

## **The Search for Richard Samuel France... Agent, Contractor, Promoter, Quarry and Colliery owner, Business Entrepreneur, Family Man... and founder of The Potts Line!**

**Philip Davies, Board Member of Shrewsbury Railway Heritage Trust has been researching the life of Richard Samuel France, the original contractor in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who built Abbey Station in Shrewsbury, and the 'Potts' line from Shrewsbury to Llanymynech, as well as many other ventures.**

"I have occasionally read about Richard Samuel France who built Abbey Station in the 1860s and of course the Potts Line, but his work is often overshadowed by the Shropshire and Montgomeryshire Railway and the work of Colonel Holman Fred Stephens, valuable and important as it was. In my opinion if it hadn't been for Richard France there would probably never have been an S&M line. Anyway for some unexplainable reason I had an irresistible urge to research him and his family.

I soon found out he lived in troublesome, turbulent times, with antagonistic business rivals, with his first wife's early death and child bereavements, his life sadly ending in bankruptcy and with his early death at 55 years of age. He was above all else a determined and driven man who lived in fine houses with servants. He kept company with Thomas Sabin another entrepreneur who was a valuable and beneficial friend (Thomas later being Mayor of Oswestry and Founder of the Fitzalan Freemasons Lodge in the town).

Much has been written about Richard's industrial work with the Potts Line, and the quarries, mines, collieries that he was associated with, but I thought it would be good to try and find some personal information out about him and his family. I discovered some initial information courtesy of Shropshire Archives and located his family at the small hamlet of Plealey, near to Pontesbury. Plealey was the home of some great academic and wealthy men who held strong religious views and dissented from the Church of England. I visited the hamlet and discovered there were three people named France (and their family) buried in a family tomb at Plealey Chapel. Firstly Richard France (1749 -1829), his son Richard France (1785 – 1869) and Richard Samuel France (1827 – 1882) who as we know was the contractor for the Potts Line.

R.S.France's father – termed 'A Gentleman' lived at Galliers Farm, which had been the summer residence (between 1788 and 1798) of the noted scholar and mathematician Edward Waring FRS **xxx what else??**. Edwards estate was 225 acres in total. Richard married Anne Harmer in 1825 at St. Alkmund's Church in Shrewsbury and together they went on to have 13 children, with many dying in infancy. The same year Richard France licensed his house as a 'dissenting meeting house' and after three years he built what is now Plealey Chapel opposite his house for independent worship. It is now redundant as a chapel and being converted into a private house. He held strong non-conformist opinions and he was a very wealthy man. When he made his will he advanced Richard Samuel France the sum of £800, equivalent to approximately £100,000 today. **Xxx also received an advance ££3 the**

will contains what is to us some fascinating detail... bolsters, candle snuffers etc likeness etc!!! Richard France (Not RSF) died on 29 June 1869 in Plealey, Shropshire, when he was 84 years old.

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**Richard Samuel France** married twice and had 3 children by his first wife and 5 children by his second wife. His second wife, Emily Matilda White, had been the family governess at the time of his first wife's death.

He was involved with the promotion of several railway ventures in Shropshire and Wales and had been an employee of the Mid-Wales Railway and the Shrewsbury and Welshpool Railway. One of his main occupations was the leasing of the quarries at Criggion and Nantmawr and to meet his objectives he built the Potteries, Shrewsbury and North Wales Railway to transport his minerals. As in business today; times were tough and competitors waged intense rivalry over the many years. There is lots of work in requisitioning land prior to building any railway and this involved many legal steps and acts of parliament. Our Trust was recently donated some legal documents showing work starting on the Potts Line from as early as 1859 for land requisition and they are currently being scanned for eventual display at what could be a future exhibition of the Life of Richard Samuel France. They were given by xxxxxxxxxxxxxx from DM BUT WHO??

Initially he demolished Shrewsbury's Benedictine monastery's Abbots Lodgings and removed the Abbey Gardens for the construction of Abbey Station, and then work started on the creation of the Potts Line.

The Shrewsbury and Potteries Junction Railway Act of Parliament was enacted on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1866 – *see document* when the SNWR and the SPJR were amalgamated to create the PSNWR. The line cost £60,000 per mile to construct and a massive total of *see document* £1,387,726,10s was spent. The funds were used not only to purchase land and agreements but also to build substantial stone, brick and metal bridges and as we know one spanning the River Severn at Shrawardine. As the line began its infancy and indeed trading was not quite as anticipated; a massive financial collapse took place on 11th May 1866, that was called *Black Friday*. A massively important financial institution and Britain's largest discount house in the City called Overend Gurney became insolvent with newspapers ranging from The Times to The Observer describing it as "Black Friday" due to the ensuing major panic.

A court ruling that prevented Overend Gurney from collecting debts owed to it by the Mid-Wales Railway Company, triggered a run on its deposits. The group asked the Bank of England for help but after an investigation of the books it refused to help. As a result, on the afternoon of 10 May, 1866, a note was stuck on Overend Gurney's door saying: "We regret to announce that a severe run on our deposits and resources has compelled us to suspend payment". The next day was Black Friday.

**The collapse of Overend and Gurney amounted to £11million and equivalent to £1.5 Billion in today's money. Hundreds of railway company stocks, and railway companies were affected and the effect on the PSNWR was fatal.**

A receiver was appointed and the railway was closed on the 18<sup>th</sup> December 1866. The amounts of money involved were massive. Ken Owen found and has kindly given the Shrewsbury Railway Heritage Trust some extremely important historic documents for which we are most appreciative. Ken and I have really enjoyed getting our teeth' into this research and we visited several locations in our quest. Firstly we visited the home of Martyn Roberts, at Bryntirion where Richard Samuel France died on  
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The house had been mentioned in the document shown to me by David Owen. **Did this include Winding Up Order? Mention here**

Richard Samuel France was no stranger to 'trouble'! He was called 'before the Bar of the House of Commons' on 1st June 1874 for an official admonishment by the Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli who had been Member of Parliament for Shrewsbury between 1841 and 1847 (Information courtesy of *The Industries of the Morda Valley* by R.D. Thomas.

The PSNR winding up act was finalised on the 18<sup>th</sup> July 1881 which decided upon the winding up of the company and payment to creditors depending on their willingness to accept the decision made.

R S France leased a colliery between Treflach and Trefonen from around 1870 **although the last payment made to him for using the still in- situ incline was in 1976.**

There were lots of legal hearings the one being before the House of Lords Select Committee in July 1881 regarding an agent through which £100,000 had been loaned to France by Brown Shipley and Company in 1865. Lord Bradford remonstrated in the House of Commons that the PNSR had taken 30 acres of land and had not been paid for it. France objected to the bill and indeed he was strong minded criticising the London Financial Association through his Barrister. ??? The Earl of Bradford claimed that the PSNWR had not paid for land valued at around £10,000 but he was willing to take shares in a new company in part settlement. As for Robert France's character he was at the time described as energetic but obstinate and lax in his maintenance. BY THOMAS SOUTHAM ? SEE BOOK For more comprehensive information about the Railway Mania of the 1860's, the formation of the PSNWR , the origin of the Shropshire Montgomeryshire Light Railway and the eventual ownership by the War Department please see 'An illustrated history of the Shropshire and Montgomeryshire Light Railway' ISBN 978-0-86093-619-0 by Peter Johnson.

With his first wife dead, a new wife aged xx and children xxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx  
xxxxxxx Richard Samuel France died on 8th August 1882 iat Bryntirion, on Morda

Richard France (R.S.France's father) inhabited Galliers Farm, which had previously been the summer residence of the mathematician Edward Waring. It is believed that Richard added the 3-bay frontage to the property. In 1825 he married Anne Harmer at St. Alkmund's Church in Shrewsbury and together they went on to have 12 children, although not all survived infancy.

In 1825, Richard France licensed his house as "dissenting meeting houses". By 1828, he had decided to build a chapel, and bought a piece of land opposite his house. He bought for five shillings, "the parcel of land known as Corfield's Yard" for the purpose of erecting a chapel "for the use of Preachers of the Methodist Conference as established by the late John Wesley". It was, however, originally licensed as a Congregational Chapel. In the 1830s, Richard France (who still owned the chapel) had arranged for the chapel to be used by the Baptists. It was finally handed over to the Wesleyan Methodists in 1851. The 1851 Religious Census records that 50 people attended morning services there.

In later years, some additions were made to the structure, to provide for toilets and a kitchen. The different brickwork on the photo of the rear of the building shows this. The outside of the main chapel is now painted white and is of the same brick as the "Sunday School" at the rear. Modern brick gives away the later extensions. The porch also appears to be a later addition, not matching the simplicity of the original architecture, and having two layers of flashing over the join to the building.

The style is more typical of Primitive Methodists, but the building was assigned to the Wesleyans. When the chapel was built, it was normal Methodist practice to display both the date and the branch of Methodism. The plain style, almost square plan, with no inscription, is explained if Richard France built it as a Congregational chapel. However, this description would have allowed France the freedom to invite those preachers of whom he approved, Methodist, Baptist or Independent. There is no doubt as to his non-conformist Christian conviction. The attendance in 1951 shows that a substantial number in the village were non-conformists. It is possible that a factor in his decision was the greater respectability of the Wesleyans coupled with their being the most capable to maintain the building as a place of worship.

Richard and Anne's son, Richard Samuel France, was born in Plealey in 1827 and as the newspaper article (image attached) tells us that Richard Samuel France was buried in Plealey, I believe that his earthly remains were returned to be interred in the family tomb. This website provides an image and details of the France Memorial.<https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/item/IOE01/09210/15>

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Road, Oswestry (formerly Pool Road) Shropshire, when he was 56 years old. He died of kidney disease, and despite all his endeavours, hard work and enthusiasm, he left £148???. In his will. His widow Emily moved to xxxxxxxxx (opposite Bryntirion) and left a few years later to live in Caterham Valley. She died in 1921 at Tittlesford, The Haven, Billingham, Sussex aged xxxx leaving £xxx in her will. Cause of death -

Important – Philip Davies, Board Member of Shrewsbury Railway Heritage Trust is continuing with his research on the family history of Richard Samuel France, the original contractor in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century for the ‘Potts’ line from Shrewsbury to Llanymynech. The Trust would like to hear from anyone either named France or who has a ‘France’ ancestor, particularly from Shropshire. Both he and his near family, including his father and grandfather are buried in Plealey. Richard died in Oswestry, and lived in Oswestry so there may still be local people that are France descendants. More importantly we know from Richard Henry France’s Last Will and Testament that he bequeathed a ‘likeness’ of Edward Waring TO WHO and a ‘likeness’ of himself (Richard Henry France) TO WHO so it is hoped that the search for descendants of this family will be successful. Please contact Philip Davies on 07762 215008 or email srht1860@outlook.com

Chapel was built in the early 19th century on the estate and at the expense of a gentleman (Richard France ?) who at first supported the Independents but later, c 1839, transferred his allegiance and the chapel to the Baptists and again, c 1839, transferred his allegiance and the chapel to the Baptists and again, c 1858, to the Wesleyan Methodists who still use it.

Monuments in yard at rear, to Richard France, 1829, two sons and three daughters of Richard and Ann France, including John, 1835, Julia Ann, 1843, Waring, 1846, and Marianne, 1849, also Caroline Helen France, 1864, Richard France, 1862, and Hannah his wife, 1866, table-tomb. Elliot(1898).

The non-conformist chapel was founded by Richard France of nearby Galliers Farmhouse, Plealey in 1828 for independent worship originally as a Congregational chapel, the chapel became a Baptist chapel following its founder's change of religious views in the 1830s and by 1851, for similar reasons. It was finally a Wesleyan Methodist chapel, which it subsequently remained until its closure in 20xx???

**Acknowledgements:** to Michael Aynsley for his extensive and valuable family history research (Wills, birth and death certificates); and to Kenton Owen – who directed me to Bryntirion, Coed Y Go, and Nantmawr. He established and runs the Oswestry Borderland Heritage website which is literally a mine of information! The website is a repository of industrial and historical information from the local area. See <http://www.oswestry-borderland-heritage.co.uk/> Ken has shared some maps and kindly donated an actual 1888 copy of the Winding Up Order for the PSNWR (Potts Line). SRHT member and Cambrian Railways stalwart David Owen of Shrewsbury kindly provided the reference from *The*

*Industries of the Morda Valley* by R.D. Thomas, that mentions RS France's appearance before Benjamin Disraeli. Thanks also to Martin Roberts who lives in Bryntirion and who agreed to meet and chat about the history of the house and much more. Archivist and historian Pam Willing of Oswestry swiftly provided some information that was helpful as I started my initial search, and Diggory Dalton, owner of Craig Gwyn helped with information about the House Rs France lived in at the time of the census in 1861; with whoooo

I visited Bryntirion. Martin Roberts believes from his knowledge the brickworks is where the bricks were made from the Old Trefonen Colliery

Nantmawr Quarry - Dalton and Craig Gwyn once the home of RICHARD in 18xx

Our appreciation to Ken Owen (who has given us an actual document showing the winding up of the potline and the details the **original costs of £1,378,000 and so many other pounds shillings and pence** are thanks to him

More importantly I likeness of Edward wearing and the likeness of RICHARD Henry France we are hoping that the search for descendants of this family will be found.

### **Richard Samuel France**

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