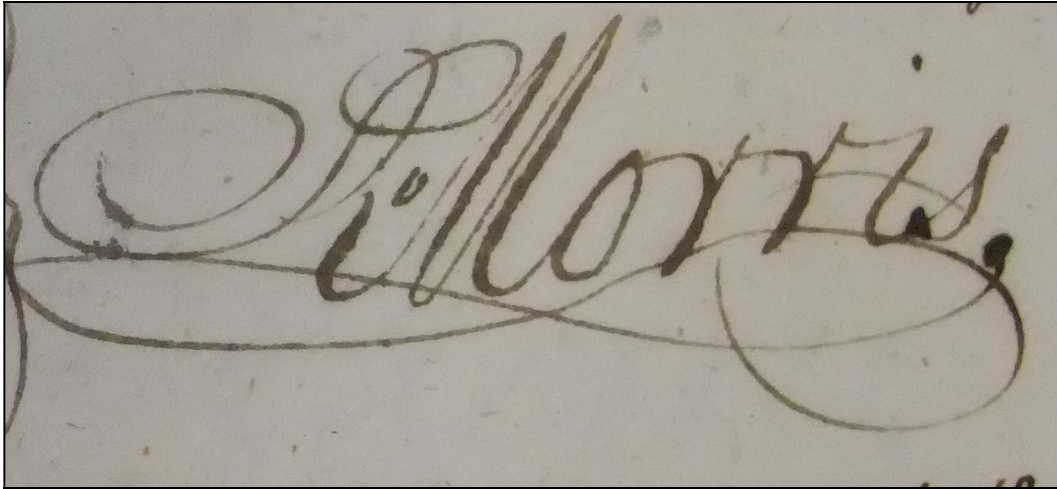


A few notes on the only copper works built in Swansea – *Gerald Gabb*



**Signature of Robert Morris from the Quarter Sessions records October 1759 (GRO/Q/S/R/1760/A/14),
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When the first Norman lords staked out the town and franchise of Gower in the twelfth century, its northern boundary was the Bwrlais brook, and in the eighteenth century this was still the limit of the jurisdiction of the burgesses of Swansea. Long since culverted, the brook flows into the Tawe just above the former Unit Superheater site on the Strand, where houses are now being built. By the seventeenth century the Corporation had established its right to lease out plots along the west bank of the Tawe from Blackstone point to the brook. These were taken for timber yards, shipbuilding and repair, forges and coalbanks. From 1693 to 1695 Thomas Evans was paying £3 10s 0d *'for ye coalplace'* on the last of these, abutting the Bwrlais. It had previously been used for the same purpose by *'Mr. [Richard ?] Seys'*. Names tended to stick, and when this bank was leased to the promoters of a copper works in 1720, it was described as *'Mr. Seys alias Thomas Evans's' bank* or *'Bank y Gockus'*. They probably valued the water power offered by the stream. It is interesting to see that the lease of 3 August 1720 gave permission for erection of buildings and installation of engines for *'a Glassworks or other works'*. Perhaps the *'glasshouse'* which had existed in Swansea Castle from about 1678 to 1696 was the inspiration. There must have been a change of mind.

The common attorneys were burgesses appointed year by year at Michaelmas to oversee the Corporation's finances. Their account books for this period can be consulted in the West

Glamorgan Archives. They cannot be totally relied upon; the absence of a previously recorded item, for example, need not mean that an activity has ceased – the common attorneys, who were not salaried, did not always relish their demanding role and seem to have omitted things without obvious reason.

However, we are told that in 1721-2 the lessees of the works were *'Mr. Gabriel Powell & Mr. Silvanus Bevan'*, the rental £3 5s 0d. Such charges might remain static for decades – in 1762 this was still the rent. It is odd though that in 1727-1728 James Griffiths (Bevan's son-in-law) was paying only 10s for *'the Copper Works'* – perhaps this was a part-payment by one partner. By 1730-1731 the leaseholder was Richard Phillips, once more paying £3 5s 0d, as he did until 1735. All these men had strong Swansea links, Gabriel Powell (d.1735) and his son of the same name becoming very influential in the town, partly through their role as stewards to the duke of Beaufort.

In 1732-1733 a new name, Robert Morris, appears in the accounts, paying 10s for a coal bank, and from 1736 to the 1760s leasing what was usually called *'the Lower Copper Works'*, presumably to distinguish it from the earlier Llangyfelach works at Landore, where he had been involved since 1724, and in control since 1726. Sometimes his works and the coalbank were jointly charged for. The resource and energy of Robert Morris and his son John in pushing ahead copper smelting at Llangyfelach, then at Fforest and Landore, is well documented, but their use of the Swansea site is

not. By historians it is often called the Cambrian copperworks, but this may just be a retrospective naming, because in 1764 it was replaced there by the famous Cambrian Pottery which seems to have re-used some of the buildings.

There is a puzzle. In the Morris's accounts for 1745 and 1768 there is expenditure on *'the Swansea Copper Works'*. Such a phrase would fit this site, but the new pottery was in being there by 1764. Possibly Robert Morris was allowed to retain a small part of the old works for a while longer, though on 25 July 1764 he *'surrendered his Lease on the ground whereon the old Copperworks is built ... [in favour of] ... William Coles of Cadoxton near Neath, Ironmaster ...'*. Yet in the Corporation rent roll for Michaelmas 1766 is the item *'Robert Morris for Lower Copper Works £3/5/-'* and it is not until 1768, the year Robert Morris died, we get *'Mr. Coles for a pot house with its appurts late the old Copperworks £3/5/-'*. The Land Tax records are similarly confusing – Mr. Coles is assessed for *'the Lower Copper Works'* in 1766, *'the Pot House'* in 1767, and, as late as 1778, for *'the old Copper Works'*. It all suggests a spell of transition, and there is certainly evidence that the pottery only gradually became a working concern, and that it began with a single kiln, expanding to three by 1786. These are depicted by P.J. de Louthembourg in drawings of the site all of which he describes as an iron foundry or works. That the latter then existed is attested, and suggests a split site which is was convenient to describe as the old copperworks. This is confirmed by the proceedings of one of the burgess's Hall Days as late as 13 February 1789, as related by Charles Collins:

A memorial was read from John Coles & Mr Hains [sic] respecting the Pottery Lease when it was resolved that upon their signing their present Lease They should have one granted to Them of the ground they wanted for the Pottery at 5£ per annum ye first 16 years and 10£ after to the end of 61 years and the Foundry become tenants of the Corporation at 5£ which they now pay the Pottery.

Coles and Haynes had been sub-letting to the foundry.

In the surrender of the lease there is reference to an *'old building commonly called the old copperworks'*, suggesting it had been out of use for smelting for some years. In his notes, Robert Morris, who died in 1768, called it *'the old copper work'*. Similar phrases are used in leases of 1763

and 1818. However, it was certainly a working concern between about 1720 and 1735. The way the burgesses pointedly prohibited use of the land for smelting copper or lead in the sixties and nineties suggests an experience of smoke and fumes which townsmen did not want repeated. In the *'History of the Copper Concern'*, Robert Morris junior records, on the basis of his father's notes, that as early as 1729 the owners lacked funds and a regular supply of coal and ore; they owned no collieries, and their Irish copper mine was proving a disappointment. He is dismissive of the capacity and trading knowledge of those in charge. Nonetheless, in 1734 a Corporation document referred to the then *'great quantitys of Copr Ore and other goods Imported and Exported'* in relation to the works – though they may have had reason to exaggerate.

The burgesses were trying to enforce their traditional right to levy dues on the growing copper trade. For centuries 'keyage' had been paid by ships trading to the Town Quay which they had built. (Today it would be a little upriver from our Sainsbury's store.) Now many ore vessels passed it by, and plied straight to Landore, though it is interesting to read, even at so early a date, of some transshipment into *'barges and lighters'*. The burgesses claimed that as they incurred expense in marking the river mouth sand bar, and in preventing irresponsible disposal of ballast, they should still be recompensed – but met a blanket refusal to pay from the works owners. They applied to *'learned counsel'*, a Mr N. Fazackerly, for rulings. As to the Llangyfelach works, which were outside *'the Limitts of the Corporation'*, his answer disappointed them. Over the *'Cambrian'* works, though, which was just within their bounds and built on what they described as the Corporation estate, they pressed hard, and Fazackerly advised that they had a sound case. Apparently some of the Cambrian proprietors claimed exemption because they were burgesses, but he ruled that burgess privileges were personal *'and cannot be Extended to Exempt the goods of others'*. It looks as if, two years later, the matter was unresolved, and was complicated by the fact that Robert Morris now controlled *'the Cambrian'* as well as Llangyfelach. At a hall day of 1 October 1736 the refusal of Richard Lockwood & Co (the Morris concern) to pay dues on ore import was raised, and there was specific reference to the oath taken by burgesses by which they swore to do all in their power towards the *'Preservation and maintenance of their Rights, Privileges and*

Liberties'. Gabriel Powell junior was instructed to take legal action to secure payment. There seems to be no record as to the outcome.

There are quite full Corporation records for this period, but this makes it all too easy to suggest to ourselves that we know the whole story. A moment's reflection shows this is nonsense. Formal minutes and accounts are indicative, but the resolution of problems and evolution of practice owe a huge amount to informal human interaction. Unless we are lucky enough to find diaries or personal letters, all of this is a blank. Robert Morris junior's *History of the Copper Concern* should constitute a wake-up call; it is littered with lively personal comment. In writing history, it is obviously important to move from the particular to the general, and identify those forces which changed people's lives. In doing this it is tempting to rely, almost exclusively, on the official records. In this way, Robert Morris may become a progressive industrialist opposed by a burgess body wielding archaic weapons and represented by Gabriel Powell, who was to become the arch-conservative. In fact, the young Powell of this period seems to be an ambitious and efficient young attorney, who succeeded his father as steward to the duke of Beaufort in 1735. He was also a burgess and gradually acquired lands and business interests of his own. Like his fellow burgesses and the new breed of incomer industrialists, his motivations were complex, as must have been the interplay between all of these.

Let us apply this to Robert Morris senior. In his sadly undated notes he concluded that the Cambrian owners had failed in their enterprise and knew it – *'they would willingly sell, but nobody so mad as to buy'*. And yet in 1735 he took up the lease himself, despite the further complication that keelage would probably have to be paid! Perhaps in 1736 or soon after he reached some sort of accommodation with the burgesses. Though he was never to become a burgess, and even his still more prominent son John had to wait for this until 1789, he did business with them as individuals and as a body. The accounts tell us that in 1745-6 and 1748-9, he supplied the Corporation with *'deal boards'* (softwood planks) on the second occasion explicitly for repair of the Town Hall porch – it stood where there is now a grassy patch by the castle ruins – a David Harry being paid 6d. for transporting them as far as a sawpit in the town. In 1739 he was a subscriber towards the rebuilding of St. Mary's church, much of which had fallen down. (In a similar way a

famine caused by shortage of corn drew donations of £60 from the management of the White Rock works and £50 from Chauncy Townsend the coal owner towards the burgesses' relief fund in 1757. Nineteenth-century industrialists like the Vivians and Grenfells were to take this involvement in the community to its fullest extent.) Robert Morris's status rose – the *'Mr. Morris'* in the 1736 accounts became *'Robert Morris Esq'* in 1756. In 1739 he acquired the minor gentry house *Tredegar* to go with his town house, which was probably in High Street or the Strand. At a hall day of 15 June 1747 he is called a gentleman and a merchant, and the ropeyard he ran by 1745 was a typical enterprise for a Swansea man of business – he took on David Rowland as an apprentice there in 1746.

Whether he initially meant to run the Cambrian as a works or not, perhaps he quickly decided against. It could be that he wanted to prevent competitors acquiring the works, and, for him, it just became a convenient depot. Maybe he established a foundry there at an early date. His deal deliveries of the 1740s came *'from Lower Copper Works'*. The second load was considerable – *'9 double drams'* of 12 foot timber costing £1 4s 0d. A *'dram'* implies a tramroad. His ropeyard was nearby and he took on local men to work it. His coalbank was leased on 21 September 1733 on the understanding that he would build a dock there. It lay on the Strand opposite the end of what we call King's Lane, but long known as Morris Lane, and close enough to the copperworks site. It ran as far as the bottom of Welcome Lane. His industrial activity in this quite closely confined area is suggested by a story recounted by W.H. Jones and others, and originating in *A Description of Swansea and its Environs*, printed in 1826 by F. Fagg, Wind Street, (p.22) – the anonymous author, it has been suggested, was either William Jones a local notary (lawyer) or an N.P. Jones:

The state of Swansea about 100 years ago, may be easily conceived from the following little anecdote; at that period, coal, in bags of no more than two Winchesters, was conveyed from the pits to the shipping-wharfs, on horseback; a practice so dilatory and injurious, that Robert Morris, Esq ... determined upon the use of waggons; which had no sooner made their appearance in the streets of Swansea then the inhabitants one and all, determined to indict these cumbrous machines as a nuisance declaring, that the rumbling noise, and agitating motion, caused the beer to turn sour

in their cellars, and it required no small address to persuade them to the contrary.

This appealing tale has been used in explaining the burgess's stated subsequent desire to exclude industry from the neighbourhood of the town. As far as it goes it certainly suggests that Robert Morris saw the town – the Strand/High Street area especially – as a legitimate industrial zone.

He was also a considerable acquirer of land across a wide area. A relatively minor but interesting block was in this north eastern part of the franchise. In 1756 he took over what was called 'a

messuage and garden' in Brynmelyn (the area south of the road to Carmarthen before Cwmbwrla) which had formerly belonged to an Isaac Matthews. Given its £9 rental, far higher than the works site, it must have been considerable. It actually comprised several houses and cottages, gardens, crofts and fields. From 14 February 1735 he also held the nearby Greenhill Mill, later called the Flint Mill, including its '*watercourses, dams, ponds'* – they were still his in 1764. Here was a man building up his business interests, landholdings and local profile.

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