

GLAMORGAN ARCHIVE SERVICE

COWBRIDGE
BOROUGH CHARTERS
1254-1421



*The Seal of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Worcester,
Lord of Glamorgan and Morgan,
on the Cowbridge Charter of 1421*

The Coat of Arms quarters Beauchamp (a fess charged with a crescent, between 6 cross crosslets), and Despenser (quarterly, in the second and third a fret, over all a bendlet)

THE BOROUGH

The history of Cowbridge as a borough commences with a charter of 13 March 1254, granted by Richard de Clare, Lord of Glamorgan and Morgan.

De Clare had recently taken the Lordship of Llanblethian into his own hands, a forfeit from the disaffected Siward. The establishment of Cowbridge borough can be seen as part of de Clare's policy for the political and economic exploitation of the area. What nucleus of a town existed already is not known, but the site was full of promise, at a river crossing on the main highway leading through South Wales. The swift development and economic prosperity achieved by the new borough is reflected in the number of its burgages, which had risen to 233 by 1295. The distribution of the burgage plots on either side of the highway, High Street, gave the town a pattern of ribbon development, and it is interesting that the charter of 1254 refers to the borough under the name *Longa Villa*, Long Town. This suggests the existence of a settlement laid out in this characteristic pattern by the mid-thirteenth century. The name was not to survive, however, but to give place to *Cowbridge*, found spelt in various ways on documents of the medieval period, Coubrig, Cowbrige, Cowbrug, Coubrugge, Cowebrugge, Kowbrygge.

Cowbridge, in common with other boroughs of Norman foundation in the medieval lordship of Glamorgan, once possessed a series of parchment charters. These documents recorded the privileges enjoyed by the burgesses, and successive Lords of Glamorgan and Morgan inspected and confirmed the grants made by earlier generations.

Until 1983 it was thought that all the medieval charters granted to Cowbridge borough had perished, that rats, mice, fire or damp had led to their decay and destruction. In the autumn of 1983 the charter of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Worcester, granted to Cowbridge in 1421, came to light in a Somerset solicitor's office. Its return to Glamorgan was successfully negotiated. The fifteenth-century parchment is now housed in the strongrooms of the Glamorgan Record Office, while a photocopy hangs on display in the Council Chamber of Cowbridge Town Hall.

An explanation can be offered for its discovery in Somerset. A member of the Glamorgan landowning family of Gwyn of Llansannor married a West Country heiress in the 1690s. Presumably the Cowbridge charter had by then found its way into the hands of the Gwyns, and was taken across the Bristol Channel, with other documents. Although the South Wales and West Country estates later became separated, the Cowbridge charter remained in Somerset, unrecognised and forgotten, until its re-examination in 1983 led to its restoration to Glamorgan and its re-association with the ancient borough to which it related.

THE CHARTERS

The charter of 1421 is at present the only known surviving charter granted by the Lords of Glamorgan and Morgan to Cowbridge, but its recitals provide evidence of the earlier (still lost) charters.

CHARTER OF RICHARD DE CLARE, 13 MARCH 1254

Richard de Clare granted to the burgesses of his borough of Longa Villa all the privileges (not specified) enjoyed by the burgesses of his borough of Cardiff.

CHARTER OF HUGH LE DESPENSER THE YOUNGER, 19 APRIL 1340

Hugh le Despenser, by a charter under the seal of his Chancery at Cardiff, granted specific liberties to the Cowbridge burgesses. The main privileges were those of the right to hold their own courts and to elect their own officials, in whom authority in the town was vested. The borough might keep its own gaol, and was to control the standards of bread and ale. Other major privileges granted were of economic advantage, allowing burgesses immunity from many dues and tolls, and a certain independence in trading. Furthermore, burgesses were to have the right to bequeath their burgage plots, lands and rents, and to form a Guild.

CHARTER OF EDWARD LE DESPENSER, 18 JUNE 1358

Edward le Despenser, in a charter given under the seal of his Chancery at Cardiff, inspected and confirmed the 1340 charter of his uncle.

CHARTER OF THOMAS LE DESPENSER, 16 FEBRUARY 1397

The charter of Thomas le Despenser, given under the seal of his Chancery at Cardiff, records the inspection of his father's charter of 1358 and its confirmation.

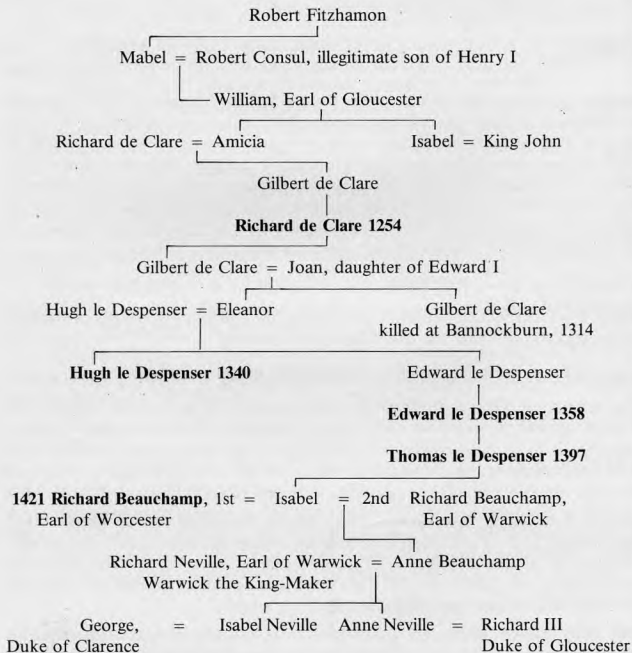
CHARTER OF RICHARD BEAUCHAMP, EARL OF WORCESTER, 1 MAY 1421

Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Worcester, Lord le Despenser and of Abergavenny, had become Lord of Glamorgan and Morgan through his wife, Isabel le Despenser, daughter of Thomas le Despenser of the 1397 charter. Beauchamp's charter inspects and confirms the charters of 1397, 1358, 1340 (setting out the liberties in detail) and 1254, and thus reveals their existence and their content.

The 1421 charter, written (as were the others) in medieval Latin, and given at Cardiff, was sealed with Richard Beauchamp's green wax seal. Although the seal is damaged, its central portion is intact and shows Richard Beauchamp's coat of arms displayed on a shield. On the reverse of the seal the equestrian figure bears a shield with the same arms. The seal is affixed to a parchment seal-tag which is threaded through the turned-up foot of the document. The parchment measures approximately 20 by 21 inches. It is written in a neat hand but the embellished initial R of the first word *Ricardus* was never completed.

BRIEF PEDIGREE OF THE LORDS OF GLAMORGAN AND MORGAN

Those who granted charters to Cowbridge are shown in bold type



*Elfydd Scourfold
Welsh Folk Museum*