

BATCHELOR, JOHN (1820 - 1883), businessman and politician

Name: John Batchelor
Date of birth: 1820
Date of death: 1883
Gender: Male
Occupation: businessman and politician
Area of activity: Business and Industry; Politics, Government and Political Movements
Author: Jean Silvan Evans

John Batchelor was born on 10 April 1820 in Newport, the second son of the 12 children of Benjamin Batchelor (d. 1836), a timber merchant and shipbuilder, and his wife Anne. The family were devout Congregationalists.

For John Batchelor, the combined influences of religion and progressive politics came early. The Batchelor family were friends with the Chartist leader **John Frost**, both families being members of the newly-formed Hope Congregational Church in Newport where the Frost and Batchelor children were baptised between 1813 and 1829, including the infant John in 1822.

John Batchelor was always a gifted speaker and, although there is no documentary evidence, this supports traditions that he spoke from Chartist platforms, as certainly does the speed with which the family spirited the 19-year-old radical away from Newport to the safety of a Sunderland shipyard in the unrest that followed the collapse of the Chartist Rising in 1839. John had been apprenticed in the shipyard of his father Benjamin, who died when John was 16, and at Sunderland, one of the biggest yards in the country, he could practice the skills learnt there. During that time, he paid a visit to shipyards in Scotland but it was in Canada he settled for three years, developing and managing a large shipbuilding yard in New Brunswick. On his return to Wales he decided to set up business in Cardiff with his younger brother James Sydney (1824-1915) as Batchelor Brothers, timber merchants and shipbuilders, on the bank of the River Taff in 1843.

It was then began the series of events that saw John Batchelor become a prime force in the creation of modern Cardiff, break the political-economic stranglehold of the powerful **Bute** family, and deserve the Hayes statue whose plinth declares him Friend of Freedom.

Batchelor was a bitter opponent of the Butes, led by the Marquis of Bute of Cardiff Castle and known as the Castle party. In the general election of 1852, with Liberal-Nonconformity a growing social and political force in Wales, he broke their political control when he spearheaded the successful campaign to elect Liberal-Nonconformist **Walter Coffin** as Cardiff MP, ousting the Butes' favoured long-serving Conservative MP **John Nicholl**. Significantly, Coffin was the first Nonconformist MP elected in Wales, underlining Batchelor's key role in the nationwide political shift that saw the long ascendancy of Liberal-Nonconformity. Batchelor broke the Bute control of the coal export trade in 1856, when he was chief promoter of a Parliamentary Bill to build Penarth Dock, and he was part of the group to found Mount Stuart Dry Dock.

In 1850 Batchelor and fellow shipbroker **Richard Cory** were elected to Cardiff Town Council as Liberal councillors for South Ward. An extension of the franchise to include the rising merchant class saw the Liberals take control of the council in 1853, when Batchelor was appointed Mayor of Cardiff. An early and major success was to secure a clean water supply and an effective sewage and drainage system for Cardiff at a time when up to 40 people a day were dying of cholera. Nationally, he campaigned for free trade, against protection and the corn laws, and against the payment of church rates that were still paid by Nonconformists.

The Batchelor Brothers business flourished for several years, but by mid-century, as Isambard Kingdom Brunel brought the South Wales Railway into Cardiff, it was necessary to divert the course of the River Taff, which then no longer flowed past the site of the Batchelors' yard. The brothers were able to secure a new site in the West Bute Dock from the Bute estate, but by then John Batchelor had antagonised the Butes by the election of Walter Coffin, and they dealt the first blow in a long campaign to make business highly challenging for him. In an open show of discrimination, they refused to grant him a long-term lease at the dock, insisting instead on a yearly tenancy. It was to prove a more lasting and devastating threat to Batchelor than the small but spiteful response of humiliating his second wife Fanny by refusing her entry to the weekly opening of Cardiff Castle grounds. The Butes had banned all Coffin supporters and Fanny was publicly singled out and denied entry as the rest of her party went in.

In his first years in Cardiff, Batchelor was a member of Trinity Church in Womanby Street, which traced its origins as far back as 1640 to the Independent congregation set up by the radical preacher **William Erbury** when he was ejected from his Cardiff living. Batchelor was among a group there who believed a growing Cardiff would soon need another English Congregational Church and who left Trinity, amicably, to set up a sister church that a couple of years later founded Charles Street Congregational Church. Batchelor was a prime mover in the initiative and his financial contribution was substantial. Glamorgan Archives has a record of a lease dated May 1855 for a chapel to be built on the site, the lease to be held by Batchelor's two young daughters Lydia Mary and Annie Gertrude and his brother James Sydney Batchelor, with an annual ground rent of £25.

The 1851 religious census shows John Batchelor living as a widower of 30, with the two little girls in 10 Charles Street, just opposite the chapel site. The girls were children of his first wife Hannah (née Reese), who died in 1848. He was remarried later that year to Fanny (née Burder, d. 1909), and they went on to have ten more children. He remained an active member of Cardiff Town Council until the family moved to Penarth, outside the municipal boundaries, in 1859.

Always interested in education, Batchelor helped to found a British School in Cardiff for the education of poorer children and when, much later in 1874, the Education Department made an order for the formation of a School Board in Cardiff, Batchelor was elected to the board and chosen as chair, a position he retained until he retired only some 18 months before his death - although some objected because he was already a member and chairman of the Penarth School Board. Politically, he continued to support the later Liberal MP, as Coffin, already aged 68 at the time of his election, served only one term. At the following election in 1857, he supported Colonel Stuart, described as a good man, but no orator. The fluent Batchelor was said to 'follow the Colonel everywhere, and with such good effect that he was returned unopposed at that and several subsequent elections'. When the Cardiff Liberal Association was formed, Batchelor was unanimously elected president.

The 1851 census describes Batchelor as a timber merchant and shipbuilder, employing 40 men, so Batchelor Brothers was still a significant business at that time. And, indeed, the business continued to thrive for some years more despite the regular conflicts with agents of the Bute estate and some law court battles. About 1862, Batchelor received notice to quit the West Dock. He brought an action for damages of £27,000, which was referred to arbitration but finally seemed to just fizzle out. Again, he moved on, this time to develop the Mount Stuart Graving Dock, another business venture that flourished for a while. The final blow came in 1873. Batchelor had lost heavily in the commercial panic of 1866, so was not in a robust position. He applied to the Bute trustees for various permissions at the graving dock he felt would see him through but the application was refused. He had no option. The graving dock was sold at auction for a knock-down price and was eventually re-sold with the full permissions he sought for £100,000.

When Batchelor was declared bankrupt, there was an outpouring of respect and affection for him from Liberals and Nonconformists. In July 1874, a presentation was made to him of the magnificent sum of £3,700 (later made up to £5,000). Newspaper reports said his name had been 'associated with almost every popular and philanthropic movement in the town' and emphasised that 'the working men of Cardiff had contributed towards the fund'.

In one last attempt to keep the business going, in 1873 Batchelor proposed a visionary scheme - something not accomplished until more than a century later with the Cardiff Bay Barrage in the 1990s - to build an embankment from Cardiff to Penarth across the Taff and Ely estuaries to give 15 times more wharf space. He proposed a merger of competing dock, rail and canal companies to extend the harbour area of both Cardiff and Penarth, control vested in a harbour trust, and costs to be shared by the Butes, those involved at the Penarth docks, and the Taff Vale Railway, built in the face of opposition from the Butes, where Walter Coffin was chairman. The 3rd Marquis of Bute rejected the scheme, and Batchelor retired into private life, still mentally strong but physically broken.

He continued to make a living as an agent, and in about 1881 he was appointed Inspector of Coals to the Crown Agents. This was a time when politically-opposed newspapers expressed their views with robust partisan enthusiasm. The Liberal side was supported by the *South Wales Daily News* and *South Wales Echo* of Scottish Liberal and devout Presbyterian David Duncan (1811-1888), and the Conservative group by the *Western Mail* and *Evening Express* of the Yorkshire Tory **Lascelles Carr**. In a war of words typical of the acrimonious attacks Batchelor was subject to all his life, the *Western Mail* was soon on to 'a piece of political jobbery'. A question in the House of Commons in April 1882 was answered in Batchelor's favour and he kept the office until his death.

Batchelor died of a stroke on 29 May 1883. The funeral cortege travelled slowly the whole way from Upper Cliff in Penarth to Cathays Cemetery, with the crowds increasing until there were thousands in St Mary's Street. Tributes were heartfelt, and even the *Western Mail*, which admitted it was usually in opposition to him, paid tribute to

Batchelor as 'an active, industrious man of business, and a capable and sagacious political leader'.

There was soon talk of a statue. Subscriptions raised £1,000 and the statue, created by Welsh sculptor **James Milo Griffith**, was unveiled before a crowd of 5,000 in October 1886. The original site chosen for the statue was, significantly, opposite the Free Library in the Hayes, for which Batchelor campaigned against opposition from the Bute estate, but it has been moved a couple of times since. At the unveiling, Batchelor's former fellow town councillor Richard Cory reminisced about Batchelor's early days in Cardiff and - in a reflection of his teenage Chartist support - recalled when he was still 'engaged in the noble task' of pressing for the 'six points of the Great Charter - the Charter to remove the disabilities and enfranchise the people'. Something, said Cory, he did even in those later years at the risk not only of losing his position and reputation but of 'actual transportation'.

The bitter vituperation between parties and papers that followed Batchelor's life was then transferred to the statue. The statue was authorised by the Liberal controlled Cardiff Town Council. A few months later, Conservative members of the town council organised a petition to remove the statue, claiming it was wrong for a memorial to such a controversial political figure to be displayed in a public place. The petition was rejected by the Council and the statue was then vandalised with yellow paint and tar by Conservative William Thorn.

Batchelor's epithet on the plinth of the statue, 'Friend of Freedom', was another cause of complaint from Conservative opposition. Frequent contributor to the *Western Mail* and staunch Conservative T. H. Ensor offered some caustic alternatives in a letter that was published - and lives on in libel law today. He put forward instead: 'traitor to the Crown... hater of the clergy... sincerely mourned by unpaid creditors'. Editor Lascelles Carr and writer Ensor were prosecuted for criminal libel in a famous case that set a libel precedent. The judge declared 'the dead have no rights and suffer no wrongs' and ordered the jury to find for the defendants. Two of Batchelor's sons, Cyril and Llewellyn, were subsequently fined for assaulting Lascelles Carr at Cardiff Station.

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Further reading

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Additional Links

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