

COWBRIDGE

Conservation Area · · Appraisal



3 (1)

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

Cowbridge and Llanblethian

Introduction

This report is one of a series compiled by the County Planning Department, intended to increase awareness and awaken interest in the historic heritage and character of the designated Conservation Areas in Glamorgan. It is intended to be read in conjunction with the general policy document, 'Conservation Areas', which outlines the principles adopted by the County Council in respect of development within the Conservation Areas. This document is also a forerunner to a more detailed statement of policies to be adopted by the Local Planning Authority, concerning the future of Cowbridge and Llanblethian's Conservation Area.



The Historic and Architectural Character of Cowbridge and Llanblethian

Cowbridge, a market town with Llanblethian, a small village, which adjoins it to the south, has a population of approximately 2,000. The town is situated in the Vale of Glamorgan, a thriving agricultural area, often called the Garden of Wales. It lies approximately thirteen miles west of Cardiff and seven miles east of Bridgend to the south of the Trunk Road A.48. This road was built to by-pass the original route along which the road-side, market town of Cowbridge was built.



The small town of Cowbridge and the village of Llanblethian are situated at crossing points of the River Thaw, which flows south across the Vale of Glamorgan to its mouth between East and West Aberthaw. The river bisects the county from north to south and its bridging was necessary for east to west travel. In early times the river was not confined to its present day banks and north-west of Cowbridge the waters flowed over the land, creating a large expanse of soft and marshy moorland, full of springs. The unsuitability of these areas for development has influenced the form of the town and village which have developed on the higher land to the south, avoiding these marshy areas. On reaching the place where Cowbridge now stands, the river banks come close together and it was here that the first settlers forded the river. The first stone bridge that was erected across this crossing point (probably in Norman times) is thought to have given the place its Welsh name, Pont faen or Bont vaen—stone bridge.



There are many traditions associated with the English name of the town. One tradition propounds that during the period of Norman occupation the tax collectors were active in the area and hence the Welsh hid their beasts when the collector was expected. However, on one occasion a collector discovered a cow hidden under an arch of the stone bridge. The administration viewed this with such triumph that they named the place Cubrigg.

A second legend concerns a cow which was said to have become so wedged under the bridge that the only way that it could be moved was for it to be slaughtered. An early Latin reference gives the name as Pontoubice, i.e. 'Bridge having two horns or points', which possibly refers to the shape of the bridge. The name Llanblethian originates from the Church of St. Blethian, Llan in Welsh being a church or enclosure.



The earliest records of activity in the area concern the wandering tribes of Iberians or New Stone Men, in the second century B.C., who forded the River Thaw where its banks narrowed. In time, this gave rise to the development of Cowbridge and other settlements associated with the convergence of tracks on this crossing point. These tracks became well established from constant use by the Celts and Bronze Age Brythons or Early Britons. During the Bronze Age, there were numerous settlements within easy reach of the River Thaw. Evidence of these settlers exists in walled burial grounds, known as tumuli, scattered in the vicinity. The most extensive of these



burial sites is the round cairn at Breach Farm. It originates from 1400-1200 B.C. and its form, with a well constructed kerb of dry stone walling, is suggestive of the continental influences of the colonisation of the Vale. Finds in the small pit at the centre of the burial mound include bronze axe-heads and flint arrowheads. The form is characteristic of similar artifacts found in Brittany of the same period.

An extensive hill fort, Caer Dynnaf, was established during the early Iron Age upon the strategically sited promontory of Llanblethian Hill, overlooking the River Thaw. This site can still be identified from aerial photographs which also suggest that at a later date a mediaeval village was built within its boundary walls.

During the Roman occupation of Glamorgan the first bridge was built across the River Thaw, which carried the Great Sea Road, running from the fortress at Caerleon to Carmarthen and later St. Davids. The present Trunk Road A.48 running from Cowbridge to Bridgend still follows this route. A small camp, possibly called Bovium was located in Cowbridge, with the function of assisting in the defence of the routes crossing the River Thaw at this point.



At subsequent periods in history Llanblethian's strategic location again gave rise to much development. The importance of Llanblethian by the Norman period (from the late eleventh century) is evidenced by the fact that it gave its name to the Lordship of Llanblethian, a manor held by Norman feudatories. It is significant that the Lordship was named Llanblethian rather than Cowbridge. Both had fords over the Thaw but Cowbridge only grew in importance under the later periods of the rule of the Normans in the thirteenth century. The manor of Llanblethian covered the extensive parish of Llanblethian itself and St. Hilary. The village of Llanblethian was sited on high land overlooking the River Thaw.

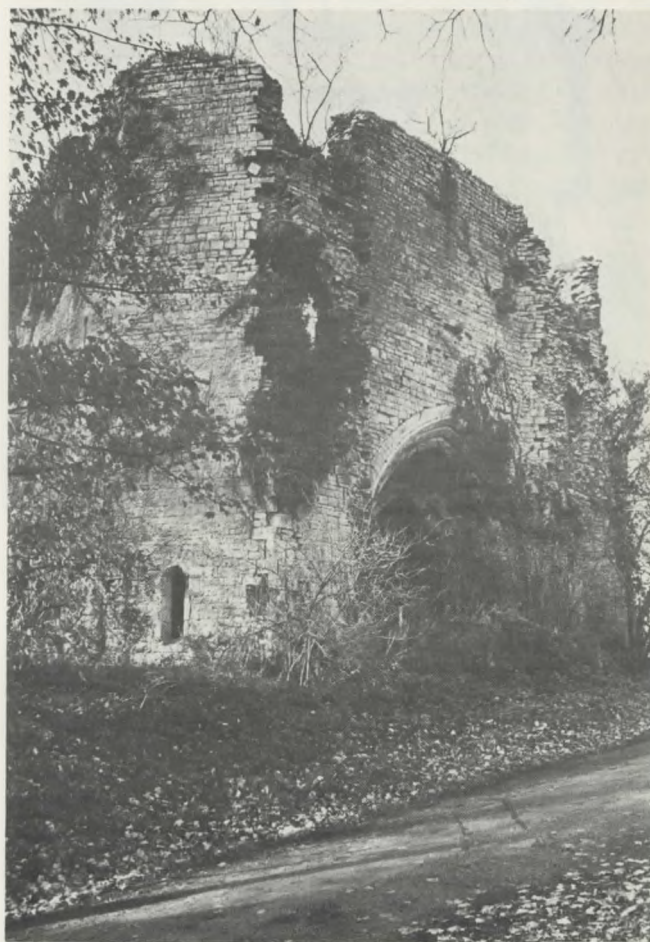


The first Lord of Llanblethian manor was Robert St. Quentin. He or his successors, the Siwards, held Talyfan (the adjacent Lordship) as well as Llanblethian and the two are usually coupled together in subsequent records. The St. Quentin family probably retained an interest in the area until as late as 1218. It is possible that a castle was built by this first Norman Lord within Llanblethian hill fort. However, folklore has confused this event with the erection of the later castle built by the De Clares, called Llanblethian Castle, often wrongly called St. Quentin's Castle. Llanblethian Castle, as the ruins show, stood on the eastern bank of the River Thaw, opposite the site of the Iron Age fort. The work of building this castle was commenced by Gilbert de Clare the younger, early in the fourteenth century. It was being constructed in 1314 but it is probable that the work was never completed by Gilbert de Clare, who was killed at the age of 24 at the battle of Bannockburn in 1314. It is believed that during later years stone from the castle was used to build walls and cottages in the vicinity.

During the Norman occupation, between 1093 and the thirteenth century, the first stone bridge was built across the Thaw to carry the 'Portway' and the town of Cowbridge also began to emerge. In about the middle of the thirteenth century, a small town developed. In 1250 there is no record of a town, but by 1289 it was well established. Although within the

parish of Llanblethian, by the thirteenth century it was at Cowbridge that evidence was taken as to manorial affairs. The town claimed Borough rights by prescription or title, first granted by Richard de Clare in 1254 (Lord of Glamorgan). English immigrants became attracted to Glamorgan and the first Burgesses were either exclusively Norman or English, as the administrators still did not trust the Welsh! It was not until 1315 that Welsh Burgesses were reported.

Gilbert, Earl of Gloucester, concerned with the conflict between the Welsh and English, built Caerphilly Castle and soon after, in 1266, directed the building of protective town walls around the Boroughs of Cardiff, Neath and Cowbridge. The town had four gates in the wall and it was surrounded by a town ditch. The North Gate was probably a smaller feature than the other three, giving Burgesses access to the meadows and wells to the north of the town. However, by 1622 the North Gate had fallen into disuse. The increase in the volume of traffic in the later part of the eighteenth century brought about the removal of the East and West Gates. The West Gate was pulled down in 1754 by the owner of Old Hall, the dwelling adjacent to this gate, whilst East Gate was removed or had crumbled by 1770. The South Gate and the remnants of the old town wall are included in the Department of Environment's list of scheduled Ancient Monuments in Wales.



Early in the thirteenth century the Churches of Cowbridge and Llanblethian were built. The dedication of St. Blethian shows that Llanblethian Church stands on an early Christian site; although records go back only as far as the thirteenth century. It became a mother church, serving a large area, with chapelries in Cowbridge, Llangan and Welsh St. Donats. Cowbridge is, perhaps surprisingly, larger than its mother church. The linkage of these two churches is continued in the tradition of calling the area, 'Llanblethian with Cowbridge'. The defensive appearance of Cowbridge church is attributed to the unrest during the period of its construction, because of Welsh attacks on the Borough.



The Borough, enclosed within the oval shaped town walls, exhibited typical features of a mediaeval market town and route centre. The settlement pattern and its process of development was, however, unique as it was a result of specific constraints and factors operating in the area. The settlement has tended to grow on an east/west axis, in relation to the main route across Glamorgan, which passes over the River Thaw at this point. Intersecting this route, at right angles, in the centre of the town was Rood Street, running from the North Gate to the South Gate and Llanblethian beyond. Adjacent to this intersection were located the Guildhall, Shambles and Market which also provided a focus for residential development. Development to the south of the town has been constrained by the flood plain of the River Thaw, and to the north-west by marshes.



Although this early pattern has been much extended over the years, the basic characteristics are still evident. During the fourteenth century the Borough boundaries extended to include the growing centres of East Village and West Village, a continuation of the east-west axis of the ancient Borough.



At the end of the thirteenth century the Borough of Cowbridge was so prosperous as to be second only to Cardiff among the Glamorgan Boroughs (as the quantity of yearly rents show). As Cowbridge served as an administrative centre for its surrounding area, i.e. the Hundred of Cowbridge, from the mediaeval period to the nineteenth century, courts were held in the Guildhall. The walls were whitewashed stone with timbers of oak, the ground floor contained first one and later two town shops owned by the Borough and let to tenants. There were also facilities for retailers who did not own scales, to weigh their goods in a weigh-house. Near the Guildhall and the cross-roads, at the centre of the town was the Shambles and market stalls.

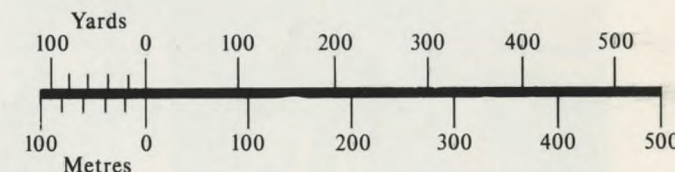
Life in the Borough during the seventeenth century was controlled by the town laws which were inscribed in the year 1610, although it is probable that these laws were in force from the fourteenth century. They included punishment by fines and penalties for misdemeanours and the use of a ducking stool for 'scolding women'.



Cowbridge

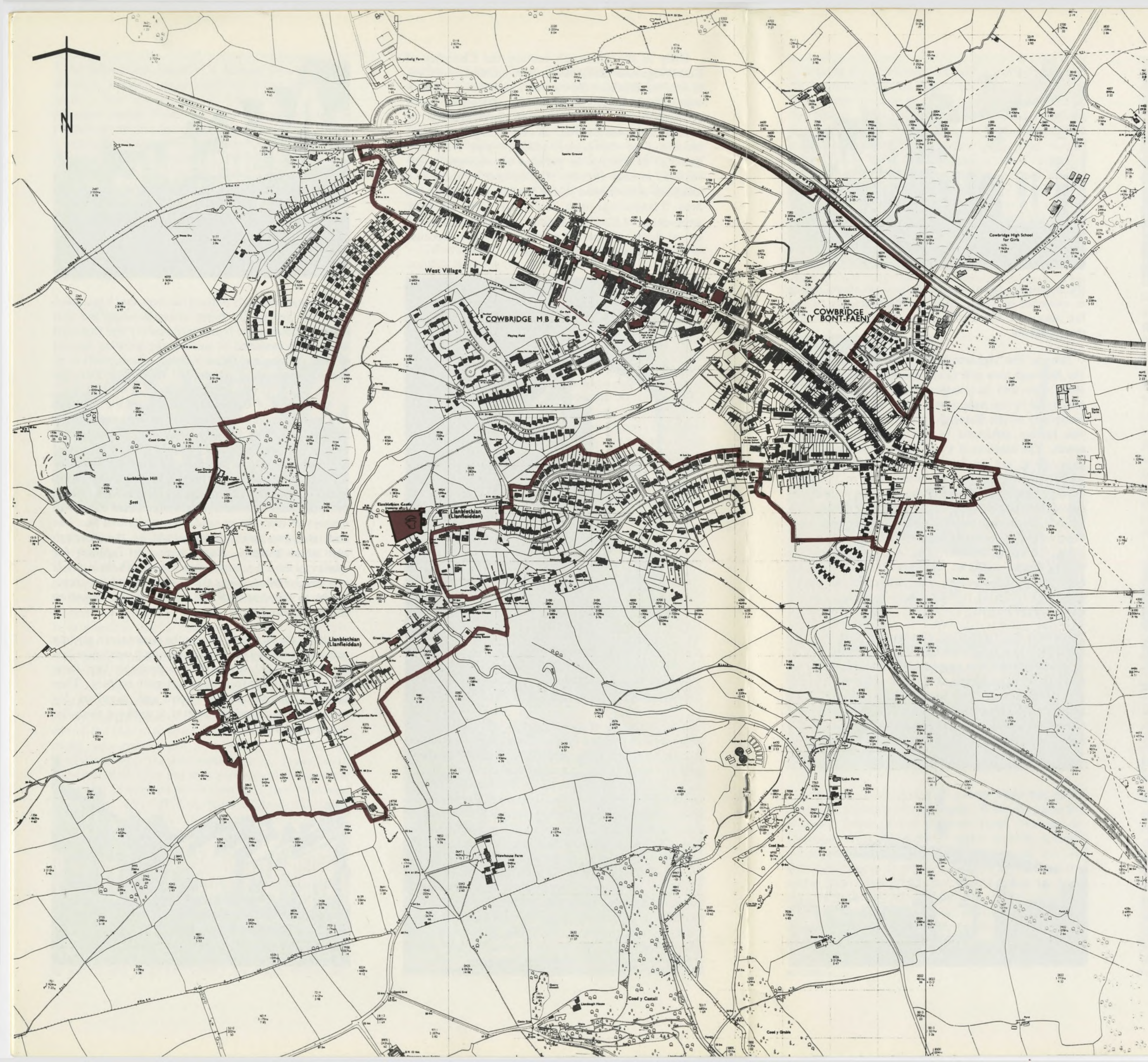
Legend

-  Boundary of Conservation Area
 -  Buildings listed as of Special Historic or Architectural Interest under Section 54 of the 1971 Town and Country Planning Act
- See Appendix



The Boundary of the Conservation Area

Land bounded by Cowbridge By-Pass (A.48) to the north and continues to include the properties flanking the north side of Eastgate Street, but excluding Druids Green Housing Estate and thence eastbound to include properties at the foot of Primrose Hill and housing east of St. Athan Road. The southern boundary generally runs west from St. Athan Road to Broadway along the western boundary of the County Primary School and north to new development at Cae Rex to St. Quentins Castle and continues to a point east of Llanblethian Farm west Kingscombe then to Brynhafryd and then to the site of the old woollen mill. The western boundary generally includes the old village of Llanblethian and follows a line from St. John's the Baptist Church, including Stallcourt and remains of Caer Dynnaf and Llanblethian Hill down and skirting new housing to the east of Llantwit Major Road B.4270 to rejoin the Cowbridge By-Pass south of Llwynhelyn House.



The first reliable record of a school in Cowbridge was in 1608, when there is mention of a school held in the base of the Prior's tower. A 'Free School' was founded in 1608 and in 1617 was moved to the site of the present school. From 1685 to 1919 the school was governed by the Principal and Fellows of Jesus College, Oxford. The main portion of the present building was constructed in 1847. It is doubtful whether the school was 'Free', as the term is understood to-day, as only those Cowbridge boys who were able to pass a standard examination, were admitted at reduced fees. The pupils in general appear to have been of mature age and members of wealthy families. The establishment was renowned for its classical tuition and was the only school offering secondary education in Glamorgan during the seventeenth century. The school had strong clerical ties and until the 1920's the headmaster was a member of the clergy. A rival in the areas of sport and academic studies was Eagle Academy, which contained mostly farmers' and tradesmen's sons.



Due to its function as a market town, Cowbridge was the site of many annual fairs and fetes. In the seventeenth century there were two annual fairs and two market days per week. Later in the nineteenth century there were four well patronised stock and pleasure fairs held annually, but only one market day a week. These early fairs, selling produce from the 'Garden of Wales' were well attended by dealers from London, Bristol and various other parts of the country. This may help to account for the large number of inns in the Borough. Sites of thirty-six inns are said, by John Richards, to have existed in



the Borough; twenty-two and two 'gin shops' being in existence in 1890. After the business-side of the fair was over the inns became the places of much merrymaking.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Borough was still Glamorgan's centre for farm-stock sales and its prosperity during this period is evidenced by the scale of rebuilding undertaken. The prosperity of the Borough in the nineteenth century was further enhanced by the advent of the stage coach. The location of Cowbridge on a major route gave rise to the provision of many facilities for the travellers in the coaching inns. The majority of houses within the old core of the Borough were either erected, rebuilt or externally renovated during this period. Although mostly simple, small dwellings, there were also a number of coaching inns and several large Georgian houses. The scale of rebuilding during these centuries has given Cowbridge its homogenous appearance. The pattern of the settlement and the road network, does however, exhibit much earlier origins.

In 1830 the Town Hall was moved to its present site which had been used as a House of Correction, or prison, until it was moved to Swansea in 1829. As early as 1824 the 'Court of Common Council' passed a resolution that they would move the Guildhall (Town Hall), Shambles, Market and Weigh-house, from their location on the central cross roads of the town when the opportunity arose.



During the nineteenth century, Cowbridge played an important part in the economy of South Wales. The extent of trade is shown by trade directories of the period. In 1835, Cowbridge possessed 9 schools, 4 tailors, 6 maltsters, 3 coopers, 3 stonemasons, a currier and many other trades; 17 public houses also existed. There was probably a tallow factory, a brewery and mills of all types as well as several smithies. In Llanblethian during this period there were several flour mills, a malthouse and a woollen factory of moderate size (on the site of a mediaeval house). The mill wheel and looms from this factory are now at St. Fagan's Folk Museum. Cloth and flannel were taken into Cowbridge and Bridgend on market days until the early twentieth century. This woollen factory probably gave its name to the road upon which it stood—Factory Road.



Industrial development on a large scale was never sought or gained by the Borough. When the plans for Brunel's South Wales Railway from Swansea to Chepstow were being settled, prior to 1850, a route passing near Cowbridge was condemned by the Borough. The lack of connections of the town to the major rail network at this time is said to have resulted in a lull of activity during the period of industrial expansion in the rest of Glamorgan. However, in 1862 work commenced on the Cowbridge Railway linking Llantrisant to Cowbridge. The Taff Vale Railway Company took over the line a year or so later.



Despite optimism amongst tradesmen of the time, the railway took people out of the town rather than bringing trade into it. The construction of the Vale of Glamorgan line and the introduction of livestock markets in Llantwit Major began to deprive Cowbridge of its prominence as a market for stock sales. The erection of a station in East Village gave rise to much associated building. The additions included four new inns or hotels and the building of Taff Street (now Croft Street) to accommodate railway employees. The single line to Aberthaw was opened in 1892 but did not connect with the Vale of Glamorgan line from Bridgend to Barry. A new station was built on this line replacing the station in Eastgate Street. Passengers from Cowbridge to Barry had to change from the high level to low level stations at Aberthaw. This passenger service was discontinued in 1930, due to the poor services and the increased use of motor transport. The Cowbridge to Llantrisant route was withdrawn in 1951.

In 1886 a Charter or Deed of Incorporation was obtained under the Municipal Corporations Act of 1861, which meant that the town became managed by a body wholly elected by the Burgesses.

With the increase in mobility due to motor transport, commuters from Cardiff and Bridgend were attracted to the area and during the last twenty years much development has occurred on the periphery of the old core of both Cowbridge and Llanblethian.

This development and improved road communications have ensured that the High Street's shopping area has flourished and the 'Spine road' through the centre is still the dominant route. The east-west growth of the town has now been replaced by development on the southern periphery. The old Rood Street and the Promenade, now called Church Street and Town Mill Road, have declined in importance, as a road from East Village is now the major link between Cowbridge and Llanblethian.

Description of the Conservation Areas

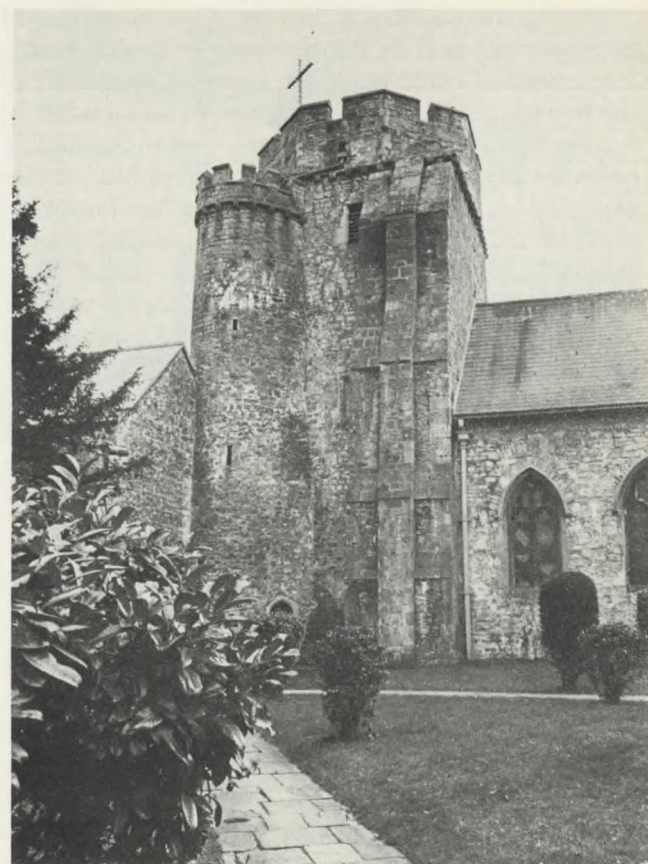
The Conservation Area includes the whole of the older part of Cowbridge together with the village of Llanblethian. The boundary of the area to the north is defined by the by-pass. To the south Llanblethian Hill Down is included, the boundary extending as far as the old woollen factory. Large areas of post war housing to the east and west have been excluded. The land on both sides of the River Thaw, part of which has been developed, has, however, been included to maintain an essential visual link between the two settlements.

Cowbridge is one of the two towns in Glamorgan, Llantwit Major is the other, which are listed by the Council of British Archaeology as areas requiring careful treatment because of their historic qualities.

In its outward appearance Cowbridge still retains many signs of its original form. The location of the old town wall can still be traced as parts of its south-western portion and the South Gate are still standing. The road pattern is still principally as it was in the thirteenth century with only the importance of certain routes having changed.



Another reminder of the age of this ancient Borough is the Parish Church, founded in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. The octagonal tower and part of the church were possibly built early in the fourteenth century on the site of an earlier chapel. The south aisle is said to have been added in the fifteenth century. The unusual tower played an important part in the early life of the town, serving both as a watch tower in times of trouble and housing for the bells which sounded the alarm and curfew. In the thirteenth century the chapel was called Holy Cross or Holyrood in the nineteenth century it adopted the name of St. Mary's. Between these dates the church had undergone much restoration.



The eighteenth and nineteenth century development of Cowbridge, located along the much older High Street, contains over 70 buildings listed as of Special Historic and Architectural Interest under section 54 of the 1971 Town and Country Planning Act. This road retains its linear pattern with courts and alleyways leading off the main street. Archways leading to courts and stabling accommodation pierce the front of several buildings, including particularly the coaching inns. The gentle curve of this highway further enhances the street picture which is one of considerable architectural quality. Most of the listed buildings in the main street are simple and small dwellings. There are, however, a number of good coaching inns and several large Georgian houses which punctuate the scene and further enhance the character of the area.



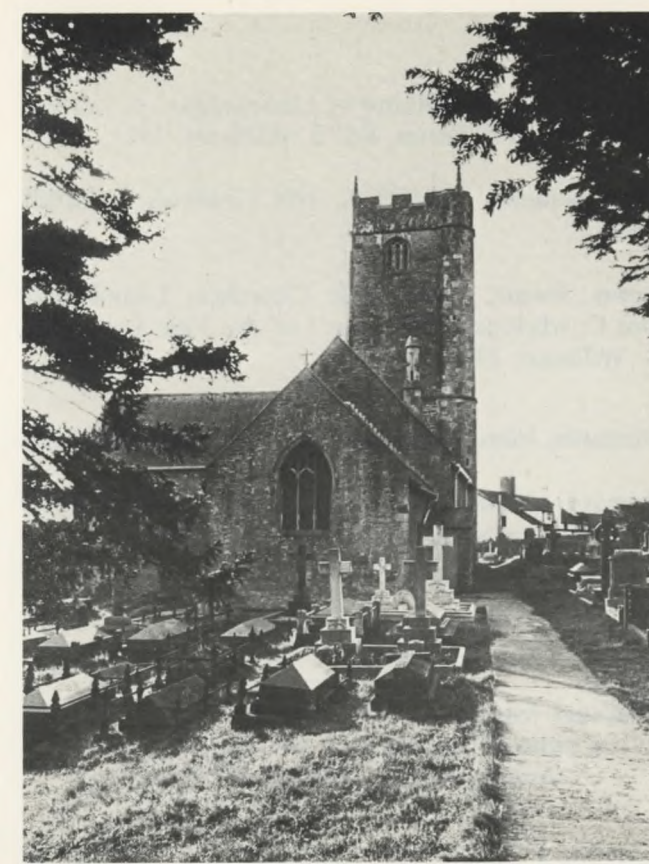
The houses have mainly two or three storeys with rendered, stucco or roughcast walls. Although the majority of the houses have been individually designed and the dwellings vary in date from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, there are certain common design elements between the houses which gives the area its unique character. The overall homogeneity of character of this eighteenth and nineteenth century market town and route centre, and the scale of the development of this period makes Cowbridge unique in Glamorgan. The differences in height and various changes in style between buildings creates a street picture of interesting contrasts. The junction of the road running at right angles from High Street, now Church Street, formed the ancient cross roads and focal point at the centre of the town. Along this road are found the Church and Grammar School leading to the South Gate.

Of special interest is the Ancient Druid which is said to have been a pilgrims' hostel in mediaeval times. Woodstock House was formerly the town house of the Wyndham family in the fifteenth century and the Duke Inn has traditional associations with the Duke of Wellington. Both are of historic and architectural interest.



Llanblethian, in contrast, relies for its value on a more intimate sense of enclosure. The village is dominated by the massive ruins of Llanblethian Castle, a fourteenth century fortress, built on a promontory in the Thaw Valley. Around this area grew the village of Llanblethian overlooking the River Thaw. The intricate maze of narrow lanes that climb the hillside, together with the simple architectural form of the buildings are the foundations of the unusual character of the area. The setting of the village amongst hillside pasture adds much to the charm of the settlement.

The Church of St. John the Baptist is probably of thirteenth century origin with eighteenth and nineteenth century alterations. It is of decorated and perpendicular styles and has a particularly splendid fifteenth century tower. This impressive church overlooks a small green upon which is sited a mediaeval



roadside cross. Only a stump of square shaft in a square socket, on a base of three restored square steps remain.

Within the village there are seven buildings listed under the Town and Country Planning Act, 1971, as of Special Historic or Architectural Interest. These are of eighteenth and nineteenth century origin and are scattered within the village. Great House, an impressive eighteenth century building sits in its own gardens with interesting forecourt walls and two pairs of decorated gatepiers. Also of interest, although not listed, is the Old Woollen Mill. This stands on Factory Brook and where Factory Road crosses this stream there is an attractive ford. Unlike Cowbridge, Llanblethian's road pattern is interestingly informal with steep and winding routes offering unexpected vistas as one rounds a corner.



References

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APPENDIX

Buildings listed under Section 54 of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1971 as of Special Architectural or Historical Interest

COWBRIDGE *Grade*

<i>Church Street</i>	
Church of St. Mary	B
*South Gate	II
Town Wall	II
Cowbridge Grammar School	II
Cowbridge Grammar School Boot House	II
Nos. 6 and 7	III

Eastgate Street (South Side)

No. 44 'The Ancient Druid'	II
No. 46 'The Armoury'	II
No. 48 'East Villa'	II
No. 54 'Heath House'	II
No. 56	II
No. 58	II
Nos. 66 and 68	III

High Street (North Side)

Town Hall	II
No. 23	II
No. 41	II
'The Bear Hotel'	II
'Woodstock House'	II
No. 27	III
Nos. 35 and 35a	III
No. 55 'Cross House'	III
No. 67 'Sorrento'	III
Lloyd's Bank and adjacent property to east	III
No. 43	III
No. 69	III
No. 77	III
House adjoining No. 77 to east	III
No. 81	III

High Street (South Side)

No. 20	II
No. 30	II
No. 32	II
No. 34	II
'The Duke Inn'	II
No. 58 'Caercady House'	II
No. 52 'Nanette'	III
West End Garage (Cowbridge Tyre and Auto Ltd., Bear Lane Auto Repairs)	III
Ye Old Mason's Arms	III
No. 14	III
No. 50	III
The Hall	III
No. 16	III
No. 18	III
Premises adjoining No. 20 to west, Milk Bar, No. 22 and J. & C. Hollings (Newsagents), No. 26	III
Premises adjoining above to west, Principality Building Society, No. 28	III
No. 38	III

Westgate Street

Nos. 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22	III
Nos. 28, 30, 32, 34	III
Nos. 7, 9, 11	III
Premises occupied by E. John now Incorporated into Townsend and Co. Ltd.	III
Ramoth Baptist Chapel	III

The Limes

Methodist Chapel	III
Nos. 1 and 2	III
Nos. 9, 9a, 10	III

LLANBLETHIAN

Church of St. John the Baptist	B
Roadside Cross	II
*(St. Quentin's Castle) Llanblethian Castle	II
Great House with Forecourt walls and gate piers	II*
Kingscombe	III
House on right-hand side of village street, at foot of hill, approximately 80 yards north of Kingscombe	III
Eastfield House	III

*Also listed as an Ancient Monument.

Churches are graded as A or B. Grade A churches being of superior architectural or historic interest.

Grade I, II and II* buildings are included in the statutory list of buildings of national or regional importance and therefore any alteration or demolition cannot be undertaken without informing the Local Planning Authority. Grade III buildings are not included in the statutory list but form a provisional list of buildings of local interest.

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