

# NEWSLETTER

of Cowbridge History Society

*Christmas/New Year 2025/6*



## SAYING A FOND FAREWELL TO OUR FRIEND DON

The ink was barely dry on this issue when we heard the shocking news that our old friend Don Gerrard had passed away in hospital on the morning of 2nd December. Don was a stalwart of Cowbridge History Society, a long-serving committee member who only handed in his badge a year ago, and a regular speaker at monthly meetings. His latest contribution to this newsletter can be found on pages 3-5. Members will remember him largely for his good humour, delivered in a booming voice and some will also have been fortunate enough to hear his sonorous bass baritone accompanied by music. We will all miss him.



The photo shows Don with his friend and fellow history enthusiast, Zena Mabbs. We thank Zena for giving us permission to use it.

# Welcome!

We're beginning this issue with yet another appeal for members (and non-members) to come forward with any information about buildings in Cowbridge, especially those not covered in the original *Cowbridge Buildings and People* publication, a millennium project. At present we are still looking urgently for further information and old photos of Westgate to help with the publication that is currently in preparation. The cover illustration is an amateur photo, showing "Westgate in snow", exact year unknown.

Further work is being done by Betty Alden, Kishli Laister and other volunteers to streamline the hard copy archive and make it more easily accessible. An acquisitions policy has been put into force so that we no longer keep duplicate material or items not relevant to Cowbridge's history. In addition, we hope in due course to be able to open the Local History Studies Room in Old Hall at times more convenient to those wishing to carry out independent research.

It has been sad to see the destruction of the former Cowbridge Girls' School in recent months, and we still find it inexplicable that Cadw declined our repeated requests for this historic building to be listed or at least commemorated in the form of a plaque. However, it is good to see that the former police station and the historic Masons Arms are both being preserved in the form of residential projects.

On another sad note, it was with great sorrow that we heard of the recent death of Susan Cox, one of the prime movers in the creation of the Cowbridge Charter Trust. Sue and her husband Geoff have served Cowbridge diligently for many years as councillors and made an unsurpassed contribution to the preservation of the town's heritage. An obituary appears in this edition.

## Talks of the season

The autumn season began with a talk by Gwerfyl Gardner on the history of Cardiff. As always, Gwerfyl had carried out extensive research in order to present her subject effectively. Unfortunately, for various reasons, the date turned out to be difficult for most of the committee, leaving only Chair Chris Turner to hold the fort. At the last minute, arrangements for backup by volunteers partly fell through because of illness, but in the end refreshments were provided by a few kind individuals from amongst the membership. We apologise to you all and especially to our speaker for this and promise that it will not happen again. In the New Year, we will be trying out a new system to fund the provision of refreshments by requesting donations instead of a fixed amount.

In November we welcomed distinguished historian Adrian Goldsworthy of Penarth, who talked on the subject of "Writing historical novels as a historian". Alongside Adrian's many non-fiction works on topics from ancient history, such as Antony and Cleopatra, he has written a dozen successful historical novels, and he explained to us the dilemmas and compromises he sometimes faces in order to produce readable fiction without altering the facts. This popular talk drew comments such as "brilliant" and "inspiring" from our members.

Our Christmas meeting included the usual mince pies and wine in addition to a talk from the popular Graham Loveluck-Edwards, who spoke on the subject of "Cads, Scoundrels and Vagabonds" ("Cads" in this case not to be confused with Cowbridge Amateur Dramatic Society!)

## Obituary: Susan Cox (1942-2025)

Sue was born in Swansea in 1942, and was educated in the town, gaining an HNC in metallurgy. She worked as a research assistant in the metallurgy department of the university where Geoff was a student. They were married in 1965 and spent their first years in Bridgend before moving to Cowbridge in 1971. Sue retired before having her first child and, while enjoying motherhood, found being home all day frustrating and decided to return to work. She joined Glamorgan County Council treasurer's department. With reorganisation she moved to West Glamorgan County Council and was principal human resources manager. She took early retirement in 2003 after having many health problems, including a spinal cord operation which left her paralysed and spending six months in the spinal unit at Rookwood Hospital.

Sue was heavily involved with local organisations, being a member of Cowbridge with Llanblethian Council for over 25 years and twice Mayor of Cowbridge, school governor of Y Bont Faen and Llanfair primary schools. She was a trustee of four charities, the Evan Jenkins Charity, Cowbridge Institute Educational Trust, Cowbridge and District Museum Trust. She was a founder member of Cowbridge Charter Trust and on retirement as a trustee became its President. She played a central part in the Cowbridge 750 celebrations and the arrangements for the visit of HRH Prince of Wales (now King Charles III). She was also Churchwarden of Llanblethian Church and chairman of Cowbridge Conservative Association. She was a founder member of Cowbridge Town Twinning Association and signatory of the twinning agreement with Clisson, France.

Outside the Cowbridge area she sat as Member of the South Wales Rating Valuation Appeals Tribunal Board. She chaired the Cardiff and Vale University Health Board Stakeholder Reference Group and subsequently was an Associate Member of the Health Board. In recognition of her community involvement, she was made a Member of the British Empire (MBE) by Prince Charles in November 2018.

Sue died on 15th July 2025 and will be sadly missed by husband Geoff and children Edward, Anthea and family. Her ashes are to be buried in Llanblethian Church cemetery alongside those of her last child, Alistair, who was born and died on 1 August 1975 after living only a few hours.

*Geoffrey Cox*

## News from the Museum

Following recent organisational changes, Cowbridge & District Museum Trust is pleased to announce the appointment of a new curator, Louise Brookes. Louise is a trained archaeologist from Cardiff. In the coming weeks we will also welcome a new trustee in the shape of James Evans. If James looks familiar, it's because he previously briefly served as curator during the 2010s.

## The Dark Ages in Wales

Rome was no more. The Empire had fallen, under the menace of external threats, internal decay and moral decline. Some historians tend to emphasise the military aspects, while others highlight the ethical issues. The fall of the Empire was a multifaceted process, driven by a combination of all these factors – economic woes, political instability, military overextension, as well as external pressures from barbarian invasion and even trade disruptions, with the Islamists of North Africa and the Middle East.

Indeed, many historians are now very critical of Rome, and the fundamental nature of its existence and effects. "I felt disgusted by --- the nearness of their civilisation at all times to cruelty and corruption" (Sir Mortimer Wheeler) and "The demise of the Roman Empire has been mourned to excess. Its essence was violence and its accomplishments were fundamentally second rate" (John Davies). However, those who support the existence of the Empire see its collapse in the West as ushering in the so-called "Dark Ages", in Britain and Wales more than anywhere else. It appeared that civilisation had yielded to barbarism. With both written evidence and artefacts contracting, historians were deprived of a coherent chronicle of events, and with this so-called "long sunset" came an age of myths and fantasy. In fact, most historians are now abandoning the term "Dark Ages" and substituting "Early Middle Ages" for it. Nevertheless there were great changes, and certainly by about 620-650 the Roman economy was dead, partly due at this particular time to some sweeping Islamic victories.

The years 400-600 were central to the history of Wales, and the rest of Britain. It was the era when Britain came to be divided into a CELTIC West, a TEUTONIC East, and a GAELIC North, and thus where the nations of the Welsh, the English and the Scots crystallised.

There is very little material available or indeed relevant to Wales post 400. There is the *De Excidio Britanniae* by the monk GILDAS about 540 (repeated by BEDE much later after 730). They are prejudicial towards the Welsh and interpret the success of the Anglo-Saxons as the vengeance of God upon the Britons. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* begins to appear much later, about 890, and it provides a narrative of the beginnings of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

Many historians have argued that it is very difficult to provide a coherent account of what actually happened in Britain in the period 400-600. How then can we throw some light on the 5th and 6th centuries in Britain and in Wales?

The collapse of Roman power was a disaster for some, but an opportunity for others. Some sought to tread the path of imperial authority, while others looked towards independence. There were areas of present-day England which chose the former, in the Roman towns such as VERULAMIUM (St. Albans), RATAE (Leicester) and CAMULODUNUM (Colchester), while in less Romanised regions such as Wales, the West and the North, power and authority had been seized by warlords, some minor and others very powerful. Such men may have included VORTIGERN and ARTHUR, both shadowy figures whose very existence has been contested. Information on them both is scanty but those who support them claim Arthur to have been a legendary King of Britain, and a central figure in medieval literature and tradition. In Welsh folklore Arthur is portrayed as a leader of the post-Roman Britons in the struggle against the Anglo-Saxons. On the other hand, it is claimed that Vortigern had a measure of authority throughout Britain sometime between 420 and 450, while at the same time yielding a good deal of land to the Saxons in S and E England.

After Arthur and Vortigern (existent or not), there slowly emerged, certainly in Wales, a succession of small areas, each controlled by minor warlords. In North Wales firstly MAGLOCUNUS (Maelgwn), and then CUNEDDA, controlled what later became GWYNEDD.

The Kingdom of DYFED was of quite different origin, where there was considerable Irish immigration (which had in fact been going on for some time). The same applied to BRYCHEINIOG, which became SOUTH POWYS. In the SE, the most Romanised area of Wales, the kingdoms developed from a combination of the Roman settlements and the traditions of the Silures. GWENT was quite large, bordered by the small kingdoms, ERGYNG and GLYWYSING, and ruled by MEURIG AP TEWDRIG. It was probably he who created the kingdom of MORGANNWG, named perhaps after MORGAN AP/OWAIN. Evidence from the other Welsh "kingdoms" is less plentiful, although there was a small but powerful presence at Dinas Powys, based on the former Roman villa settlement, which came to nothing.

The overpowering of the English (and Welsh) kingdoms is a central fact in the history of Britain after 400, although it was a very slow process. The eight Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were not established until well after 700, although their foundation was earlier: Kent (450), Sussex (480), Wessex (495). These small footholds were not seen as much of a threat to Wales. However, there were substantial English communities in what was later Wessex by 500, and then Mercia, the two most powerful English kingdoms.

The period 550-650 saw the English gain supremacy over much of southern Britain. The Welsh were severely beaten at DYRHAM, near Bristol by the men of Wessex in 577, and in the same year Northumbria was attacked at LINDISFARNE by URIEN of RHEGED (a small kingdom on the north-east coast). Northumbria was successful, absorbed BERNICIA and DEIRA, and the Kingdom of NORTHUMBRIA was founded in 596.

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By 642 Saxon settlers had reached the fringes of the uplands of Wales, and by doing so had severed the links between the Welsh who had existed between upland and lowland. At the same time, from obscure origins, the Mercian warlords began to assert their independence, and to dominate Britain up to unification in the 9th-10th centuries, ETHELWALD OF Mercia (716-757) began the construction of OFFA'S DYKE, one of the most remarkable structures in Britain, a boundary between England and Wales, 240 miles long, of which 130 miles was actually constructed as an earthwork, the rest using natural barriers. It was completed by OFFA in 780.

While Offa's Dyke was being constructed it was only in Wales that the British (Celtic) kingdoms still survived. The Saxons (the English) had succeeded in mastering the larger part of Britain. One of the reasons may be that the people did not regret the passing of the Empire, and the English were less oppressive than the Romans had been. The native peoples kept their language, the English theirs. In 400 the Welsh spoke a Brittonic language; in 700 it was recognisably Welsh.

By about 650 the Saxon invaders had gained a strong foothold in Britain, and certainly after the completion of Offa's Dyke, the Welsh and English co-existed amicably for the most part. The Saxon kingdoms, under the leadership of Mercia and Wessex, established a distinct cultural identity that influenced the evolution of the English language, customs and political structures. The Welsh retained their own language and customs within the larger model, and then within English unification under the strong leadership of the powerful Wessex dynasty in the 9th century.

The Welsh nation was conceived on the death bed of the Roman Empire. Its infancy may have been meagre and lonely, but after 1066 it would have an exciting adolescence.

## 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*

## How we get around!

Most members will be aware that most of the contents of the CHS archive is also available online through the People's Collection Wales website. We were thrilled to receive an e-mail recently from Hilary Monahan, a relative of the Millman sisters, former residents of High Street, Cowbridge. Perhaps some of you remember them? Hilary had found a photograph of a letter written by her Aunt Stacie on Peoples Collection Wales, and wrote: "I just wanted to get in touch to thank you for preserving this letter." She remembers visiting her aunt, who lived in no 33, site of the former Lloyds Bank. Stacie's sister, Nancie, lived "in the little cottage on the corner by the cattle market". This is the kind of correspondence we love to get; it makes our efforts all seem worth while.

## Past and future publications

At our November meeting, we mentioned that we still have copies of many of our past publications. If you would like to acquire any of these, please approach the Publications Officer (Deb) and we will do our best to find you one. Even if the title is out of print, it's worth asking because we occasionally have second-hand copies donated. Last time we were able to help a member find a copy of the much sought-after *Cowbridge Buildings and People*, which has been out of print for twenty years! We continue our project of revising and expanding CB&B in instalments, beginning with the volume on Westgate in 2026.

## 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 ([chrisbturner@live.com](mailto:chrisbturner@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 SPRING-SUMMER 2026**

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

2026

- January 2<sup>nd</sup>      *St John's House - Bridgend's oldest habitable dwelling – the story so far*, Ian Price
- February 6<sup>th</sup>      *Severn Princess*; Tim Ryan
- March 6<sup>th</sup>      *The Ely Industrial School 1860 - 1903*; Terry Kane
- March 13<sup>th</sup>      **Charter Day trip** - National Museum Cardiff - Important Roman and medieval finds in the Cowbridge area; Sian Iles and Evan Chapman; incl. refreshments
- April 10<sup>th</sup>      *More than 30 years of the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust*, Elaine Davey
- May 1<sup>st</sup>      14<sup>th</sup> **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.