

COWBRIDGE & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

No 54 : April 2004

EDITORIAL

Many thanks to all our members for your support this year. Meetings have been informative and enjoyable, and very well attended. It is good to know that we are building on the foundations set by those who started off the Society in October 1974.

So next session will be our 30th anniversary, and we intend to mark it in a special way with a Society lunch, followed by a visit to a historic building in the Vale, probably Sutton, near Llandow. Yvonne Weeding will organise this in her usual efficient manner; details will be in the next newsletter, and we will collect names AND payment in the September meeting.

The weekend of March 13-14 went off really well. It was good to see the charter in Cowbridge on Charter Day, and the other exhibitions in the Town Hall, Church and Old Hall were most interesting, and the medieval banquet was fantastic. The members of Cowbridge 750 are to be congratulated for an excellent weekend, which must have made all their efforts seem worthwhile. If I were to 'name names' I'm sure I'd miss someone out: so well done, all concerned!

On another note, I have visited John Miles in hospital on a number of occasions and have taken him a card with the best wishes of the Society. When I last saw him he looked very much better and was very cheerful. I trust that he will be back in Cowbridge before long.

My thanks to the contributors to this newsletter; deadline for the next is August 15.

INFORMATION REQUIRED

Alec Jones is trying to find out as much as he can about the Cowbridge Militia. If anyone has any information, reminiscences, or names of contacts, particularly about the Armoury or the Drill Hall, do please get in touch with him. (Tel 01446-772124)

MEETINGS

All meetings are held in the Lesser Hall, Cowbridge, and start at 8pm.

April 4th

The Mumbles Railway:

G Gabb

September 3rd: AGM and

The 16th century wreck on Margam Beach

Dr Mark Redknapp

Later in September (further details to be announced in the next newsletter and in the September meeting):

Excursion to Sutton farmhouse, preceded by lunch, with a local speaker. We will use this to commemorate our 30th anniversary as a Local History Society.

OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE

Joint Chairmen: Bruce McGovern, Jeff Alden

Hon Secretary: Don Gerrard

Hon Treasurers: Ivana Locke and Val Pugh

Programme secretary: Dick Tonkin

Publicity Officer: Don Wallis

Editor of the newsletter: Jeff Alden

Representative on Vale Conservation

Advisory Group: George Haynes

Committee: Betty Alden, Arline Boulton, Marilyn Cope, Robert Cope, Liam Ginn, Keith Jones, Iris Simpson

President: Revd Norman Williams

Vice Presidents: Revd Stanley Mogford

Mr Arthur Peplow

Mrs Yvonne Weeding

Editor: Jeff Alden, 01446 773373

BRUNEL, THE SOUTH WALES RAILWAY AND COWBRIDGE.

Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1806 - 59) was an engineer of outstanding originality, arguably the finest ever produced by Britain. He was the son of a French emigré, himself a famous engineer who had solved the problem of underwater tunnelling. The young Brunel was appointed Resident Engineer of the Thames tunnel in 1825, and in 1830 his design for the Clifton Suspension Bridge was accepted in preference to that submitted by Thomas Telford. He also designed docks at Bristol, Brentford, Briton Ferry, Milford Haven and Plymouth, and three famous steamships - the Great Western, the Great Britain and the Great Eastern.

It was however as a railway engineer that he is best known. In 1833 he became Chief Engineer of the Great Western Railway, and the London - Bristol line was probably the first main line built anywhere in the Railway Age, with its gentle curves and slight gradients, the famous Box Tunnel and the terminus at Temple Meads. He introduced the broad gauge (7ft), as opposed to Stephenson's 4ft 8½ inches, which made high speeds possible. He designed and built over 1,000 miles of railway in the west country, south Wales and the midlands. It was Brunel's plans for the extension of the GWR from Bristol into south Wales (the South Wales Railway) that had a great impact on Cowbridge.

Cowbridge was probably at the peak of its prosperity in the first half of the 19th century. The road through the town was made a turnpike road in 1764, and by 1786 there was a regular mail coach service using the Bear hotel as an intermediary stop. There were two attempts to build a tramway to Cowbridge (similar to that from Maesteg to Bridgend and Porthcawl), in 1816 from Llanharry Colliery and in 1825 from Trecastle Colliery near Pontyclun. In 1825 there was a meeting at the Bear Hotel to promote such a tramway, with an extension to Aberthaw. Nothing came of it, however.

In 1844 the South Wales Railway was proposed, and sanctioned by act of Parliament in 1845 as a broad gauge line. Work began in 1846, and the route from Gloucester to

Cardiff, Bridgend, Neath and Swansea was surveyed personally by Brunel. It appeared to Brunel that by far the best and shortest route would be across the Vale of Glamorgan via Cowbridge, a prospect that did not meet with the approval of the Corporation or the inhabitants. Whether this influenced the choice of route is not known. It has been suggested that there would have been engineering difficulties in crossing the Thaw valley, although these would not have been as great as those experienced by Brunel later at Landore and Llansamlet. The 1844 prospectus for the railway stated that "from Cardiff the railway passes through the rich agricultural district adjacent to . . . Cowbridge, Bridgend, Porthcawl and Pyle", and later "the proposed railroad will run through the coal works about 5 miles to the north of Cowbridge, and the good people of the ancient borough are well pleased to be left undisturbed". Because of this it was suggested that "Cowbridge is an old-fashioned town, consisting of one long street, which is likely to bear a crop of grass as soon as the South Wales Railway is in operation" (CF Cliffe, *Book of South Wales*, 1847).

Not all the inhabitants of Cowbridge were hostile to the railway. Revd Thomas Edmondson, the vicar of Cowbridge, ran a concerted campaign to have the railway run through the town, although he later became convinced that the route via Pontyclun was chosen for engineering reasons. David Jones of Wallington said "No-one . . . believed the action of the Corporation . . . compelled the South Wales Railway to pass by Cowbridge . . . they were hostile to the railway when as guardians of the welfare of the town, they should have taken active steps in getting the railway to enter the neighbourhood."

The line from Cardiff to Swansea opened on 18 June 1850. The effect on south Wales was immediate. It was no longer remote, the growth of the coal industry was accelerated - in 1845 there were 7 pits in the Aberdare valley, by 1855 there were 28. The Taff Vale Railway was engineered by Brunel, so that 20 new pits were opened in the Rhondda valley

between 1865 and 1875. Before this the Rhondda was a “wild, untouched, mountainous region, where the lark sang and a Sabbath sweetness reigned” (F Booker, *The Great Western Railway*). It was never to be the same again: “its pastoral stillness was shattered forever” F Booker, *op cit*). The first trainload of coal reached Cardiff in 1855, and soon Rhondda coal, the finest steam coal in the world, fuelled the Navy and the world’s merchant ships.

There was great excitement in Cardiff on the opening day of the railway. Its construction had brought about a major change in the face of the town: the course of the Taff had been altered enabling Westgate Street to be built and Cardiff Arms Park to be created. Local dignitaries met the first train, hordes of people were at the station, some even on the roof. At Bridgend a band paraded through the streets four hours before the train was due to arrive, and hundreds of people were on the streets and at the station. “This attitude contrasted with that of the people of Cowbridge, who decided that they did not want . . . the railway . . . anywhere near them, and lived to regret it as trade slumped with the extinction of stage coach travel” (H Williams, *Railways in Wales*). At every stop along the line to Swansea there were huge crowds, the pealing of church bells and the flying of flags. (The journey from Cardiff to Bridgend took one hour, the 2nd class fare was 1/6d. From Bridgend to London cost 15/6d).

The effect on Cowbridge too was immediate. The mail coach service was withdrawn a month later, in July 1850. The Quarter Sessions were held for the last time in Cowbridge in 1850, and the town soon began to stagnate. The *Cardiff and Merthyr Guardian* suggested in 1853 that “the want of a railway reduces Cowbridge . . . to a state of hopeless isolation . . . and confines Cowbridge to the humble position of a small country market town”.

There began almost immediately agitation in the town for the construction of a railway, a branch from Llantrisant or a loop line from Peterston-super-Ely through Cowbridge to Bridgend. Five long years of agitation followed. In December 1855 a public meeting was held at the Town Hall, and a committee was formed to press for a branch

line from Llantrisant to Cowbridge. This ended in failure, and another meeting at the Town Hall in September 1860 with the Mayor, RC Nicholl Carne, in the chair recommended the building of an independent railway from Cowbridge to Llantrisant at an estimated cost of £25,000. A further meeting in October 1860 suggested the railway be built by the TVR company, but the project came to nothing.

Finally in 1861 a committee was formed to promote the Cowbridge Railway! A prospectus was issued with a capital of £30,000, and the TVR agreed to subscribe £5,000. There was however great difficulty in raising funds in Cowbridge. “Tradespeople came forward with modest sums, but the wealthy landowners seemed reluctant to support the venture” (C Chapman - *The Cowbridge Railway*).

Despite the shortfall in capital, plans went ahead and in June 1862 the Cowbridge Railway Bill was passed. There were great celebrations in the town, and the GWR agreed to assist with costs (the SW Railway sold out to the GWR in 1863) despite continuing difficulties in raising funds. In April 1863 Messrs Griffiths and Thomas were appointed contractors and on 9 June Nicholl Carne cut the first sod. The town was packed, there was a procession headed by a band to the proposed terminus in Eastgate Street, and a public dinner was held at the Bear Hotel that evening. Although construction work on the railway was slow, largely due to men being taken away during harvesting, the railway was completed on 12 December 1864. The Cowbridge Railway was ready to start operating.

Don Gerrard

JETHRO TULL AND THE BEAR HOTEL

Do you remember those history lessons in school, many years ago, when you tried to learn about the agricultural revolution, with the wonderfully evocative names of Robert Coke, Turnip Townsend, and Jethro Tull and his *Horse-Hoeing Husbandry*? I have recently been reading the *Records of the Glamorganshire Agricultural Society* written by John Garsed in 1890 - and all those memories came flooding back.

The Glamorganshire Agricultural Society was founded on 28th October 1772 at the Bear Hotel in Cowbridge 'for the encouragement of agriculture'. Two general meetings were to be held annually at Cowbridge, with two regional meetings at both Cardiff and Swansea (incidentally suggesting the importance of Cowbridge in those days). Subscriptions were invited and seemed to come mainly from the landed gentry of Glamorgan; prizes were to be awarded for the best examples of farming. The first awards were to be for the best fields of turnips and sainfoin, 'well hoed and cultivated'. John Garsed's comments were: "The selection of premiums and classification of farms show great judgment, as turnip husbandry is the fountain head of all good cultivation; and the encouragement of a forage crop as valuable as sainfoin (Clover) indicates that the originators of the Society were alive to the new features of husbandry, and well up with the spirit of the times when 'Coke' was a household word in Norfolk".

Within six months it was decided that £50 be put aside to purchase 'implements of husbandry' for members to inspect at a warehouse in Cowbridge, and by the end of 1773 a Northampton plough, a machine for dressing clover, one for slicing turnips and two each of approved horse hoes, turnip hoes and straw cutters had been bought and put on display. This year also saw the clear encouragement of the Norfolk four-course system of farming (1st year, turnips; 2nd, barley; 3rd, clover; 4th wheat). Prizes were awarded for the reclamation of rough land, for the best coach or cart horses, and for the best potato crop. By 1774, cattle and sheep prizes were also awarded.

The names of the people involved in the Society also ring a number of bells. The initial vice-president was Robert Jones of Fonmon, and all three other dignitaries in the first year owned property in Cowbridge and district: George Venables Vernon of Briton Ferry, Thomas Mansel Talbot and Gervase Powell. In 1774, John Edmondson Esq received a silver medal for the best crop of turnips in the county, 12 ½ acres. In 1775, George Howells, Llanmaes, and Thomas Thomas, Llampha, had prizes for yearling bulls, and Thomas Jenkins, Pwll y Darren (presumably Welsh St Donats) and John Jones, Eglwys Brewis, for yearling rams. In the same year, John Franklen of Llanmihangel was awarded a silver medal for fourteen acres of turnips; silver medals were awarded instead of monetary prizes to the larger landowners.

In the next year, John Franklen was commended for cultivating 1½ acres of cabbage, one of which weighed 18 ¾ lbs; and John Edmondson produced the best yearling bull. Franklen, who was agent to the Dunraven estate and thus controlled over 40,000 acres, remained secretary to the Society for 49 years.

Premiums were soon offered for bar and twig (wattle) hurdles and for growing hawthorn 'quicks'. The hurdles were mainly for temporary enclosures for sheep, while the quicks were for permanent hedges. A study of the Newton moors north of Cowbridge indicates that the straight hedges of this area are nearly all hawthorn and were probably planted when the land was reclaimed from marsh at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries - no doubt stimulated by the work of the Glamorgan Agricultural Society.

Early in the 19th century, two other prizes went to men associated with the Bear Hotel: in 1803, Christopher Bradley received a prize of five guineas for the best crop of potatoes, while two years later, Michael Glover had two guineas for the best boar, 'Suffolk red and white, cock-eared sort'. The list goes on, as for example fifty years later 'the names of Captain Entwisle (Marlbro Grange) and Revd WH Beever (Crossways) appear as frequent winners.

One interesting sideline of the Society

was its role in the establishment of the woollen factory at Bridgend. In 1790 a spinning Jenny with a person to work it, was sent for. It was to be placed "near the middle of this county, to instruct those engaged in flannel and hose manufacture, in the hope that it may tend to the introduction of manufactories, and thus prevent the exportation of raw wool from the county". Franklen and Thomas Wyndham of Dunraven were the chief members of the Company of Proprietors by whom the factory was set up. The factory was water-powered, on the river Ogwr just upstream of the old bridge, and included all the processes from combing, spinning, weaving and dyeing to finishing. It was never financially viable and closed by 1820 when the buildings were sold to a tannery, and later became Stiles brewery.

The story of the Society is a fascinating one. I am grateful to John Cann of Walterstone for drawing my attention to the existence of the book in Park Street Library, Bridgend.

Jeff Alden

AN (ALMOST) COWBRIDGE VC

An article in the Bridgend Chronicle of December 5th, 1857, alerted me to the fact that a son of Doctor Sylvester of Cowbridge had been awarded the Victoria Cross (and the Cross of the Legion of Honour) for bravery in the Crimean war, and must have been among the first to receive the VC.

Assistant Surgeon William Henry Thomas Sylvester of the 23rd Regiment, later the Royal Welch Fusiliers, was aged 24 at the time of the action. The citation reads: On 8 September 1855, at Sebastopol, Crimea, near the Redan, Assistant Surgeon Sylvester went with a corporal to the aid of an officer who was mortally wounded and remained with him, dressing his wounds, in a most dangerous and exposed situation. Again, on 18 September this officer was at the front, under heavy fire, attending the wounded.

We do not yet know a great deal about Assistant Surgeon Sylvester. He later achieved the rank of Surgeon Major and worked with Florence Nightingale in the Crimea. He was

born at Devizes in Wiltshire in 1831, and died in Paignton in Devon in 1920, aged 89.

In the 1851 census, his father Charles Sylvester, MD, MRCS, a 54-year-old general practitioner apparently born in Swansea, lived in Woodstock House with his wife and daughter; the latter was, like William, born in Devizes. George was not recorded in Cowbridge.

I write that Charles was 'apparently' born in Swansea because the Sylvesters were well established as doctors in Wiltshire. There was an Edmund Sylvester of Warminster, who died in 1715, whose tombstone said that he was of the ancient family of Sylvesters of Burford in Oxfordshire. Joseph Sylvester, surgeon, apothecary and practitioner in midwifery announced in 1759 that he had purchased the drugs and utensils of an apothecary in Warminster; Samuel Sylvester was in partnership in Trowbridge with a William Palmer in the late eighteenth century; his son George was born in 1788, qualified as a naval surgeon and saw action off Java in 1811; he returned to Trowbridge in 1813 and remained a doctor until he died in 1887, aged 99 years. George's son, George Mayris Sylvester, and grandson Kirwan Francis Sylvester continued the family tradition in medicine in Trowbridge through the nineteenth century. Perhaps that is why 'our' Sylvester moved to Cowbridge: there was no room for any other doctor Sylvester at least in Trowbridge.

As Dr Sylvester is listed in Cowbridge in a 1848 directory, there is at least a good chance that the young WHT lived here for a while. With a little more research we may be able to claim him as our first VC.

JA

MERCI, GILLES!

M Gilles Renoul, the chairman of the Clisson Town Twinning Association, visited Cowbridge for Charter weekend and presented the Society with the authoritative history of our twin town and its region. We thank him for his kind gift of *Histoire de la Vallée de Clisson*, which may be borrowed on request to Jeff Alden.

VALE CLOCKS AND CLOCK-MAKERS

It is a well-established fact that the past wealth of an area can be judged by the quality of its artefacts. It will be no surprise, then, to learn that in the 18th century the prosperous and beautiful Vale of Glamorgan was the home of the maker of some of the finest domestic clocks ever to have been made in Wales: Henry Williams, farmer and clockmaker of Llancarfan, 1727 -1790. He is the subject of a new book, *Henry Williams, Llancarfan: 'A Clock and Watchmaker and a Great Farmer'*, by two outstanding scholars in this field, Dr E W Cloutman and Dr W Linnard. This has a fascinating and lavishly illustrated text, which includes pictures and descriptions of the fourteen so far known pieces by Williams. The full account of his life and status as a craftsman and farmer in the rural Vale community, with origins in Gloucester, and Somerset connections as well, makes it a "must" for local historians as well as for antiques enthusiasts.

Dr Linnard has also recently published a new definitive work, *Wales Clocks and Clockmakers*, which includes a dictionary of makers. In this book, there are ten Cowbridge clockmakers listed, including Philip Walton and Godfrey in the 18th century. Llantrisant had six makers including Jenkin Griffiths who died in 1729, and Bridgend had sixteen.

A RESEARCH PROJECT

It is hoped that we can fill in some gaps in the broader picture indicated by Dr Linnard's lists. So, we are hoping very much that people in this area who own Vale clocks, that is, any clocks with a Vale town or village identification on the dial, will allow them to be recorded. This would mean a visit from Dr Cloutman and/or myself to take photographs and measurements, and details of past ownership when known, to build up a picture of the different types and qualities of the clocks and their makers. Recently clocks by Richard Lloyd and Philip Walton of Cowbridge have been discovered. There may be yet more makers to be found, as well as clocks. Who knows?

The aims of this project are:

- to provide owners with a background history of Vale clock-making, to enhance the interest and value of their clocks.
- to contribute to the Wales-wide scene, feeding the information into the database being developed at St Fagans
- to publish a report of the results of the project via the History or Record Society, and hopefully to incorporate it into a wider, more substantial work on Vale furniture.

What we would NOT do is to reveal details of present ownership and precise whereabouts of any clock seen. All contacts will be in strict confidence. So, if you own a Vale clock, or know anyone who does, or have relevant contacts, please contact me, Luke Millar, on 01446 773528, or Jeff Alden on 01446 773373. The quality of the project will depend upon the strength of the response to this appeal.

Luke Millar

Cowbridge Record Society AGM

A reminder to CRS members that the AGM, with wine and light refreshments, takes place on Weds, 21 April in the Pagan Room of the Duke of Wellington. The speaker will be the President, Brian James, on 'The hangings on Stalling Down'. Members only - but the membership fee of £3 would be worth it for the evening alone. Please let Mrs J Rawlins of 8 Mill Park, Cowbridge (01446-772750) know if you wish to attend.