

NEWSLETTER

of Cowbridge History Society

Summer 2025



Welcome!

In recent months, the Society has acquired a number of new members. We could not survive as a group without your interest and participation and we very much appreciate those of you who support us in our activities.

Our cover illustration is a sketch made by the late Jeff Alden (exact date unknown) of part of Westgate, looking towards Cowbridge High Street. Westgate will of course be the subject of our new publication, on which we are actively working. It would be nice to have it available before Christmas. Unfortunately, there has been little response to our plea for photos and recollections of people who have lived in the area, especially from the years between 1950 and 1970.

Some of the properties in the area were covered in the original *Cowbridge Buildings and People* publication, a millennium project. We would really like to be able to offer you more information rather than a re-tread of past research, so please come forward if you have anything further to offer. You may find your name in print!

A new committee

At the AGM in May, there were a few important changes to the committee. After many years of faithful service, Professor Dick Buswell has retired from the Chair, and has been replaced in the post by Dr Chris Turner. Dick will now be taking on the role of joint President, along with Brian Ll. James. We also have a new Secretary, Valerie Monaghan, whom most of you will recognise as a loyal and active member of the Society. Valerie replaces Dick Tonkin, who has resigned for health reasons but for the time being will continue as joint programme secretary. Beverly Tonkin remains as Treasurer.

Don Gerrard has retired from the committee after many years of loyal service, during which he has given many memorable talks to the Friday night crowd. As you will see from this issue, he remains an enthusiastic historian and researcher. The remaining committee members are Betty Alden, Deb Fisher and Kishli Laister, who will take on joint responsibility for the speaker programme with Dick Tonkin. Both Valerie and Kishli have already proved to be enthusiastic and valuable additions to the committee.

Masons Arms

A group of CHS members and associates was invited by Jean-Yves Robic to view the archaeological work he is doing. Although we were not able to view the whole ground floor, it was interesting to see the layout and a few of the finds (which include some very nice pieces of Roman samian ware (high-class pottery)).

The photo on the right shows an interesting inscribed slab found in the original flooring. At first sight it resembles a gravestone, but it is actually an apprentice's practice piece. We hope it will be possible to display it in Cowbridge Museum in due course.



Parts of the wall of the Masons Arms are thought to have been constructed of stone left over from the demolition of the town's original West Gate in 1754. (What a pity it was too early for a photographic record.) It is known that some of the rubble was salvaged for recycling in local buildings.

Eagle-eyed locals will have observed that work has begun on the conversion of the former police station, another listed building in the centre of Cowbridge, with the later outbuildings already having been removed. Some have incorrectly assumed that the police station itself is being demolished; thankfully, this is untrue. An archaeological investigation is also taking place here, again supervised by Jean-Yves Robic.

While on the subject of archaeology, those of you who have been following the progress of the Globe Field excavation at Llantwit Major, either in person or through the blog at <https://archaeometallurgy.co.uk/llantwit-major-2025/> will be aware that it continued (in a small way) after the official end date and finally closed down in August. We gather that, during her recent appearance at the New Theatre, Alice Roberts talked about the work at Llantwit, and we expect it to be featured again in the new series of *Digging for Britain* on BBC2, to be broadcast early in 2026.

AGM and talk

In this issue, we do not have multiple "talks of the season" to discuss, though there is certainly an interesting programme for October onwards - printed at the back of this newsletter - to look forward to. Since the Easter issue, there has been only one talk, by our new Chair, Chris Turner, who spoke about "Crime and Punishment in 19th century Cowbridge" after the AGM, a topic that attracted much interest among our law-abiding membership.

The AGM itself was well attended and the following changes to the committee were approved:

- Professor Dick Buswell will become co-President (with Brian Ll. James) in succession to the late Reverend Norman Williams.
- Chris Turner will replace Dick Buswell as Chair.
- Valerie Monaghan will replace Dick Tonkin as Secretary.
- Kishli Laister will join the committee.

Big plans for...

Most of our readers will have heard the words "Place Making Plan" in relation to Cowbridge, but some may remain unaware of what the phrase refers to. This Plan has been in the making for a year, and the local community (whether they knew it or not) has been widely consulted (see vol 9 no 1, under the heading "Big Plans for Old Hall"). In all, there will be four such plans for the Vale of Glamorgan: one each for Barry, Cowbridge, Llantwit Major and Penarth, each with the same remit. Work on the initial plan for Cowbridge has now been completed and options are being considered. You can see details of the exercise online at <https://cowbridge-tc.gov.uk/place-making-plan/>

Cowbridge History Society and the Museum were both represented at the official launch on 8th July. Since about the same time, the Museum has been seeking a replacement for long-serving curator Alex Latham. A suitable candidate has been identified and we should have news for you soon.

Obituary: Reverend Heather Weddell (1956-2025)

We were very sorry to hear of the death of Rev Heather Weddell, who was suddenly taken ill just a few weeks before the end of her term as Mayor of Cowbridge. Heather was a long-standing member of Cowbridge History Society, who participated in many of our events. Only last November, at our Open Day, she launched the society's latest publication at the Town Hall.

Heather, as the eulogies at her funeral testified, was tremendously active in the community, and spent most of her adult life looking for ways in which she could help others. Born in Newport and educated at Croesyceiliog School in Cwmbran, she had many jobs before deciding to take a Theology course and become a minister. In this capacity, she was a great comfort and help to her parishioners, as well as continuing to work for the community in general. The extent to which her efforts were appreciated was clearly shown by the number of people who turned up to her funeral on 12th June at Holy Cross Church.



Unfortunately, Heather's health had deteriorated in recent times. Nevertheless, her passing was a shock and a great loss to Cowbridge. We extend our sincere sympathies to her husband Rodger and daughter Beth.

The Wilkins family of Cowbridge and the Red Book of Hergest

Recently a local asked if we were aware of the connection between Cowbridge's Wilkins family and the Red Book of Hergest, a medieval manuscript written in Welsh, dating from the late 14th century. It contains the texts of several works, including the Mabinogion, and is thought to have originated from the Swansea area.

The answer is YES. When Thomas Wilkins died in 1699, he was rector of St Mary Church (which happens to be where our new Chair lives), a position he had inherited from his grandfather. Wilkins junior had been educated at Jesus College, Oxford, often known as "the Welsh college". Although founded by Queen Elizabeth I, the initiative came from several Welshmen, one of whom, Leoline Jenkins of Llantrisant, is closely connected with Cowbridge, having been a driving force in the establishment of Cowbridge's historic Grammar School.

After the original owners of the manuscript fell out of favour with King Edward IV of England, it came into the hands of the Vaughan family of Tretower, where some additions were made to it. A branch of the family took it to Hergest Court in the Welsh borders. Somehow it found its way back to Glamorgan, where it was held for a time by the Mansels of Margam and finally it came into the collection of the Thomas Wilkins who died in 1699. His son, also Thomas Wilkins,

donated it to Jesus College, to which it still belongs, though the hard copy is looked after at the Bodleian Library.

Meanwhile, the Wilkins family thrived in various professions, including banking, politics and ironworking. Wilkinsons lived at Great House in Llanblethian into the 18th century, but we are not aware of any direct connection between the Wilkins family and the Cowbridge of today. Do let us know if you find out something more.

The Romans in Wales, part 2: The Sun Sets on the Empire

The Roman Empire, and the Roman Republic before it, together lasted over 1,000 years, from 756 BC to 476 AD. At its height it controlled most of Europe, from Britain in the north to the coastal area of North Africa in the south, and most of the Middle and Near East. Its long frontier was protected by an army of 33 Legions, plus auxiliary troops, a total of about 400,000 men.

The Romans changed Britain beyond recognition. In Wales the impact of the Empire was not as widespread, but no less important. The Romans introduced money, roads and cities, restructuring society and expanding long distance trade that had started to develop in prehistory. Life in Wales, outside the main cultural centres, changed very little. However, the economically viable areas of South and West Wales, and the North Coast, underwent considerable changes. Some historians have nevertheless suggested that achievements in science and technology were few. Literature and the arts were nothing compared to Classical Athens. "I suffered from a surfeit of things Roman --- the nearness of their civilisation --- to cruelty and corruption ---" (Sir Mortimer Wheeler).

Towards 350, the stability of the Roman Empire was coming to an end. A combination of ineffectual rulers, political and military instability, widespread social and economic decline, constant warfare, and above all prolonged attacks from the Barbarian tribes on its eastern, western and northern frontiers, weakened an already failing Empire.

There had always been threats of attack from outside the lengthy borders of the Empire, thus the army was necessarily large, in order to repel them. These "Barbarians", as they came to be known, were attracted by the prosperous Roman lifestyle and strong economy. Britain in particular was regarded as rich, with its fertile grain-growing lowlands (where the Romans had introduced root crops and fruit), and abundant supplies of minerals – gold, iron, lead, copper, tin, salt and stone.

In Western Britain, and West Wales in particular, threats came from the Irish. There had always been trade across the Irish Sea, which increased after 44AD. Soon after, the Romans sought to strengthen the western defences, in order to lessen the numbers of Irish coming to settle. In 300AD a fleet was established in the Channel and Irish Sea, and some forts were built in Dyfed. These measures were not successful and a number of Irish "colonists" settled in Dyfed and Gwynedd.

Between 350 and 375 the fortifications of the major Roman towns in Wales, Caerleon, Caerwent, Carmarthen and Caernarvon were strengthened, but at the same time many villas and farmsteads were abandoned. About a dozen sizeable villas have been identified in Wales, six in the Vale of Glamorgan, with the most famous in Llantwit Major. The Vale and its inhabitants were Roman in style, but this was certainly not embedded beyond the fertile South, indeed not much beyond the Via Julia Maritima. (A farmhouse near St. Nicholas for example, remained Iron Age in character.)

In the East of Britain, threats of attack came from the German tribes on the North Sea coasts, especially the Saxons (and later the Angles and Jutes), again attracted by the wealth of

South and East England. A chain of pressures came from the East, most of the peoples east of the Rhine have been classed as "VOLKERWANDER" or "Wandering people". A substantial number of Germans had come to Britain after enlisting in the Roman army, and many had been allowed to settle in Eastern England, as the Irish had done in the West. Again, attempts were made to prevent uncontrolled immigration, which failed, e.g. in 324 a Count of the Saxon Shore was created, together with a fleet and a chain of coastal stations.

The Romans had tried to invade Scotland three times, in 79, 139 and 209. A fleet had actually reached the Orkneys, and some garrisons were established on the east coast. There were a huge number of marching camps in the Highlands, the most in Europe, and in 83 a large battle was fought against the Picts at Mons Graupius. The 9th Legion from York, altogether about 5,000 men, mysteriously disappeared about this time. There have been many theories but no evidence about what actually happened. Hadrian's Wall was abandoned in 140 and the Antonine Wall in 160.

Rome reacted with vigour to the threats from beyond its boundaries, but it was increasingly paralysed by the ambitions of generals and politicians who aspired to rule, usually with the help of the army. (Between 244 and 284 the legions elevated 55 Emperors).

In 350 MAGNENTIUS, a German legionary general, made an attempt on the throne with the aid of some troops from Britain, leading to a brief civil war. In 361 British troops played a part in elevating Julian to the throne. In 367 the "Conspiracy of Barbarians" attacked the north, east and west of Britain with some success. This was once thought to be the final straw but in 368-9 THEODOSIUS strengthened British defences. All the while the Empire was under increasing threat, and in 383 MAGNUS MAXIMUS began a long campaign to rule the Empire, with some initial success, but he was killed in 388. Magnus Maximus is generally identified with the "Macsen Wledig" of the Mabinogion.

The NOTITIA DIGNITATUM (a document recording the location of troops and population) suggests that there were no troops in Wales by 390 and that most of the villas and farmsteads had been abandoned. This was of course a heavy blow to the economy. The Roman way of life had practically gone.

The Roman Empire had always existed in two almost separate parts, the Latin West and Hellenistic East. The attacks were almost confined to the West, so much so that as early as 275 the walls of Rome were strengthened.

In 395 the fragile unity of the Empire vanished with its division into East and West. HONORIUS was recognised as Emperor in the West. In Britain there were vain attempts by men such as STILICHO to stem the tide, but by 401 he was sending troops to Rome, which was in danger from the Goths, Huns and Vandals.

In 405 the western coasts of Britain were plundered by NIALL, an Irish chieftain, followed by further colonisation in Dyfed. The years after 405 were a period of great confusion, when most of what was left of the Roman army in S.E. Britain was sent to Rome. By 408 the Romano-British peoples appeared to be in control, and in 410 Honorius advised the British to defend themselves.

This was as good a conclusion as any to Roman rule in Britain. It was not an orderly conclusion, and most historians would agree that certainly by 429 few if any troops remained. In 410 Rome itself had been sacked by ALARIC, leading the Goths and Visigoths.

In 476 the Western Empire formally came to an end. Roman rule in Britain faded away, estranged from its organisation and culture. This was a long process during which there was something of a power vacuum, in what has been called the Dark Ages.

SOURCES

Collingwood, R G & Myers, J N L Myers - Roman Britain (Bell, 1939)
Davies, John - History of Wales (Penguin, 1993)
Fleming R. - Britain after Rome (Penguin History of Britain, 2017)
Oxford History of England (OUP, 1952)
Mattingly, D - Britain in the Roman Empire (Penguin History of Britain, 2015)

Don Gerrard

If you want to know what happened next, Don will be writing about the early medieval period in our next issue!

Subscriptions

If you have not already done so, please pay your subscription for 2025/26, either by sending a cheque, payable to "Cowbridge History Society", to Beverly Tonkin at Porth y Felin, Town Mill Road, Cowbridge, CF71 7BE, or transfer the fees by BACS to Cowbridge History Society account no.00034614 at Barclays Bank UK PLC, sort code 20-12-25, using your surname and first initial as a reference. A standing order may be set up if preferred. The annual subscription rate is now £10 per person.

Non-members are welcome at all our monthly meetings, at a charge of £2 per head, payable at the door.

The Dictionary of Cowbridge Biography

The dictionary is a compendium of people born before 1900 who have a significant connection to Cowbridge and its district or who have made an important contribution to the life of the town or surrounding area.

Suggestions for inclusion are welcome and can be submitted to Chris Turner (christurner@live.com), who edits the Dictionary. Chris can also provide advice on relevance and word limits, but by way of example see earlier issues.

Chris Turner

COWBRIDGE HISTORY SOCIETY

PROGRAMME FOR 2025-26

Talks will be on the first Friday of each month (save for April when it will be on the 10th) in the Maendy Hall of Cowbridge United Free Church and will start at 7.30 save for the AGM at 7.00 on 1st May

2025

October 3rd The Story of Cardiff: you know it well - or do you?; Gwerfyl Gardner

November 7th Writing historical novels as a historian; Adrian Goldsworthy

December 5th Cads, Scoundrels and Vagabonds; Graham Loveluck-Edwards
With mince pies and wine

2026

January 2nd St John's House - Bridgend's oldest habitable dwelling – the story so far; Ian Price

February 6th Severn Princess; Tim Ryan

March 6th The Ely Industrial School 1860 - 1903; Terry Kane

March 13th **Charter Day trip** - National Museum Cardiff - Important Roman and medieval finds in the Cowbridge area; Sian Iles and Evan Chapman; incl. refreshments

April 10th More than 30 years of the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust; Elaine Davey

May 1st 14th **AGM at 7.00** followed by *Who Lives in a House Like This? Unexpected Stories of Cowbridge from CHS Archives*; Kishli Laister and Betty Alden

*Dick Tonkin
Programme Secretary*

NOTE: A cake-making rota will continue to operate during the new season! If you are interested in helping, please speak to Beverly or e-mail us.