

New book asks: How well do you know Cowbridge?

The GEM's place in the history of Cowbridge

by JEFF ALDEN

I WONDER how many readers of *The GEM* know where in Cowbridge is Graig House?

The clue, of course, is in the question itself, because Graig House is where the *The GEM* offices are, but in the early part of the last century this was the home of William Lewis Jenkins, one-time mayor of the town.

He was in business as an 'aerated water manufacturer.' His bottling plant was in the building now occupied by the arcade next to Gail Armytage's flower shop, and he produced ginger beer in stoneware bottles and 'pop' in green glass bottles embossed with the word Cymedroldeb (temperance). His father, Lewis Jenkins, ran the Vale of Glamorgan brewery next door, in the buildings running back from today's Vale of Glamorgan Inn to the Wool Barn (the malt-house) and across North Road to the stables.

Many years ago, I met two elderly ladies who were William Lewis Jenkins's daughters, and they gave me some photographs which had been taken from the upstairs windows at the rear of Graig House.



View from the rear of GEM offices circa 1920.

The photograph shows the view to the north-east, looking over the orchard at the back of Graig House to the railway yard and to the High School beyond – the line from Llantrisant to Cowbridge was opened in 1865 and was closed in 1965.

During that period, a line from Cowbridge to Aberthaw was opened in 1892 (and closed in 1932) and the 'new' ticket office can be seen in the photograph, to the left of the High School.

The station had been built in what was known as the Mill Field, that seven-acre field to the north of the town which figured in so many documents of the 18th and 19th Centuries.

Here lay Johnny's Mill,

sited on the meandering river Thaw, until the construction of the railway meant that the river had to be diverted, and so the mill was stranded away from its source of power.

The buildings of Millfield cottages survived into the 20th Century, and, of course, the name lives on today, in Millfield Drive.

The entrance to the railway complex was off Eastgate – two cottages on the main street had to be demolished to allow for the construction of the platform and the station buildings, which helps to explain the wide entrance to Druids Green and the Fire Station today.

As for the name Druids Green, that was taken from the name of the inn

which was built at the entrance to the railway; the inn variously called the Ancient Druid or the New Druids.

This, in its turn, had taken the name and the licence from the attractive building across the other side of the road, 44 Eastgate – the house with the reputation of having been a pilgrim's hostel on the route to St David's. In the photograph, the grassy slopes on the right, running down from Slade farm, explain the origin of the name Slade Close.

Cowbridge railway station played an important role in the history of the town, but its importance was only intermittent. On market days in the 19th Century, cattle and farmers came in and went out by train, and special excursion tickets were issued for particular events in Cowbridge, some 7,000 tickets being sold for a one-day eisteddfod in the town in 1873.

During the First World War, Cowbridge was a collecting point for hay and for horses, and in the Second World War, a large yard was opened to store timber.

In the end, however, the line was not economically viable and was closed, with very little now left in the town to remind us of its 100 years of history.

A chapter in our forthcoming book, How well do you know Cowbridge? which should be available in early December, deals with the railway, and the evidence, still visible, that points to its former existence.

We have looked at the history of Cowbridge from the viewpoint of what can be seen today: so the pictures should test your observation as well as your knowledge!