist and a political activist only second. As a historian he portrayed the social unrest that was endemic in the early nineteenth century as the product of a society where trade unionism was barely, if at all, tolerated. Tellingly, in writing the history of the London Working Men's Association, the organisation that drew up the original People's Charter, Howell ground to a halt in 1838, leaving it uncompleted precisely from the point that Chartism commenced. As a member of the Reform League's executive during the movement that culminated in the Second Reform Act of 1867, he opposed the organisation of regular demonstrations in Trafalgar Square. He regarded the great Hyde Park demonstration of 6 May 1867 with such deep misgivings that shortly before it he made financial arrangements to support his wife in the event of his arrest and imprisonment.<sup>20</sup>

Howell was a classic example of a workman who had 'pursued knowledge under difficulties', impatient with those who would leap over the exacting sacrifices of self-help to demand immediate concessions from employers and the State instead. He therefore struggled to reconcile his fond childhood memories of George Shell with the latter's readiness literally to fight for freedom. Yet despite his hardening reputation for political moderation, Howell's sympathy towards George Shell appears to have increased as the years passed by. The final version of his autobiography (compiled in 1896 and clearly intended as a text for publication)

contains this eulogy:

He seems to have been beloved by all who knew him. He was also as fearless as he was patriotic. in so far as his conception went of patriotism. However mad the freak of the "Newport Rising". he was guiltless of any offence save that of an honest proselyte.<sup>21</sup>

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#### NOTES

- 1 George Howell, 'Autobiography of a Toiler' [n.d.], fols 27-8 – unpublished manuscript in Bishopgate Institute, London, Howell Collection, HC 5/1/1, Volume A, fols 27-8.
- 2 Colin Gibson, 'George Shell's letter revisited: some perspectives on its use at the Monmouthshire Chartist trials', *Gwent Local History* 116 (2014), 33-49; D. J. V. Jones, *The Last Rising: The Newport Insurrection of 1839* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), pp. 33, 97-8, 107-9, 155-6, 205; Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 111, 113-14, 116-17, 120.
- 3 Michael Stenton and Stenton Lees (eds), *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament: Volume II, 1886-1918* (Hassocks: Harvester, 1978), p. 182.
- 4 F. M. Leventhal, 'Howell, George (1833-1910)', in Joyce Bellamy and John Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography, Volume 2* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 187-95 (p. 193); F. M. Leventhal, *Respectable Radical: George Howell and Victorian Working Class Politics* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1971), p. 217; F. M. Leventhal, 'Howell, George (1833-1910)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2012 [<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/article/34025>, accessed 13 Nov 2015].
- 5 Leventhal, *Respectable Radical*, p. 7 and see also *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, p. 187 and the Howell entry, which closely mirrors Leventhal, in Joseph O. Baylen and Norbert J. Gossman (eds), *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals, Volume 3: 1870-1914, A-K* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1988), p. 463.
- 6 The sole exception was a short article, 'Labour Politics, Policies and Parties', in *Reynolds's Newspaper* 4 June 1905.
- 7 His uncompleted history was finally published, edited and with an introduction by D. J. Rowe, as *A history of the Working Men's Association from 1836 to 1850* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Graham, 1972).
- 8 Howell, 'Autobiography of a Toiler', fols. 9, 10.
- 9 I am grateful to Colin Gibson for the following information. The map accompanying the 1840 tithe survey of the parish of Trevethin shows a small number of buildings overlooking the canal around the mid-point between Pontnewynydd and Pontypool, close to Snatchwood House (residence of an ironmaster, William Morgan). Though the list of occupiers of these properties accompanying this map (compiled July 1839) does not mention Edwin Howell, it is clear that there was a lot of subletting: for example, plot 2355 is listed as tenements in occupation of William Harris and others. See Gwent

Archives D4893, Parish of Trevethin Survey, E.S.Gisborne. 1840.

- 10 Howell. 'Autobiography of a Toiler', annotation on folio A.
- 11 Gibson. 'George Shell's letter revisited', pp. 38-9. 41.
- 12 See the 1841 Census for the Shell family, by then living in Bath. I am grateful to Colin Gibson for pointing this out.
- 13 HC 5/1/1, Volume A. 'From Ploughboy to Parliament. The Story of an Active, Arduous and Strenuous Life' [n.d. circa 1890], fol. 15. This account is essentially the one Howell used for the Newport instalment of 'Ernest Jones, the Chartist', in the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 1898.
- 14 HC 5/1/1, Volume A. 'Rough draft of Autobiography Birth to 1855', [n.d., circa 1890 but later than 'From Ploughboy to Parliament'], fol. 10.
- 15 HC 5/1/2, Volume B, 'Memoirs of a busy life, 1896', fols 5, 6.
- 16 Gibson, 'George Shell's letter revisited', p. 41.
- 17 This paragraph is based on information from Les James, for which – as for his encouragement generally in writing this article – I am very grateful.
- 18 HC 5/1/3, Volume C, 'Autobiography of a Toiler', fol. 26.
- 19 HC 5/1/5, Volume E, fol. 3; R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Browne, 1894), p. 163.
- 20 Leventhal, *Respectable Radical*, pp. 89-90.
- 21 HC 5/1/2, Volume B, 'Memoirs of a busy life, 1896', fol. 6.