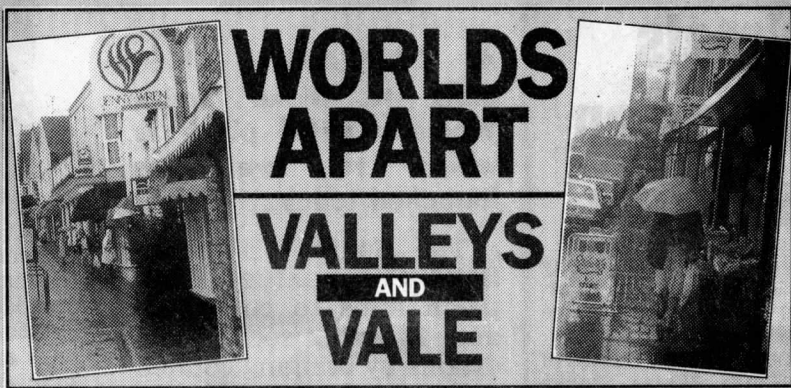
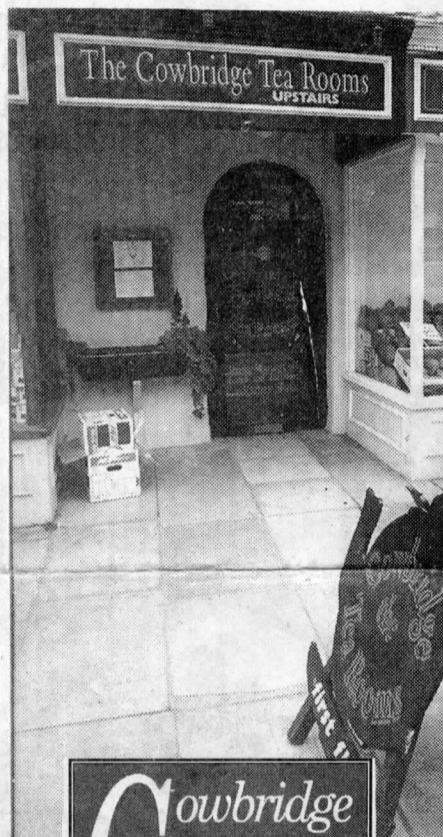


They're only 20 miles apart - yet the market town of Cowbridge and its gingham-covered jam jars is worlds away from the boarded-up shops and fish and chip cafts in Cynon Valley, consistently high in the statistics for the most depressed areas of Britain. DAN O'NEILL spent a couple of days comparing the two...



Ambridge in the Vale



WHERE are they, you wonder as you amble along this street chopped from the top of a chocolate box. The film crews, the stars, the lights and cameras? Oh, come on — this can't be real, can it?

Not in South Wales, not when the Cynon Valley's round the corner. It's just a big film set, it has to be. Where they're maybe making *Mrs Miniver Returns* and there IS honey still for tea.

Yes, it uncannily resembles early Hollywood's idea of Ye Olde Englishe Village, right down to the ancient stone and gently sighing yews. Cowbridge or Ambridge?

But this is for real — proof, if you ever doubted, that if this affluent town shares the same slice of the map as Penrhiwceiber and Mountain Ash, we are indeed two nations.

To step into the High Street is to trip back in time. Hold your breath. Unless you ignore the Electricity showroom, part of an organisation not noticeably short of cash, there is not one empty shop or boarded-up window along the tranquil length of this street.

There is no evidence on the pavements, clearly scoured at dawn by battalions of serfs, that such beasts as dogs exist. In fact you do not see a single wandering dog on this lumin-



LIFESTYLE: If you can tell the tweezeness of a town by the titles of its shops... ABOVE, bistro chic; LEFT, Shoppers reflect on the fashions in these windows

Cowbridge cameos

'To step into the High Street is to trip back in time'

ous spring day, nor is there the tiniest hint of the graffiti so universal everywhere else.

Bill might love Blodwen here — but they don't tell the world by scrawling the news all over the bus shelter or the Town Hall wall. And here's another miracle — there's not a single fag-end on the pavement.

Malcolm Davies propels his broom along the gutter. Been in Cowbridge since last summer. Not bad, he muses. "You get a lot more mess in Barry." Malcolm, you should see Mountain Ash!

If you can tell the tweezeness of a town by the titles of its shops, well... take a flower shop rejoining in the name *Oops-a-Daisy*, a restaurant announcing that it's *Off The Beeton Track* — Beeton, as in *First Catch Your Hare*, geddit? — and the place where you get your curtain material called the *Fabric Library*. With other shops masquerading as... studios.

When the sun shines at the back of Beeton, basking among the spring blooms, the matrons of Cowbridge take their morning coffee. Wait a couple of months or so and it might be the Med, so overflowing the flora in season.

Across the road in the Cowbridge Tearooms you don't just order a pot of tea. You speak of Assam or Darjeeling, Earl Grey or Lapsang Souchong.

Coffee? Every country from Colombia to Costa Rica contributes. And in Cowbridge, apparently, they don't sell icecream. It's *iced creams*.

In the grocer's you'll find snails at £6.25 the

jar. To go with the French cheese, maybe. Half the shops, in fact, remind you of Anne Hathaway's cottage.

Speaking of cottages... you too, can live in Cowbridge if you've got two hundred grand to spare. That's about the average cost of the better class of cottage. One was actually reduced from £248,000 to a mere £195,000.

There are humbler hovels. A town house, which in valley terms means something in the middle of the terrace, is only £66,500. You can go up to another at £300,000, but that one had no photograph to show you what it looks like.

Photograph? At these prices you suspect they're waiting for some latterday Leonardo to finish his painting of the pad.

You miss the familiar old steel grilles slamming down over windows. The wood instead

of glass. Behind that glass kids' clothes, a baby's dress reduced to £32 with £25 for a romper suit.

Want a deal? Go to Mountain Ash. You find sports coats there for a lot less than the £128 for the bargain in Cowbridge.

How many weeks' dole is that? Who worries when there are only 159 out of work in the Cowbridge area compared to 3,833 in Cynon?

The Cynon Valley — where you don't find filet and avacado pears as you do in Miniverland. Where you don't find pubs like *Ye Olde Mason's Arms*, stuffed with brass and polished mahogany, a calendar illustration come to life.

Cowbridge — where there is not even a job centre or a chippie, only a very discreet Chinese takeaway. Which more or less says it all...



'Cowbridge shimmered in the sunshine. Cynon Valley glowers in the gloom' — READ PART TWO ON MONDAY

early 1970s