

## **The Physic Garden in Cowbridge**

The physic garden is a walled garden, bounded on the south by the early-medieval town wall of Cowbridge, on the east by the tall wall adjoining Church Street, on the north by another wall abutting former grammar school land, and to the west by the Old Hall garden.

This probably occupied a number of burgage plots (the building and garden plots laid out by the developers of the new town of Cowbridge which was granted its charter by Richard de Clare, the Lord of Glamorgan in 1254). Later this probably was part of a coniger (rabbit warren) where rabbits were reared for food.

The earliest records we have relating to today's physic garden are those of the Edmondess family, because for nearly two centuries this was part of the garden of Old Hall, which was owned by the Edmondess family.

John Edmondess (1688-1761) was a steward and agent to the Aubreys of Llantrithyd who also owned a sizeable estate in Boarstall, Bucks. His son Thomas Edmondess (1715-1790) also started off as land agent to the Aubreys but, like other land agents in the Vale of Glamorgan, rose to become a wealthy landowner in his own right. It was this Thomas Edmondess who bought a number of properties in High Street, Cowbridge in 1744 from John Towgood of Bristol (who had earlier bought them from the Wyndhams of Dunraven). They were described a century earlier as being two new houses, two adjoining plots, and at the rear – including our garden - a coninger and orchard.

Thomas was responsible for rebuilding and developing the property, and in particular for building the classical garden frontage with Venetian windows and for laying out the grounds. Presumably for effect, directly facing the front (garden) door he built the gateway now at the entrance to the car park, with two ball finials, even though that led nowhere other than to the gardens of the filled-in ditch around the walls. He also probably built the walkway near the top of the west wall, as there is a similar pillar with ball finial there. Thomas Edmondess married Mary Thomas of Llangynwyd who brought a great deal of property in the hilly areas of Glamorgan into the family – initially low-grade farm land but by the next century very valuable because of the underlying coal reserves.

His two sons, John and Thomas, both lived, at different times, at Old Hall, and an inventory of 1778, when Thomas took over, describes 'a greenhouse and gardens' as well as a stable and coach house. It is tempting to think that the recently-discovered slabbed floor, wall and flue of a boiler room in the north-west corner of the physic garden, directly under where a greenhouse stood till recently, dates back to this time; certainly the bricks were larger than usual and non-standard in dimensions.

The Edmondess were interesting people. The next Thomas Edmondess was the son of John, known as The Major. "He was sent to Ireland with his regiment to quell a rebellion, and rode away from Cowbridge with his wife on a pillion behind, and the manservant rode behind them with the cradle behind him".

The next Edmondess to live in Old Hall was another Thomas, the Revd Thomas Edmondess, vicar of Llanblethian with Cowbridge for 46 years. One of his sons recorded in his diary in 1868 (when he was courting his wife-to-be) that he had been 'under the

plane trees' and 'under the laburnums' and that they had walked on the terrace – presumably the walkway near the battlements. He records playing croquet on the lawn, and that he had tried out the new mowing machine, made by Greens, for the lawn. He also wrote that he had helped to mark out the tennis court, which was where the library now stands.

The first edition OS map of 1879 shows something of the layout of Old Hall gardens, with a detailed path layout for our part. The second edition of 1899 shows less detail but does include three buildings – the greenhouse already mentioned, together with the two sheds which have recently been restored for our use. A watercolour by Eleanor Edmondson shows our garden in the 1920s, then maintained as a flower garden but possibly with vegetables tucked away from the main path in the middle of the picture.

When Old Hall was taken over by Cowbridge Grammar School in 1932, our garden then became the boarders' kitchen garden, and supplied the boarding house of the school with vegetables, and some fruit. The greenhouses continued to be used. Boarding stopped in 1975 and from then on South Glamorgan used the site as a tree nursery, but this was soon abandoned. The trees grew close and tall so that it became an impenetrable woodland, which had to be cleared before the development of the Physic garden could begin.

*J Alden*

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## **The history of the Physic Garden**

This plot of land has had a variety of land uses over the past two hundred years.

Most recently, up to 2003, this was an abandoned tree nursery, with tall trees and saplings competing with each other in their search for light, and growing very close together. This impenetrable woodland had to be cleared: the trees had to be felled and roots grubbed up, before the development of the Physic Garden could begin. South Glamorgan Council had developed the tree nursery soon after 1975, but soon afterwards abandoned the idea, leaving the trees growing but untended, a situation which continued after the change-over to the Vale of Glamorgan Council.

Until 1975 the garden had been the kitchen garden of the boarding house of Cowbridge School, but as boarding ceased in 1975, the need for a vegetable garden also ended. That use had occurred since 1932. There were greenhouses on the south-facing wall, fruit trees, and especially vegetables in abundance. Especially during the 'Dig for Victory' campaign of wartime, the schoolboys were often enlisted to help in the cultivation of vegetables. *The Bovian*, the school magazine, records . . . "Teams of boys engaged quite capably in digging, weeding, planting and watering . . . while Mr Penny (the school gardener) detailed squads of boys for this job or that". By the summer of 1941, the garden not only supplied the boarders' kitchen, but also managed to yield nearly all the vegetables for the day boys' dining hall, which provided 400 meals a week.

Our garden had, before 1932, been part of the garden of Old Hall, owned by the Edmondson family for nearly two centuries. The greenhouses on the north wall had been built by that family, as had the two sheds on the southern boundary of the garden. The greenhouses, tall and south-facing, had been heated by furnaces, the remains of one of which have recently been excavated in the north-west corner of the plot.

A water-colour of 1926, painted by Eleanor Edmondson, shows a feast of colour and a wealth of flowers in this area, but no doubt there were vegetables set back a distance from the main pathway leading to Church Street which appears in the middle of the painting.

The earliest pictorial record of the garden is the first edition OS map of 1879, which shows a rectangular layout of paths in 'our area', quite different from the large trees shown in the main part of Old Hall garden. This must have been the organised, cultivated, part of the gardens of the property. Probably something like this existed on the site ever since the Edmondson family developed Old Hall in the 1740s.

*J Alden*

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## **A 21st Century Physic Garden for Cowbridge**

*As we all know Cowbridge celebrated the 750th anniversary of the granting of its first Charter during 2004. Much was done locally to commemorate the event. One outcome was an initiative by the Welsh Historic Garden Trust to consider the possibility of creating a physic garden on the site of an area that was once part of Old Hall, the home of the Edmondson family from the 18th to the 20th century.*

*A physic garden is of course a garden where plants with medicinal properties are grown. Such plants have been known to man from time immemorial and grown in gardens for many centuries in countries throughout the world. In the Middle Ages physic gardens were associated in particular with monasteries. In gardens close to an infirmary plants, flowers and herbs such as rose, lily, cumin, lovage, tansy, mint and rosemary would be grown to treat fevers, aches and pains and other ailments of the monks and their guests*

*The first garden intended to provide plants to study was established at the medical school of the University of Padua in 1545. By the end of the seventeenth century physic gardens were proliferating throughout Europe, all linked with universities where medicine was taught. The Chelsea Physic Garden in London was established in 1673 by the Society of Apothecaries to train their apprentices in the identification of medicinal plants.*

*The site for the planned physic garden is located in the south eastern section of Old Hall gardens and is presently enclosed on three sides by high stone walls – one of which comprises a section of late 13<sup>th</sup> century Town Wall.*

*The complete eastern wall, with gated access into Church Street forms part of the most historical streetscape in Cowbridge. It includes the Grade I Holy Cross Church, the Grade II former Grammar School range (built by Jesus College, Oxford in 1847 on the site of the earlier 'free' school of 1617), the Grade II 16<sup>th</sup> century pair of cottages and the 'Duke of Wellington' (formerly the Black Horse Inn). 'The Grammar School' range is currently being refurbished as houses and flats. The boundary wall to the north is fully extant but is now badly overgrown and deteriorating. The Western Wall dividing the site from the gardens of Old Hall no longer exists. Until very recently the original footings of the wall were still in situ. These have now been removed to allow a new West wall to be built which will help to create the "secret" garden and the right environment for the plants.*

*Historical records indicate that, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the walled enclosure was laid out formally with paths and beds, probably to a design that had been established many years before. At one stage the site was used as a kitchen garden by the Grammar School but in recent years it has served as a tree nursery for the Councils of South Glamorgan and the Vale of Glamorgan.*

*The site had been neglected for some years and was until very recently a virtual wilderness. It is slowly being brought back to life by the Cowbridge Physic Garden Trust and as can now be seen the ground has been cleared and the true potential revealed.*

*The Edmondes family acquired Old Hall in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century (probably 1745) and re-designed the house and garden as their principle residence. At that date the gardens would have been formal, laid out to strict geometric patterns, with allees, parterres and arbours.*

*The walled garden at Old Hall, Cowbridge presents a unique opportunity, not only to re-create the formal garden of the Edmondes family of circa 1750 but also to incorporate into it a Physic garden of that date. While England, Scotland and Ireland have retained examples of these historic gardens, in Wales Physic gardens in any form remain extremely rare*

*The design of the 'Physic Garden' is being undertaken by Anthony Jellard Associates, based near Abergavenny who are one of Wales' leading landscape architects. Mr. Robin Walley, the foremost authority in the U.K. on parterre/formal gardens of the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries will assist the design work.*

*" A pretty concept " I hear you say " but it cannot work –have they no idea what it is likely to cost – it is just not possible "*

*Well – it is possible and we will do it. A lot of effort has gone into properly establishing the Cowbridge Physic Garden Trust. We now have a structure, an appropriate legal framework, a number of permissions and licences, we are a registered charity and last, but by no means least, we have a reasonable amount of finance to drive the first stage forward.*

*The site has been cleared – with full regard to wildlife and archaeological obligations, the Topographical Survey has been undertaken, the final designs for the hard landscaping have been completed and we now await planning permission.*

*We know that there are many hurdles to overcome – we have already encountered quite a few – but we will achieve our objectives. The work that we plan has to be done in a number of distinct phases and during 2005 we intend – in addition to what we have already done – to:*

- (a) Complete our wall survey.*
- (b) Repair / restore the north and east walls.*
- (c) Reinststate the missing west wall (approximate cost £30000).*
- (d) Construct paths – including service ducts and drainage.*
- (e) Create walkways and banking.*
- (f) Construct suitable disabled access to the garden.*

***Yes it is ambitious isn't it!***

*Then of course we go into 2006 when amongst many other things we will restore our section of the 13<sup>th</sup> century Town Wall and the derelict stone sheds, possibly create a pergola walk, purchase and install plant material – benches – equipment – interpretative signage etc; etc; We have in addition a planned programme of enhancement that will run through into 2007, all being well, which will include a summerhouse, floodlighting, irrigation systems, water feature and much more. We have been extremely fortunate (with a lot of hard work and solid local support) in being able to obtain initial capital finance from the Welsh Assembly and the European Union under a WDA project. However we are required to generate a very significant slice of matched funding to ensure that the garden is developed as we would wish. Our initial lease on the site will be for twenty-five years, there will be no admission charges and it is hoped that much, if not all, of the maintenance can be undertaken by volunteers.*

*If anyone would like to know more about this rather special garden or would like to assist in any way please contact Bruce McGovern on 01446 7736611. (2005)*