

# A WALK AROUND ROBERT OWEN'S NEWTOWN



The long bridge over the Severn



Owen's Birthplace at The Cross in Newtown

## Robert Owen's Newtown

This short walk starts from the Robert Owen Museum right in the centre of Newtown and takes in the sites most associated with Owen. Although Newtown has lost many of its 18<sup>th</sup> century buildings, you can still get a feel of Owen's Newtown in the walk by the river and the views up and down the high street to the steep sides of the Severn Valley. The walk is just a few hundred yards and will take around 15 to 20 minutes.

1. *Start at the Museum.* **The museum** tells the story of Owen's life and continuing influence and has been in this impressive arts and crafts building since 1983. The building was opened in 1902 as a free lending library which would have pleased Owen. You will see a plaque at the front which records that the ground floor of the building was presented by the Co-operative Society of Great Britain in 1902. A plaque on the side records that the balance of the cost of the building came from local donations.



2. *Cross the road to the HSBC bank.* A bronze plaque records that this was the site of **Owen's birthplace** at No. 2 Broad Street. Owen was born here on the 14<sup>th</sup> May, 1771, the sixth of seven children. Owen's father had a business as an ironmonger and saddler here at the Cross, right in the heart of the town. In the painting below by Brian Jones Owen's home can be seen much as it was in Owen's day. The Owen home is the double fronted shop on the right hand side. Sadly it was demolished in the mid 1920s.



3. *Walk past Barclays Bank and down Broad street for 100 yards.* Opposite the Post Office you will see the **Robert Owen Park**. In the centre of the park is Gilbert Bayes' memorial to Robert Owen, commissioned by the people of Newtown in the early 1950s. An appeal raised £2000; you could buy a very large house with that money at the time! Bayes died before it was completed and a Mr King, a former President of the Royal Society of Sculptors, was brought in to complete the work.



The statue was unveiled on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1956 and was much admired. It travelled to Lancashire to be copied and in 1995 a replica was unveiled in front of the Co-operative Bank in Balloon Street in Manchester, illustrating that Owen's ideas of fairness and cooperation are still honoured by the Co-operative movement today.

4. From the statue, walk up Gas Street towards the river. You will pass Bank Cottage, one of Newtown's oldest buildings on your left. In 50 yards you will come to an elegant square. Turn right at the end of the car park (in front of a large white house) and walk towards the footbridge. *At the footbridge turn left (5 steps) and walk alongside the river.* After about 150 yards you will reach the ruins of **St Marys Church**. *Take the footpath on your left into the churchyard.*



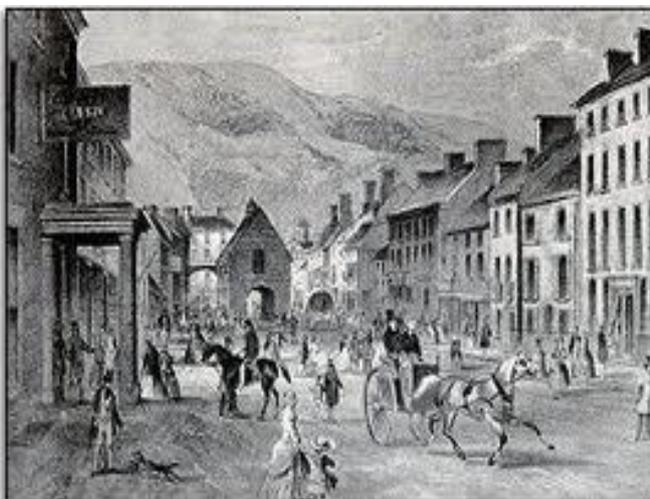
This watercolour from the museum shows how the church would have looked in Owen's day. As you can see from the picture, a rickety wooden bridge stood here when Owen was born and is mentioned in Owen's autobiography. The river ran much higher than it does today. This led to flooding which badly damaged the church and caused the building of a new parish church, St David's, in the 1840s.

5. Follow the footpath around the church to **Owen's tomb**.

Repeated flood damage must have left the whole site in a sorry state when the funeral took place in 1858. But Owen's parents were buried in St Mary's and he wished to join them. George Holyoake, one of Owen's social missionaries and fellow co-operators attended. Over 40 years later in 1900 Holyoake and other co-operators, concerned that this modest grave was an inadequate memorial to the great man, arranged for Owen's grave to be a renovated and £1500 was spent on the project. At the service of dedication in 1902 Holyoake said-



"thanks to the doctrine of national environment which Owen was the first to preach - Knowledge is greater; Life is longer; Health is surer; Disease is limited; Towns are sweeter; Hours of labour are shorter; Men are stronger; Women are fairer; Children are happier; .....Co-operation ... has brought us nearer and nearer to that state of society which Owen strove to create - in which it shall be impossible for men to be deprived or poor."



6. Follow the footpath back to the riverside path, and continue to walk up river. This part of the walks provides attractive views of the bridge over the Severn and up Bryn Meadows where Owen would ramble as a child. *In a few yards turn left onto Broad Street* between the new bridge and the **Elephant and Castle**. In this print you can see the High Street as it must have been in Owen's day. The elegant portico of the Elephant and Castle is clearly visible at the front left of the picture. Many of the buildings still stand today but, sadly, the Market Hall in the centre -right outside Owen's birthplace- was

demolished late in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. A similar market hall still survives in Llanidloes.

The bridge over the river is a good place to admire the steep sides of the Severn Valley to the North and South. Owen loved to walk the hills around Newtown and there conceived a love of nature which was influential in his educational reforms many years after he left Newtown.



7. Walk down Broad Street back towards the Museum. On your right, close to Owen's house, you will see the Bear Lanes shopping Centre. This is on the site of the **Bear Inn**. When Owen returned to Newtown to die Thomas and Elizabeth Langworthy, the innkeepers, allowed him to stay here free of charge. Sadly in 1987 the hotel was closed and demolished to be replaced by a modern shopping precinct.

Owen's friends were with him at the end and Owen died holding the hand of his eldest son, Robert Dale Owen. Owen's personal opposition to the established churches was well known and there were those in Newtown who did not want him to have a Christian burial, but a broad minded Church of Wales minister gave his permission.

8. You are now back at the Museum where you started. On his deathbed Owen said that he wanted to "make Newtown a paradise and all its inhabitants angels". We hope that this taste of Owen's Newtown will persuade you that Owen's optimism was not in vain. If you have enjoyed the walk, you can find many beautiful longer walks around Newtown on the Newtown Town Council website.

