

**DRAFT**

**TO RESTORE THE TOWN WALLS OF COWBRIDGE  
A Cowbridge Charter Trust Project.**

**Introduction: a problem and a solution**

The historic town walls of Cowbridge are in trouble. First completed in the thirteenth Century, since then much-demolished, part-re-built, repaired, sometimes cherished, abused, neglected and taken for granted, they now face dereliction unless action is taken to restore them. How long do we have? Ten years at most before they become dangerous. A detailed survey carried out in 1999 for the Vale by S.T.Walker and Partners painted a grim picture of the walls' condition. What prospect is there that the authority responsible for them, the Vale of Glamorgan Council, could do the work in that time? Virtually nil. Long-term neglect of the rich heritage of historic sites in the Vale of Glamorgan has resulted in as many as seventy requiring rescue restoration. Some hope!

It is an intolerable situation, but a solution has been found, in the form of a Service Level Agreement between the Cowbridge Charter Trust and the Vale Council. In return for practical support from the Vale, the Trust undertakes the work, using volunteer labour to do basic tasks, principally clearance of vegetation, and as a registered charity, the Trust is able to draw on grants for restoration which are not available to the Council.

To date, progress has exceeded all expectations, with support in kind by the Vale (tree-felling, waste clearance, provision of hand tools, and the bureaucracy involved in risk-assessment and bat-and-bird surveys), a grant for tool purchase by Creative Rural Communities, and by generous help from individuals such as mechanical clearance of coppice growth, loan of staging for high-level work, and finally two day's-worth of work with a mechanical digger to clear waste and level ground within the walls. Especially, though, it has been the tireless work by a dedicated group of volunteers, almost all of retirement age, who have worked in groups for two hours in the morning, 6 days per week for six months that has resulted in the clearance of all vegetation, and the exposure of the walls for re-surveying well before the target date of 1<sup>st</sup>.March 2006.

The imminent re-survey will up-date those parts of the 1999 study which apply to the relevant lengths of the walls. Once done, the restoration needs can be assessed, estimates prepared and grants applied-for. It will be a long and costly business, but both the Council and the Trust are totally committed to carry it out.

**The Town Walls: a potted history.**

Cowbridge is unique in Glamorgan, both in retaining a substantial proportion of its mediaeval walls and in being a walled town without an included castle. Instead, St.Quentin's Castle, looking over the town from Llanblethian, was the local stronghold, and Cowbridge itself was founded by the de Clares, who were the lords of Llanblethian and Talyfan, mainly as a commercial venture to raise revenue from this small part of their vast estates. Cowbridge is one of the Welsh border towns to have been given borough status in the middle-ages, in 1254 for Cowbridge, and 1330 for Kenfig, for example. Cowbridge is the only one to have had complete stone walls, and so far as we know was the only one never sacked during those troubled times. The walls were probably built after the (granting) **CREATION** of the borough, and complete

before 1300. They enclosed a rectangular town space with four gates, of which only the South Gate still survives.

Opinions have differed as to the purpose of the walls, one view being that they were too slight to be of much defensive use, and were built mainly to protect the town market. They must have served this purpose, but they must also have been defensive, effective at least against local insurgencies and inter-family feuds. Cowbridge was unscathed by the revolts of Morgan ap Maredudd in 1296 and Llewelyn Bren in 1316, both of which caused local damage in Talyfan to the North of the Town, and the early statutes required every man to own a “defensible weapon”, suggesting that they may have been required to “man the ramparts” in emergencies.<sup>1</sup>

The later history of the walls’ use is largely a matter of speculation, but it is worth considering that even in the periods of the 17<sup>th</sup> century civil wars they may have been valued at least as shelter for fighters with small-arms, and against attacks sometimes more rumoured than real.<sup>2</sup> The settled domestic peace of the 18<sup>th</sup>.C, and the growth of “polite society” in our prosperous boroughs, resulted in a general opening-up of walled towns, with their narrow foetid streets <sup>3</sup>. Cowbridge lost its West gate in 1753, and the East^gate was pulled down between 1768 and 1775, both for road widening and better access to the markets which were the town’s life-blood. The whole of the Northern and North Eastern lengths have gone; when is not recorded, but perhaps demolished piecemeal by the owners of the many abutting burgrave plots.

Today, the main surviving lengths enclose the West, South and South East sides of the old town. The part we are concerned with borders the grounds of Old Hall, previously the mansion house of the Edmondes family, and its previous function as a garden enclosure may have been important for its survival, despite later alterations and adaptations. It is 80 metres long on the South side, 44 on the West, plus the SW corner bastion, and up to 3 metres high.

Within the eastern part of the gardens was a separate enclosed garden adjoining Church Street, which is now the site of the Physic Garden. This includes a small part of the South wall, so our restoration plans appropriately (carries) **CARRY** on where the Physic Garden stops; a “sister project”, in fact. It is perhaps significant that apart from the Old Hall lengths, walls remain, of whatever period, round the substantial property of the Old Grammar School and churchyard, doubtless thereby preserved from ravages by individual owners, and linked to the Old Hall part by the fine remaining South Gate. The “bird’s eye view” map (Fig.1) shows the existing walls and the present core of the town. It is apparent that, even where the walls are missing altogether, the patterns of ownership which developed within them are still with us. A 14<sup>th</sup>.Century inhabitant, dumped bewildered into our High Street, would soon get his bearings!

Old Hall eventually became amalgamated with the Grammar School, in Church Street, and thence into public ownership. A photograph taken in the 1960s shows the South wall outside as a clean run, without foliage or trees overtopping it. Evidently the period of most serious neglect has been the last thirty five years, roughly the period since the overhaul of local government removed responsibility from the Town’s Council to the South Glamorgan and then Vale of Glamorgan Councils. During this time the fine Georgian south wall of the old house was largely demolished as part of the conversion of the house into a successful adult education centre, and the building of the Health Centre and Library within the grounds. Happily a central part of the old mansion house’s back wall was retained, with its fine classical doorway and two Venetian window recesses. All this work won a prize(\*WHAT PRIZE?), but it is a measure of our present but much-belated strict conservation policies that so much demolition would be unthinkable now, and that the surviving town walls have been listed grade 2\* status.

### **Getting down to it: clearance and archaeology.**

The clearance of the vegetation, which had completely masked the inside of the South wall with a screen of hazel coppice and scrub ash trees, has revealed features of historic interest. The dramatic effect of this work is seen in Fig. 2, the inside looking east before clearance, and Fig.3, the same view afterwards. The main length of the walls, seen here, runs from the S.W.corner bastion to a few metres past the Georgian Gateway, and is a double-faced rubble-filled structure, founded on clay. It is without doubt part of the original 13<sup>th</sup>.century fortifications. It ends at the line drawn to the right of the gateway on the map, reducing to a single wall with a short return on the inside, (Fig 4), which also shows the dilapidated state of much of the structure.

The single wall which continues through the Physic Garden to the South Gate is a later re-build which, before our clearance, was piled up with earth and rubble stone on the inside, probably spoil from the demolition of the original inner wall face. However, stones which appear to be the footings of the an old double wall have been found inside too, and very recently excavations within the Old Grammar School "Boot Room" and gardens ( to the right of the South Gate on the map) have revealed original double-wall foundations as well. With luck, and more investigation, it may be possible to map the whole of the original South wall, which is expected to conform fairly closely to the existing lengths.

The South wall is pierced by the Georgian Gateway, now the main car-park access to the Old Hall grounds. It is flanked by two high rectangular stone gateposts, topped by handsome moulded stone caps, of the mid 18<sup>th</sup>. Century, (Fig.6) which until quite recently supported stone ball finials (also visible in the 1960s photo). Together with the classical stone doorway mentioned above, these are two rare survivals of fine Georgian stone detailing in Cowbridge. It is our intention to provide new finials for this and the other remaining post at the extreme North West end of our walls, which still has part of the finial stand remaining (not illustrated)

Moving westward, we come via a sloping rampart to the S.W.corner bastion, seen here on the inside (Fig.7) It is probably basically original, but with altered upper structures, connecting with the crenellated top of the West wall. It is reputed to have carried a wooden super-structure in the 18<sup>th</sup>.Century, forming a garden summer-house for the Edmondes family, perhaps resembling one which crowned one of the towers of (Dinevor)**DYNEVOR** Castle, Llandeilo, seen in a contemporary painting in Newton House. From the bastion, we can look Northwards (Fig.8) along the raised Wall Walk, supported by an inner wall.

Romantically, we can imagine the archers of Cowbridge (presumably there were some) shielded by the crenellations and using their skills, honed by (practise) **PRACTICE** in The Butts which adjoin the West wall, to pick off the supporters of Llewelyn Bren or any other marauders rash enough to come within arrow-shot.

Sadly, we would be wrong. The crenellations are fairly obviously of late date, smacking more of 18<sup>th</sup>. century "Gothick" than mediaeval defences. In fact the whole raised structure is enigmatic. A fascinating passage, now closed at each end with a metal grille, cuts right through the walk and outer wall close to the North end, and peering into it one can see, on each side some two metres in, shallow stone embrasures which suggest access to chambers within. Perhaps the whole walk over-lays a vaulted chamber, containing the Treasure of Abbott Thomas at least?

Wrong again, of course. An experimental dig on the top close to the passage has revealed a sequence of soils, clay, and then more soil, suggesting a filled-in structure, perhaps once an old building converted to a walkway. However, it is long, and may contain other features. An 18<sup>th</sup>.C ice-house is a possibility; there were ice houses at [Knoll] **GNOLL** (Neath), ^ **DUNRAVEN**,

Nash Manor, and Llansannor, so surely the Edmondes would not have been content to lack one. One real discovery has been made in this area: a deep experimental dig across the entrance to the tunnel (Fig.9) is revealing the foundations of the wall to be deep, and also reveals a sub-soil-level wall running out from the side of the gateway. Hopefully, too, future digging within the tunnel may tell us more about the age of the main part of the West Wall, beneath its frippery crenellations.

So much, then, is still speculation, but stimulating nevertheless for continuing archaeological explorations which, we hope, will eventually reveal much about these fascinating old structures and the different ways they were used over time. Certainly the Georgian contributions to the scene are to be treasured, both as features of Cowbridge's heyday and reflections of the quality of its "polite" life at that time.

Of course, the fine developing Physic Garden, and the exposure of the walls, are making the 1970s municipal layout of Old Hall grounds look very tired indeed – but that is another story, for the future, we hope.

### **References.**

1. For a full history of Cowbridge at this and later periods, see "Cowbridge and Llanblethian, past and present" by Brian Ll.James and David J.Francis: D.Brown & Sons, 1979.
2. For a first-hand account of such events during the civil war of 1688, see events at Reading and its neighbourhood, described by Daniel Defoe in his "Journeys throughout the Whole Island of Great Britain", letter No.4, pages 269 -275 in the Penguin edition.
3. See Mark Girouard, "The English Town", p.75 et.seq., "A Polite and Improving Society".

### **Acknowledgements.**

I am indebted to Robert Cope for permission to use his finely-drawn "Bird's eye" map (Fig.1) and to Harry Hales for the "before and after" pictures, Figs.2 and 3. Also to Jeff Alden for historical scrutiny and helpful advice.