

## THOMAS, JAMES HENRY (1874 - 1949), politician and Labour leader

**Name:** James Henry Thomas  
**Date of birth:** 1874  
**Date of death:** 1949  
**Spouse:** Agnes Thomas (née Hill)  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** politician and Labour leader  
**Area of activity:** Business and industry; Politics, Government and Political Movements  
**Author:** Huw Morris-Jones

Born 3 October 1874 at Newport, Monmouth. Little is known of his early life except that he received his elementary education at Newport national schools and that he began his working life while very young as an errand boy in a chemist's shop and then as an engine cleaner in the Newport railway yard. Later he went to Swindon and worked as a fireman. He became interested in trade union activities and was elected to the Swindon town council where he gained valuable experience in public affairs. In 1904 he was elected president of the A.S.R.S.; he was re-elected in 1905. In the following years he was employed wholly as a trade union organiser in Manchester and then in south Wales.

In 1910 **Richard Bell** disagreed with the policy of the A.S.R.S. in affiliating to the Labour Party and resigned his office as secretary and his seat as Lib.-Lab member for Derby. J.H. Thomas was made assistant secretary of the union and was elected to succeed **Bell** in the Derby constituency, a seat which he held for 26 years. In 1911, while negotiating the settlement of a railway strike at Liverpool, he arranged for a number of smaller unions to combine with the A.S.R.S. to form the N.U.R., of which he became the general secretary in 1918.

During World War I war he gave much assistance in recruiting campaigns and visited the United States in 1917 as a member of the Balfour Mission. In the same year he was made a Privy Councillor. The post-war unrest led to many grave strikes on the railways, but Thomas was successful in arranging a settlement with the companies which doubled the rates of pay for his men together with an agreement to link such rates with the cost of living.

In 1920 and 1921 he was prominent in the Triple Alliance of railwaymen, miners, and transport workers to resist the use of armed force against the Soviet government. In 1924 he was made Colonial Secretary in the first Labour government. During this brief period of office he visited the West Indies, and developed a lifelong interest in colonial affairs.

He was a member of the executive committee of the Trades Union Congress which in May 1926 called a general strike of all its members. Thomas exerted a moderating influence which prevented a dangerous situation from getting out of hand and this resulted in the strike being ended with the promise that negotiation would be resumed, although the miners dissented strongly and were on strike for many months afterwards.

In 1929 Thomas was made Lord Privy Seal and Minister of Employment in the second Labour government. He was charged with the task of preparing measures to deal with the formidable rise in the numbers of unemployed men and women, a phenomenon which at the time was afflicting most industrial countries. In the hope of increasing Commonwealth trade Thomas visited Canada as a result of which an Imperial Economic Conference was organised which later led to the Ottawa agreements which established a preferential tariff area in the British Commonwealth. Despite his efforts, however, the number of unemployed increased and in 1930 he was appointed to the newly-formed Office of Dominion Affairs. In 1931 the Labour party was seriously divided on the measures required to meet the economic crisis and a section of the Government under the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, formed a National Government of all the main political parties. Thomas was a member and he retained his post as Minister for the Dominions. But his action caused great bitterness within the Union and he was dismissed from his post as secretary. However, he kept his seat at Derby in the elections of 1931 and 1935. During his later life he was more criticised by those whom he had once represented than by his political opponents. In 1936 a premature disclosure of certain financial changes in the Budget led to his resignation from Parliament and his retirement from public life.

He belonged to the right wing of the Labour movement and was much admired for his skill in conciliation and negotiation. He was President of the International Federation of Trade Unions, 1920-24. He received honorary degrees from Cambridge, LL.D. in 1920, and Oxford D.C.L. in 1926. He was a J.P. for the county of Kent and a governor of Dulwich College. He wrote *When Labour rules* in 1920 and *My story* in 1937. He married Agnes Hill of Newport in 1898. They had two sons and two daughters He died in London 21 January 1949.

### Author

**Professor Huw Morris-Jones**, (1912)

### Sources

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J. H. Thomas, *My Story* (London 1937)

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*Who's who?*, 1948

### Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [James Henry Thomas](#)

### Additional Links

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**Published date:** 2001

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APA Citation



Morris-Jones, H., (2001). THOMAS, JAMES HENRY (1874 - 1949), politician and Labour leader. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 11 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s2-THOM-HEN-1874>

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