

ROBERTS, EVAN (1836-1918), watch salesman and 'the greatest horological collector of all'

Name: Evan Roberts
Date of birth: 1836
Date of death: 1918
Gender: Male
Occupation: watch salesman and 'the greatest horological collector of all'
Area of activity: Business and Industry
Author: William Linnard

Evan Roberts, the second son of Hugh and Jane Roberts, was born 18 December 1836 on his father's small hill farm, Fotty Bach, Gwyddelwern, Meirionnydd. The family was very poor and struggled to make a living there. Young Evan received no formal education, but he was a strong lad and in his teens he went to work as a labourer for neighbouring farmers, one of whom cleaned clocks and watches as a sideline. This inspired an interest, and Evan Roberts left home to seek his fortune 'with an empty head and pocket' (as he himself later recalled), and became a watch repairer.

In 1861 he set up his own jobbing business repairing watches in Manchester, and by frugal living and hard work his business prospered. He shrewdly saw the advantages of the cheap mass-produced Waltham watches imported from America, seized this commercial opportunity, and became a very successful salesman, travelling throughout Britain and Australia, selling Waltham watches and simultaneously indulging his passion for collecting old watches. His collection grew to thousands of items, including watches of great historic and horological interest. Part of his famous collection was exhibited at the World Exposition in Chicago in 1893, and subsequently at various venues and international exhibitions in London; several catalogues were published (H. G. Abbott, *Catalogue of the historic and antique watches from the famous collection of Mr Evan Roberts...* Chicago, 1893; H. G. Abbott, *The Roberts collection of antique watches...* Chicago, 1897; [Evan Roberts] *Historic horology, being a catalogue...* London, 1912).

Now a wealthy man, and respected in horological circles, he moved to St George's Square, Regents Park, London where he continued trading and collecting. He was a staunch supporter of the various British watch and jewellery organizations, a liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, and a proud member of the American Horological Society.

Eventually his health deteriorated and about 1910 he retired to his home near Clapham Common, where he died on 28 November 1918, leaving his wife Jane, a married daughter (Mrs Jeanora Williamson), and his son Bruno. Evan Roberts, a member of the Cremation Society of England, directed that his body be cremated at Golders Green. He left much of his horological collection to the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Science Museum, and a few of the Welsh watches from his collection came to the National Museum of Wales.

Author

William Linnard

Sources

Personal Research

William Linnard, 'Evan Roberts from Gwyddelwern', *Journal of the Merioneth Historical and Record Society*, 2010

William Linnard, 'Evan Roberts, the greatest horological collector', *Horological Journal*, February 2011

Additional Links

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