

DOS NAIL WORKS

Messrs. J. J. Cordes & Co., Ltd.

The Industrial Heart of Newport, Monmouthshire

c.1835 – 1961



Bird's-eye reconstruction of the Dos Nail Works, Newport — Messrs. J. J. Cordes & Co., Ltd. at its Victorian industrial peak, circa 1880–1900. Note the River Usk and canal to the left, and the railway sidings to the right.

A Factory That Pinned the World Together

There are buildings whose silhouettes define an era, and there are industries whose products become so commonplace that we forget, entirely, that someone had to make them. The Dos Nail Works in Newport, Monmouthshire, was both. For more than a century from its establishment around 1835 to its final closure in 1961 this sprawling complex on the banks of the River Usk did something quietly extraordinary: it manufactured the nails that held together the infrastructure of an expanding world.

Houses, railway sleepers, dockyards, barns and bridges across Australia, India, and South America were fastened, in part, by iron pressed and cut in Newport. The men and the boys who worked the machines of the Dos Works did not travel to those distant places. But their labour did. This is their story.

"Newport to export nails by the ton literally pinning together the infrastructure of the developing world."

Origins: The American Industrialist and His Second Factory

The Dos Nail Works owes its existence and its curious name to James Jamieson Cordes, an American-born industrialist of considerable ambition and entrepreneurial energy. Arriving in Newport at a time when South Wales was transforming itself into one of the great industrial powerhouses of the British Empire, Cordes recognised the opportunity that the region's iron heritage, waterway access, and labour supply presented.

He established his first nail works in the Newport area, and when success warranted expansion, he built again. The second factory was given the Spanish word for 'two' Dos a name that was practical, memorable, and quietly internationalist, hinting at the global trade Cordes was already conducting. It was a factory that knew from its very naming that its products were destined to travel far.

By the time the works reached its Victorian peak in the 1880s and 1890s, the Dos Nail Works had evolved into one of the most significant manufacturing sites in South Wales. Under the trading name Messrs. J. J. Cordes & Co., Ltd., it produced what became known as 'Ewbank' Patent Cut Nails a product that bore the name of Henry Ewbank, whose engineering refinements turned nail-making from a cottage craft into a high-speed industrial process.



Inside the cutting shops of the Dos Nail Works men and boys operating high-speed cutting machines, with barrels of 'Ewbank Patent Nails, J.J. Cordes & Co., Newport' ready for despatch. Steam haze and iron sparks were the constant companions of those who worked here.

The Ewbank Patent Nail: A Technological Revolution in Iron

To understand the significance of the Dos Works, one must first appreciate what the 'cut nail' represented in the mid-Victorian era. Before machine manufacture, nails were hand-forged by individual smiths a slow, skilled, and expensive process. The introduction of high-speed cutting and heading machines changed everything. A single machine, tended by a worker who might be no older than fourteen, could produce in an hour what a blacksmith would struggle to make in a day.

The Ewbank Patent Nail was cut not drawn from flat rolled iron bar stock. The cutting machines sheared the iron diagonally to create a tapered, wedge-shaped nail that was, in many applications, superior to the wire nail that would eventually supplant it. The cut nail gripped timber more firmly, resisted withdrawal more effectively, and was the product of choice for heavy construction work across the Empire.

The cutting shops ran day and night. The rhythmic percussion of the machines — iron on iron, cut and headed, cut and headed was the heartbeat of the works, audible across the surrounding streets. Workers developed an intimate relationship with their particular machine, learning its temperament, adjusting its tolerances, coaxing consistent product from its jaws. It was skilled work, despite appearances to the contrary, and the men of the Dos Works took pride in it.

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The Geography of Industry: Water, Rail, and the River Usk

The location of the Dos Nail Works was not accidental. Newport's geography made it one of the great transit points of the industrial age, and Cordes chose his site with a tradesman's eye for logistics.

To the west of the works ran the River Usk and the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal the twin arteries of Newport's pre-railway trade. Raw Welsh iron arrived by barge from the furnaces and forges of the valleys. Finished nails departed the same way, bound for Newport Docks and from there to the world. The canal had been the lifeblood of South Wales industry for half a century before the railway arrived, and the Dos Works had been built to take full advantage of it.

To the east, however, the future had already arrived. The railway sidings visible in contemporary reconstructions of the site tell the story of adaptation and modernisation. As the rail network spread across South Wales through the mid-nineteenth century, Newport found itself at a vital intersection of the coal and iron trades. The Dos Works integrated itself into this new order, accepting deliveries of iron stock by rail and despatching finished goods to the docks via the same network.

Between canal and railway, the factory occupied a site of remarkable industrial efficiency an island of manufacture between two transport systems, producing product that fed both.

The Human Story: Families, Skills, and Hard Labour

It would be a mistake to speak of the Dos Nail Works purely in terms of machinery and logistics. Behind every barrel of Ewbank nails was a community of workers whose lives were inseparable from the works men who had learned their trade from fathers who had learned it from grandfathers, families for whom the smell of hot iron and machine oil was the smell of home.

The cutting shops were long, smoke-filled spaces lit by skylights and the occasional lantern. Steam haze drifted between the machines. The noise was constant and deafening by modern standards. Boys worked alongside men, learning the craft by watching, by doing, by the corrective hand of an experienced machinist placed on a shoulder at the critical moment. Child labour in Victorian industry was commonplace and largely unremarked upon, and the Dos Works was no different from its era in this respect.

Yet these were not broken people. The photographic record and oral histories of Newport's industrial communities speak of pride, solidarity, and a fierce local identity built around working knowledge. The Dos Works was not merely a source of wages — it was a place that shaped character and cemented community bonds across generations. When the works finally closed in 1961, it was not just jobs that were lost. It was a way of life that had persisted for over twelve decades.

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Decline and Closure: The Wire Nail and the End of an Era

The Ewbank Patent Cut Nail was a magnificent product. It was also, ultimately, a product of its time. Through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the drawn wire nail cheaper, faster to produce, and suited to the new softwood construction methods spreading from North America began to displace the cut nail from market after market.

The Dos Works adapted where it could. It diversified its product range, refined its processes, and leveraged its established export relationships. For several decades the works remained viable, sustained by those markets particularly in the developing world where the cut nail's superior holding properties still commanded a premium. But the arithmetic of industrial competition is pitiless, and by the mid-twentieth century the conclusion was becoming inevitable.

The works closed its doors for the final time in 1961. The chimneys fell silent. The machines that had run day and night for over a century were stilled. The site that had once been one of the most industrially dynamic in South Wales was emptied of purpose, and in time much of the physical fabric of the works was lost.

What remains is memory, and the record that dedicated researchers have worked to preserve.

A Legacy in Iron

The Dos Nail Works deserves a place in the consciousness of anyone who cares about the industrial history of Wales and of Newport in particular. It was not the largest factory ever built in South Wales. It did not produce iron in the quantities of the great foundries of Merthyr or Ebbw Vale. But it made something universal and essential, it made it well, and it made it for 126 years.

The generations of Newport families whose skills and hard work fuelled the town's global reputation for ironwork the men and boys whose faces are half-glimpsed through the steam haze in contemporary reconstructions of the cutting shops built something that outlasted them in the most literal sense. The nails they made are still in the timber of buildings on the other side of the world, holding fast in the grain, unnoticed and irreplaceable.

The history of the Dos Nail Works is the history of industrial Wales at its most representative: innovative, hardworking, globally connected, and ultimately subject to the same forces of economic change that all industries must face. To remember it is to honour that heritage and the people who made it real.

Record & Research Metadata

Location	Newport, Gwent / Monmouthshire, Wales
Coordinates	51.588, -2.997 (Dos Road / Malpas Road area)
Founded	c. 1835 by James Jamieson Cordes
Closed	1961
Trading Name	Messrs. J. J. Cordes & Co., Ltd.
Key Product	"Ewbank" Patent Cut Nails
Export Markets	Australia, India, South America
Associated Names	J. J. Cordes, Henry Ewbank, Dos Works, Newport Iron Industry
Tags	#Newport #DosWorks #JJCordes #VictorianWales #WelshIndustry #EwbankNails
Research Platform	People's Collection Wales (PCW)

Research & Narrative: Tudor59 / Graham Tudor Emmanuel · People's Collection Wales

<https://tinyurl.com/Dos-Nail-Works-Newport>

