

Review of 'Wartski: The First Hundred and Fifty Years' by Geoffrey C. Munn

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Wartski: *The First One Hundred and Fifty Years*, Geoffrey C. Munn (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2015), isbn 978-1-851-49784-3, pp. 288, £65.

Material on the history of the Jews of Wales, let alone the Jews of North Wales, is hard to find beyond a sprinkling of articles and books. Fortunately, Cai Parry-Jones's forthcoming book on the Jews of Wales (in the interest of full disclosure: it is based on the doctorate he completed at Bangor University under my supervision) will go a long way to filling this gap. Geoffrey Munn's history of Wartski, perhaps the most famous firm (Jewish or otherwise) to emanate from the small north Welsh city of Bangor, likewise makes a valuable contribution.

The eponymous Morris Wartski, born in 1855 in Tureck, near Karlisch, Poland, emigrated to Liverpool, and eventually arrived in Bangor in 1882. He began his trading life, as many immigrant Jews did, as a pedlar, travelling with his stock of silver watches, jewellery, and haberdashery, offering it for sale "to gentry and local farmers" (p. 22). Legend has it that a chance encounter with the 5th Marquess of Anglesey, Henry Paget (1875–1905), known as the Earl of Uxbridge, caused his fortunes to change. Paget was fond of theatre, clothing, and jewellery, gaining a reputation as the "Dancing Marquess". It was his patronage, so the story goes, that allowed Wartski to open permanent premises on Bangor High Street in 1895. Fifteen years later, he had transferred his business to Mostyn Street in Llandudno, opening two shopfronts and benefiting from the boom in seaside tourism.

Having married into the family, Emanuel Snowman was invited to join the business. Finding North Wales too restrictive for his tastes, the London-born Snowman opened a Wartski subsidiary in London in 1913. While Wartski had influential friends and customers, including the future Prime Minister David Lloyd George, it was really Snowman who gave the company its modern identity and international reputation. Following the October Revolution in 1917, and short of cash, the Soviets were having what can be described as a "fire sale", selling off valuables and antiquities confiscated from royalty, aristocracy, banks, bourgeoisie, and churches to fund the new state. On behalf of Wartski, Snowman acquired from them a selection of antique and twentieth-century objects, including the work of the Russian Court Jeweller, Carl Fabergé, and jewellery in the Louis Style. Such purchases boosted the profile of Wartski, and the firm attracted a series of famous customers, including international royalty (British, Egyptian, Iraqi), film stars, actors and actresses, film directors, presidents, singers, and writers. Perhaps the most famous of the latter was

Ian Fleming, who immortalized Wartski in his story, “The Property of a Lady” (1967). Unfortunately, though, in its adaptation in the film *Octopussy* (1983), Snowman was left out. Eventually, the branches in Bangor and Llandudno closed and what was once only a subsidiary became the main and only store, Wartski of Llandudno in Bond Street, where it remains today. While it may have faded from public profile, the firm fashioned the royal wedding rings in 2005.

The Wartski connections to North Wales may also have become attenuated, but their footprints still remain. While no trace remains of the Bangor shop, the name Wartski can clearly be seen in the floor tiles of a shop in Llandudno. Morris Wartski’s son, Isidore, became the mayor of Bangor and it was owing to him that tolls were dropped over the Menai Bridge. He also bought land, which he bequeathed in perpetuity to the city and carries the name Wartski Fields. More recently, in 2015, Nicholas Snowman OBE, Chairman of Wartski, was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by Bangor University.

Munn’s *Wartski: The First One Hundred and Fifty Years* does exactly what it says on the tin. It describes itself as “simply a history of Wartski, its stock, its scholarship and its clientele” (p. 18). It is divided into eight thematic chapters: “Onwards and Upwards”, “Thirteen Eggs and Other Things”, “Louis Galore”, “The Great and the Good”, “A Royal Flush”, “Tell and Show”, “Collectors and Collecting”, and “In with the New”.

Geoffrey Munn is not an academic. Rather, he is an insider. Having joined the firm in 1972, he rose to become its current Managing Director. He can also be seen on the BBC’s *The Antiques Roadshow* as one of its resident jewellery experts. Nevertheless, despite the absence of references and a bibliography, it is evident from the text that he has done solid research to produce this tome. Furthermore, it is detailed, readable, and accessible. But what takes this book on to a different level, is the imagery. There is not a page which is not illustrated, depicting historical advertisements, photographs, pictures of the well-heeled clientele, and, of course, the very wares Wartski sold. And some of this stuff is simply amazing. Overall, not only is Munn’s book a contribution to the scholarship on Jews who lived in, and were from, North Wales, but it is also a beautiful edition; a lovely coffee-table book, full of striking images of wonderful craftsmanship.

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