

Cowbridge
1254 750 2004

The Cowbridge Charters

*In 2004, Cowbridge celebrates the 750th anniversary
of its first borough charter, granted on 13th March 1254
by Richard de Clare, the Lord of Glamorgan.*



Richard de Clare

*Richard de Clare, from a stained-glass
window in Tewkesbury Abbey*

This leaflet gives some information about the first charter and the other medieval charters relating to Cowbridge.

Medieval Cowbridge and its Charters

It is strange to realise that up until about 1245 the town we now call Cowbridge did not exist. There may well have been a few houses here, where the main road through Glamorgan crossed the river Thaw, but the main settlement was at Llanblethian with its well-established church and which gave its name to the manor and parish.

Yet within a few years, the 'new town' of Cowbridge had been planted and laid out on both sides of the road, and was granted its first borough charter on 13 March 1254 by Richard de Clare, the Lord of Glamorgan.

De Clare was one of the most powerful barons of the day, having huge estates stretching across south Wales and southern and eastern England. From 1243 he had actively extended his authority in Glamorgan; in 1245 he seized the manors of Llanblethian and Talyfan from Richard Siward, and the lordships of Miskin and Glynrhondda from Hywel ap Maredudd. In Miskin he founded the castle and town of Llantrisant and in his manor of Llanblethian he founded the town of Cowbridge.

Longa Villa from the 1421 charter

In 1254, Richard de Clare addressed his charter to "our beloved burgesses of Longa Villa" (long town), but the name of Cowbridge (variously spelt) is found in

documents from 1262 onwards. The charter gave the burgesses (the inhabitants of the borough) freedom from tolls and the ability to trade in the market; the town attracted settlers, mainly from England judging from an early list of burgesses, and prospered from the trade of its markets and fair. Within fifty years the street seems to have been fully built up as far as the Llantwit road junction to the west and to the junction with the Aberthin and St Athan roads to the east. St Quentin's Castle - although it was more than half a mile away - provided military protection against possible Welsh attack; walls and gates were built around the centre of the town to give it added security and to allow the lord's officers to control the access to the market place. As far as we know, the rebellious Welsh never attacked Cowbridge, though they regularly sacked the neighbouring borough of Kenfig. A church was built before the end of the thirteenth century; the original stonework from that time survives in parts of the tower, nave and chancel of the present building.

De Clare's charter granted valuable rights and liberties to people who were thus drawn to settle in Cowbridge, in return for the annual payment to the lord of one shilling for each building plot (the burgage rent, which continued to be paid down to the beginning of the twentieth century). In 1324, by royal charter of Edward II, the burgesses of Cowbridge were privileged to sell their goods free of toll in all markets and fairs in the King's realms, in England,

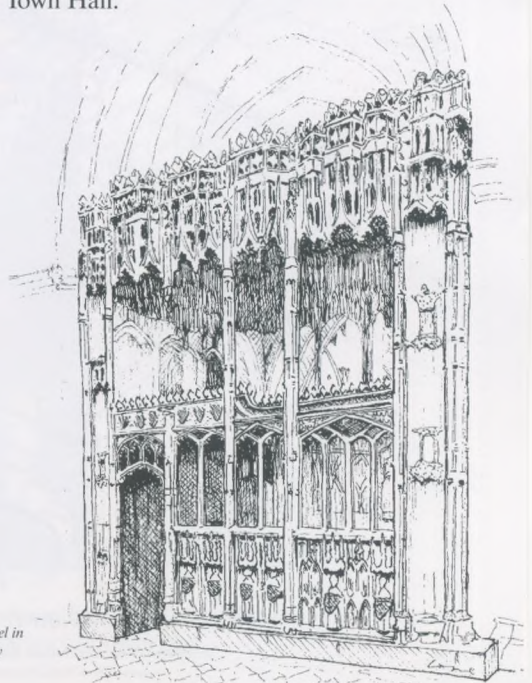


Seal of Richard Beauchamp

and France. Later charters issued by Richard de Clare's descendants - the Despencers, Beauchamps and Nevills - in 1340, 1358, 1397, 1421, 1423, 1460 and 1473 confirmed these rights and gradually enlarged them. By the 1460 charter, issued by Richard Nevill the "Kingmaker", Cowbridge enjoyed self-government by two bailiffs and a bench of twelve aldermen selected from among the burgesses, and the town had its own set of "Ordinances" or by-laws which all residents had to obey. The last of the medieval charters was granted by George, Duke of Clarence, famous (at least in tradition) for having met his death in a butt of malmsey wine in 1478.

All the medieval charters save one have been lost. There was great excitement in 1983 when the charter of Richard

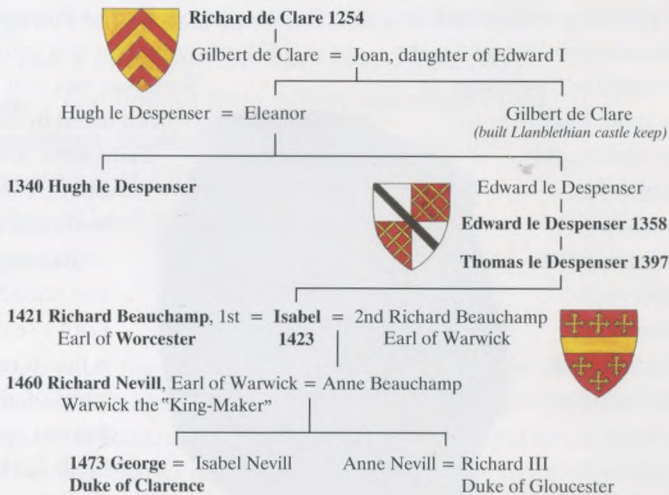
Beauchamp, Earl of Worcester, granted in 1421, came to light in a solicitor's office in Somerset, where it had seemingly been taken by the Gwyns of Llansannor and Forde Abbey. A very important feature of the Latin text, written on parchment and sealed with the Lord's seal in green wax, is that it repeats the terms of all the previous charters, and confirms 13 March 1254 as the date of the first charter. The precious document is now in the safekeeping of the Glamorgan Record Office and a copy is displayed in the Council Chamber of Cowbridge Town Hall.



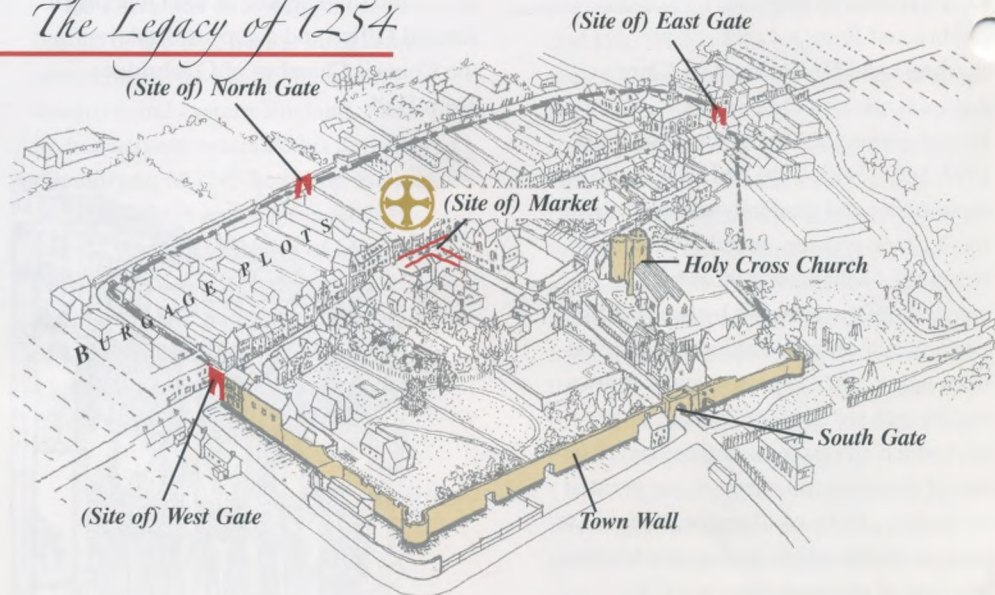
*Beauchamp chapel in
Tewkesbury Abbey*

A Pedigree of the Lords of Glamorgan

(Those who granted charters to Cowbridge are shown in bold type, with the year of the charter)



The Legacy of 1254



www.cowbridge750.co.uk

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