

CONSTANTINE HUG of Merthyr Tydfil

by **John Robey**, UK



Figure 1. Large gallery clock signed 'C. Hug, Merthyr Tydfil', now used as a domestic clock with striking.

While I must confess that I am not a great fan of dial clocks, the one shown in **figure 1** is more interesting than usual. Not only is it quite large and has an inscription in Welsh, it is signed 'C. Hug Merthyr Tydfil'. This town is in Glamorganshire, in the heart of the industrial South Wales valleys, which had rich seams of coal and iron ore, with numerous collieries,

mines and ironworks.

During the nineteenth century these industrial areas expanded rapidly and the high wages and a growing demand for consumer goods, acted as a magnet to both manual workers and skilled tradesmen. These included numerous German clock dealers from the Black Forest, who were initially travelling salesmen, many of whom decided to

stay and set up in business in Wales.

The places mentioned in this article are shown in **figure 2**.

Two young men from the Black Forest who settled in this area were Sebastian and Constantine Hug, who were almost certainly brothers. Constantine was a Catholic, as presumably were all his family members, which explains why they do not appear in parish records. —

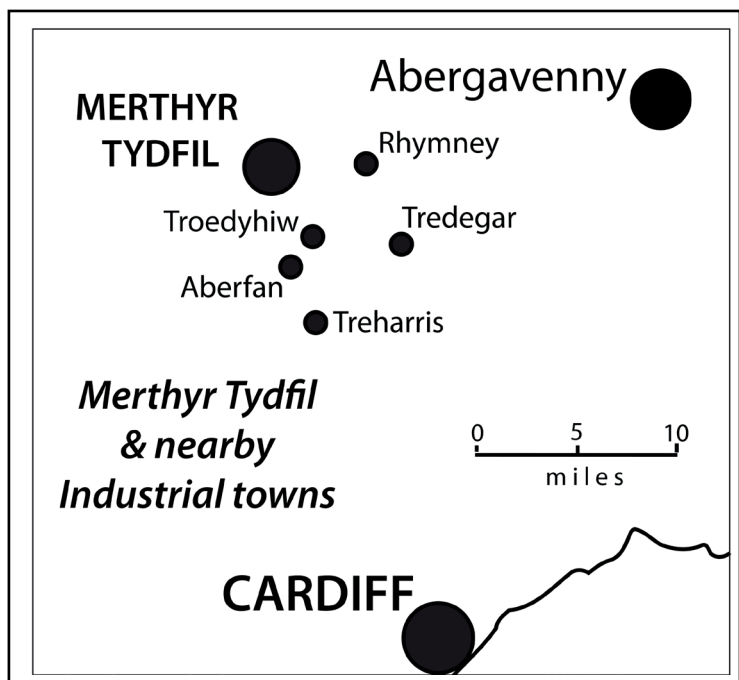


Figure 2. Map of places near Merthyr Tydfil.

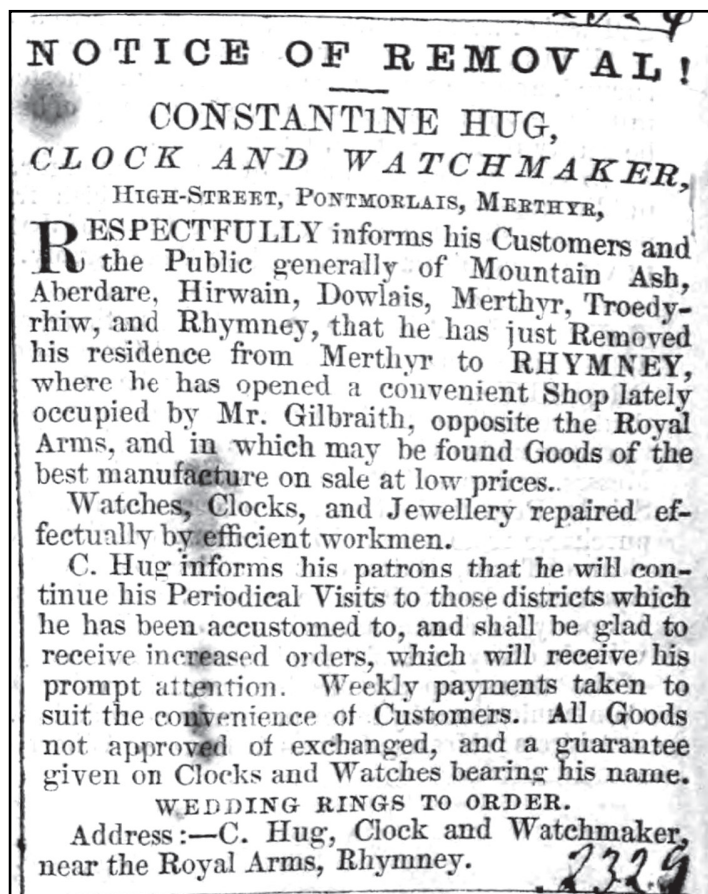


Figure 3. Constantine Hug's Notice of Removal from Merthyr High Street to Rhymney in January 1859.

Nevertheless, there are enough other records to give us a reasonable account of their lives in Wales.

Sebastian, who was six years older than Constantine, was the first of the Hug brothers to arrive in Wales, probably in the mid-1840s, when he would have been in his early 20s. In the 1850 and 1859 trade directories he was a watchmaker and clockmaker in the iron-making town of Tredegar, in the Rhymney

Valley east of Merthyr Tydfil.

In the 1861 Census he was 36 years old with Philip Miller aged 19, both being unmarried clockmakers born in Germany, with Philip probably being Sebastian's apprentice. Sebastian Hug died in 1866 at Merthyr Tydfil, probably at his brother's house, being only 41 years old. Philip Miller continued as a clockmaker in Tredegar, being listed in trade directories in 1868-71.

Constantine Hug followed his older brother and probably arrived in Wales in the early to mid-1850s. The only mention of his first business is when he published a 'Notice of Removal' in *THE MERTHYR TELEGRAPH, AND GENERAL ADVERTISER FOR THE IRON DISTRICTS OF SOUTH WALES*, in January 1859, **figure 3**. His first recorded shop was in the High Street, Pontmorlais, Merthyr Tydfil, in the Taff Valley about 23 miles north of Cardiff.

Pontmorlais is not only an area of Merthyr, it is also a widely used alternative name for the High Street, both addresses having different house or shop numbers, even though they refer to the same property. Local historian Steve Brewer explained to me that both names are still used today to the confusion of even the locals, and the reason for the different building numbers remains a mystery. This street was the town's centre for shopping and commerce and was clearly an ideal location for a retail clock and watchmaker.

His move was to the iron-making town of Rhymney, four miles due east of Merthyr. So why did Constantine Hug decide to move after what was probably a relatively short period? He would have been competing with half a dozen established tradesmen (a couple of them appearing to be German), or the rent might have been too high for him. It would not have been easy for a young German watch and clockmaker, who might not have been fluent in the English language. He would have had to build up confidence that the claims of his advertisements were justified.

Whatever the reason for his departure from Merthyr, his later advertisements give his address as the Rhymney Ironworks, which might seem an unlikely place to be selling and repairing watches and clocks. He was actually located in the adjoining community, with his shop opposite the Royal Arms public house. Rhymney was effectively a company town where, by the 1870s, 800 houses, shops and a brewery had been built for the employees at the nearby ironworks. Tradesmen in the shops supplied food, clothing and even clocks and watches. While there would have been a smaller number of potential customers than in Merthyr High Street, Constantine Hug had a monopoly, there having been only one clockmaker and watchmaker recorded in *WALES CLOCKS & CLOCKMAKERS* by William Linnard (Mayfield Books, 2003) in Rhymney a decade earlier and just one later.

Hug advertised that his shop in Rhymney had 'Goods of the best

manufacture on sale at low prices. Watches, Clocks, and Jewellery repaired effectually by efficient workmen.' While this might imply that he employed workers to do the repairs, it is most likely that Constantine did these himself. Also 'C. Hug informs his customers that he will continue his Periodical Visits to those districts he has been accustomed to'. Wedding rings were available to order, which suggests that stock in his shop was rather limited at this stage in his career. An eight-day longcase clock in a typical Bristol case, signed 'C. Hug, Mertyr Tydfil & Rhymey' is probably from the period shortly after his next move, which was from Rymney back to Merthyr.

After trading in Rhymney for less than two years he had probably built up his business and it was time to move back to the centre of local commerce in Merthyr. In September 1860 the following effusive advertisement, typical of the period, appeared in *THE MERTHYR TELEGRAPH*:

CONSTANTINE HUG,
CLOCK AND WATCH MAKER, HIGH
STREET, MERTHYR;
(late of Rhymney Iron Works)
BEGS to thank the inhabitants of
Rhymney and its neighbourhood for
the liberal support he received when at
Rhymney, and would inform them that
in consequence of Merthyr being more
centrally situated among his customers,
he has been induced to remove here,
where he has taken suitable premises
near the English Wesleyan Chapel.
He will make periodical trade visits to
Rhymney, as heretofore, and every
Order that he may be favoured with will
receive his best attention.
Charges strictly moderate and none
but the best workmen employed.

Though no address is stated Hug's shop was close to the largest and most popular chapels, located in the High Street, Pontmorlais, where he first set up in business.

Shortly afterwards, the 1861 Census recorded that Constantine Hug was living at Pontmorlais, an unmarried clock and watchmaker aged 30, born in Baden, Germany. Also in the house was Eliza Dunn aged 19 (though she was actually 24), a house servant born in Abergavenny. Constantine's birthplace of Baden confirms that he was from the Black Forest in the state of Baden-Württemberg.

Three years later, in 1864, Constantine Hug married his former house servant Elizabeth, who would have dealt with

Figure 4.
Advertisement
in the MERTHYR
TELEGRAPH 16th
October 1870.

C. HUG,
WATCHMAKER, JEWELLER, AND GENERAL
REPAIRER OF CLOCKS, JEWELLERY, &c.,
RESPECTFULLY announces that he has
REMOVED from Merthyr, and taken a Commo-
dious Shop at BRIDGE STREET, TROEDYRHIW,
where he will carry on his Business, in all its branches.
The public may be assured that all goods supplied will be
of good value and that the utmost attention will be
devoted to give satisfaction.
C. H. will continue as heretofore, his periodical Visits
to Duffryn, Ynysowen, Quaker's Yard, Mountain Ash,
Rhymney, and other places. 4185

Figure 5. The
dial with
a Welsh
inscription and
the retailer's
name and
town.



customers wanting to buy jewellery and the like, leaving Constantine to concentrate on repairing clocks and watches.

Retailers of small expensive items such as watches and jewellery have always been a target for thieves, and Constantine Hug was no exception. In March 1867 a mother and her daughter were found guilty of stealing three gold wedding rings worth £2 while Mrs Hug had been distracted. But all was not well with the business and just over a year later on 30th June 1868 'Constantine Hug, of 84 High Street, Merthyr Tydfil ... watchmaker and clockmaker and jeweller' was declared bankrupt. However, an order of discharge was granted on 31st August, 1868, though it was not reported in local newspapers until ten months later. That the bankruptcy lasted for only two months

was perhaps due to the debts not being large, or he had managed to come to a satisfactory arrangement with his creditors.

This might have prompted a further 'Notice of Removal' to Troedyrhiw that appeared in the *MERTHYR EXPRESS* during the last quarter of 1870:

C. HUG,
WATCH AND CLOCK MANUFACTURER
BEGS to announce that he intends
removing from Pontmorlais to
BRIDGE STREET TROEDYRHIW. Where
he will continue to carry on his business
on the same principles as hitherto. And
solicits the patronage of the public of
Troedyrhiw and the neighbourhood.
All kinds of clocks and watches
repaired by efficient workmen on the
premises.
WEDDING RINGS

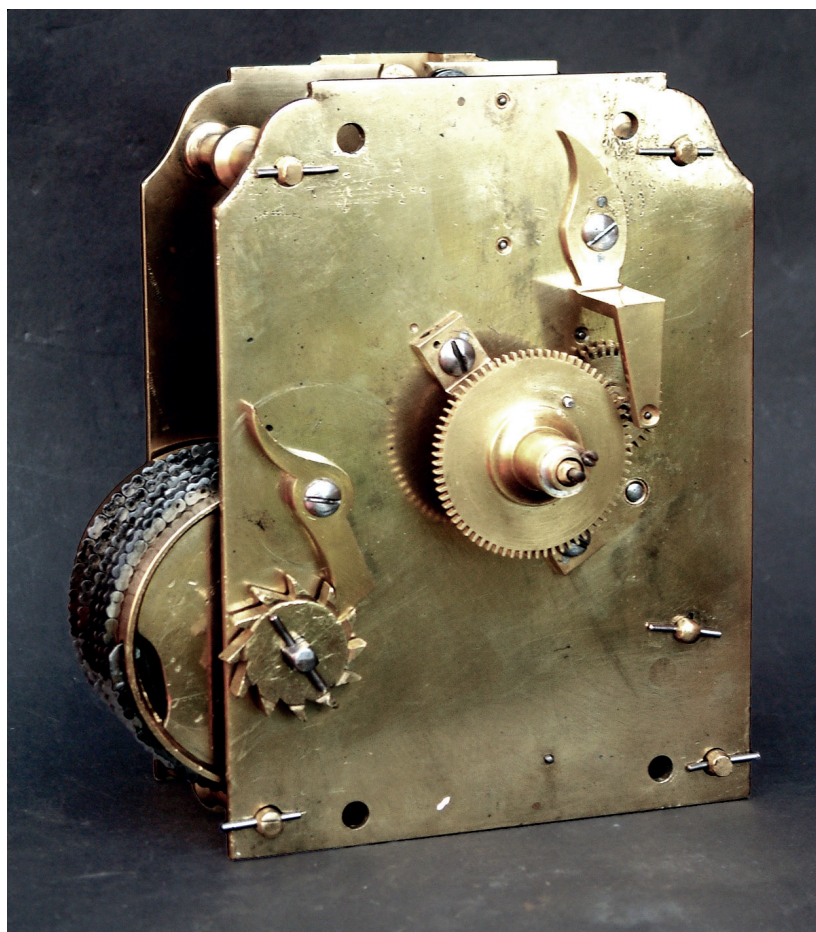


Figure 6. Front of the chain-fusee movement with shaped plates.

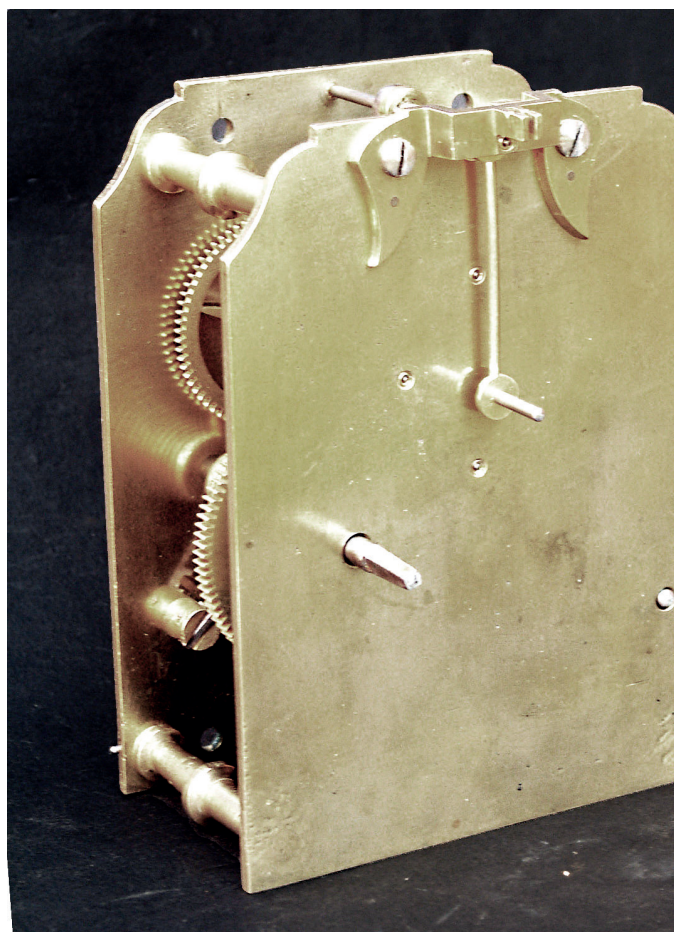


Figure 7. Movement with rear winding.

The claim that Constantine Hug was a watch and clock manufacturer should, of course, be taken with a pinch of salt. In actuality he would have bought in the items he sold, or possibly added dials and hands before fitting them into the respective type of case. A more realistic description appeared in the rival *MERTHYR TELEGRAPH* where he described himself as a 'Watchmaker, Jeweller and General Repairer of Clocks, Jewellery, &c'. He also listed the towns where he made periodic trade visits, no doubt to collect and return watches and clocks before and after repair, **figure 4**.

Troedyrhiw (also known as Troedy-y-rhiw) was a separate community at that time, being about four miles 'down the valley', though still part of Merthyr Tydfil Borough. It would have been a less viable location for a watchmaker's shop than the bustling High Street in the centre of the town. Perhaps he had to find cheaper premises to rent, as well as trying to recover from the stigma of having recently been bankrupt, despite it being very short lived.

His entries in trade directories appear

around this time, and in 1871 he is listed as: 'Hug Constantine, wholesale & retail watch & clock & jeweller & plated goods of all descriptions, Bridge Street, Troedy-y-rhiw.' Directories in 1875 and 1880 simply include him under 'Watchmakers' at the same address.

By the time of the 1881 Census he was back in the High Street at 16 Pontmorlais, so perhaps his business was now prospering again, and we now have the first details of his family. Constantine Hug, aged 50, watch and clockmaker, born in Baden, Germany, was living with his wife Elizabeth aged 41 (actually 43), born in Abergavenny, with five children and an Irish 'visitor' aged 19, who may have actually been a servant. The children were: Martha 14, Frederick Sebastian 12, William J 9, John S 6, and Bernard J less than a year old, all born in Merthyr Tydfil. Frederick became a grocer, with two stores in Merthyr High Street and another further south at Treharris, while John became a grocer's assistant. William and Bernard later became watchmakers, presumably trained by and working for their father. For some unaccountable reason

Constantine Hug and his family do not appear in the 1871 or 1891 Censuses; perhaps their surname has been transcribed incorrectly.

In April 1893 there was an attempted burglary at the shop of Constantine Hug, jeweller, in Penydarren Road, about a mile north of Pontmorlais, which might have been a branch shop. He died in 1901, aged 70, when he was recorded as being a Roman Catholic. His widow Elizabeth moved back to Abergavenny and died in 1925 at the considerable age for the period of 88, with her spinster daughter Martha, an elementary school teacher, looking after her.

Turning now to the clock, its dial is 16in (40.6cm) in diameter with an overall diameter of 20½in (52cm) including the mahogany surround. The brass bezel has a silvered sight-ring and the original lock and key survive, the latter very often being lost. Above the dial centre is

'Rhodd yr
Y Sgol Sabbothol'

which translates as 'Gift of the Sunday School', while below the centre is 'C.



Figure 8. The clock now sits above a kitchen door.



Figure 9. The case swings open for rear winding.

Hug Mertyr Tydfil', **figure 5**.

Like the dial, bezel and the mahogany surround, the single train fusee movement is of good quality with shaped corners at the top of the plates, **figures 6 to 7**. Being a gallery clock, winding is from the rear, with the winding square being at the large diameter of the fusee, rather than at the small diameter on clocks that wind from the front. On the cap of the spring barrel is inscribed 'chain fitted 20-10-88', which is likely to be 1888 rather than 1988, when new fusee chains were both difficult to obtain and expensive.

The fusee would have originally had a gut line and the grooves in the fusee have been re-cut with a flat bottom to accommodate the later chain. Alternatively the inscription might be interpreted as meaning that the fusee chain had been replaced due to it having been faulty, but this seems less likely. The pendulum has a beat of 0.56 seconds.

The dial and wooden surround of a gallery clock were fixed in the centre of the gallery, with the movement and pendulum sitting in a locked box that

I acquired it before the previous owner had fitted a new fusee arbor so the clock could be wound from the front.

could be accessed from the gallery for winding and pendulum adjustment. While the infrequent setting of the hands to the correct time could be done by hanging over the edge of the gallery, this was too dangerous when winding the strong spring, hence the need for rear winding. On some gallery clocks the hands can also be set to time from the rear.

The previous owner was intending to fit a new fusee arbor so the clock could be wound from the front like a conventional dial clock. I managed to acquire it before this happened and the intention was to keep it as original as possible, while being able to use it in a domestic setting, located above a kitchen door where a large clock would be appropriate, **figure 8**, though steps are needed to wind it. A case was made to accommodate the movement and pendulum, with an opening door at the bottom for pendulum adjustment. It was made from timber that was already veneered with mahogany and it now looks like a drop-dial clock.

The case was fitted to a thick oak backboard with two sturdy brass



Figure 10. The Original Smyrna Welsh Baptist Chapel, Aberfan, built in 1879, now a community centre. (Photograph by Steve Brewer.)



Figure 11. The New Smyrna Welsh Baptist Chapel, built in 1902, demolished in 2002. (Photograph from The Alan George Archive.)

hinges on the left and two period hook-and-eye catches on the right. It was also arranged so that the top of the case sits over the backboard, so when it is closed the appreciable weight of the clock is mainly taken by the backboard, which is firmly screwed to the wall. Now the whole clock can be swung open for rear winding.

However, it had not been appreciated that the relatively large overlap of the dial surround, amounting to 5¼in (13.3cm), contacted the wall to prevent it opening fully. This is not a major problem and rear access can still be made for winding. Anyone attempting a similar conversion is advised to make scale drawings to check this point.

The final thing we need to consider is where and when it was used. It would have been situated on the gallery of a chapel (without the recently-made case, of course), facing the pulpit so the preacher would, hopefully, not allow his sermon to drag on for too long.

After giving a talk to the Wales and Marches Horological Society in 2006, the final slide was of this clock to ask if anyone knew where it had been used. One member said that his brother was the editor of the *MERTHYR EXPRESS* and if I sent him an image and details a request for information would be published. A reply was received from Douglas Pearson JP, an elderly member of the former Smyrna Welsh Baptist Chapel in Aberfan. This village, a short distance south of Merthyr Tydfil, was the scene of one of Britain's worst peace-time disasters, when in 1966 a colliery waste tip collapsed during heavy rain engulfing a junior school and a row of houses, killing

116 children and 28 adults. Despite the great loss of life no-one was ever prosecuted for this disaster waiting to happen.

Mr Pearson said that as a young boy he had been told that the clock had been donated by J R Richards (presumably on behalf of the Sunday School), a deacon of the chapel for many years. And where better for him to commission a special clock than from Constantine Hug, whose shop at this period was in Troedryhiw, only 1½ miles from Aberfan. This was in the Merthyr Tydfil Borough, so the dial was legitimately signed as such, rather than a small place that few would have heard of.

The original small Smyrna Chapel was built in 1879, **figure 10**, with a larger new chapel built in 1902, **figure 11**, with the original building then used as a vestry. Since there had been a Sunday School since the 1860s in private houses and even a pub, the clock was probably presented when the original chapel was built in 1879. Then it would have been transferred to the new chapel in 1902.

Both buildings were involved in the tragic events of 1966, the new chapel acting as a casualty centre. As a result of the inevitable mess caused, it was refurbished later and this is when the clock may have been removed to be replaced by an electric one. The new chapel was demolished in 2002, while the original chapel is now used as a community centre.

The inscription confirms that it was used in a Welsh speaking chapel, and there are many to choose from. While the Merthyr area was mainly English speaking, there were about 100

chapels, with the vast majority being Welsh speaking only. At the time the Smyrna Chapel was constructed in 1879 Aberfan was a brand-new village, housing workers from the Merthyr Vale Colliery, which had started production only two years earlier. The chapel's early congregation would consist of Welsh speaking families who had migrated from rural Wales to find work at the nearby mine.

At present I am inclined to give Mr Pearson's account the benefit of the doubt. It is gratifying to think that this clock was probably used in the Aberfan Smyrna Welsh Baptist Chapel, where it would have witnessed some of the tragic events during the worst disaster in Wales during the twentieth century.

This article has recounted the life of an immigrant clock and watchmaker from the Black Forest who travelled from Germany to the industrial South Wales valleys. After setting up as a retailer and repairer in the commercial centre of Merthyr Tydfil he had to move twice to out-of-town locations, but each time he managed to return to Merthyr High Street.

His experiences were typical of many such tradesmen, not only in South Wales but also throughout Britain in the nineteenth century. A gallery clock supplied by Constantine Hug to a Welsh-speaking chapel has now been adapted for use in a domestic environment. It is said to have come from the Smyrna Welsh Baptist Chapel in Aberfan. This clock illustrates one aspect of the social history of the industrial valleys of South Wales.

Grateful thanks are due to Steve Brewer for much local information and illustrations. 📷