

Helen Raby 19th Century Journalist and Author

by Maggie Jarman

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In the mid 19th century, few middle-class women pursued careers outside the domestic sphere. However, the increasing number of quality periodicals and newspapers aimed at the female market offered educated women the possibility of a small income and a public voice through their writing. Helen (sometimes “Helena”) Eliza Raby, the granddaughter of the industrialist Alexander Raby, was a prolific journalist and author whose writing career began in women’s magazines but later expanded to include scientific and historic journals and the popular press.

Helen was the only child of Alexander Raby junior, a shipbroker, and Jane Rees of Cilymaenllwyd, Pembrey, who had married some twelve years before Helen’s birth in 1821. The family lived at Brynmôr, Furnace, Llanelly (later the site of the Stradey Park Hotel) and

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Image 01: Brynmôr House: by John Wynne Hopkins

family lived at Brynmôr, Furnace, Llanelly (later the site of the Stradey Park Hotel) and Helen’s idyllic childhood there inspired a life-long love of the Welsh countryside. She and her best friend (both “of a tomboyish character”) went blackberrying, climbed trees, and went fishing, often coming home in “torn frocks, wet shoes and stockings”. As a child, “Nelly” had “a perfect understanding” of the Welsh language, thanks to her nurse, and would steal down to the kitchen in the evenings to hear the servants telling ghost stories around the fire. She was a confident rider (even “as a tiny child” she rode to hounds with her adored father) and later wrote of “one dear, loved spot” on a local, heather-covered mountain, where she would ride her pony each evening to watch the setting sun. She had a passion for nature from a very early age and spent much of her time collecting wild flowers in the surrounding countryside and learning traditional herbal remedies from a local village “doctress”. [3]

FURNACE HOUSE, LLANELLY, CARMARTHENSHIRE.

TERMS

OF

MISS BROWN'S

ESTABLISHMENT FOR YOUNG LADIES.

Board, with Instruction in the English Language, History, Chronology, Plain and Ornamental Needle Work, &c. &c. Twenty Guineas per Annum.		£.	s.	d.
Weekly Boarders	Per Annum	18	18	0
Day Boarders	Do.	8	8	0
Entrance		1	1	0
Washing		2	2	0
Day Pupils.	Per Quarter	0	15	0
Writing and Arithmetic	Do.	0	10	6
Entrance		0	10	6

Music, French, Drawing and Dancing, each Four Guineas.

Each Young Lady to be provided with a Silver Spoon, Six Towels, and a Knife and Fork.

BILLS TO BE SETTLED HALF-YEARLY.

Miss BROWN begs leave to inform her friends that she has lately removed to that very desirable residence, FURNACE HOUSE; which circumstance, together with her having recently engaged a Lady competent to assist her in the several duties of an English education, and to give instructions in the different accomplishments, and her unremitting attention to the health and morals of her pupils, will, she hopes, ensure her their kind patronage.

PRINTED BY G. BROOM, THOMAS-STREET, LLANELLY.

Watermark
1836

Image 02: Advertisement for Miss Brown's School

When she was 22, Helen married a young widower, David Lewis of Bank House, Llandeilo. Helen was initially taught at home by a governess but was sent to school at the age of twelve or so; this may well have been Miss Brown's "Seminary for Young Ladies" at The Dell in Furnace (once her grandfather Raby's house). In any event, her education likely went beyond that of the average young lady of the period, given the ease with which she added classical and literary allusions to her later writings. Helen's written accounts of her happy childhood make no mention of the public controversy over Helen's father's role as Portreeve of Llanelly[2] or the Raby family's continuing financial problems; in 1842, her father had to reach an agreement with his creditors, as an "insolvent debtor", by paying into court the value of his household furniture.

David's first wife had been Jane Morris, a daughter of the notorious Rev. Ebenezer Morris of Llanelly, but Jane had died tragically young in 1841. After the wedding, Helen moved to Bank House, "a large and commodious family mansion ... commanding a beautiful view of the river Towy and the distant mountains", where she lived with her new husband, her infant stepdaughter Jane and her elderly mother-in-law Mary [4]. David, who liked to describe himself as a gentleman, seems to have tried to establish a career for himself as a surgeon (his half-brother John Davids was a well-to-do surgeon on the Isle of Wight), as well as continuing his late father's malting business. If Helen thought her financial worries were now over, she was sadly mistaken, as David died only a year after their wedding, aged just 29, intestate, insolvent and "wholly unable to pay" his debts (his death certificate, oddly, gives no cause of death). These debts included substantial loans, mortgages and



Image: 04 Bank House

outstanding bills to tradesmen for cigars, carriage hire, wines and spirits, which together suggest that David might have been living beyond his means for some time. He had even mortgaged his reversionary interest in his late father's substantial estate, which he never in fact inherited, as he died before his mother's life interest expired. Helen was therefore left a penniless widow.

Helen returned to live with her parents but, within a year, had brought a lawsuit against David's widowed mother Mary, claiming back-payments of the maintenance she believed herself entitled to, under the terms of her late father-in-law's will. [5] The original court rolls held at the National Archives suggest that Helen won her case but that, unfortunately, Mary herself died before any payment could be made. Undaunted, Helen applied to the Court of Chancery to add new parties to the case – Mary's heir (David's half brother John Davids) and the Rev. Morris, the legal guardian of his granddaughter Jane, who had now inherited the reversionary interest in David Lewis senior's estate. This court case may well be the ultimate source of the antipathy between Helen and the Rev. Morris, who seems to have taken control of the young heiress's affairs; Jane later married one of his nephews, which ensured that her Lewis inheritance stayed in his family.

Just six months after David's death, Helen had a short story published in a high-quality ladies' serial, *World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons* ("for Ladies of Taste and Distinction"); this was followed by another short story in the next issue. By convention, most of the contributors used only their first names or initials for their written work and some were published anonymously; Helen's published work from this period is variously ascribed to "Helen Lewis", "Helen" or just "H.R.L.". Over the next two years *World of Fashion* published around twenty poems and short stories by Helen (possibly more; some very much in her style are published anonymously). One of these stories, "*Mary Mortimer*", published in 1845, stood out from the others and caused an absolute sensation in Llanelly.



Image 08: Church Lane to Berry Grove



Image 07: Berry Grove

Helen's friend, the journalist and amateur astronomer Arthur Mee, later wrote that, "at this time, Llanelly was a hotbed of gossip, cliques and all the rest of the pleasant things that go to make up a village just blossoming into a town... Local jealousies and spiteful treatment of Miss

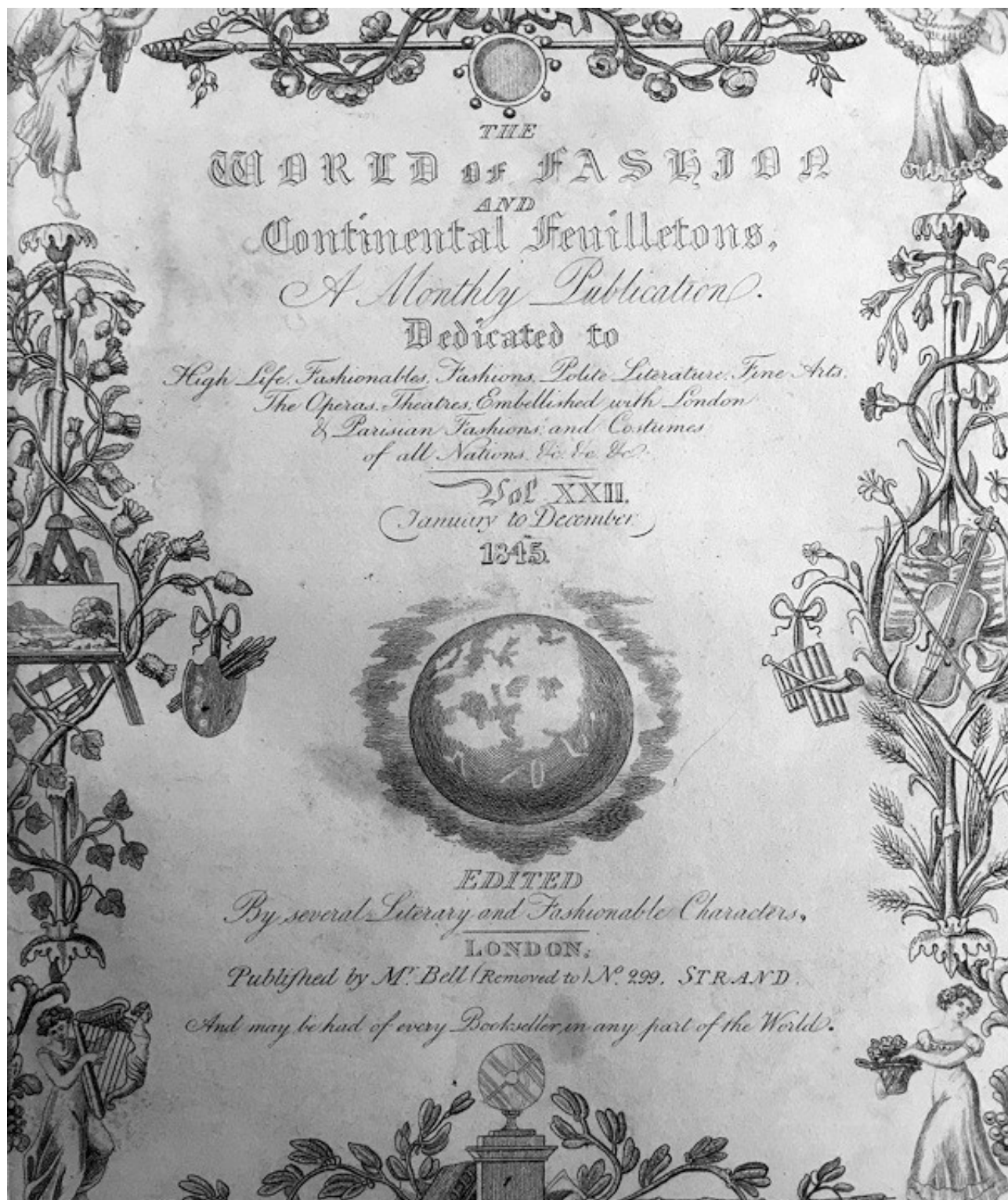


Image 2: World of Fashion

Raby led to her taking a revenge which was absolutely crushing"; it was also a very public revenge. The story begins as a conventional tale about the trials and tribulations of an orphaned heiress but it takes a very different turn in its third instalment, as the heiress and her friends take a trip to "Ll-----" and meet the local inhabitants.. This section of the story is a

barely-disguised and vividly-written satire on the middle classes of Llanelly, who are variously dismissed as vulgar, cruel and ridiculous. Its most explosive suggestion was that “Mr Roommy” (i.e. William Chambers) was the illegitimate son of Sir John Stepwell (i.e. Sir John Stepney) but the clear villain of the story is the larger-than-life Mr Machiavel i.e. Rev. Morris (“a wolf in sheep’s clothing”), who only escapes punishment for his slanderous rumour-mongering because he is a man of the cloth. Helen herself appears in her book as one of “the Y-bars”, a young lady “well acquainted with the troubles and cold realities of this harsh and unfeeling world”; the objects of her satire dismiss her as part of “a nasty proud set”, “disagreeable” and “a great flirt and what you men call *clever*”. Although the story celebrates the beauty of the local countryside and the pure, fresh sea air at Pembrey, Llanelly does not come out of it well: “the town itself was a vile place, the streets always dirty and full of black coal-dust...the houses small and ill-built.” Helen’s writing is an extraordinary contemporary record of the daily lives of the gentry and burgeoning middle classes in Llanelly at that time but its contemporary social references shocked the town (it “came like an earthquake or a thunderclap in the little social world of Llanelly”). John Innes reports in his history of Llanelly a local tradition that a gentleman was sent to London to horsewhip the magazine’s editor, only to find that “he” was a lady.[7] This probably explains why the serialization ended abruptly in May 1846, before the story was concluded. However, a re-worked, completed version of the story was published in book form in 1847, as “*Mary de Clifford*”, with the author named as “Madeline Jones” and Llanelly renamed as “Melton”. The book was as controversial as the serialised story had been and was swiftly removed from sale locally; it was still notorious decades later. Later reports called the story “the *jeu d’esprit* of a brilliant and roguish youth”, “a freak of a mischievous maidenhood” and (less charitably) “a spiteful production”, “ill-natured, libellous and vindictive”.

Although it seems to have been an open secret in some quarters that Helen was the book’s author, her reputation cannot have been completely ruined by the scandal, since in 1848 the “accomplished and beautiful” [8] Helen married Alfred Watney, the eldest son of the distiller Daniel Watney, of Wandsworth. The Watney family had acquired a stake in the Gwendraeth Anthracite & Iron Company and, by the time of his marriage to Helen, Alfred was responsible for the management of the colliery in Pontyberem, where the Watney family also founded the village school. There were reports of great celebrations in the village when the pair married at Capel Ifan in Pontyberem (the old St John the Baptist Chapel, later rebuilt). Helen wrote fondly of her years living in the village, her admiration for the chapel-going locals, their “spirit of independence” and their extraordinary willingness to share what little they had with any neighbours in need. [9] Helen’s early married life there with Alfred seems to have been very happy and her brief literary career was apparently over as she settled into the financial security of married life with a successful businessman. The couple had a daughter, Edith Helena, in 1849 and a son and heir, Arthur Raby, in 1850.

However, tragedy struck the Watneys’ “great anthracite colliery” in 1852 when water broke into the pit and 27 men and boys were drowned; it was initially assumed that the miners must have tapped into disused workings by mistake but the inquest ruled this out and so the cause of the flood remained a mystery. In her short story “*A Night of Terror in the Gwendraeth Valley*”, first published in 1869, Helen draws a vivid picture of the fathers and mothers standing around the pithead, crying for their lost sons, and the bewilderment of the sole survivor, David Evans; she describes how she had to take her baby and leave her house (Coalbrook House, which stood next to the pit) in the middle of the night, as cracks appeared in the walls and a chasm opened in the adjacent field. Although the suffering of the workers’

families must have been immense, Alfred does not seem to have been blamed for the tragedy; the *Carmarthen Journal* went out of its way to describe him as a “particularly careful” owner who “used every means to keep the pit safe”. It reported that he “kindly and generously ministered to the wants of the bereaved families”. [10] If Helen’s story is to be believed, Alfred was distraught at the loss of life (“the strong man wept like a child”). Despite initial fears that the colliery would have to be closed, Alfred was eventually able to re-open the workings, while in 1854 his four-year-old son Raby ceremonially lit the furnaces of the new Gwendraeth Iron Works, to “great rejoicings amongst the workmen”. [11]



Image 5: Coalbrook House: © Crown Copyright:

Figure 3: Image 06: Memorial Plaque for Gwendraeth mining disaster:
Author's Collection



The Gwendraeth tragedy seems to have triggered a crisis in the Watneys' marriage. Helen later alleged that, from this point onwards, Alfred began a succession of affairs with their housemaids and that he deserted her in 1854, taking their two children with him to New York. [12] After six months, Helen joined him there and they were reconciled for a short time, travelling around America before moving back first to Wales, then to Richmond and finally central London. One of their London maids who was accused of stealing dresses from Helen in 1857, alleged that Alfred had "improperly assaulted" her more than once, a claim which Alfred denied, on oath, in court. [13] Although the couple had another son, Daniel Herbert ("Bertie") in 1858, Alfred's infidelity continued and later that year he began an affair with Anna Belinda Burton, whose late father had been a slave-owning clergyman in Jamaica. Alfred left Helen for good when she was expecting their fourth child, Meta Jane, born in January 1860. Helen could have chosen to divorce Alfred, thanks to the recently enacted Matrimonial Causes Act, but it is likely that her Christian faith - and possibly the continuing social stigma of divorce - led her to apply for a formal, judicial separation instead, on the grounds of Alfred's adultery and desertion. By the time the petition was filed in the summer of 1860, Alfred was living openly with Anna, who had already given birth to his child, a girl. This must have been a particularly cruel blow, as, just days after Helen's petition was lodged at the court, baby Meta fell ill and died. It's unclear whether a formal separation order was ever made, although the fact that Helen was able to bring a court case in her own name in 1867 suggests that it was. In any event, the pair lived separate lives from this point; Alfred raised their two older children, while their infant son Bertie stayed with Helen. Her later writings imply that she had little or no say in the removal of her older children from her care and that she felt their loss deeply.

From this point on, Helen outwardly lived the life of a lady, mostly in Hampshire, although she spent a few years in the 1870s in Beaumaris, North Wales, too. Her frequent trips to London, Brighton and Bath were often in the company of one of the Comtesses de Hamel de Manin (Helen's first cousin, also called Helen, had married Jean Francois, the 21st Comte de Hamel de Manin, making her and all their subsequent daughters French countesses). Her later articles suggest a life of travel, dinner parties and cultured society. The reality, though, was probably rather less glamorous. A bizarre court case in 1867 relating to the letting of her furnished house in Hampshire to a Mr Lyne and his notoriously eccentric son referred to "rubbishy" and "shakey" furniture and saucepans without bottoms (the alleged damage included holes in the bedroom curtains caused by the tenants' pet magpies). [14] Her claim for damages was only partly upheld and it is hard not to sense a degree of prejudice in the court report's description of Helen as "a lady living apart from her husband". It is possible that financial pressures led Helen to re-launch her writing career after the separation.

In 1862 *The Queen* (an early forerunner of *Harper's & Queen*) and *The Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times* started to publish letters from Helen, often in answer to queries from readers. They were well received and seem to have led to Helen being commissioned to write longer articles, usually on gardening, household management and travel. Another contributor, "Firefly", had letters and articles published in the same papers around this time, writing about similar subjects but often with a more satirical or controversial tone; this was also Helen, again using a pseudonym to push the boundaries of feminine decorum. Helen was soon a prominent contributor and devoted fans were sending letters to the editor requesting "*carte de visite*" photographs of her and praising her "serious thoughtfulness and real store of learning" and "sisterly counsels". Helen later claimed that her writing was only a "pastime" but

the sheer quantity of her articles over the next 30 years suggests it was much more than this and, if nothing else, that she enjoyed the status and respect that came with being a published writer.

Helen soon acquired a reputation as a respected amateur naturalist and as a particular authority on gardening and on Wales and the Welsh. Her personality shines through every article: assured, witty, erudite and entertaining. As was typical for the time, her work spans a wide range of genres and included not only opinion pieces and factual articles but also, occasionally, poems and short stories, which usually centre around themes of betrayal and loss. These fictional works were often re-workings of her writings in *World of Fashion* from the 1840s; rather poignantly in one, she changed the original name of the heroine to "Meta". Several of her short stories were inspired by memories of her nurse's traditional tales or by her own studies of Welsh history and legend, while she drew on memories of her travels around Wales for her many articles aimed at the burgeoning tourist market. Helen's cousin Caroline Okeden was also a published author and she dedicated her 1869 novel *Philip Vaughan's Marriage* to "my cousin Helena ... with affection". [15]

Alfred, meanwhile, was still living with Anna and their three children; Helen's indignation at this arrangement is clear from her letter to the *Brighton Guardian*, which had published a notice of the birth of a son to "the lady of Alfred Watney Esq"; Helen demanded and secured an apologetic public retraction from the editor, stating that she was "the only Mrs Alfred Watney". [16] Alfred is consistently described as a cornfactor during this period but remained for some time an absentee owner of the Gwendraeth Iron and Coal Works. When he died in 1873 his estate was worth something near £40,000; the bulk went to his oldest son Raby, with generous provision for Anna and their three illegitimate children, but he left considerably less to his son Bertie and nothing to Helen. [17] Alfred and Helen's daughter Edith was, sadly, already dead by this point, from complications caused by the birth of her third son, at the age of just 22.

In later life, Helen contributed extensively to "*Hardwicke's Science Gossip*", the short-lived literary magazine "*Red Dragon*" and Arthur Mee's "*Carmarthenshire Notes*", as well as local Hampshire newspapers, but it is clear from surviving references that she also wrote intermittently for a number of national journals and newspapers and was a constant (and welcome) letter-writer to many more. She developed a network of contacts who kept her supplied with their travel notebooks as source material for her articles, but she also carried out her own research. She designed an aquarium for her drawing room, so that she could study marine plants and animals, and, when a friend gave her two pairs of guinea pigs as a gift, she kept one pair as pets and had the other pair cooked, one in a stew and one in a curry, to see if they were edible – she reported that they were delicious. Always happy to engage in debate in the letters columns of high-profile publications, from *The Field* to *The Spectator*, she never shied away from controversy and held her own against male contributors, though she was careful to never claim to be more than an enthusiastic lady amateur. Helen also used her position to support worthy causes, such as the campaign against the use of songbirds' feathers for trimming ladies' hats. Occasionally, her entertaining articles in the more serious natural history publications attracted criticism from gentlemen readers for combining science with "imagination" but Helen defended her lighter-hearted approach by saying that she "preferred a faster steed" and would rather ride "Pegasus" than "Dobbin". [18] Local newspapers often cited her latest articles in the national press and in 1874 the *Llanelly & County Guardian* pronounced that "Llanelly should be proud of Mrs Watney". [19]

Helen was devoted to her younger son Bertie and his large family, who lived nearby in the same village in Hampshire. Helen's letters to her cousin Lady Hills-Johnes of Dolaucothi, written in her distinctive style - and atrocious handwriting - suggest she also kept a lively interest in social events and literary debates right up until her final illness.[20] She died in 1899, in her late seventies, leaving the whole of her (very small) estate to Bertie. The *Western Mail* wrote in its obituary of Helen that she had been "an interesting, if not unique, personality". Bertie wrote to Lady Hills-Johnes about his deep grief at the loss of his mother, as they "had been separated so little from each other". By her express desire, he said, Helen was buried at Liss in "the quiet old churchyard", close to her infant granddaughter, who had died just a few months earlier. Bertie added, "I was very pleased that so many friends sent flowers. She was always so fond of flowers and wrote so much about them."

REFERENCES

1. Helen's descriptions of her childhood are taken from her articles published in "*The Queen*" newspaper between 1862 and 1866
2. See for example Raby's letter to a local magistrate published in *The Welshman* of 7th February 1845
3. *The Silurian*, 12th November 1842
4. Sale particulars published in *The Welshman*, 13 September 1844
5. Court of Chancery; Clerks of Records and Writs Office: Pleadings 1842-1852, Cause no. 1844 L81 (rolls held at National Archives)
6. *Western Mail* 8th December 1899
7. *Old Llanelly* by John Innes (1902)
8. *Bristol Mercury* 26th August 1848
9. *Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times* 20th December 1862
10. *Carmarthen Journal* 14th May 1852
11. *The Welshman* 16th June 1854
12. Divorce & Matrimonial Causes Files 1858-1866, file W75 (wife's petition), held at National Archives
13. *Morning Post* 18th February 1857
14. *Morning Herald* 29th January 1867
15. Caroline Okeden published two novels (as Fitzmaurice Okeden): *Felicia's Dowry* (1866) and *Philip Vaughan's Marriage* (1869)

16. *Brighton Guardian* 5th August 1863
 17. Will of Alfred Watney proved at the Principal Registry, 18th July 1873
 18. *Hardwicke's Science Gossip* (1870)
 19. *Llanelli and County Guardian* 5th November 1874
 20. Dolaucothi Estate correspondence held by National Library of Wales
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2. Advertisement for Miss Brown's school for young ladies and Furnace House "The Dell":
Llanelli Library collection
3. World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons, 1845:
Author's Collection
4. Bank House, Llandeilo:
Author's Collection
5. Coalbrook House: © Crown Copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales © Hawlfraint y Goron: Comisiwn Brenhinol Henebion Cymru
6. Memorial plaque for Gwendraeth mining disaster: *Author's Collection*
7. Berry Grove with family group outside (Helen may be the lady sitting in the chair) circa early 1890s:
Courtesy of Liss Area Historical Society: Hampshire: Record Office, 30M97/54
8. Church Lane, Liss, leading to Berry Grove: *Courtesy of Liss Area Historical Society*
9. St Peter's Church, Liss, Helen's burial: *Courtesy of Liss Area Historical Society*
10. Alexander Raby Junior: *Courtesy of Llanelli & District Civic Society*
11. Furnace House - "The Dell" - "*Llanelli Unseen*"
12. Signature. *Author's Collection*