

COWBRIDGE IN THE EIGHTEEN SIXTIES

by

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COWBRIDGE was the emporium of the Vale in the eighteenth-sixties. All kinds of commodities in use at the time were stocked or made by competent, ingenious and practical tradesmen, from a needle and thread to a churchwarden clay pipe, and from a tallow candle to the full complement of household furniture, scythes, hay rakes, milking stools, threshing flails, carts and waggons. Bristol was the wholesale store of the West, goods being shipped to Cardiff by a regular steamship service and then brought to Cowbridge by the horse waggons of the local "carriers."

Although English was the predominant language, most of the tradespeople spoke Welsh. Young people of the town were not generally taught Welsh but could understand it to a limited extent, yet in the neighbouring villages there were many families who understood little English.

Donkeys were numerous in the district and when not at work, would flock together grazing on the waste land or roadside. Many cottagers would bring them to the town to carry their purchases away in sacks. The donkeys were also used to transport coal from the mine near Llanharry. All the villages possessed at least one cottage shop, the proprietors of which used their donkeys and carts to collect supplies from Cowbridge.

Some of the tradesmen of the town at this time indulged in "poetic" advertising, an example being:—

"If you want good Tea, full flavour and strong,
Don't fail to try what is sold at the Hong-Kong."

Once a week a woman used to drive about half a dozen donkeys carrying bags of sand on their backs from Ogmores Downs. The sand was sold to Cowbridge householders for sprinkling on the stone flag floors of their houses.

The local chimney sweep named Aeron Anderson, owned a

remarkable lightweight fast trotting donkey, exceptional in every way. It had a dark grey short silken coat, was always well tended, and stabled when not at work. It was a high stepper, quick in motion, and would travel in a spirited way like a thoroughbred pony. It drew a small spring trap carrying the sweep and his brushes, and seemed thoroughly to enjoy a good spin. "Neddy" had a long term of life and was always an attraction to all animal lovers, so different in temperament from the generality of the stubborn breed.

In these days women made their own clothes, chiefly of local spun yarn, and the shawls and dresses made of that material often lasted the owner's lifetime, and if outgrown the garment was cut down for the younger members of the family. The male cottagers and boys cultivated their gardens, and bred pigs which roamed on the roads. They were also expert in the common hand crafts of the day.

The chief items of diet were oatmeal porridge, called gruel, bakestone cakes, home-made bread of luscious flavour, cheese, bacon and vegetables. Of the pigs reared, some were for home consumption and others, which were sold, were considered to be "the boys that paid the rent." It was the practice to milk sheep after weaning the lambs and nutritious sheep milk cheese was made at most local farms.

The cottages in the surrounding villages were generally very clean and neat. Thomas Carlyle tells us that Llanblethian was inhabited by people of cultivated tastes with refined habits, and that the village itself was one of the cleanest he had seen in Wales. As with all things there were, however, a few exceptions and E. W. Miles introduces us to one of these. "I remember going to Penylan, Newton, when a boy, and visiting a small cottage occupied by an old woman. The front and only door opened into her room on the ground floor, where there was a bedstead covered with a heap of wraps. Fowls were walking about the room, and a pig, which seemed to be treated as one of the family, was resting on the floor! Swedes and turnips were stored on the floor under the bed giving a somewhat pungent aroma to the room."

Farmers and their wives used to ride into Cowbridge on their cart-horses; the wife sitting behind the husband on a pad and carrying a large basket of butter, cheese, and poultry on her lap. These horses were trained to run in a sliding manner and could travel at about seven miles an hour without jolting or causing the

good wife any discomfort. Many of the inns of the town provided extensive stabling accommodation, and in front of them, set in the cobble pavement were stone steps, called "mounts", at which the wife mounted and dismounted from the carthorse, which sidled up to the mount for this purpose without any guidance. At this time the ordinary farmer was a working man and his wife a working woman, and they probably could not afford a spring carriage, although sometimes they used farmcarts. Carriages were a scarce and costly luxury and only a few of the wealthier gentlemen farmers owned two-wheeled spring carriages.

During the hay harvest scythe mowing was very general, and a company of men would combine in taking contracts for mowing fields of growing hay. It was an impressive sight to see six or seven men swinging the scythes following each other in adjoining swathes in perfect rhythm. They would start work in early morning, have a rest during the heat of mid-day, and resume work from late afternoon till nightfall. At harvest time the corn was reaped by gangs of men who arrived in the locality for that purpose. One band of sturdy, sober and respectful Welsh reapers arrived annually from Carmarthenshire, complete with sickles. Another band of not so temperate part-time fishermen hailing from Ireland also visited the area undertaking this seasonable work. They slept in the open, and when not employed indulged in excessive beer-drinking which frequently ended in fights with the local toppers, for the local beer brewed from malt and hops was of undoubted potency. Later in the season after the harvest, men would thresh corn in the barns from morning till late evening using the old fashioned long handled flail.

The town was frequently visited by roving gipsies with a crippled horse and an old van, patched with canvas, and containing a small stock of tin goods, various brushes and floor mats, which were offered for sale from door to door. They generally had a couple of donkeys, fowls, which perched on the van when moving, and a few fast dogs which picked up many a rabbit or hare on their journeys.

About this time, a Mr. Culverwell, a native of Somerset, rented two or three farms in addition to Llwynhelig, and introduced the all-red Devonshire breed of cattle to the area. He also brought with him a number of Somerset farm labourers whose descendants are local residents at the present time. He ploughed his land with

teams of oxen for many years.

The Mail Coach from London to Milford ceased running about 1850. The proprietor of the *Bear Hotel*, John Thomas, afterwards a prominent auctioneer, provided post horses and carriages for hire, but not much business was done because local people were accustomed to walk long distances in those days. It was not unusual for artisans to walk five or six miles daily to and from their work. Roads were repaired when and where required every winter with local rough stone quarried by the roadside and broken up with hammers to the size of a goose egg. Holes were filled with the stones and the heavy traffic of the day rolled them into place. Naturally such roads were muddy in wet weather and extremely dusty when dry.

The Mail Coach was drawn by four horses which were changed about every twelve miles. The horses used to gallop the whole distance between stages, which in this particular area were situated at the *Five Bells*, *Cardiff*, *Bear Inn*, *Cowbridge*, and *Pyle Inn*, at *Pyle*. On one occasion the horses started off from *Pyle* before the driver had mounted the coach, and did not halt until they drew up in the ordinary way on the pitching in front of the *Bear Inn*, *Cowbridge*!

