

Cowbridge Grammar School- a fading snapshot

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This evocation of schooldays in Cowbridge in the 1950's comes as a result of many return visits by my Irish wife and I to old University friends in the Vale of Glamorgan, long after the arbitrary closure of Cowbridge Grammar School by Glamorgan County Council in the early 1970s. In the course of our many visits I found myself responding to an increasing number of questions from a variety of people about life in the school in my time, perhaps in its heyday at that time, with Idwal Rees as headmaster and a galaxy of gifted scholars and teachers who had returned from active service in WW II to throw themselves into the construction of a better world. Far beyond my own happy memories of my own time there at that particular conjuncture, is also the fact the the Grammar School of Cowbridge, bought and re-founded in 1685 as a dependency of Jesus College Oxford by a former pupil, Sir Leoline Jenkins (secretary of state to Charles II), had always had an enduring reputation as a fine school: this is clearly illustrated by the centuries-old academic pipe-line to Jesus College (the Welsh college of Oxford) from which, in turn, graduates returned to high station in the social, political or religious life of the Principality¹. Conscious of the continuing interest and curiosity in the old school, particularly in the wake of WW II, I thought it might be useful to pen a few lines about life as an 'inmate' in the 1950's, the penultimate decade of the school's existence, in the early years of post-war recovery and reconstruction.

I was a boarder in Cowbridge Grammar School (C.G.S.) from 1950 to 1958 (taking a 3rd year in the 6th form to attempt [and fail] Oxbridge entrance scholarships). Those years remain in my memory as a very happy (if Spartan) time of my life. There was nothing exotic about life as a boarder: whether day-boys or boarders, we were all from somewhere in the county of

¹ Leoline (anglicized version of Llewellyn) Jenkins, born in Llantrisant, son of a yeoman and educated at Cowbridge School and Jesus College Oxford. From Jesus College, he took refuge in France with the court of Charles II at the time of Oliver Cromwell's 'Commonwealth', and returned from exile to become Principal of Jesus College (1661). Subsequently served as Ambassador to the court of Louis XIV, Judge in the Admiralty Court, then to become Privy Councillor and Secretary of State in 1680 (Iolo Davies, *A Certain School. A History of Cowbridge Grammar School* (Cowbridge: D. Brown & Sons, Ltd, 1968).

Glamorgan. In my time, the furthest flung of the boarders came from places such as the Gower peninsula, Maesteg, or Aberdare, but in those years the 'Western Welsh' bus fleet ran regular and reliable enough services from the areas of Porthcawl, Bridgend, or Llanharan and Talbot Green: fewer boys, however, came from the direction of Cardiff, Whitchurch, or Penarth, areas already well-provided for with many high-performing schools (Cardiff High School, St Illtyds and Whitchurch Grammar School) which, with Swansea Grammar School, were among our keenest sporting rivals. Of an approximate total of 300 boys, fifty were boarders who, between them, all came from the areas mentioned. The prime reason for their being boarders would almost universally have been because of parental concerns about time for concentrated study being lost or wasted in commuter travel, not to mention the anxiety about premature romantic relationships with girls (always, of course, a source of envy for sequestered, studious, boarders). For boarders, there were no circumstances in which social or academic association with the opposite sex could be contemplated: girls were never even invited from the local girls' high school to play the female roles in our annual theatrical productions (annually performed to packed audiences over three nights in the Town Hall) – the continuing strategy for the casting of female roles was, therefore: i) not to select plays with too many feminine roles; ii) in the case of the latter, the casting team invariably sought boys of slight build, with high pitched voices (and highly gifted acting talent). As for organizing a dance on school premises to which girls (GIRLS?) might be invited – it simply wasn't on the map. There was not even a debating competition with the girls' school.

Initial entrance to C.G.S. was determined by success at the state-organised 11+ examination, prepared by local government administration, and sat at all authorized primary schools in the country. To qualify for C.G.S., the entrance requirement was approximately in the area of 200 marks out of a maximum possible of 300, in English and Arithmetic. Once admitted, future pupils were required to purchase all items of school uniform (caps, blazers, ties, and socks) from Roberts' Gents Outfitters in Cardiff. The three red cockerels of the school badge on our black blazers and caps were worryingly unusual for new boys, until we saw their origin, engraved in stained glass in school classrooms: '*argent three cockerels gules*' was the crest of Sir Leoline Jenkins who bought and re-founded the school in 1685. Every day of the early weeks as a

boarder in C.G.S. brought new experiences for boys emerging from sheltered home backgrounds. For new boys, life began in Form 2 (with all classes having A and B streams); after Forms 3 and 4, we went into Remove (Remove A or Remove B), followed by Form 5 (A or B), from which we sat our eight 'O' Levels. After 'O' levels, those with ambitions to advance to University moved on to the sixth form. Whereas there might have been about 25 or more boys in 'O' level classes, 6th form specialisation meant much smaller classes which rarely reached double figures. This, then, entailed a shift of location to Old Hall.

Consisting of a refurbished family country seat in separate grounds, Old Hall had once been for many years, the home of the Edmondson family, until its purchase from them in 1932 : once a fine old building, the sad shell of what it had been in the mid-twentieth century can now be seen behind the present-day Physic garden. As well as the Staff Room and School borrowing library, the then-elegant space of Old Hall also provided a bright spacious room reserved for 6th form Arts classes: adorned with photographs of eminent past pupils and members of staff, it was dominated by a large bookcase, overflowing with books, which filled the entire space of one wall. For boarders (otherwise confined to the confined space of the mock-Tudor block on Church Street), the grounds of Old Hall provided, in all seasons, a refreshing haven of space, light, and peace. Peter Cobb, a brilliant teacher of Geography and Geology at the time, and a fine musician to boot, has left a very evocative description of the interior of Old Hall as we knew it in the 1950's.²

If Old Hall itself provided an attractive and congenial centre for study, far more conducive to constructive study and reading than the more heavily frequented and darker, rooms of the main school block, the gardens offered a different universe altogether. Open, spacious, and green, they offered a vista from the high garden walls (which we called the battlements) of all the activity in the cattle market, and the spreading vista of the countryside beyond. In June 1952, the battlements also provided a grand-stand view of the communal banquet and activities organized by the town in the cattle market, around a huge roasting spit in celebration of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth 2nd. In summer and autumn the gardens yielded a rich alternating harvest of succulent berries, from the many mulberry trees which were planted around the grounds to plump filberts from the boundary hedgerows. Day-boys, who spent so much less

time on the premises than boarders, were never in a position to enjoy the gardens of old Hall in the same way as the boarders did. It was in autumn that the abundant harvest of that variety of large hazel nuts, known as filberts, ripened in the hedges ringing the perimeter. It was, of course, in the summer that the magnificent copper beech was to be seen at its best, standing outside the 6th form library at the garden entrance to the elegant structure of Old Hall: Peter Cobb devotes a whole page in his book to the magnificent spectacle it offered, also expressing his disappointment to find that, after the closure of the school, the tree had disappeared². In winter, the gardens of Old Hall often became a wonderland of snow: lying thick on the ground, it also formed a brilliant tracery of strange shapes in the evergreen trees of the gardens, not to mention wide open spaces where snow-ball fights became alternatively swift-moving and inventive in the more open spaces of the gardens, but more like guerilla warfare when conducted from behind the thick trunks of snow covered trees. If Old Hall was our 6th form H.Q, it was also a green lung and a ludic space for boarders of all ages who would otherwise have been restricted to the confined space of the mock-Tudor wing. With his citation from the memoirs of Richard Williams, M.C., headmaster of the school from 1919 (immediately after his valiant service in WW.1), until his retirement in 1938, Iolo Davies also confirmed the tonic impact of the grounds of Old Hall: '*the more spacious and equally delightful grounds of Old Hall, with their massed crocuses, nodding daffodils and bluebells, their glorious beeches with chequered light and shade in summer and delicate tracery of boughs in winter – these will form no small part of the memories of twenty happy years.*' (Iolo Davies, *op.cit.*, p.278). And nobody had yet, it seems, discovered either the mulberries or the filberts!

Unusually, the form master for my own class throughout my first five years remained the same – he was Iolo Davies: instead of simply remaining form-master for Form 2A, he followed our progress through to our 'O' level exam year in Form 5A. This was the point at which the pupils were required to make a critical decision: either to leave to find a job/ alternative stream of education, or to stay on to enter the 6th form where, with good 'A' level results, one might have the luck to enter one's preferred degree programme at the university of one's first choice. Iolo Davies was an exceptional man. After his early schooling at Swansea Grammar School, he

² Peter Cobb, *At Cowbridge Grammar School, 1949-1966* (Cowbridge Record Society, 2001), pp. 9-12.

completed most of his degree in classics as a Meyricke scholar at Jesus College Oxford, and then volunteered for the Royal Artillery (serving as a lieutenant in the 8th Army in the Monte Cassino campaign) before returning to complete his degree after the war at Oxford. His devotion to the school, and his interest in its history, found their ultimate expression in his fine book, *A Certaine Schoole*, often quoted here. Such was his commitment to the school that he became its last headmaster, thus heir to the legendary Idwal Rees (also a classical scholar, graduating through Swansea University and Cambridge University), member of one of the last Welsh teams to to beat the All Blacks (1935). Under the joint tutelage and care of Iolo Davies and Idwal Rees, the boarders at the Grammar School enjoyed a quality of education and advice that has become more and more apparent with the passage of time. Iolo Davies, Peter Cobb, Idwal Rees and his family, and fifty boarders all lived on the premises, in the mock-Tudor range of buildings, built in the 19c by Jesus College Oxford (completed in 1849). Now transformed into an elegant period apartment block, this erstwhile Dickensian factory of learning still survives on Church Street, between Holy Cross church and the inspired new physic garden opposite. One only has to scour Iolo Davies's *A Certaine Schoole* to discover just how many successful scholars and servants of state passed through its echoing corridors.

The tone of the teaching and the encouragement I was to receive for the seven following years was set for me early in the Michaelmas term of 1950, in one of my first first year classes (I started in form 2B). In my first year, I had the good fortune to be in a class which was housed in Old Hall. One day, in our first days in the school, bathed in the lingering glow of an autumnal afternoon, with the setting sun flooding through the sash window of an upstairs classroom in Old Hall, we were treated as 11-year old 'new boys' to one of those improvised, thoughtful, reveries which school-teachers were once entitled to deliver. Unfortunately, I can't remember who it was who delivered it (I did not even know all my teachers at that early stage), but he certainly made a lasting impact. Whoever it was, he held us spell-bound with the novelty of his train of thought. It communicated a new, aspirational, sense of empowerment and responsibility in a domain of politics/sociology/philosophy, of which we knew little at the time. I remember to this day what he said; '*You must remember*', intoned our unknown Cicero, '*there will be no more wars. There must be no more wars, and you are of the generation that will ensure that this will*

be so, because you will learn to read critically.' At that age, we were not aware that another major conflict was already gathering momentum with the Russian invasion of North Korea, but our now-unidentifiable teacher had us in the palm of his hand. Never before had any of us been flattered with such an assumption of adult responsibility: the conviction of this ringing statement was further reinforced by the strong, four-syllable, Welsh pronunciation, '*crit-ic-all-y*', clear, resonant, and deliberate (with a hard Welsh 'A'), rather than the mumbled English '*crit-icl-y*'. This was an elevation to a new, and far higher, understanding of what we were in school for, reinforced much later in the 6th Form when seminal authors of the literary canon were studied in some detail.

In addition, it was a simple fact, already known to most of us that, only a few years before, many of the staff (all male – boys school) had served in WW II. James ('Pinky') White, a distinguished history master, had been a navigator in Bomber Command; shot-down over Hamburg, he had spent most of the war in a prisoner-of-war camp - and wore a golden caterpillar badge in his lapel. Schoolboy rumour created an air of heroic mystery about that golden caterpillar in Pinky's lapel, but it was only many years later that I learned how the development of a canopy made of silk had finally rendered escape by parachute possible, thus putting an end to the unremitting pogrom suffered in WW I by pilots who, although not wounded by gunfire, were killed by the unavailability of reliable parachutes made from silk. The golden caterpillar was the silk-worm which ensured the survival of thousands of air-crew jumping from their damaged aircraft, and *The Golden Caterpillar Club* was an association of surviving heroes. The same James White gave little heed to safety, however, when he went out for a spin on his big (1,000 c.c.) Vincent 'Black Shadow' motor-bike: during his time as one of the boarding masters, he would take willing volunteers for a ride on his pillion – simply to share the exultation of sheer speed and the wind in your hair on the Golden Mile (without crash helmets). Lloyd Davies, my irascible, but inspired, poetry-quoting, 6th form French master, had also served in the war, but he talked no more about it than the other ex-veterans, but the information had seeped out (sometimes via other masters) that, taken prisoner in Italy, he managed to escape, finding his way back to his own lines after several months of severe privation and hunger. The volatility of Lloyd Davies, I later realized, masked sentiments of sorrow, anger, idealism and hope, none of which could find direct

expression but which he obviously felt the need to communicate to his 18-year old pupils. Why else, in the middle of a class on Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot*, would he have burst into an impromptu, but heart-felt, recitation of John Pudney's then-famous poem *Missing?*

Less said the better.

The bill unpaid, the dead letter.

No roses at the end

Of Smith my friend.

Last words don't matter.

And there are none to flatter.

Words will not fill the post

Of Smith, the ghost.

For Smith, our brother,

only son of a loving mother,

The ocean lifted, stirred,

Leaving no word.

Iolo Davies, too, had served in Italy, and he talked no more about it than the others, but the reticence only served to reinforce the sense of unspoken sacrifice in a cause that had to be sustained. My own father had served with a West African division in Burma (a far-away front, from which no letters could be sent): he left in 1942 and I did not see him again until 1947, but he was my father, always a hero. This accumulated (but never ostentatiously broadcast) war-time sacrifice of so many teachers in my own classroom imparted a strangely new and motivating sense of idealism to the education they offered us³. It was a climate of generosity and hope emerging out of lives lived dangerously.

³ See Richard Lewis (pupil and boarder, 1959-66): *A Certain Schoole Master. A Portrait of Iolo Davies* (Apple Tree Books, 2012 [www.richardlewisbooks.co.uk]). This, the most recent book/memoir to be published about Cowbridge Grammar School is, appropriately, a biography of Iolo Davies (the last headmaster) written by a former pupil and boarder at C.G.S. Full of insight, it offers detailed new information from his early days at Swansea Grammar School, followed by Jesus College Oxford, and then

the Royal Artillery in WW11, to the development and 'abolition' of the school in its final years.