

**HUMPHREY BROWN, M.P.,
c.1803-1860**

Ship Owner, Silk Manufacturer, Mayor, M.P. – and Bankrupt!

By John Dixon

Preface

This article started life as a challenge issued by *Hugh Conway-Jones* for protagonists of different databases to demonstrate to the County Computing Workshop on 17 May 2003 how their preferred database would handle two lists of Shipping using the River Severn through Gloucester. My talk demonstrated the integrated use of *Bekon's Idealist Database* integrated with *Microsoft's Excel* and *Word*. Immediately *Idealist* showed a link between the only two boat owners from Tewkesbury – *Theodore Evans* and *Humphrey Brown M.P.*... Our database had already contained information researched and transcribed by our Secretary, *Wendy Snarey*. The connection between these two men was financial corruption and this challenge has opened up a 'Pandora's Box' of scandal which affected Tewkesbury and, indeed, London. This article will represent only the start of a far ranging enquiry which should, one day, make fascinating reading!

The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate what can be written using mainly¹ information already entered at random into the *Idealist Database* which can be consulted by the public in Tewkesbury Library.



Humphrey Brown M.P. when Mayor of Tewkesbury:
"a tall, dark, striking looking man of fine presence"
(*Tewkesbury Weekly Record* 1905)

Humphrey Brown started life with, at least, a pewter spoon in his mouth as he entered the firm of ship-owners and carriers inaugurated by his eponymous father. He intervened in Tewkesbury's fortunes as something of a saviour at a time of economic recession by investing in the town's declining textile industry when he was elected M.P. in 1847. Not only did he serve in that capacity for ten years but he was also, during that time, twice Mayor. However his apparently inexorable rise was abruptly terminated in 1857 when he was engulfed by a national financial scandal which ended with his bankruptcy.

Within three years, he died in Westminster in December 1860 aged only 57. He is buried in the church yard of Tewkesbury Abbey².

Not only was he M.P. and Mayor, but he was also born in Tewkesbury in about 1803³, the son of Humphrey Brown, "coal and corn merchant and an extensive and respectable barge proprietor"⁴. Like son, the father was also a boat owner originally based in Gloucester but who played a part in Tewkesbury public life by serving in 1819 as one of four Directors of the Poor⁵ while in 1823 this Tewkesbury wharfinger contributed £100 to the building of the Mythe Bridge over the Severn which

was designed by Thomas Telford⁶. He died in 1831, aged 63.⁷

By that time the son was already making his mark since, aged 27, he was featured in the trade directory along with his father as being part of Humphrey BROWN & Son, Canal Fly boat owner, Coal Dealer & Wharfinger⁸. In 1834 he was sufficiently prominent to have his marriage noted by local chronicler, James Bennett⁹ when the *Wharfinger & General Carrier of Gloucester* married *Caroline*, Eldest Daughter of *Charles Edward Chandler*. The *Chandlers* were an important local family and his father in law had been *Bailiff*¹⁰ (Mayor) in 1816 and a member of the old Corporation until he retired in 1833¹¹. Mrs. Brown was missing from the household on census night in 1851¹² but we learn that there was a son, inevitably *Humphrey A. Brown*¹³. However, a chance cross-reference with a wider 1851 census revealed that our hero was also living in the Queen (sic) Hotel, New Canal Street, Birmingham on census night: "*Humphry (sic) Brown; Visitor (Head); Married; Male; 45; M. P.; Born Tewkesbury Glos.*"¹⁴! Not mentioned in either sources was his only daughter, *Caroline Chambers* after whom he named one of his boats.

It was the *Caroline Brown* (no 23448) built at Cardiff in 1853 and registered (of 19) in 1853; a Sr (schooner?) weighing 112 tons (new); Owner: Brown, Humphrey of Tewkesbury, Gentleman¹⁵. His father had owned four boats, one of which, the *Mary*, was built in Tewkesbury by the locally famous *Charles Bathurst* in 1820 but most of the son's six boats were registered in c1853-54¹⁶. Two were built in Nova Scotia.

Hugh also asked in his challenge if we could successfully integrate notes from another source and indeed his own research added interest to the *Caroline Brown* by attaching an "*Advertisement for the new clipper schooner Caroline Brown, 180 tons, now loading for Melbourne. For freight or cabin passage apply E. L. Kendall*". This was gleaned from the *Gloucester Journal*¹⁷. My curiosity inevitably led me to the internet via *Google*¹⁸ and I picked up the following intriguing passage about our hero which pointed to squalls ahead:

"Salt and Seed, Lamp Oil, Lemons, and Vermin.

All sorts of trading went on. One merchant, Humphrey Brown tried to cash in on the Australian gold rush in 1853. He started a shipping line taking pioneers and everything they needed

such as prefabricated houses and pots and pans to Australia. But the business failed, and he was eventually sent to prison for embezzlement."¹⁹

This, the only other local source on Brown on the internet, suggests that he was indeed a risk taker. We also take the first glimpse of his character! By 1843 he was fully appreciative of the potential of the new mode of transport – the railway and was reputed to be an enthusiastic supporter of the *Bristol to Gloucester Railway*. However, his involvement became more direct in December 1843:

*"After Captain Moorsom left....., the determined Humphrey Brown talked himself into the job of Traffic Manager, declaring that he would work without profit until a dividend of 3% had been achieved. Eventually, he had to resign, however, because of his rudeness to a customer."*²⁰

Four years later, as soon as he was elected M.P. for Tewkesbury in 1847, he turned himself into a textile manufacturer and, in doing so, seemed to have won the hearts of local people.

The first evidence we have of political commitment came in 1832 when as an occupier he voted for the two *Reform* candidates in that historic general election²¹. By 1847 these politicians were known as Liberals after being proposed possibly by his brother-in-law, he was adopted along with local landowner *John Martin* as Liberal candidate for Tewkesbury after the long established Conservative candidate, *William Dowdeswell*, withdrew because of "domestic afflictions"²². The replacement promptly withdrew leaving the two Liberals unopposed as M.P.s for Tewkesbury. In 1852 the two heavily defeated a conservative opponent but it was Humphrey Brown who topped the poll with 205 to John Martin's 189²³.

The reason why he topped the poll possibly lies with his new guise as a textile manufacturer. Within three months of his election, James Bennett²⁴ was reporting that Humphrey Brown newly elected MP bought Theatre in Oldbury and "*at considerable expence*" afforded employment "*to a number of the poor of the town*". In 1850 he lived in a mansion at 24 Church street and described himself now as "*Silk throwster & manufacturer of Tewkesbury silk mills*"²⁵.

Dr. Anthea Jones²⁶ has suggested that it was a means of buying votes. She is perhaps supported by the editor of the Weekly Record²⁷ who reported with a sting in the tail that: “*Mr Humphrey Brown gave his annual supply to those engaged at his factory, and also to those poor voters who assisted him at the late election*”. The voters also supported him locally by electing him Mayor of Tewkesbury twice in 1854-5²⁸.

By 1856 he was, however, already caught up in controversy with a frank editorial by the editor of the Tewkesbury Weekly Record, one concerning “*a handbill purporting to come from Framework knitters thanking Humphrey Brown for providing work and a reply from H.B. on 200 of his famished fellow townsmen who could have no relief unless they went into the poorhouse*”²⁹.

Brown was inspired to make a riposte in a speech³⁰. His peroration is interesting:

Mr Humphrey Brown said he had made it his business in London, to ascertain what could be advantageously done for the assistance and employment of the Stocking-Makers of this Town, and he had come to the conclusion that unless new blood could be infused into the trade, it could not be carried on here. He had consulted Mr Morley, one of the greatest hosiers in London... (who) had told him that the frames were so worn out, that it was impossible to produce anything but second rate work; he said he would willingly give something as a gift towards alleviating the distress, but he could not employ labour. Mr Brettell, another gentleman in the trade, whom he had consulted, said that the Tewkesbury work was really so bad that he was ashamed to offer it in the market; the hosiers had so injured the trade that the place had a bad name. The hosiers of this Town (continued Mr Brown) are like the dog in the manger; they have accumulated their wealth by the labour of the working men, and did not care now what became of them, (cheers.) But he did not despair, one of the greatest writers had said that ‘The labour of the people was the wealth of the land’ and there was no doubt about it, (cheers.)”

By the autumn of that year, he was to move from controversy to centre of scandal. It may have been of short duration but it cost him his reputation outside of Tewkesbury, his livelihood and all his property. Within three years he had died.

The scandal erupted in August 1856³¹, seeming indirectly with a report from the *Times*, that the Manager of a local bank in Tewkesbury had been indicted for making unauthorised loans to various customers – including £1,000³² to M.P., Humphrey Brown.

In summing up the Judge said the circumstances did not show that Mr Evans took the money with felonious intent. What he had done was improper; but, to a certain extent, he was allowed to overdraw his account. He had always admitted his liability. The jury found the prisoner ‘not guilty’ though with evident reluctance.

What originally alerted me to the connection between these two men was that in a database of shipping on the River Severn, all Tewkesbury boats were said to be owned by Humphrey Brown – but there was one other owned by Theodore Evans!

A month later the scandal was widening to engulf our boat owner when, “*at a Special General Meeting of the Royal British Bank, the public accountant. He appealed to the shareholders to give the directors a fair hearing. Many questions were asked. One referred to Mr Humphrey Brown: were Mr Brown’s liabilities to the bank as much as £70,000 at one time?*”³³ The Bank was subsequently wound up. Brown tried to fight back in the correspondence pages of the *Times*³⁴ but his fate was surely sealed when he became the butt of the satirical wit of the nineteenth century, *Punch*³⁵:

“The Secretary of the zoological gardens, to the great disgust of the hippopotami, has received a magnificent live alligator, nearly fifteen feet long, and prodigiously lively. The animal has been visited by a large circle of rank and fashion. Mr Macgregor, of the British Bank, and “purely a west-end man” with his companion in advances, Mr Brown of Tewkesbury, has attended the alligator at feeding time, and even both gentlemen have expressed themselves

astonished at the animal's power of swallow. For our own part, we think that, as things remain, even the alligator is beaten by the constituents of Glasgow and Tewkesbury."

Punch was referring to the gullibility of the Tewkesbury constituents who seemed to refuse to hear anything ill of their MP.

Mr Brown's supporters being determined to give him a public reception rang the Abbey church bells as he passed through....; was met on the long bridge by a concourse of persons; the horse was taken out and the vehicle was drawn by a rope into town by a great number of boys and a few men The driver of the fly held up a small flag on which was written "the choice of the people." The cavalcade was greeted by some of the well-known names of Tewkesbury's history: Prosser, Chandler, Browett, S. P. Brookes, Badham jun, W. Healing, etc. Mr Brown addressed the assemblage from the window. He expressed his feelings for their respect and stated that they had told the world how cruel it is to hang a man first and try him afterwards; he had always done his duty to town and community of Tewkesbury and if he could not be their representative he would be their townsman. The proceedings were enlivened by the factory boys and girls, who indulged themselves by tearing down the evergreens, which had been hung round the archway, and chasing each other with them.³⁶

The presentation seemed to be working since that same month the Weekly Record³⁷ published a long editorial describing the testimonial:

"an elegant and massive piece of plate, composed of a triangular pedestal standing on three scroll feet in burnished silver. upon this 6" high pedestal stand three figures draped in dead or frosted silver, each about 13" high. These figures bear above them in their hands, a silver basket, filled with beautifully-executed wax flowers. One side was engraved with Mr Brown's

*motto and crest, **perseverantia omnia vincit** - perseverance surmounts all obstacles. It was said to have been presented to Humphrey Brown, Esq., M. P., by the working classes of Tewkesbury, in testimony of their regard for him With 1013 subscribers. The present weighs 343 ounces³⁸.*

The Cheltenham Chronicle was much more sceptical as we might expect³⁹:

We are informed that the subscriptions in Tewkesbury to the testimonial amounted to £120, and about £150 more was collected among Mr Brown's friends in the neighbourhood.

The prestigious *Illustrated London News* praised his alleged MP accomplice for honourably retiring:

"McGregor hath vanished for ever and aye" from the House of Commons. Apropos whereof, Mr Humphrey Brown, of Tewkesbury, has been to his constituents, and has "explained" his connection with the British Bank; that is to say, he has declared himself to be spotless, but bound by oath not to divulge the secrets that would prove his innocence. One would have supposed that an oath of secrecy to a dissolved bank was like an oath to an extinct dynasty; but we must wait for legal disclosures before we judge Mr Humphrey Brown's tender conscience.

The Cheltenham newspaper (From the *Cheltenham Chronicle*) weighed in and claimed that he was

an accomplice in one of the most gigantic frauds ever perpetrated – Mr Humphrey Brown has "been and gone and done it;" as if resolved to demonstrate to the world the truth of the axiom, that he who undertakes to plead his own cause before certain tribunals, has a fool for his client!

The good but gullible people of Tewkesbury eventually had to admit defeat as their M.P. was declared a bankrupt and arrested; it was suggested

that he might be prosecuted by none other than the Attorney-General⁴⁰. His fall was evident in the town since, in May 1857 "A Portion Of Mr H. Brown's Property Was Put Up For Sale At The Swan Hotel"⁴¹. This included *The Black Bear Inn*, sold to *George Blizard* for £490⁴². Two months later⁴³ the joint possessions of Brown and the hapless solicitor Joshua Brown were auctioned:

Lot 2: A Mansion House, Late The Residence Of Humphrey Brown Esq., With Gardener's Cottage, Pleasure And Kitchen Gardens, Conservatory, Large Heath And Forcing Houses, Vinery, And Melon Pit, Stabling, Coach House And Yard, Sold To Baker, Esq.



This was **24 Church Street** and now the **Abbey School** Main building. Subsequently a great deal of land surrounding Tewkesbury and belonging to Brown was sold for £70,000 in modern values.

One can only feel sorry for his only daughter Caroline. Despite having one of his boats named after her, her marriage at the Abbey in the midst of the scandal must have been a sombre affair⁴⁴. She married presumably well to *John Wells Fletcher Esq., Surgeon of Upton on Severn*.

Worse was to follow, however, since he was sentenced to six months in the *Queen's Bench Prison*. By 1905 the *Weekly Record* had taken a much more charitable interpretation of Brown's fate:

"Towards the end of this life he was unfortunately induced to become a director of the Royal British Bank and was involved in its terrible crash. Although a high legal authority declared that he had committed no

crime, he was punished for the faults of his colleagues..... His health, however broke down, and he was soon released and, shortly afterwards, he died – it is believed – of a broken heart."

Reynolds newspaper, however, took a much more brutal interpretation in an article complaining that he received a royal pardon for "*horrible and inhuman rapacity*"⁴⁵.

We have learned that Brown's motto was ***perseverance did not conquer all obstacles***. Sadly the story of our hero failed to confirm this optimism. Four years after the scandal broke, Humphrey Brown died in Westminster on 5th June 1860, aged 57. It is not a happy tale concerning one of Tewkesbury's own sons but, at least, his friends ensured that he was buried in the Abbey Churchyard⁴⁶ as befits the Town's Mayor from 1854-1855 and its M.P. from 1847 to 1857.

Notes

¹ My inquisitive historian's nature did, however, impel me to do a little following up research in the GRO, the results of which have been added to the database.

² *Tewkesburian, They used to live in Tewkesbury*, (Sutton, 1991) p302. The rights to use the book for the Woodard Database have been purchased by the County Library Service.

³ According to the 1841 census; as we know is not always reliable.

⁴ Bennett, *Register & Magazine*, Vol. I, p44. (This can be consulted in the Town Library.

⁵ Bennett, Vol. I, p37

⁶ Bennett, Vol. I, p21

⁷ 30 September 1831: Bennett, Vol. I, p44.

⁸ Pigot's Directory for Tewkesbury 1830 GFHS Website

⁹ 1834: Feb 3 Marriage: Abbey J. Bennett, Vol. I, p169

¹⁰ Before the reforms of the Municipal Corporations Act in 1835, Tewkesbury was led by two bailiffs: *Tewkesburian* p256.

¹¹ Bennett, Vol. I, p135.

¹² 1851 Ref- HO107/1974 9 426 047 24? Church Street, along with three servants.

¹³ This is yet another error: it should read Humphrey Rory Brown who died at Lahore in 1875 aged 36 (*TWR* Commemorative Edition, 1905: Tewkesbury Borough Museum, Box 29).

¹⁴ 1851 Census Devon, Norfolk & Warwick: HO107/2054 Birmingham Warwickshire (GFHS)

¹⁵ Original data supplied to be by Hugh Conway-Jones. GRO Ref D4292

¹⁶ The database also indicated the availability for study of random documents in GRO D1406 *Smithsend Archive* - uncatalogued, 2 boxes re Walton Cardiff estate.

Miscellaneous Deeds: George Thomas and Humphrey Brown's ship, "Rosy Brown", 1853. This would in fact be the Rory

Brown, included in Hugh's data. This ship was named after his son Rory –see f/n 13.

¹⁷ 30 July 1853 p2

¹⁸ an excellent 'search engine': www.google.com

¹⁹Website:

http://www.livinggloucester.co.uk/histories/gloucester_docks/what/cargoes/

²⁰ Nigel Druce: The Railway comes to Tewkesbury 1830-1845 *THS* Vol. 9 p30-31; *TWR* 1905: "So successful was he in these operations that he is said to have made in one year £40,000" – in 2003 £1.5m.

²¹ Tewkesbury Election 1832: A List of Poll 11 & 12 December 1832 2: Bennett, Vol. I, p4.

²² Bennett, Volume II, p306: replaced by Viscount Lascelles, eldest son of Earl of Harewood; date of election 30 July 1847:

²³ W R Williams: *Parliamentary History of Gloucestershire* (1898), p256; in G.R.O. Map Room.

²⁴ Bennett, Volume II, p299: 1847: September 14 Local Memoranda: new silk manufactory. Part of the building still stands in 2003, in Oldbury Road, next to the Ambulance Station. Soon it will be converted into flats.

²⁵ Slater's Directory 1850 (database supplied by Direct Resources)

²⁶ A Jones, *Tewkesbury* (Phillimore, 1987) p 174-5; by 1858 it advertised for 200 operatives; in 1861 there were 160 'hands' but by 1870 it had already closed and was then replaced by Thomas Walker, agricultural and, later, fairground, engineer.

²⁷ 25 December 1852

²⁸ Borough Year Book 20 1970 List of Mayors, supplied by David Willavoys

²⁹ 1856 *Tewkesbury Weekly Record (TWR)*, researched and transcribed by Wendy Snarey.

³⁰ *TWR* 25 January 1856; Letter to the editor.

³¹ *TWR*: 5 August 1856; Gloucestershire Bank

³² worth £39,000 in 2003

³³ *TWR*: 20? September 1856; a cutting reproduced from *The Times*.

³⁴ *TWR*: 24 September 1856: *Letter to the Editor of The Times*.

³⁵ *TWR*: 10 November 1856

³⁶ *TWR*: 9 February 1857

³⁷ *TWR*: 21 February 1857

³⁸ It cost nearly £10,220 in modern values

³⁹ Wendy Snarey

⁴⁰ *TWR*: 13 June 1857; Royal British Bank.

⁴¹ *TWR*: 27 May 1857: Sale Of Property

⁴² £20,000 today

⁴³ *TWR*: 8? July 1857; Property Sales

⁴⁴ *TWR*: 19 September 1856

⁴⁵ <http://locate.gloscc.gov.uk>: reference RX301.7(50)GS, located in Gloucester City Library.

⁴⁶ *Tewkesburian* p302;