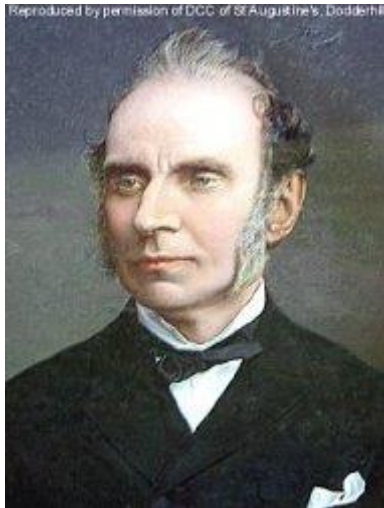


John Corbett

Born 1817. The Salt King.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



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1. Introduction

The following chapters (1 to 5) were archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Wikiwand website at www.wikiwand.com.

John Corbett was born in Brierley Hill, Staffordshire, where his father, Joseph Corbett, ran a successful canal transport business. John joined the family business but by 1850 canals were facing increasing competition from the new and expanding railways. John Corbett sold his share of the family canal business and, in 1853, purchased disused salt workings in Stoke Prior from the British Alkali Company. Corbett brought all the innovations of the industrial revolution to mechanise and commercialise the business, soon making his salt workings the largest in Europe and built a great fortune. It was a massive operation, with boreholes drilled hundreds of feet underground and coal-fired steam engines pumping the brine up to the surface. There it was evaporated out in great pans, heated by coal furnaces.

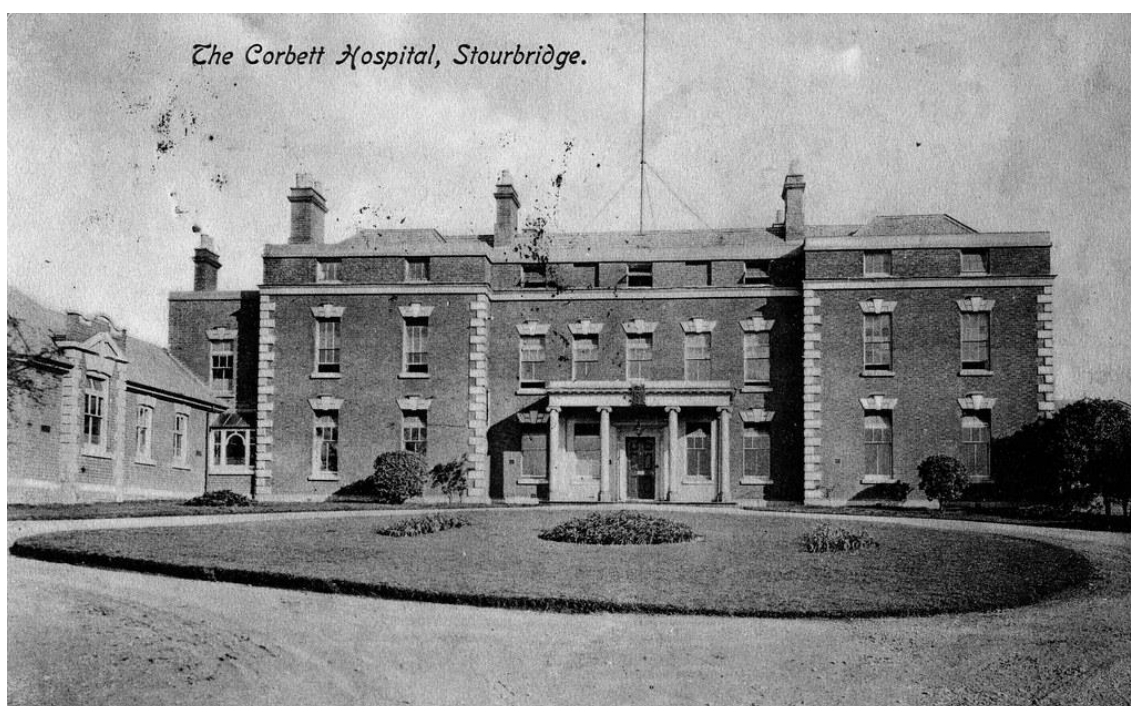


John Corbett's salt works near Droitwich.

2. Philanthropy

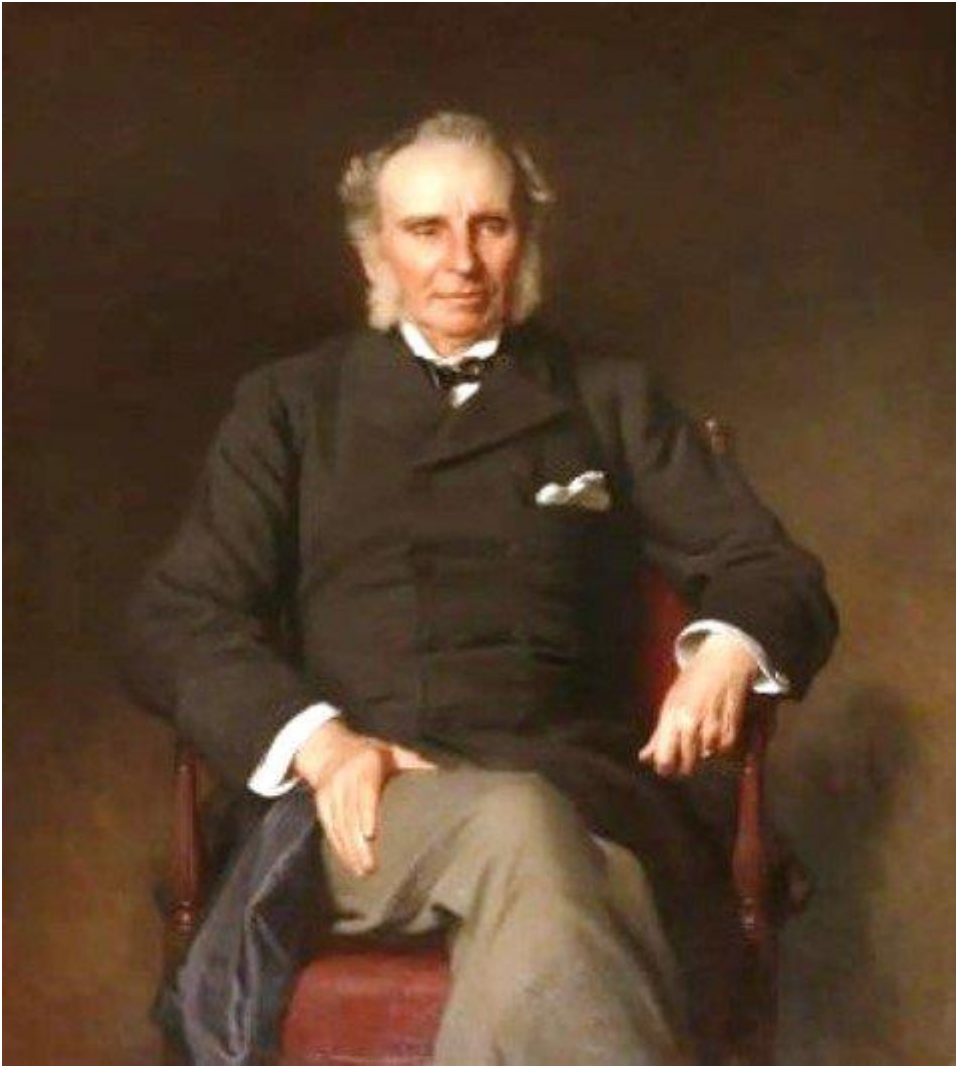
Corbett did not simply utilise this fortune just for his own ends, preferring to reinvest profits into the business processes, innovation and also into improving his workforce's working conditions and even raising wages. His workers were so well paid, for the time, that many could boast that their wives did not need to work at all.

He purchased a rundown house near to his birthplace, The Hill in Amblecote in December 1891. He repaired and refurbished the house, changing its use into a hospital and endowed it to the local people on 31 July 1893 as Corbett Hospital, with a sum of £2,000 for endowment (increased by public subscription to £5,000) and two sums of £500 towards the repairs fund and furnishing. John Corbett never lived at The Hill.



The original Corbett Hospital, established by John Corbett in a property he bought for the purpose in Amblecote, near his birthplace of Stourbridge.

3. Politics



Corbett was elected at the 1874 general election as Member of Parliament for Droitwich, having unsuccessfully contested the seat in 1868. He was re-elected at three subsequent general elections, joining the breakaway Liberal Unionists when the Liberal Party split in 1886 over Home Rule for Ireland. Corbett retired from the House of Commons at the 1892 general election.

4. Marriage



Chateau Impney.

In 1855 he met his future wife Hanna O'Meara in Paris. She lived in Paris with her Irish father and mother. He married her within a year of meeting her. They had six children together. She missed her elegant Parisian lifestyle and the French upbringing she had enjoyed so Corbett had a French style chateau built to assuage her homesickness, completed in 1875 for the staggering cost, at the time, of £247,000. Chateau Impney still stands today, as a well-known landmark just outside Droitwich Spa. They separated after nearly thirty years of marriage.

5. Retirement



The porch of the Aberdovey Literary Institute, donated by John Corbett.

In 1888, Corbett sold his massive salt business to the Salt Union Ltd for GBP £660,000 (equivalent to £50 million in 2007). He spent much of the proceeds in philanthropic work in and around Droitwich Spa, buying St. Andrew's House and turning it into the Raven Hotel. At the end of the 19th century, he presented a veranda (above) to the Aberdovey Literary Institute.

John Corbett died on 22 April 1901 and was buried in the churchyard of St Michaels, Stoke Prior, Worcestershire.

6. The Aberdovey Literary Institute



Drone view of the water side of the Institute. It is the left hand half of the sea fronting terrace in the centre of the photo. Reproduced with the kind permission of the photographer, Paul Fowles.

During the late 19th century hundreds of reading rooms were established across the UK, funded by philanthropy and public subscription. The Aberdovey Literary Institute, founded in 1882, is one of the finest surviving examples. Originally a bath house, it is a well-preserved Victorian building, in a beautiful setting on the waterfront of the Dovey Estuary. It maintains its original purpose - a calm reading room - which the public can enjoy without charge.

The Institute is open from 9am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday, with newspapers and magazines (in English and Welsh), and free wi-fi. It operates as a registered charity, managed by volunteers. There is a membership scheme, costing £15 a year, for those who wish to support the Institute. Members are able to use the Institute's private sea-facing terrace looking out over the estuary.

The following history of the Institute is extracted from "Aberdovey Literary Institute 1882–1982" by the late Henry Kenneth Birch.

The Literary Institute, a registered charity, is one of the few buildings on the river / sea side of Aberdyfi and has had a long and chequered history. It was founded in late 1882 and was formerly an old bath house and a meeting place of the Plymouth Brethren. Initially the rent of the building

was £10 per annum, a not inconsiderable sum then and meant that charges for those wishing to be members had to be an appropriate way of raising this figure. The first subscription fees were fixed at:- Honorary Membership 10/6d per annum, Ordinary Membership 1/- per annum and for those under 21 years of age the fee was 6d per annum. However, these were quickly revised and in January 1883 Ordinary Members were paying 4/- per annum and those under 21 but over 14 years of age paid 2/-. Visitors could have temporary membership for 2/6d. Membership of the Institute obviously proved popular as a list of Ordinary Members for 1905 shows a membership of over 60 persons each paying 5/- per annum.

Opening hours were shown as 10 a.m. until 10 p.m. Sundays excepted with smoking only allowed from 6 p.m.

During World War I the Institute was used by a wide variety of organisations – Belgian refugees in the area were allowed free use of the rooms, the Lower Committee room was used for the Emergency Corps and by October 1915 the Institute was used as a centre for those wishing to 'join up'. Many fund raising efforts were organised so that parcels and sometimes money could be sent to those on active service. When peace finally came with the signing of the Peace Treaty at Versailles in 1919 it proved to be a new start for the Institute. A number of applications were received to join the Institute with four under age boys all wishing to play billiards. This resulted in the Committee buying its first billiard table costing £65 from the Dovey hotel.

In 1922 the freehold of the Institute was purchased together with freeholds for 1, 2 and 3 Bath Place. This was only possible due to the generosity of Mr A Tomlins who purchased the properties for £360 on behalf of the Institute and then gave the Deeds to the Trustees as a gift.

In 1933 the Institute marked its Golden Jubilee by setting aside 20th July as day of celebration. Tea was provided for all schoolchildren who also received a commemorative mug or medal and in the evening entertainment in the form of the Concert Party took place – fee being £10 guineas!

Within days of the outbreak of World War II a letter was received asking permission to use the Institute on five mornings a week as a school. Permission was granted and this arrangement continued until 1943. An attempt was made to continue after this but the new arrangement was to only last for one term. However in January 1945 a request was received to run a school for an indefinite period and this was granted on the condition that 15/- per week rent was paid together with the responsibility for heating the room. During the war years troops in the area were admitted to the Institute at a special rate of 1/- per quarter.

In 1948 the Institute received the gift from the Masters and Fellows of Emmanuel College, Cambridge of a billiard table belonging to the late Mr C H Alcock. In the same year the Committee received a solicitor's letter advising that a Miss E Roberts, Gwynfechan, Arthog had included a clause in her will:- “To the Aberdovey Literary Institute my freehold dwelling houses and premises known as No's 33, 34 and 35 Terrace Road Aberdovey, aforesaid in trust to apply the annual income thereof for the benefit of the said Institute such gift to be known as the Elizabeth Roberts benefaction”. After much discussion by the Committee the properties were sold to the existing tenants for £800 and this sum was invested by the Trustees on behalf of the Institute.

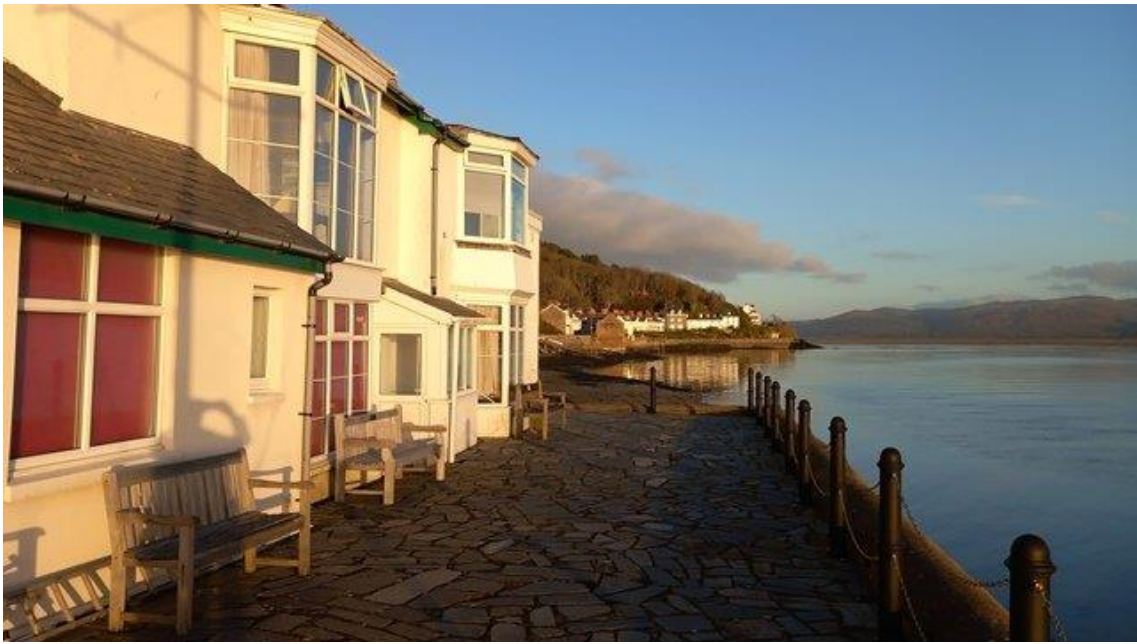
By the 1950's membership was declining – some said it was due to the increase in the membership fee from 5/- to 7/6d per annum – and consideration was given to the formation of a Literary and Debating Society. This culminated in a ‘Drama Week’ and through tremendous effort on the part of a sub-committee the venture was a huge success.

The Institute had experienced problems for some time trying to attract a suitable applicant to fill the post of caretaker which had, by and large, been a residential post. Finally, an Aberdyfi resident was appointed to fill the post in a non-residential capacity which then meant that the accommodation was available to be rented out.

The Building Today



The Institute viewed from the road.



The sea-facing Members' Terrace. Photograph at sunset, December 2023.



View east from the Members' Terrace at sunset. December 2023.



Upper floor Reading Room. Also a museum and meeting room.



View of the sea from the bay window of the Reading Room.



A display of stuffed birds in the Reading Room.



The lower floor billiards room. Originally a pool, used by the Plymouth Brethren.

Date	Name / Address	Comments
15 th NOV	PAM & PHIL NORTH WALES	HAVE BEEN COMING HERE TO ABERDOVEY FOR THE PAST 35 YEARS. SUCH A BEAUTIFUL PLACE SO PEACEFUL. KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK.
21 Nov 2023.		We've been coming here for 20yrs + only just discovered this little gem. So peaceful. Thank you to all who make it possible. Frank Roy, Bishops Wood, Staffs.
2 Dec 2023		This place is amazing. So pleased to have been told to 'push the door hard!' by a passerby. Ron & Marie, Bichington, Mants.
4 th Dec '23		What a lovely place to visit. <i>[Signature]</i>

Words of appreciation in the Visitors' Book. December 2023.

The Great Billiards Controversy

The most contentious issue in the long history of the Aberdovey Literary Institute was the morality of billiards. The following account of this controversy is extracted, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the history of the institute by Henry Kenneth Birch.

At the Annual General Meeting of the Literary Institute which was held on the 4th February 1897, members were asked by the Chairman, Mr. W. Jones, the local Relieving Officer, to consider a proposal by Mr. T. Walton, who was seconded by Captain Edwards, that billiards should be added to the activities offered by the Institute. This proposal, however, which not only appealed to but had the support of many members, was in contrast looked upon by others as something that could well threaten the Institute's very existence.

For example, the Vicar, the Reverend J. Rowands, was totally opposed to the introduction of billiards and spoke of the gambling evils associated with the game. He believed that if the motion was passed then the Committee might just as well write 'Ichabod' above the door in place of Literary Institute for in his opinion 'the glory of the reading room would have departed'. Equally opposed to the idea of billiards was Captain Griffiths and Mr. W. Jones, who both expressed sentiments similar to those of the Vicar. Alderman J. H. Jones, however, supporting the proposal, did not agree and expressed the view that he saw no more harm in playing billiards than in playing golf, croquet or lawn tennis, except these were outdoor games. His conviction stemmed from a belief that to deny young men and visitors the opportunity of playing billiards only compelled them to go and

play in rooms connected to licensed houses. Support for the game also came from Captain Lewis, who believed that the introduction of billiards would add considerably to the revenue received by the Institute and that in his opinion this was a consideration they could not entirely ignore.

However, the Reverend J. O. Thomas in expressing his anxiety about the proposal went on to declare that the introduction of billiards was something that went completely against the basic principles upon which the Institute was founded. Instead, he urged all present to do all in their power to extend and develop the literary side of the Institute which over the years had proved so popular and successful. Undoubtedly his compelling argument did much to influence opinion and in the voting that followed eighteen voted for the introduction of billiards with twenty-four voting against. There the issue, which had certainly proved contentious, was allowed to rest for several years.

On the 9th October 1903, the question of billiards was to be raised once again. Members attending a special meeting called by the Chairman were asked to consider the advisability of purchasing a miniature billiard table. Various views were expressed and none more forcibly than those of the Vicar, the Reverend J. Rowlands, who since the matter was last debated six years before had in no way mellowed in his attitude towards the game. In fact, he showed an even stronger determination to oppose billiards, for on this occasion he threatened to resign his position as Vice-Chairman if the proposition was passed. However, others were equally strong in support of billiards and among these were such prominent members as Messrs. A. Tomlins, H. Lewis, J. P. Lewis, I. Clayton and Captain Edwards. It was in order to resolve the matter, or so it was thought, once and for all that the Chairman called for a ballot on the issue which resulted in a vote of 41 for the introduction of billiards, with 18 voting against. There was only one abstention. As a consequence of the result the Vicar had no other option but to resign his position as Vice-Chairman of the Institute.

However, victory for those supporting billiards was to be short lived. The mere thought of the game being introduced was looked upon by many of the older members as something completely offensive and a serious split in the membership appeared inevitable. It was therefore considered not only necessary but vital to reconvene a meeting on the 30th October in order to examine the whole position once again. It was only by diplomatic pressure on some of the younger members of the Institute that a compromise was reached on 4th December 1903, when it was generally agreed to buy a bagatelle table from the Albion Hotel, Tenby, for £10. This particular table proved to be unsuitable, and a new bagatelle table was purchased from Orme and Sons, Manchester.

Although Mr. E. L. Rowlands gave notice in February 1908 that he was going to re-open the billiards issue, it was not until five years later that a decisive move was made on the matter. In January 1913 the Aberdovey Billiard Club offered to sell their billiard table to the institute for £30. The offer, which a few years earlier would have proved so controversial, was accepted by the Committee, thus demonstrating quite clearly how attitudes towards the game had changed since 1897 when the issue was first raised. Unfortunately, the advent of the Great War was to deny many of the younger members the opportunity to enjoy this long awaited addition to the facilities provided by the Institute.

Years later another controversy, regarding the Daily Worker newspaper, was more easily resolved. The Committee received in 1940 a letter of complaint from Mr. H. E. Barton, who considered that the 'Daily Worker' was a dangerous publication and as such should not be in the reading room. After discussion it was decided by the Committee that the paper should in future be kept in the custody of the caretaker and only handed out on request.



The lower floor billiards room. Originally a pool, used by the Plymouth Brethren.
