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Rescue work to save historic Cowbridge walls will start soon

RESCUE work to save Cowbridge's ancient town walls from further decay is likely to begin soon.

Twenty-four volunteers have offered to help with the programme and will soon take part in a training programme.

The work is due to continue through to March 15, when it will pause during the nesting season, which lasts until July.

Restoration group chairman Luke Millar said: "The walled area is in need of urgent attention and I am glad to say that, not before time, it is going to receive it."

Vale conservation officer, Nick Lloyd, said that Cowbridge's ancient

walls, which are at least 750 years old, were listed structures protected by preservation orders and were of considerable architectural and historic importance.

He explained that there had been two important surveys conducted during the last decade – the first in 1996, which identified five buildings in Cowbridge seriously at risk.

A more recent survey by ST Walker & Partners, exclusively to examine the state of the walls, had recommended courses of

action to remedy weaknesses, estimating costs of repairs at more than £500,000.

Working group member, Robert Cope explained that parts of the walls were heavily overgrown by ivy and by hazel, ash and alder.

Once these intruders were taken out, a new tree planting line further from the walls would be considered.

"Another pressing need," he said, "was the decaying state of the south west bastion, adjacent to the cattle market."

Cowbridge Town Walls

Developing plans

1. Where we are now

The Cowbridge Charter Trust's programme for the restoration of Cowbridge's historic town walls has now reached a turning-point. The clearing of the vegetation adjoining the walls and the cutting of coppice growth in them, referred to in my first article on this subject, is complete and the walls are exposed ready for structural repair. A problem remains with the hazel and other coppice embedded within the walls because, of course, it is re-growing vigorously, to the dismay of some of our volunteers, Well, it would, wouldn't it?

However, following advice from the specialist surveyor of the walls, the Vale Council has decided to cut the growth close to the wall surfaces and poison the stubs. It is the lesser of two evils; if left, the swelling boles will further damage the walls, and if killed, the rotting roots will shrink and possibly cause some collapses. The latter is the least harmful, and hopefully by the time the roots are well rotted we will have begun structural repairs anyway.

The present emphasis of the work, therefore, is shifting to maintaining the present state by controlling weed and ivy growth until funds can be raised and serious work begun. An important interim event, however, will be the carrying out of a full archaeological survey, a necessary pre-cursor to restoration. This will involve excavations along the South wall, particularly in the length adjoining the Physic Garden, where the old inner wall was cut back and a corner return built, now collapsing (Fig.1). Here there are opportunities both to explore the inside structure, probably rubble infill, but more importantly to cut a sectional dig through the ground for several metres out from the inner

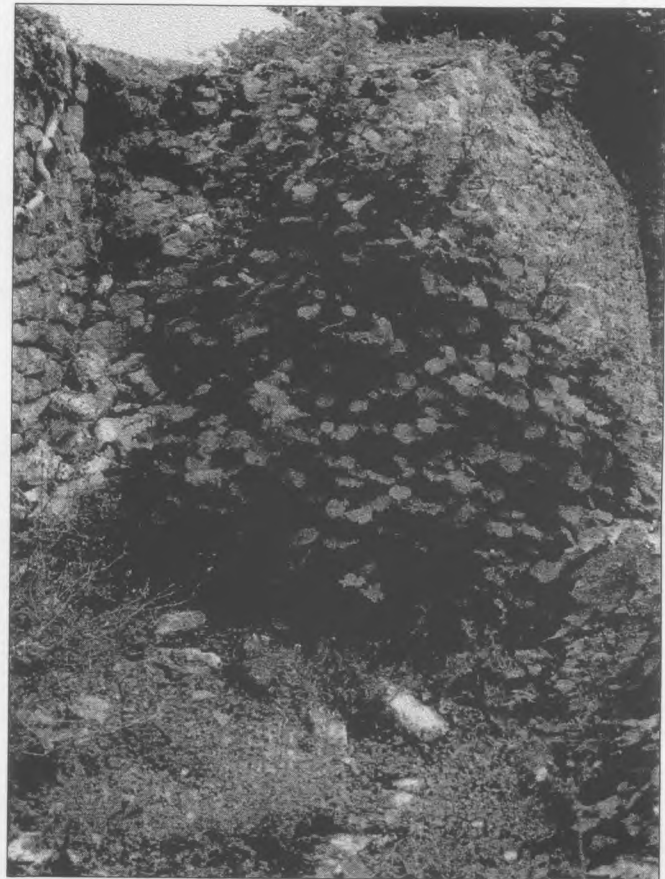


Fig.1 Showing the collapsing return wall with re-grown hazel. The line of the mediaeval inner wall can be seen coming towards the camera, mid-foreground.

wall base. The ground here has been substantially undisturbed over time, so as well as examining the mediaeval wall footings the sequence of soil levels within the wall may reveal information about the uses of the area across the centuries.

At the west end, where the history of the raised walk and the ground inside it awaits investigation, the archaeologist will use a geophysical scan to try to detect the remains of old buildings etc beneath this part of the grounds.

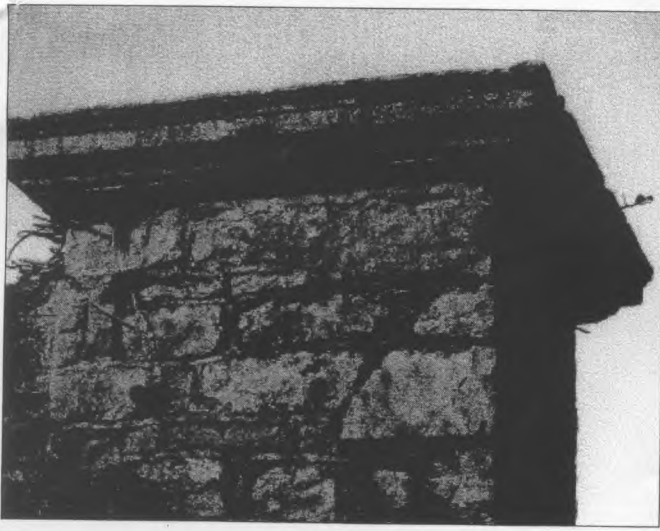


Fig.2 A handsome 18th C moulded gate-post cornice.

Linked with studies of the wall bases within the Physic Garden and Old Grammar School premises, the survey will be an end in itself, as well as contributing to the restoration process, and should throw light on the historic uses of this central area of the old town.

2. More than just a wall

During discussions about raising grant money from Heritage Lottery and other sources, a wise adviser suggested that, when restored, the walls would still only be just walls, however historically important and interesting they might be; if we are to attract grants the project must be seen to contribute significantly to the welfare of the town, both recreationally and educationally, and benefit from tourism. In short, it must embrace the whole space within the grounds which, with the Physic Garden, comprised the gardens of Old Hall in its heyday as Cowbridge's greatest mansion house.

We have accordingly set up a small group to study and advise on the revamping of this area which, although pleasant, has the air of a rather neglected public park. In particular, we aim to create a wildlife environment by developing a "hard core soft margins" approach, with formality and usable open spaces in the core of the gardens, and wildlife-friendly plantings around the sides. An area of wild-flower meadow is a possibility, plantings of native fruit trees, and butterfly-friendly flowers, together with dry garden and shrubs, low-maintenance, anticipating 21st Century droughts. People passing from the Physic Garden through the new gothic doorway into the grounds should pass from the early 19th Century (cut-off point, 1818) Physic Garden plantings to a simpler, more landscaped environment with features leading to the future too, a change in time within the same overall space.

Formal plantings, too, would emphasise the



Fig.3 The classical pedimented stone doorway in the back wall of the house.

remaining traces of the Edmondes 18th Century ownership. Symmetrical trees leading to the south gate, with its elegant moulded stone capitals (Fig.2), on which we aim to replace the originals ball finials, and restoration of the sad remaining back wall of the old house itself, with its handsome classical doorway (Fig.3), now rescued from charming but overwhelming wisteria.

3. Where to now?

Immediately, the need is to find the £2000 needed for the archaeological survey, and to work on the designs for the grounds, for presentation in the late autumn. Then, the really hard bit: raising funds for the major work to start, we trust, in 2007.

Luke Millar

Latest work reveals much older stonework

TOWN WALLS YIELD UP THEIR SECRETS

THE ancient history of Cowbridge could be coming to light, as a result of work to restore the town walls.

Although local historians are stressing that it is “early days yet”, the latest find could paint a clearer picture of Cowbridge in the past.

Luke Miller, of the Cowbridge Charter Trust, told *The GEM*: “During work to lower the ground level within the south-west bastion, overlooking the Cattle Market, stonemason Kelyvn Dark and his team have uncovered fascinating remains of much older structures.

“Working under the supervision of archaeologist Jean-Yves Robic, the project manager from Cardiff Archaeological Consultants, they first disclosed the base of the front part of the upper works, which are of 18th Century origin.

“Then, lower and within, they found the semi-circular top edge of what seems to be an older inner wall.”

He stressed: “Much more work needs to be done, but Jean tentatively suggests that the centre may possibly be part



ABOVE: The picture shows the bastion, with the revealed 18th Century wall-base at the front, and the older wall top within.

Photograph by permission of Cardiff Archaeological consultants.

of a mediaeval corner tower.

“The site is presently covered, pending a period of settled dry weather, before further investigation.

“Jean supervised the Charter Trust’s archaeological survey in 2008, when three pits dug along the inner side of the south wall revealed that the original wall had sturdy foundations, 1.5 metres deep, of stepped dressed stone.

“During the long history, most of the wall has been robbed of its original stone; and what we see now is a mainly 18th Century rubble-stone rebuild on the original

foundations.”

Mr Miller said that the find might answer some long-debated questions:

“Some townspeople have doubted that these walls could ever have protected the town against the depredations of the native population to the north.

“Certainly they could not, but evidence is accumulating to demonstrate that the original walls were very different, serious defensive structures.”

He added: “Anyone passing through the southgate arch can observe that it has a portcullis slot!”

Cowbridge town walls origins are uncovered

CONTINUING Cowbridge excavations on the south-west corner bastion of walls, have revealed the whole original structure of this key defence of the mediaeval town, dating from the mid 13th century.

The excavation, carried out and displayed by archaeologist Jean-Yves Robic, of Cardiff Archaeological Consultants, has uncovered the inner wall of the tower, and the ends of the long-buried original south and west walls joining with it.

"This work now proves what we previously thought, that the whole corner tower is mediaeval, except the faceted top stages, which are the



lower walls of a summer-house built on top of it in Georgian times", said Jean.

"There is still more to discover, but we now know the original layout and structure of the whole south-west end of the walls", said Luke Millar, of Cowbridge Charter Trust.

The bastion restoration

is nearing completion, with the teamwork of Jean-Yves, stonemason Kelvin Dark, of Kinsale Stone and Charter Trust consultant Peter Jones.

The inner top of the mediaeval wall will be paved to allow public access, and the front opened out to form a walk-in entrance to the tower floor.

Left to right: Jean-Yves Robic, of Cardiff Archaeological Consultants, Peter Jones, of Vale Consultancy, and Kelvin Dark, of Kinsale Stone, Llantwit Major, standing within the tower on the newly-uncovered wall top,

Final touches give town walls a touch of class

FINAL pieces of the Cowbridge town walls restoration programme were hoisted into place recently when three large ball finials were placed by crane above gateways in the south and west of the structure.

This completed eight months of physical work, preceded by years of research and pre-planning.

Consulting engineer Peter Jones, who has master-minded the structural programme throughout, said: "In its way, this is a particular triumph for Cowbridge, for the town's Charter Trust, and especially for its late chairman, Luke Millar, who dedicated himself selflessly to its achievement.

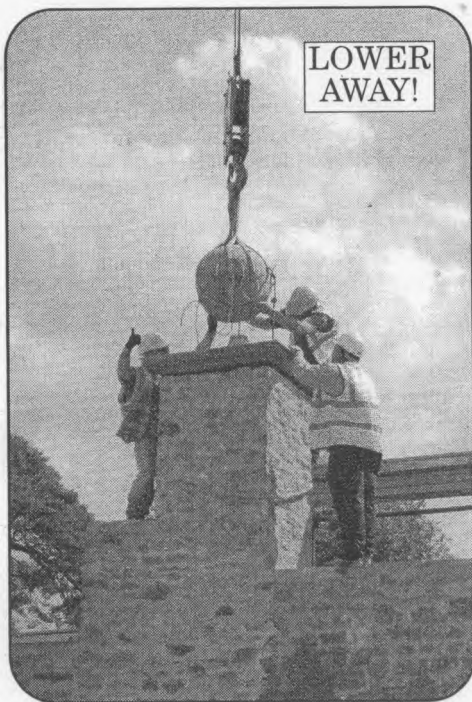
"This town owes him a massive debt of gratitude for his skill and scholarship, and the devoted way he applied himself to the project.

"In so doing, he saved council taxpayers and the Vale Council approximately £360,000 by getting all the work done via local people from many skills and disciplines."

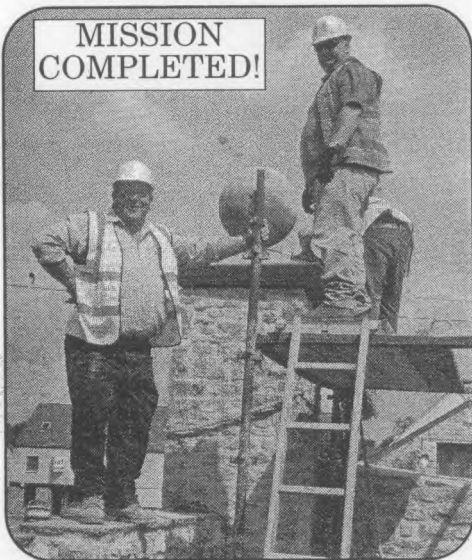
The original Old Hall, a Georgian structure, was surrounded by columns topped with ball finials, most of which were subsequently lost or destroyed, though fragments were found buried near the town walls during excavation for the restoration programme.

"By examining fragments and taking measurements, we were able to establish the size and weight of the finials, which were originally quarried in Derwent sandstone at Bridgend," Peter Jones explained.

"The new finials we have put in place this week are cast in re-constituted stone and made by Chilstone, a specialist firm from Tunbridge Wells, Kent. They each weigh around 350kg and



One of the finials is lowered into position.



have cost more than £3,000 in total," he said.

The present town walls largely replace the original medieval structure crafted from cut and dressed stone, elements of which can be seen in the restored south west bastion and in the service tunnels beneath the west wall.

An important study of the walls and their restoration has been

completed by Cardiff Archaeological Consultants in association with Cowbridge Charter Trust and Nick Lloyd, the Vale Council's conservation officer.

Peter Jones added: "Cowbridge can take delight and satisfaction in the knowledge that the town walls, so nearly threatened by complete collapse, have been preserved for the town and all who respect its historical genesis.

"What we really need is an onus for continued maintenance of our valued structures to prevent this kind of decay from happening again."

CHARTER TRUST PLANS TO SHOW OFF TOWN WALLS

THE Cowbridge Charter Trust – the organisation behind many recent civic projects in the town – is planning to put the full sweep of the town walls back on view to the public and visitors

The details should be unveiled at the trust's annual general meeting on February 26.

At that meeting, the chairman of the trust, Peter Jones, will give an illustrated presentation of the proposal to redevelop the disused cattle market area which is on land adjacent to the town walls.

A trust spokesman said that the sheds and railings are currently an eyesore which obscures the walls. They will be replaced with landscaped car parking.

Cowbridge Town Council recently wrote to the chairman of the trust, confirming their support for the project.

At the AGM, there will also be a tribute to Mike Meredith, a founder member of the trust, who died last year.

Also, there will be a slide show review of the various activities undertaken during the year.

The meeting is in the Lesser Hall, Cowbridge Town Hall, on Tuesday, February 26, doors open 7.10pm for a 7.30pm start.



The walls as they look now (above) and an artist's impression (below) of how they will look when the project is completed.

