

LEWIS, DAVID JOHN (1893 - 1982), architect and Lord Mayor of Liverpool

Name: David John Lewis
Date of birth: 1893
Date of death: 1982
Spouse: Margaret Elizabeth Lewis (née Stubbs)
Parent: John Lewis
Parent: Elizabeth Lewis (née Phillips)
Gender: Male
Occupation: architect and Lord Mayor of Liverpool
Area of activity: Art and Architecture; Public and Social Service, Civil Administration
Author: Gwyn Jenkins

David John Lewis was born on 29 April 1893 in Penparcau, at that time a small village near Aberystwyth. His mother Elizabeth (Lisi or Lizzie) Lewis (née Phillips) was a member of a family steeped in Welsh culture in the village, and his father, John Lewis, came originally from Llanwrin, Montgomeryshire. After working in the south Wales valleys, he had set up a grocery and insurance business in Penparcau. The family, which now included four children, moved to Aberystwyth around 1912.

In his adolescence, Lewis showed a talent for music and possessed a melodious tenor voice. Trained by his father and his uncle, Thomas Herbert Phillips, he sang at local eisteddfodau and concerts. One of his favourite songs was Gounod's 'Lend me your aid'.

After leaving school, Lewis became an apprentice at a local firm of carpenters, the Edwards Brothers, Trefechan, where he developed skills in draftsmanship. He attended evening classes at the School of Science and Art, Aberystwyth, and received praise from the tutor.

In February 1915, convinced of the justice of Britain's cause in the Great War, he joined the army, enlisting with the Royal Engineers where he might use his skills in the field of construction. He served as a 'sapper' with Field Company 131 and was later promoted to lance-corporal. He served in the trenches in France before being transferred with his Company, in November 1915, to Salonika, Greece, where combat was less frequent. However, he was wounded in his arm during the first battle of Doiran in May 1917 and later suffered from malaria, one of the major causes of suffering for troops in that part of the world. He was transferred to a hospital in Malta to recover his health and in August 1918 returned to Britain. He was officially demobbed in January 1919. Prior to this, on 9 November 1918 (two days before the Armistice), he married Margaret Elizabeth Stubbs, of Blakeney, Gloucestershire. They had no children.

In 1919, Lewis took advantage of further educational opportunities offered to those who had served in the armed forces. He received a maintenance grant of £200 to attend an architecture course at Liverpool University, with an additional contribution of £50 for the annual fees. He was awarded a certificate in architecture by the university in 1921 and was appointed to a position with a well-known architectural firm in Liverpool, Gray, Evans & Crossley. This company specialised in designing Art Deco cinemas and Lewis is thought to have worked on the design for the Rialto, one of Liverpool's most prestigious buildings (but which was burnt down during the Toxteth riots in 1981). He also worked in Paris, as the company adapted the 'Alhambra' cinema there. Almost all the cinemas designed by Gray, Evans & Crossley, including the 'Majestic', 'Mayfair' and the 'Astoria', Liverpool, and the 'Capitol', Scarborough, were demolished during the second half of the twentieth century.

Lewis became a prominent figure in Liverpool's public life from the 1930s onwards. In 1936 he was elected a city councillor under the auspices of the Conservative Party, serving on that council until 1974. He was elected alderman for the Netherfield ward in 1952 and nominated a justice of the peace in 1946. Lewis was the Conservative Party's candidate in the 1950 and 1951 general elections for the Kirkdale seat, Liverpool, losing twice by a few hundred votes to the Labour candidate.

In the mid-1950s, he took a particular interest in the City of Liverpool's plan to drown the Tryweryn Valley, including the village of Capel Celyn, Merionethshire, to augment the water supply to the city. He was a prominent member of the Tryweryn Liverpool Defence Committee and argued the case against the scheme at Council meetings, but in vain. In a lengthy letter to the press, under the heading 'Why I defend Wales against Liverpool', he explained his stance in a straightforward way: 'It may be commendable that our city council should be awake to Liverpool's needs; it is wrong that these needs be met by the exploitation of a weaker, poorer community.'

On the Council, he served as chairman of the City Education Committee in 1961-62, and in 1962 he was elected Lord Mayor of the City. During his tenure as mayor, it was said that he had travelled 16,000 miles and attended 1,000 events, and one of the highlights was his visit, together with the mayor of Manchester, to the city of Berlin where he met the famous mayor of that divided city, Willy Brandt.

The early 1960s was a period of regeneration for Liverpool and of popular cultural activities on the banks of the Mersey. Everton football club won the English championship in 1962-63 but Lewis preferred to watch cricket or rugby. Similarly, the singing of popular groups of the time, such as the Beatles, was not to his taste and he continued to take an interest in the classical music scene. He was president of the Liverpool Welsh Choral Union and chairman of the Liverpool Philharmonic Society from 1951 to 1955. During his time as chairman of that prestigious Society, he argued for broadening the appeal of classical music. The Society's historians considered that it was then run by 'more enlightened and forward-looking individuals', and, in an interview, Lewis claimed that he would be happy to see concert-goers wearing 'overalls', as long as they had paid for a ticket. For him, there was no need to dress up to listen to the Orchestra.

His wife died in 1978, and Lewis himself died at his home in Aigburth, Liverpool, on 6 May 1982. The funeral service was held at the Welsh chapel, Heathfield Road, Liverpool, on 11 May, and his body was cremated at Aigburth. Later, his ashes were buried in his parents' grave in Aberystwyth cemetery.

Lewis served his adopted city with devotion but never forgot his Welsh roots. He was described by John Braddock, the Labour leader of the council, as 'an undisguised Welshman' and one who upheld the reputation and status of the city of Liverpool.

Author

Gwyn Jenkins

Sources

Who was who? 1981-1990

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Family information

Additional Links

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