

INNS AND ALEHOUSES OF OLD COWBRIDGE

What do the postal sorting office, Basil's Brasserie, Snaffles tack shop, Barclays Bank and Greggs the bakers all have in common? And indeed, the Travel House, the Tenovus shop, Filco supermarket and the Cowbridge Bookshop?

These are businesses all sited in buildings which at one time were inns. In digging into this aspect of the history of Cowbridge, it has been fascinating to find out how many different inns there were, how many different locations for inns there have been, and how many different names they had. Some, of course, are long gone - nobody today can remember the *Eight Bells* or the *Green Dragon* or the *Coopers Arms* - while others are still alive in the memories of many Cowbridge people.

How about this description of a public house which closed less than twenty years ago? "At this time there was a shooting gallery in the building at the back of the yard, used by the Cowbridge small-bore air rifle team which shot in the Bridgend and district league. In the inn itself, the front of the house was the respectable part, with a lounge bar and a small room used for occasional meetings, while the back bar with pool table was smoke-filled (of various odours) and the haunt of 'the lads'. It was the only inn in Cowbridge at the time which welcomed tinkers and travellers who were staying on Stalling Down or St Hilary Down. These were often great gamblers, sometimes great fighters, and even the generous Don Herrera occasionally rued their presence." Many, I am sure, will recognise this description of the *Eastgate*.

By contrast, here is a newspaper advertisement of 1823 about the old *Horse and Groom*, which was in the block of buildings now occupied by Hollwars, Domus Interiors and Visage: "James Wheeler returns his most grateful thanks to the gentlemen, farmers and inhabitants of Cowbridge and its neighbourhood for the very liberal support he has received during his residence at the above inn, and most respectfully informs them he has laid in a large stock of spirituous liquors of the best quality, and cordials of every description which he is enabled to dispose of, wholesale and retail, considerably under the usual prices.... brandy 24s, rum 16s and gin 12s per gallon".

Those prices seem ridiculously low by today's standards - but the new book published by Cowbridge Record Society also contains a mention of beer at 2d a pint (that is 120 pints for a pound) in 1777 at the Three Tuns in Eastgate, and illustrations of two bills for meals at the *Bear* in the nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, and the prices there are also to be marvelled at!

This book, *Inns and Alehouses of Old Cowbridge*, is to be launched at Old Hall, Cowbridge on Friday, November 14th at 7pm. Space is limited, so if you would like to attend, please contact Keith Jones at 48 Eastgate, or 01446-77 5139. The book will be available from the Cowbridge Bookshop or Davies the Newsagents from Saturday November 15th onwards, at the usual price of £4.95. Yet another excellent Christmas present - and it is also the first contribution by the Cowbridge Record Society to 'Cowbridge 750'.

Jeff Alden

.....

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Iolo Morganwg wrote his poem about the Cowbridge Topers:

‘Cowbridge hath no sober rules
None of your milksop thinkers,
None of your philosophic fools
But great and glorious drinkers.’

In last year’s local history class in Old Hall, we studied the history of the inns and alehouses of Cowbridge, and of some of their ‘great and glorious drinkers’. The book which is the product of our researches has just gone to the printers, and will be published by Cowbridge Record Society in November.

So, how many pubs were there in Cowbridge? So far we have been able to identify forty-two different locations for inns or alehouses in the town. The names of many inns have changed over the years - for example the *Duke* has also been known as the *Half Moon*, the *Cowbridge Arms* (probably), the *Coach and Horses*, the *Black Horse*, the *Wellington* and the *Duke of Wellington* - and the same name pops up for different buildings, which can lead to some problems. It is well-known that the *Cowbridge Arms* occupied the premises next door to the *Duke* (today’s Tenovus building) and before that, even more confusingly, it was called the *Half Moon*.

The largest number of public houses at any one time seems to have been in 1871 when Cowbridge had twenty-five inns or beerhouses. Many of the pubs were then brewing their own beer, although there were two breweries in the town (in Coopers Lane and the Vale of Glamorgan brewery - the one near the river had not then opened). There are many contemporary accounts of people enjoying their foaming glasses of nut-brown ale, the local ‘home brew’. There are also interesting tales of floors collapsing, and customers subsiding into vats of beer and barm, of robberies and murders, and the various types of entertainment available at the inn.

In the late nineteenth century at some of the inns, the *Masons* or *White Lion*, for example, men would gather for gossip, folk songs, and ‘jigging’. Someone would play a tune on a concertina, tin whistle or Jews harp, and the men would take turns to ‘jig’, to dance on the spot, in time with the music.

A tale relating to a different sort of impromptu entertainment in two inns in Eastgate was told in the Glamorgan Gazette in 1902. Apparently the landlord of the *Commercial*, James Govier, found one of his customers, a “well-known character” named John Sullivan, to be very well oiled. He decided “to have some fun with him”, and so dressed him in a soldier’s red coat and then took him to the *Railway* inn. No sooner had Sullivan arrived, that the noise he created attracted the attention of PC Evans, who found him almost helplessly drunk (though a witness disagreed, saying he considered a man drunk when he got hold of a lamp post and could not get away). Billo Davies, landlord of the *Railway*, was charged with permitting drunkenness (case dismissed); John Sullivan was fined 2s. 6d. for being drunk on licensed premises. He promised not to get drunk again, which occasioned much laughter in the Court.

If you want to learn more about the inns and alehouses of old Cowbridge, you’ll have to buy the book when it appears next month.

Jeff Alden