

January 2013. Keith Johnson - 'Idris the Ginger Beer Man'

The guest speaker was Keith Johnson of Pembroke, who over the years has become a well known and popular speaker at society meetings because of his vast knowledge and sense of humour regarding local folklore. On this occasion his subject was Thomas Idris the Ginger Beer Man. To highlight this subject, Keith produced a display of cans and bottles, which were on view.

The story starts around 1840 on a farm in the Llys-y Fran area. Thomas was the son of a farming family, but showed little interest in the business, probably due to seeing his father struggle to survive in those harshest of times. His interests were to take him in another direction, probably being influenced by his cousin, who was a chemist and druggist.

He pursued his interest in pharmaceuticals and qualified as a chemist in the late 1860's. Being an ambitious young man, he set his sights on opening his own business at the age of 29. This he did, not in Pembrokeshire, but in Holloway, North London.

In 1873, now as a successful businessman, he traveled back to his native Pembrokeshire to marry his childhood sweetheart Emeline, whose grand-father had traveled from Plymouth in 1814, during the construction of the Pembroke Dockyard. Being a chemist, his interests and knowledge would be turned into commercial advantage when he researched and experimented with mineral water, which ultimately produced the fizzy drinks which the world has come to acknowledge today.

Thomas Idris and his fellow chemists were producing drinks that were non-alcoholic, relatively cheap and healthy, which the temperance movement of that time welcomed with open arms.

In the late 1880's Thomas was granted the Royal warrant succeeding Schweppes as the supplier of soft drinks to Queen Victoria. The business continued to grow, with one bottling works in London drawing up pure water from 400ft. below the city.

He had a house built in a London Terrace for his wife and family, next to which he built a Baptist Chapel, seating 250 people. In 1893, Idris Royal Table Waters was valued at a staggering £215,000, which was some achievement for a Pembrokeshire farm boy, becoming a JP in 1889 and elected to the London Council. Keeping his strong links with Wales, he bought land on Cader Idris in North Wales and built a fine mansion overlooking Talyllyn Lake.

To highlight a very successful career, Thomas Idris, the Ginger Beer Man, succeeded on his third attempt aided, it seems, by David Lloyd George himself, to win a seat at parliament representing Fflint in 1906. Finally in his later years, he was made High Sheriff of Merionethshire in 1912. He died in Highgate, London, in 1925, aged 82, having indeed achieved a great deal from his humble beginnings in Pembrokeshire.

(Doug Havard)