



# FACTsheet 8

## Penmaenmawr's own "J.R"

John Rowland Thomas was born on 2nd March, 1881 at Penrhyndeudraeth. In 1883 the family moved to Dwygyfylchi, where his father was born. John Rowland Thomas went to Pencae School and from there won a scholarship to Friars School in Bangor before transferring to the new Ysgol John Bright in Llandudno. At the age of 18, he entered an apprenticeship at the Cloth Hall Shop in Bethesda. The gas lights of London must have been calling because he left Wales to move to London and work in the silk department of Thomas Lloyd.

John Rowland Thomas was in the right place at the right time for the growth of the silk industry. After Selfridges bought Thomas Lloyd's shop in 1914, John Rowland Thomas stayed with them for five years. He went on to work as a silk buyer for Harrods twice in his career, until eventually he moved to what would become the John Lewis Partnership in 1930. He was their Chief Silk Buyer and he also became one of the company's Directors. John Rowland Thomas earned the affectionate nickname "J.R" and by this time he was renowned as a world-famous silk specialist.



# Penmaenmawr's own "J.R."

April 6, 1935

THE DRAPERS' RECORD

11



## New Directors of John Lewis and Co.

*Mr. J. R. Thomas and Mr. J. M. FitzRoy Elected to the Board*



Mr. J. R. Thomas.

Mr. J. M. FitzRoy.

TWO important appointments are announced to the board of John Lewis and Co., Ltd., Mr. J. R. Thomas and Lieutenant-Commander John Maurice Fitzroy, R.N. (Retd.), having become directors.

Reputed to be the biggest retail buyer of silks in Britain, Mr. Thomas is in charge of the largest buyership in the house. Born in North Wales, he came to London 33 years ago, and was with Messrs. T. Lloyd's, of Oxford-street, W., when that firm was taken over by Selfridge and Co., Ltd. Subsequently, he spent 18 months as assistant buyer with Harrods, Ltd., before joining Derry and Toms as buyer. Two years later he returned as silk buyer to Harrods, where he spent eight years, until he joined the John Lewis partnership.

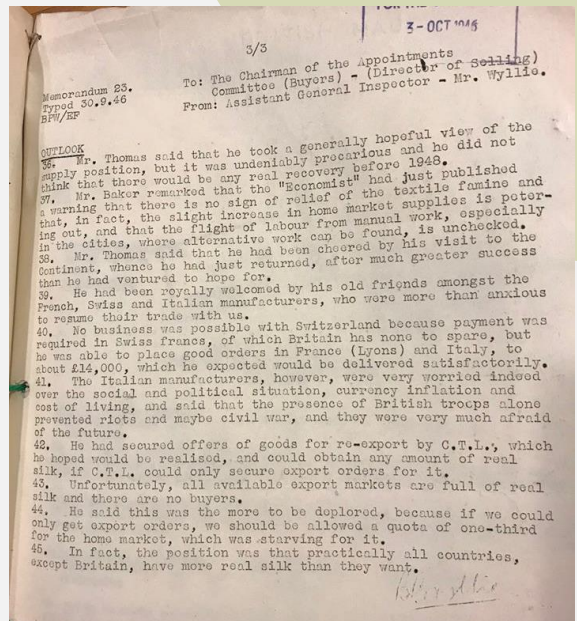
Lieutenant-Commander FitzRoy is general manager of the East House (formerly T. J. Harries and Co., Ltd.), to which position he was appointed in August of last year. He started with the partnership in January, 1931, as chief sales manager at Peter Jones, Ltd., being made general manager of that store two years later. When John Lewis absorbed Tyrrell and Green last year, he took over the managership there for the first five months. He is the youngest son of Capt. the Rt. Hon. Edward A. FitzRoy, the Speaker of the House of Commons.

J.R did not mix his work life with his personal interests that much, and the John Lewis Partnership's archive were not aware that he was prominent in Welsh society life in London. He was a Deacon of Tabernacl in King's Cross and editor of the Tabernacl periodical, Y Lamp, from its inception. During the 1930s depression, when people from Wales were flocking to London for work, he instigated the establishment of a committee to develop Welsh chapels in Slough, Luton and Harrow, as places where the Welsh contingent could meet each other and worship. To add to his list of credentials, he was at the forefront of establishing the London Caernarvonshire Society and branches of Urdd Gobaith Cymru in several of London's Welsh chapels and became one of the first Vice-Presidents of the Urdd.



# Penmaenmawr's own "J.R."

In his professional career, J.R was known as a shrewd man. Back in 1930, he negotiated an excellent salary and benefits package with John Lewis before he agreed to move from Harrods. After the turnover for his department reached over £300k per annum (the equivalent of over £20m per annum in today's money), even during the war years, he was able to renegotiate a further increase in salary to the equivalent of over £120k per annum in today's money and 60 days holiday a year! He took most of those holidays in Penmaenmawr, where he had a second home.



# Penmaenmawr's own "J.R"

By this time, the dress fabrics bought by J.R covered most of the ground floor of the John Lewis shops. He had presided over the silk trade during World War II and he is credited with helping to keep the business going after the flag-ship shop in Oxford Street was destroyed in a bombing raid in 1940. The John Lewis Partnership's Archive told us that the profits his department was making helped to fund the rebuilding of the business.

J.R stayed with the John Lewis Partnership until his retirement in 1953 at the age of 68. Apparently, he was reluctant to stop working, and tried to return to his role several times. But eventually he took his retirement and lived out the rest of his life in Penmaenmawr, with his wife Lily. John Rowland Thomas died in 1965.

*Acknowledgement: We would like to thank the John Lewis Partnership Archive for assisting the museum in this research project and supplying archive materials.*

18th April 1953

THE GAZETTE OF THE JOHN LEWIS PARTNERSHIP

159

## RETIREMENT

On the date of this issue of *The Gazette*, Mr. J. R. Thomas, Central Buyer of the Silk Department, is retiring from full-time membership of the Partnership at the age of 72 in the twenty-third year of his membership.

Mr. Thomas has spent the whole of his working life in the Silk trade. He came to London fifty-one years ago and started off in a small shop in Oxford Street where Selfridges now stands. After thirteen years there the business was bought by Selfridges and Mr. Thomas remained with the new owners until 1919 as, in his own words, "an unofficial Deputy Buyer of Silks". In 1919 he went to Harrods for eighteen months as Assistant Buyer of Silks, and then to Derry & Toms as Silk Buyer, returning, as Silk Buyer, to Harrods in 1922.

In September 1930 he joined the Partnership, and, together with Mr. R. J. Ledbrook, Mr. J. Murray and subsequently Mr. A. I. Hughes, played a full part in the tremendous development of the Partnership's Piece Goods trade that began with the great increase of space in Oxford Street from the acquisition of the T. J. Harries business. In those days, Mr.



Mr. J. R. Thomas  
Central Buyer for Silks

Thomas continually made the whole trade gasp with some of his merchandise and I remember, in particular, one line of pure silk crepe de chine at 4s. 11d. a yard in which we showed a range of four hundred colours.

In 1935 Mr. Thomas became a Director of John Lewis & Company Limited and, in 1942, of Suburban & Provincial Stores Limited.

Although Mr. Thomas has lived in London for fifty-one years he has always been very faithful to his Welsh nationality and has occupied for many years and still holds a very prominent place in the Welsh community in London.

Mr. Thomas says that he has always been extremely happy in the Partnership "from the first moment to the last", and the Partnership should certainly regard that as a high tribute to the strength of its own special character. Partners everywhere throughout the Partnership will join with me in expressing to Mr. Thomas our very good wishes for his future and our hope that we shall see him from time to time for very many years yet.

O. B. MILLER, Deputy Chairman.

