

John Batchelor:
Friend of Freedom
(1820–1883)



Gordon Hindess

John Batchelor – The Man

John Batchelor's grave, a double plot, can be found under the trees at the southern end of Section O, just across the way from the Cedar of Lebanon at the back of the chapels. The heavily inscribed red granite headstone includes details of many, but not all, family members, as follows:

In memory of
JOHN BATCHELOR
BORN APRIL 10 1820 DIED MAY 29 1883
AND OF TOM EUSTACE HIS SON
DIED NOV 17 1862
AGED 2 YEARS
O REST IN THE LORD WAIT PATIENTLY FOR HIM AND
HE SHALL GIVE THEE THY HEARTS DESIRE
ALSO OF FANNY EDITH HIS WIFE
DIED MARCH 12 1909
AGED 85 YEARS
HER CHILDREN RISE UP AND CALL HER BLESSED
ALSO OF JOHN GEORGE HERBERT HIS ELDEST SON
BORN JULY 8 1854 DIED NOVEMBER 24 1912
ALSO OF ARTHUR LLEWELLYN, HIS FIFTH SON
WHO DIED NOVEMBER 19TH 1915 AND WAS BURIED IN THE
PROTESTANT CEMETERY VALPARAISO
ALSO OF ETHEL CAROLINE AGNES HIS FOURTH
DAUGHTER WHO DIED NOVEMBER 13TH 1916
ALSO OF EDITH EVANGELINE, HIS THIRD DAUGHTER
ALSO OF WILLIAM THOMAS EDWARDS M.D.L.L.D.
DIED JULY 7TH 1919
ALSO MARY DAVEY MILDRED BATCHELOR, HIS YOUNGEST DAUGHTER
DIED AGED 72 YEARS

The headstone shouts out "Plan ahead". The initial inscriptions enjoy generous space: the later ones are squashed in at the bottom, with the final line continued on the plinth. Unfortunately, the plinth (like the kerb) is in Radyr Stone, which is far from ideal for fine engraving and lacks the durability of granite: hence the incomplete transcription.

But not all of the family are recorded here - there is no mention of the first two daughters and the second, third and fourth sons. Some of these must have died in infancy and are buried elsewhere, before Cathays Cemetery was opened. But one, at least, lived to adulthood: **Cyril** Batchelor, with his brother **Arthur** Llewellyn, may be remembered locally as the founders, in 1880, of Penarth RFC, which was originally known as the Batchelor XV. Cyril went on to operate as a metal merchant at Llanelli and Hartlepool and ended his days at Lapworth, near Solihull. The one non-Batchelor recorded on the headstone, William Edwards, was the husband of **Edith Evangeline**.



John Batchelor headstone

John Batchelor was born in Newport in 1820 and, in 1843, he came to Cardiff and set up a timber business, with his brother **Sidney**, as Batchelor Bros. Initially they took over a yard on the bank of the River Taff at the lower end of St Mary Street then, around 1854, moved to a new yard near the West Bute Dock. This company later added a slate business and subsequently opened timber yards in Cardiff, Merthyr & Aberdare. It was perhaps inevitable that John Batchelor should develop his business interests to include nautical elements, including a move into shipbuilding. He was one of a group of men who established the Mount Stuart Graving Dock.

Batchelor had a clear social conscience and his concerns led him to the radical wing of the Liberal Party. Between 1850 and 1859 he was a Liberal councillor for Cardiff South and in 1853/54 he served as Cardiff's Mayor. He was elected president of the Cardiff Liberal Association in 1869 and, as a devoted Congregationalist, he was responsible for the founding of a new chapel in Charles Street. Batchelor's range of interests was immense. He campaigned, tirelessly, against abuses such as slavery and he was also the Chairman of the Cardiff School Board. Above all, he was concerned with municipal reform and was opposed to the vested interests of the Tories. He genuinely wanted to help people less fortunate than himself, he always sided with the underdog and this stance brought him into regular conflict with the establishment.

Perhaps inevitably, John Batchelor's political activity brought him into conflict with the Bute family, who had significant land-holdings in Cardiff, had built much of the docks and were probably the most important and influential family in south Wales. There

were many disputes, particularly with John Crichton-Stuart, the third Marquess. Partly as a way of circumventing Bute control of the Welsh coal trade, Batchelor became involved in the creation of Penarth Docks, being appointed its director in 1856.

There are claims that the eventual collapse of Batchelor's business empire was down to various conspiracies by the Butes and their supporters. Whatever the reason, he lost money, his companies went into serious financial decline and, in 1873, the company went into liquidation. However, John Batchelor still had many friends and supporters, who, after the collapse of his businesses, held a collection and were able to present him with the grand sum of £5,000 - equivalent to about £350,000 today. Batchelor continued to work as an agent until his death in 1883 but, as far as social reform and public acclaim were concerned, his glory days had gone.

Most of you will be aware of the statue of John Batchelor which stands close to St David's Hall in the centre of Cardiff. It's the one usually adorned with a plastic traffic cone on it's head and not to be confused with the statue at the end of Queen Street (that's of the founder of the NHS) whose head is a popular resting place for sea gulls. The inscription beneath the statue reads:-

*John Batchelor
B 1820 D 1883
The Friend of Freedom*

It was on 23rd July 1886, some three years after his demise, that friends erected a statue of him in the Hayes. The sculptor, commissioned for a fee of £1000, was James Milo Griffiths, of London, and it was cast in bronze at the workshop of James More at Thames Ditton. The statue stands on a 9'6" high pedestal of Cornish granite weighing 12 tons. At the time of erection, the inscription had yet to be engraved.

If the statue was received by some with "the utmost satisfaction", it roused others to fury. The day after the unveiling the following appeared in the correspondence columns of the Western Mail:-

Our esteemed correspondent Censor suggests the following epitaph for the Batchelor statue.

*IN HONOUR
OF
JOHN BATCHELOR
A NATIVE OF NEWPORT
WHO EARLY IN LIFE LEFT HIS COUNTRY FOR HIS COUNTRY'S GOOD
WHO ON HIS RETURN DEVOTED HIS LIFE AND ENERGIES TO SETTING
CLASS AGAINST CLASS
A TRAITOR TO THE CROWN, A REVILER OF THE ARISTOCRACY, A HATER OF THE CLERGY
A PANDERER TO THE MULTITUDE*

WHO AS FIRST CHAIRMAN OF THE CARDIFF SCHOOL BOARD
SQUANDERED FUNDS TO WHICH HE HAD NOT CONTRIBUTED
WHO IS SINCERELY MOURNED BY UNPAID CREDITORS
TO THE AMOUNT OF
FIFTY THOUSAND POUNDS
WHO AT THE CLOSE OF A WASTED AND MISSPENT LIFE
DIED A DEMOGOGUE AND A PAUPER
THIS MONUMENT
TO THE ETERNAL DISGRACE OF CARDIFF
IS ERECTED
BY SYMPATHETIC RADICALS

The writer was Thomas H Ensor, a successful solicitor, staunch conservative, and regular contributor to the paper under the name "Censor". In the same edition of the paper appeared the following letter, possibly written by the same hand.

Sir, if the authorities ... desired to frighten away the fish-hawkers and Salvation Army loafers who make the Hayes their happy hunting ground, they could not have taken more effective measures than they have in erecting the hideous effigy now to be seen there. 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever' but John Batchelor "the old election hand" in a pair of oilskin leggings several sizes too large for him is certainly no ornament to Cardiff. The paper that the effigy clutches cannot, of course, be other than the late Mr. Batchelor's "petition in bankruptcy". Then the moral that the statue teaches all bad boys is obvious, "Mind everybody's business but your own, and your caricature will be set up in the back streets as a laughing stock for future generations".

It was signed "An Admirer Of High Art".

The South Wales Daily News of 28th July 1886 describes how sons of John Batchelor, **Cyril and Llewellyn**, had for some days met the train arriving from Penarth about 11 a.m. on which the editor of the Western Mail, Mr Lascalles Carr, usually travelled. Rumours had spread and a crowd had gathered by the time Carr arrived. The brothers had sought both Carr and Ensor: Carr was just the unlucky one. The paper continues the story as follows:-

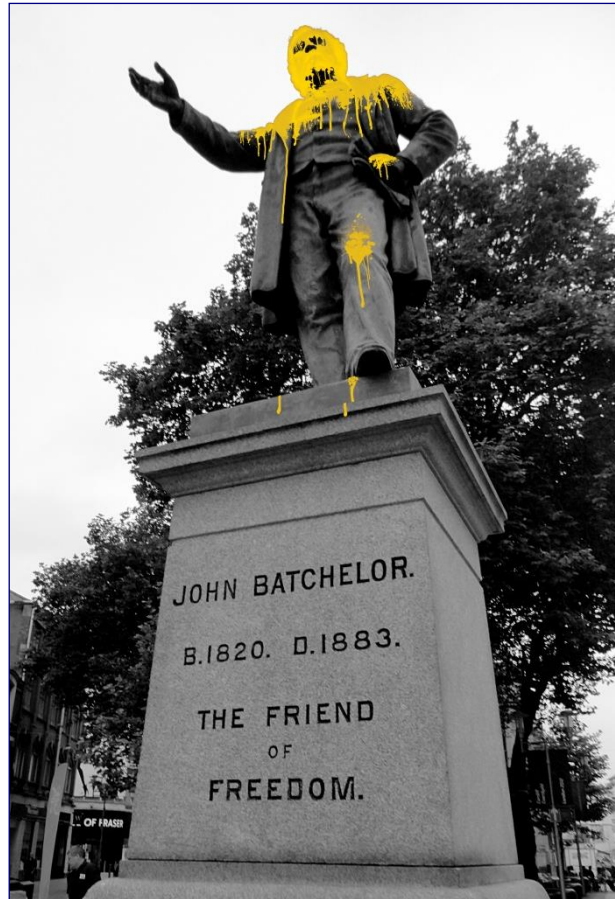
Approaching him when he was halfway between the Station and the Great Western Hotel, Mr. Cyril Bachelor seized him by the shoulder and shouted "Your name is Carr, I believe?" Before the latter had time to reply Mr Cyril knocked off his hat and then excitedly exclaiming "You are the cowardly fellow who has libelled my Father", he drew forth a dog whip, having a short handle and a long thick thong. Raising his strong right arm he brought the lash down upon the shoulders of his cringing victim, who is said to have appealed for mercy, but whose cries went unheeded. Again and again the thong twined round the body of the alleged libeller, who in sheer madness

and pain closed with his assailant and thus prevented his arm from having full play. After some hugging in which Mr Batchelor freely used his fists Carr was thrown to the ground, but so tightly did he clutch the garments of his antagonist that he also fell, the latter however being the uppermost.

A vast crowd had by this time collected. After the two men had regained their feet besmeared with mud from head to foot, the editor of the Tory newspaper rapidly pulled off his coat and offered to fight either of the Batchelors. Mr. Llewellyn, who up to this time had been a passive spectator to the affray, then stepped forward and offered to oblige the pugilistic Mr. Carr, but the spectators interfered and both gentlemen were held back. Mr. Carr was in a short time hurried away to his office, and taking a cab the Messrs. Batchelor were driven to their place of business at the docks.

Later the same day, Mr. Morgan Morgan, acting for Carr, took out a summons for assault and the case was heard before a deputy stipendiary magistrate the following week. Following lengthy argument, the magistrate concluded that the assault had been proved, but was of a somewhat trifling nature and because of great provocation. The two Batchelor sons were fined a shilling (5p).

After the erection of the statue the authorities had great difficulty in preventing it being vandalised. A special police guard was set up but this didn't stop a William Thorn, a few months later, throwing yellow paint and coal tar over it. Thorn was a respectable man but his political leanings were rather strong. He was tried and found guilty, but gained the sympathy of the judge who required only that Thorn enter into a recognisance to pay £15 to a charity of his choice. He chose the Hamadryad Hospital Ship, the old man of war devoted to the care of seamen.



*The statue as it might have appeared after the vandalism
[Courtesy of Eric Fletcher; vandalism by Matt Soden]*

Written & Reseached by Gordon Hindess

Booklet Produced by Paul Jones

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