

Vale of history, 1960

AN ANCIENT BOROUGH

by

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IT WAS some seventy years ago that young "Charlie Buns," destined to become a devoted alderman of his native town, noticed that old J S had made a bonfire of books and papers near the Town Hall, Cowbridge. After serving the town as Clerk for over thirty years he was being displaced by a mere whipper-snapper of a solicitor in his twenties, and in his wrath was burning the records in his charge. The young man rescued a long narrow roll of parchment smouldering at the edges which proved to be the 1610 copy of the ancient laws and ordinances of the borough, now safely preserved in the County Record Office.

That bonfire was but one example of the carelessness and neglect that has robbed the town of invaluable original material.

But though documents have disappeared, the setting of the town can have changed but little since the original settlement developed. Even today, in spite of drainage ditches, the wide marshes north and south of it present a grave obstacle to the civil engineers trying to plot the route of a by-pass ; to the first settlers in the area they must have proved a serious barrier to movement east-west. It is significant that the original name of the town which eventually developed was Pontfaen, i.e., Stone Bridge, in contradiction to the small wooden bridges in the marshy fields, for this is the first stone bridge downstream capable of carrying heavy traffic across the Thaw. Here the river has had to cut through solid rock. Even before a bridge was achieved this was one of the few possible crossing-places in a wet season, and Dr. Aileen Fox has shown, by plotting the sites of prehistoric burial mounds in the Vale, how the first comers, after crossing what is now the very much wider Bristol Channel, made their way from the coastal inlets to this very ford. Most of the Vale must then have been forested and, indeed,

if man and his grazing stock disappeared, it would revert to forest in a comparatively short time, judging from the innumerable seedlings of ash, elm, sycamore and hazel that appear every Spring. Only slowly, as the New Stone Age and Bronze Age men learned to fashion more efficient tools, was the land cleared for agriculture and pasture. Many a ploughman, especially in pre-tractor days, has turned up stone axe-heads and hoes in the area, and a bronze knife was found when the Cowbridge High School was built in 1894. The thirty-odd barrows between Nash Point and the Cowbridge ford are from six to eight feet high and from sixty to ninety feet across. One on Breach Farm, just south of Crossways Hospital, was opened up by the National Museum of Wales archaeological section in 1937. In an earlier volume Dr. Savory has described its pigmy cinerary urn, surrounded by beautifully-worked, almost translucent arrow-heads, suggesting symbolic value rather than practical. Further west, near Coity, a number of barrows were opened up in 1937. The cremation pyres were shown to have been composed of lighter woods and gorse, rather than oak—a pointer to the fact that these prehistoric settlers kept to the more easily-cleared areas. Here the funerary mounds contained carbonised grains of wheat and barley, one of the earliest signs of arable farming in our area—but it would seem that life still depended mainly on the chase. Incidentally, the surviving bones showed traces of rickets and arthritis !

Whereas these primitive settlers had to provide not only their own food but their clothing, dwellings and gear, in course of time the more deft-fingered and enterprising would specialise in various crafts and to them the farmer would turn. Moreover, since some land was more suited to arable farming and other to pastoral, a certain amount of specialisation would arise, with the consequent exchange of products. This is the origin of nearly every market town in the world. In the case of Cowbridge it was the pull of the river-crossing that drew craftsmen to settle near ; this was the natural place for them to meet their customers and for the farmers to buy and sell. A map will show how the Thaw bisects the Vale of Glamorgan, and how roads converge upon Cowbridge from east, west, north, south and south-west.

Even within living memory there were many such craftsmen in the town—the cooper who made churns, cheese-presses, vats and

barrels, the nailer, the currier who dressed leather for the three saddlers and the shoemakers, the blacksmith and the wheelwright. Over at Llanblethian, flannels and suitings were woven.

For many centuries, it would seem, the traditional market day was Tuesday, when craftsmen and shopkeepers would display their wares. The late Alderman Edward John used to tell of the numerous butchers' stalls around the "New" Town Hall in his boyhood days, a hundred years or so ago. The cells underneath it were still in use and the lads would get hold of bits of offal and throw them through the gratings to the prisoners.

It used to be said that Cowbridge had one inn to every lamp-post and one over, another characteristic of market towns all the world over. In several cases there were pairs of small inns next door to each other, with wide paved passages leading right through to the stabling at the rear. The farmers' carts and traps rested on their shafts in the gutters and there are just two sets of mounting-steps left.

Apart from the weekly market there were fairs like the hiring and horse fair on the Tuesday preceding the 25th of March, which became the highlight of the year for the young people and children of the whole neighbourhood. Shows and merry-go-rounds arrived and stalls lined the High Street, some selling the traditional brandy-snaps produced by a local baker. A popular feature was the afternoon parade of cart-horses, magnificent creatures with manes and tails elaborately plaited with coloured ribands. This was, to a smaller extent, a cattle and pig fair as well. On the eve of May 4th every field around was plaintive with the bleatings of sheep and lambs, brought often from great distances, as well as cattle. In September there was another sheep fair, and smaller general fairs in June and December.

Up to the coming of the internal combustion engine the pattern of life in the little town must have changed but little. The Industrial Revolution merely meant that the three drapers' shops of the 19th century now stocked factory-made goods, and that certain crafts gradually died out. Vale families that had moved away to the mining valleys still brought back their dead to be buried near the old home. (By the way, even up to about forty years ago, funeral processions approaching the parish church from east or west kept to the north side of the street until they came opposite Church Street, when they



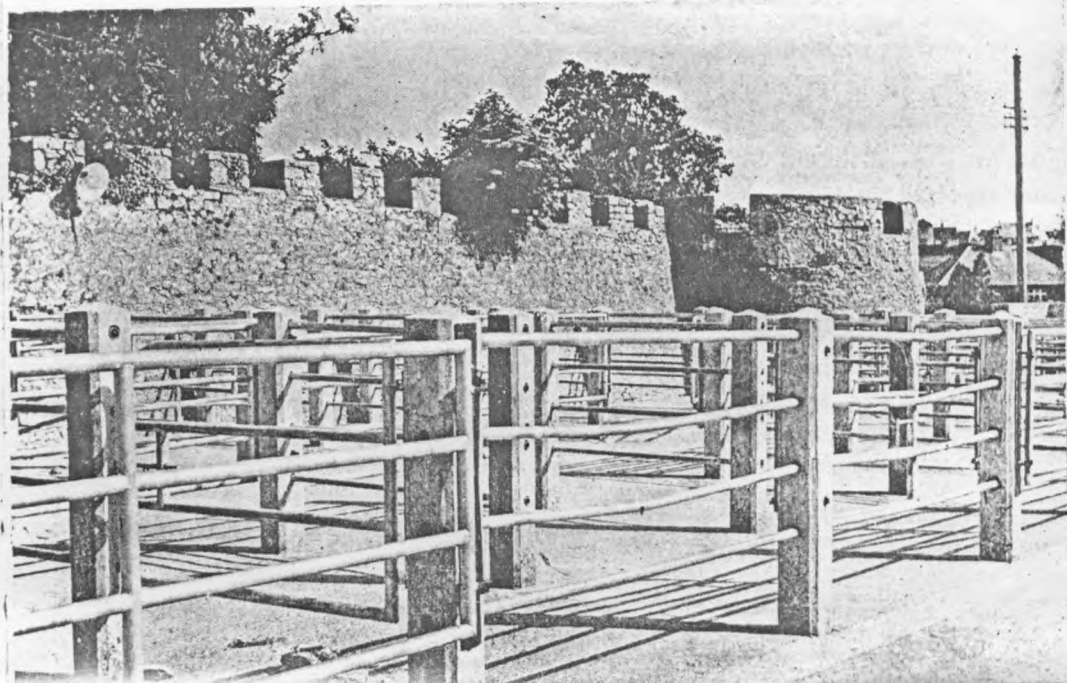
Verity's Court, Cowbridge



Mounting Steps in High Street, Cowbridge

Photographs by Haydn Baynham, Cardiff

A section of the old Town Walls, Cowbridge



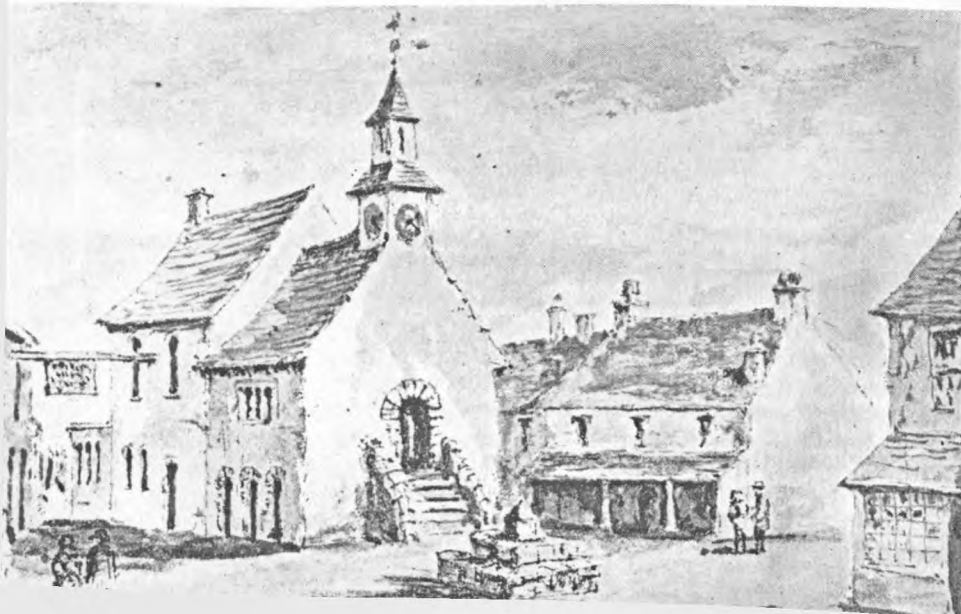
FROM A DRAWING OF THE TIME
PARTLY FROM MEMORY IN 1863.



OLD FREE-SCHOOL, COWBRIDGE.
TAKEN DOWN 1846.

Old Free School, Cowbridge. Taken Down, 1846

Drawings by David Jones of Wallington. Reproduced by permission of City Librarian, Cardiff
The Old Town Hall, Cowbridge. Dismantled, 1830



THE EAST GATE, COWBRIDGE - About 1846
From a painting by Wilson - a local artist -

This, from one in possession of Miss Eliza Thomas, Cowbridge) many of his paintings good, but, and indifferent, about
Sandwich Hill - Jenny Lewis's house - Jail house said to have been) The gate behind the gatehouse is that of a town
rebuilt in 1846.) now demolished which standing longer than

The East Gate, Cowbridge, c. 1846

Drawings by David Jones of Wallington.
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Old House, Church Street, Cowbridge, c. 1862

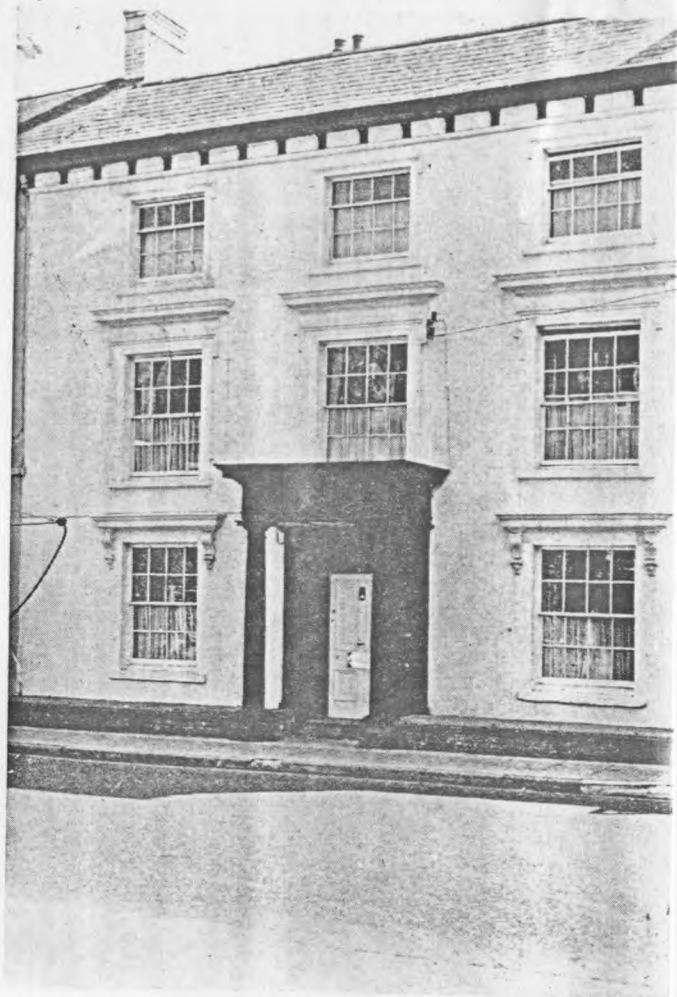
FROM A SKETCH DONE FROM MEMORY SHORTLY AFTER ITS DEMOLITION.



OLD HOUSE WHICH STOOD BY
THE CHURCH STREET, COWBRIDGE



(Left)
The Ancient Druids,
Cowbridge



(Right)
Caercady House,
Cowbridge

*(Photographs by
Haydn Baynham, Cardiff)*

wheeled across at right angles, an unconscious observance of the mediaeval custom of taking the corpse first to the Town Cross which, as old prints show, stood in front of the original Guild Hall).

That old Guild Hall, demolished in 1830, was a direct link with the Norman period. With their unflinching flair for noting focal points, the Normans fortified that part of the town now called High Street with a wall and a moat and at least three gates—the West Gate near the present market, the East Gate near the Horse and Groom Hotel and the South Gate beyond the Grammar School. Possibly there was a North Gate as well, though that could have given only on to marshy land uncrossed by any road. The moat, filled in only in the 19th century, ran along the North wall from the present bridge to the West Gate, its course now forming a back lane and the Eagle Lane, thence along the Butts (where the last remaining portion formed the Butts pool) and the lane to the South Gate. Probably it went around the wall bounding the Grammar School House garden, but south of that the river itself with its marshy banks might have afforded adequate protection. Most of the original wall has furnished material for other buildings, but a portion survives on the east side of the cattle-market, together with its watch-towers and a raised walk inside, such as remains in many old towns, Wareham in Dorset for example. Of the gates only the South Gate survives, those blocking the main street having been demolished in the days of the stage coach.

The enclosure of the space immediately east of the bridge meant that trade was controlled by those who held the fortifications. Whereas most such market-centres grew under the very shadow of the lord's castle, the nearest castle to Cowbridge was St. Quentin's castle at Llanblethian, about half a mile away. (Possibly there was a temporary motte on Llanblethian Hill on the site of an ancient earth-work). St. Quentin was one of the followers of Robert Fitzhamon who organised the conquest and new administration of the Vale. The St. Quentin family disappears from local records after 1249; either they died out or, as in other cases, sold their manor. Their direct successors at Llanblethian were the Siwards. All that remains of the castle is the gatehouse, which almost certainly post-dates the St. Quentins. Through most of the mediaeval period the manor was probably directly controlled from the Court of the Lordship at Cardiff. In 1254 Cowbridge, like Cardiff, secured certain

privileges from Richard de Clare, Lord of Glamorgan, but the first official charter was granted by the Crown in 1323 during the troubled reign of Edward II. This was subsequently confirmed and revised, as in the reign of Edward III who granted similar confirmations to "Kerdif," Neath and Kenfig in 1359. But their autonomy was limited ; the Lord's Constable of Llanblethian Castle was to be mayor of Cowbridge, and this supervision lasted up to 1870.

All the same, these town charters were greatly valued ; not only did they grant definite privileges to the burgesses but, by giving control of their markets, secured them economic freedom. And this brings us back to our starting point—that 1610 copy of the laws of the Borough.

Who were these burgesses ? Probably the inhabitants of the town at the date of the charter, and subsequent purchasers of a "burgage"; in some cases residents in the borough for a year and a day ; and, most specially, members of the town guild, a body of master craftsmen and merchants. It is significant that the Town Hall was more frequently designated the Guild Hall. In 1951, when the road through the town was being resurfaced, the foundations of Cowbridge Guild Hall were uncovered ; it stood in the middle of the highway near Rood Street (the Church Street of today). An old painting of the Guild Hall now in the Mayor's Parlour suggests a pillory in the background. The stocks, used up to the latter half of the 19th century, are now in the Welsh National Museum.

A town charter usually authorised the free election of the town's own bailiffs and officers (apart from the local proviso already mentioned that the Constable of Llanblethian act as mayor) ; security of tenure for the burgesses, with the power to bequeath same ; the independence of the local court of justice, entailing the power to build a town prison and to draw up bye-laws ; the holding of Courts of Assize ; quittance from "reliefs and heriots" (mainly death duties) hitherto claimed by the lord ; the collection of tolls ; and the holding of market and fairs.

The fact that the earliest lists of Cowbridge burgesses contain only English and Norman names suggest that the Welsh may have held aloof or been boycotted, but the economic pull of the bridging-point drew them increasingly into its life and Welsh names gradually figure in these lists.

The wording of the bye-laws is quaint and the spelling erratic, but the intentions are quite clear. One group protects the townsfolk from unscrupulous tradesmen and craftsmen: the baker must "keep true and lawful weights," the brewer brew good and wholesome ale, the butcher refrain from "blowing up" his meat and the tanner sell his leather "well and sufficient tanned."

By dint of emphatic repetition another group of laws threaten all who would attempt to avoid market dues by selling their wares privately or from house to house, *e.g.*, "Noe burgesse nor chencer nor inhabitante nor there syvanntes shall buy within the gates nor without the gates, noe maner of thinge that is comynge to the market untill the tyme yt be broughte unto the place accustomed."

As might be expected, the privileges of the burgesses were jealously guarded: no "unfitting words" were to be used to them or their "wiffes" on pain of imprisonment or a fine. Indeed, if the offender were a woman, she was to be made to sit in the ducking-stool for one hour, two if she again offended and, should she still persist, "be lett slipp," presumably into a pond. When we explore the ancient prison cells still existing under the present Town Hall, we can well understand why imprisonment under the old Guild Hall was reserved for offending townsfolk; strangers must go to "the lowe prison."

To ensure good order, taverns must close after ten o'clock at night, and brawling, fighting, slander or the housing of "naughtipackes" and vagabonds would all be severely punished. Indeed, one bye-law forestalls the Puritans in forbidding dice, cards, bowls "nor other unlawfull games," while a special fine awaited those who attempted to play "tenyse within the high street."

The cleanliness of the town was safeguarded: butchers must not throw "heades, feate nor noe other garbage in the high streate to the annoyance of his neighbours"; pigs must not be allowed to come within the town walls, nor cows be milked in the street.

The overall picture is one of a small, self-sufficient town, insular in its outlook. Perhaps that is why Cowbridge had the reputation in the Vale of being proud and exclusive; the Carnes and, later, the Wyndhams maintained houses in the town, property that gave them the borough franchise, while nearly every family of substance in the neighbourhood has sent its sons to the Grammar School ever since the 17th century. In the mid 19th century many

farmers and businessmen favoured rather the famous Eagle Academy with its less classical and perhaps more practical curriculum ; certainly the surviving exercise books with their beautiful copperplate writing and sums dealing with foreign exchanges show a high standard. Apart from Dame Schools there were at least three boarding schools for girls in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. An ambitious Book Society seems to have flourished here in the 18th century (did it meet at the old "Coffee Tavern," now "Kumalo House" in Eastgate?).

Within the last fifty years the town has lost a good deal of its original appearance. The Duke of Wellington Hotel (the Black Horse up to the Napoleonic Wars) is the sole survivor of a picturesque group of buildings demolished when the Electricity Board's show-rooms and neighbouring garage were built, just after the First World War ; the chemist's shop (in the original Carne residence) has lost its quaint windows, and several half-doors have gone. Verity's Court has the only remnant of the cobble stone paving that characterised the main street at least up to 1885, and the fine old stone gutters went comparatively recently. Notwithstanding all these external changes and the development of new "suburbs," the little town retains its individuality and air of intimacy.

"Let others rush through to impersonal towns,
I'd rather remain 'twixt the Darren and Downs."