

COWBRIDGE TOWN TRAIL

There was a small town here in Roman times, built at a point where the main Roman road in south Wales, the Via Julia, crossed the river Thaw. The High Street runs along the line of the Roman road; archaeological digs have exposed a wealth of military and civil remains.

Cowbridge as we know it today, however, developed from the 'new town' established in 1254 by Richard de Clare, the Lord of Glamorgan. The town walls, the South Gate, Holy Cross church and the burgage plots all date from this time. Its growth since then has been as a market town for the Vale of Glamorgan, as a social centre with the wealthy families of the Vale having town houses built along the High Street, and also as an educational centre, the Grammar School having been founded in 1608. The Great Sessions and Quarter Sessions were held in the town, so it can also be considered to have been a legal centre for Glamorgan; its prison was also of some importance.

It is a linear town, quickly outgrowing its roughly rectangular walled pattern with houses being built along both sides of the main road, east and west of the centre; indeed in 1264 it was known as 'Longa Villa', long town. There was very little building outside the long and narrow borough envelope, however, until the mid- twentieth century.

Its lack of industrial development in the nineteenth century, linked with the lack of east-west railway links, meant that Cowbridge stagnated at that time; but it also means that the town still has some fine Georgian buildings, and indeed the facades of many of the houses along the main street often conceal medieval fabric. Even more noticeably in this part of Wales, it is the only town which has retained its early medieval town walls with the South Gate; Cowbridge is a member of the Walled Towns Circle.

THE CHURCH OF THE HOLY CROSS

The church, a grade I listed building, was built soon after the 'new town' of Cowbridge was created, and much of the nave, tower and chancel dates from the late 13th century. The shape of the tower suggests that it was intended to serve as a stronghold or watchtower; Iolo Morganwg stated that it was once topped with a spire.

The slim pillars separating the nave from the south aisle were put up when the south or Llanquian aisle was constructed, reputedly as a gift in 1473 from Lady Anne Neville, wife of Richard III. The concrete bases to the pillars date from a 1926 reconstruction! Another link with Richard III was his granting of a chaplaincy to Holy Cross church in 1484; a copy of that charter is displayed in the church.

Memorials in the church (for many were buried there) date back to the 17th century: the most spectacular wall monument is that to the Carne family in the south aisle. Others commemorated

include Judge David Jenkins (a Royalist who was imprisoned in the Tower of London), a multiplicity of headmasters of the Grammar School, and the Edmondes family of Old Hall.

The close links between school and church are also shown by the stained glass windows of school benefactors, and the school war memorial window.

There is a fine peal of eight bells, cast in 1722 in the Evans foundry of Chepstow. They are rung regularly.

THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Cowbridge Grammar School was one of the foremost schools in Wales, and has produced skilled rugby players, and academics and lawyers of distinction. Alun Lewis, highly regarded as a war poet, and Anthony Hopkins the actor are two old boys celebrated in the world of the arts.

Sir Edward and Sir John Stradling of St Donats established their Free School on this site in 1608. Later, the school and many of the Stradling lands in the Vale of Glamorgan were acquired by Sir Leoline Jenkins, an illustrious 'Old Boy' who had become Secretary of State to Charles II. He then bequeathed them in 1685 to Jesus College, Oxford, thereby ensuring the financial security of Jesus College and beginning a 233-year-long connection between the school and the college.

Until 1847 the school was a modest building, with initially one school room for all ages of pupils. The enlargement and reconstruction was in a Gothic style in an attempt to create some architectural harmony between the school and the surrounding medieval buildings. On the garden side of the building, the neatly cut lawn surrounded by flowerbeds and enclosed by stone walls and raised banks created an impression of an Oxbridge college. The school contained a boarding 'house' with three dormitories, but boarding ceased soon after the school went comprehensive in 1974, and the school building fell out of use soon after.

TOWN HALL

Until 1830 the Cowbridge House of Correction stood where the Town Hall stands today. The guild hall stood in the middle of High Street near its junction with Church Street, but was becoming damaged by the passage of coaches, and was itself an impediment to coach traffic. When Swansea prison was opened in 1829, the Cowbridge House of Correction became redundant and was ripe for conversion into a new Town Hall.

Revd JM Traherne of St Hilary had plans drawn up; the conversion, rapidly completed under the supervision of Isaiah Verity, used the basic structure of the House of Correction. Thus the prison cells still remain. They now house the town museum: one is set out to resemble an original cell, and gives a good idea of its squalor and lack of space.

The cupola, housing a new clock - the old one had not worked well after its transfer from the original Guild Hall - was built in 1836 as a gift of the Bishop of Llandaff, Dr Edward Coplestone, who then lived at Llandough Castle. Alongside the Town Hall was the shambles with its butchers' stalls, and walls blocked off both sides of what is now Town Hall Square.

In 1895, the Town Hall was enlarged (filling in the open sides at the rear). In 1902 the Fire Brigade headquarters were established in what is now the Lesser Hall and kitchen, and remained here until the second world war.

ROMAN COWBRIDGE

The Antonine Itinerary, a Roman route guide, lists a settlement called Bomium mid-way between the Roman towns of Caerleon and Neath. The number of significant finds made in Cowbridge suggests that this probably was the 'lost town' of Bomium. Most of the finds so far have been to the north of the High Street, and date from the first century AD. The most significant finds include the bath house of military type, containing legionary stamped tiles, which was excavated on the site of the Arthur John car park, a number of buildings on the road frontage (13 Eastgate, 77 and 75 High Street), with a side street leading north from No 75. The Bear field area contained a complex sequence of pits, ditches and gullies containing iron slag and signs of leather working, together with burials and a cremation site. Other finds include the lion sculpture (now in the National Museum of Wales) from a funerary monument which was found at the western end of the town, as well as much pottery and metal ware.

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Cowbridge Town Trail

Start in the gardens of Old Hall.

Old Hall, now Cowbridge's Adult Education Centre, was built as a town house, probably in the seventeenth century, and was associated with the Edmondes family until the 1920s, and was used as part of the Grammar School from 1932 to 1964. The 'first' Thomas Edmondes was steward to the Aubreys of Llantrithyd but, through a sound business sense and judicious marriages, the Edmondes family prospered. A Classical extension with Venetian windows was added by a later Thomas Edmondes in the 1770s - but now only the ground floor of the facade remains.

Old Hall gardens are bordered to the south and west by the Town Walls, which were built to enclose the new town of Cowbridge in the late thirteenth century.

Proceed between the modern Health Centre and the Library, designed by the Welsh School of Architecture, to the steps leading to the 'battlements' - the short stretch of walkway on top of the wall.

The bastion in the south-west corner was originally higher, but still gives a good view over to Llanblethian Hill with its Iron Age fort - and also overlooks the site of the Butts Pool, where scolds (over-talkative women) were ducked in the eighteenth century. The pool was filled in when the cattle market was constructed.

Go through the gateway in the wall and walk to the Southgate.

In the mediaeval walls, there were originally four gates, which controlled access to the town, particularly to collect tolls from those going in to market. Only the Southgate remains. The walls continue to another bastion in the Grammar School garden.

Go through the Southgate to inspect Cowbridge Grammar School.

The school was founded in 1608 by the Stradlings of St Donats, and was owned by Jesus College, Oxford, from 1685 to 1918. Jesus College paid for the present buildings - now in a sorry state - to be put up in 1847-52. They were designed by the ecclesiastical architect, John Prichard, to harmonise with the church and cottages in Church Street.

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Walk past the Tally Court, where handball used to be played, and opposite are two cottages.

These were formerly one house, built in the late sixteenth century. Inside, the quality of the building suggests that it was the home of people of some importance.

Opposite the cottages is the entrance to the churchyard of Holy Cross Church.

Like the town walls and the Southgate, Holy Cross Church was first built in the second half of the thirteenth century. Its solid and perhaps fortified tower may have been capped with a small spire; the bells date from the eighteenth century. Inside the church, the tower arches are massive; the south aisle with its more delicate arcading was a gift to the church of Lady Ann Neville (wife of Richard III) in 1473. Many memorials and monuments are of interest, especially the Carne memorial and those to the Edmondes family and to various headmasters of the Grammar School.

On leaving the churchyard, turn right towards the High Street.

The Duke of Wellington was a mediaeval house: the two front rooms and passage remain in their original location. It has been an inn since the seventeenth century, with a variety of names, including the Half Moon, Black Horse and Coach and Horses. It was a coaching inn for some time. The space in the High Street opposite the 'Duke' was occupied by the Town Hall, market and town cross; these caused such an obstacle to traffic on the main road that in 1830 the Town Hall and cross were demolished and the market moved. A small brass plate on the road marks the site of the cross where, among others, John Wesley once preached.

Turn right along High Street

Many of the buildings along the High Street are of mediaeval origin, but all have been modified to a greater or lesser extent; sometimes the backs of the buildings reveal interesting details such as the mediaeval warehouse behind Davies the newsagent's shop, or the sixteenth century window at the rear of Great House Pharmacy. Great House was once the town house of the Carne family of Nash Manor. Built in the 1500s, it had a major change of its frontage in the eighteenth century, giving the Georgian windows and doorways we see today. The left hand side of the building was the Misses Culverwell's Great House School in the nineteenth century, and Franklen House, a boarding house for the Grammar School, in the interwar years.

Opposite, 39 to 43 High Street make a pleasing grouping, with a fine carved ogee hood over the door of No 41.

The Town Hall was built in 1830 over the former House of Correction. The main hall is on the upper floor, while the ground floor contains the Council Chamber and offices, Mayor's Parlour, Lesser Hall and the cells - which are now used to house the exhibits of the Cowbridge Museum. Outside the Town Hall stood the Eastgate, though nothing remains of this or of the town walls at this point. On the other side of the road and outside Martins the newsagents, the wall plaque to Iolo Morganwg, the talented but eccentric historian and folklorist, contains a line in the script he invented.

Continue eastwards over the river,

The buildings along Eastgate are of some age: the Pavilion however, recently reconstructed and preserving the facade and turret of the former cinema and ballroom (where Lloyd George was presented with the freedom of Cowbridge), now shows no sign of the handball court or wheelwright's premises which once occupied the site.

Some other buildings to the east should be noted – East Villa and The Armoury, with Georgian facades, and the adjoining Ancient Druid, reputed to be a pilgrims' hostel on the route to St David's.

Look (or go) east towards the traffic lights

On the right are the Victorian terraces of Croft Street and Croft Terrace (built after the railway came to Cowbridge in 1865). The far east of Eastgate was where the toll gate stood; the turnpike milestone is still visible, embedded into the wall on the corner of No 1 Eastgate.

Retrace your steps towards the Town Hall

The Shield, and Rhoscelyn opposite, with two parts of a standing stone in the garden, are examples of Victorian gentry houses, scarce in Cowbridge.

At the west end of Eastgate a plaque showing the position of the former bridge can be seen on the wall of the garden of Glanthaw Cottage. The river Thaw used to flow past the east side of

Glanthaw and the Old Brewery. The latter (now a residence) was one of Cowbridge's nineteenth century breweries - others being at the Vale of Glamorgan Inn, and in Cooper's Yard - which reminds us that at that time there were about two dozen inns and public houses in Cowbridge.

At the Town Hall, turn right into Town Hall Square, pass the Institute building and turn left into Bear Lane (or North Road).

The wall on your left is not the town wall, but glancing to the left one gets an excellent idea of the burgage plots, the long narrow gardens extending back from the buildings on High Street. Many of the gardens follow the exact outlines of the plots laid out soon after 1254.

On the right, the Arthur John car park was the site of a significant excavation which unearthed a Roman bathhouse, with two boiler rooms and a central heating system, and ties stamped LEG II AVG were evidence of a Roman military presence in Cowbridge, the Second Augustan Legion.

Opposite the Vale Forge, turn left into the courtyard outside the Old Woolbarn, which was earlier a malt house for the 'Vale' brewery (for which stabling was provided in the Vale Forge buildings) and go through Verity's Court.

Isaiah Verity - after whom the court was named - had been awarded the freedom of Cowbridge for his work in building the Town Hall. The entrance still preserves its original appearance with a cobbled surface and triangular stones to protect the walls from wheels of carts and carriages.

Turn right into the High Street.

The buildings at the corner of the junction with Church Street are at least of seventeenth century origin. On the north side of the road, the HSBC bank occupies the site of Prior's tower, mentioned as a possible site for the Grammar School when Sir Edward Stradling was considering its foundation in 1608. Next door is the Bear Hotel, of mediaeval origin. Inside, some doorways and carvings attest to its age. In the seventeenth century it was the town house for the Thomas family of Plas Llanmihangel, and then in the eighteenth century a celebrated coaching inn. The 'assembly room' at the rear is over a mediaeval undercroft, now used as a restaurant.

Opposite the Bear, Caercady House with a fine portico and Georgian facade was the town house for the Jenkinses of Caercady near Welsh St Donats. Old Hall whose frontage to the main road is a late-nineteenth century construction has already been described at the start of the trail. It lies next to the Mason's Arms which shows interesting examples of change - a mediaeval trefoil headed window next to a seventeenth-century bay and a nineteenth-century extension at right angles to it. This was built next to the gatehouse for the Westgate (removed in 1753 because of the increasing road traffic).

Beyond the Masons Arms, the street named 'The Butts' is probably associated with archery.

The main road here is called 'Westgate'; at the far end was the western tollgate, now demolished; the flats in Hopyard Meadow were built on the site of medieval cottages. When they were being built a stone lion, a Roman funerary ornament, was excavated.

On the northern side of Westgate, reached by a passageway through the cottages flanking the street, is the United Reformed Church, popularly known as Ramoth chapel. Built in 1826, it was soon rebuilt by 'Ten Chapel Tom' Morris, a celebrated preacher of his day. It is an attractive building with a good gallery.

Return towards the town centre

A restaurant and shop now occupy the former Spread Eagle Inn. The front part dates from the seventeenth century, but the extension running along Eagle Lane is more important in the history of Cowbridge. This housed the ballroom or assembly room which became the social centre of the town in the eighteenth century; it subsequently was used as a school, the Eagle Academy. It has a curved ceiling and two fine balconies above the fireplaces.

Across Eagle Lane is Woodstock House, another solid Georgian building, which was the town house of the Wyndham family of Dunraven.

Cross the road to return to Old Hall. Our short walk around Cowbridge ends here; we hope it has whetted your appetite to find out more about this historic town.

J Alden (ca 2004 – pre the construction of the Physic Garden)