

So what was last week's front page picture of my grandchildren standing with me in a trench in the Physic garden all about – and what does it have to do with local history?

The drainage in a corner of the Physic garden needed improving, and so I started to dig to aerate the soil. At the depth of about a foot I came upon a well-constructed wall of dressed stone, inside and almost parallel with the wall fronting Church Street. The stone blocks were larger and much more rectangular with the main street wall which is effectively of rubble; and there seemed to be cement pointing between the stones. As I continued to dig I came upon a cobbled stone surface on the garden side of the wall, a surface which sloped quite steeply northwards - to the extent that I seemed to reach the water table. A pool accumulated there and has been very reluctant to drain away. The cobbled surface is at least eight feet wide.

What was the purpose of all this? The cement pointing and a possible patch of bitumen covering some cobbles suggest a relatively recent use. Most people know that before the plot of land was used for a tree nursery by South Glamorgan council, it had been the kitchen garden for the boarding house of the Grammar School, but I do not know of any building or construction in use then. Before 1932, this was part of Old Hall garden, owned by the Edmondese family, and there is one memory of the corner being occupied by a pond, inhabited by newts. Whether the wall and slope were built for that purpose, we do not yet know.

The Edmondese family had occupied Old Hall for nearly 200 years. It was Thomas Edmondese, the land agent for the Aubreys of Llantrithyd, who bought a number of adjoining properties on High Street in 1744, and converted them into a mansion with gardens. Thomas built a stylish garden front to the new house, with Venetian windows, to create a lovely building which lasted until 1974. He and his brother John also decorated the house well in the eighteenth century; we know that the porch and lobby contained a sedan chair, lots of pictures, and two orange trees – really a sign of their wealth and importance.

These were interesting people, Thomas Edmondese being willing to set up a cockerel in a cockfight in the Spread Eagle Inn in Cowbridge for 100 guineas a battle (against the cockerel of the inveterate gambler, Robert Jones of Fonmon). Another later Edmondese, known as The Major, was summoned in the early nineteenth century to join his regiment in Ireland. He decided to go on horseback, with his wife on a pillion with the baby in her arms, and had his manservant ride behind carrying the cradle!

Between them, the Edmondeses did a lot to the garden of Old Hall: probably laid out the 'battlements walk', probably rebuilt the Town Wall, certainly opened the doorway in the wall, placing ball finials on the pillars, and built a greenhouse in the part where the Physic garden is today. Did they build some structure in the corner where I have been excavating? More digging – this time in the archives – is required.

There are still tickets available for the screening of the DVD, Cowbridge on Film, in the Town Hall on Tuesday, February 6th at 3.00pm. Tickets at £2 each are available from Arthur John and Co, or from me.

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