

# Fascinating story of The Vale from Iron Age onwards

**COWBRIDGE and Llanblethian — past and present, by Brian James and David Francis, both old boys of Cowbridge Grammar School and graduates of University College, Aberystwyth, is not intended for the specialist or the scholarly reader.**

Although drawing much on previous writers, the authors have aimed to write an essentially new history, giving at the same time equal attention to describing the life of the communities at the present.

Contained in 204 pages (with 74 photographs), the book is available in a hard bound, laminated jacket. Priced at £8.90, it is beautifully presented — another excellent contribution to local history from the up to date presses of D. Brown and Sons Ltd., who are joint publishers with Stewart Williams, Barry.

It would be impossible to do justice in any review to such a comprehensive venture, seeking, as it does, to outline the changes in the social structure and economic pattern of Cowbridge and its associate parish of Llanblethian over the centuries. One must bear in mind that the origins of Llanblethian go back to the Iron Age, while the name has not changed significantly in 800 years. Cowbridge, on the other hand, enjoyed a brief prosperity under Roman rule (perhaps under the name of *Bomium*), then ceased to exist (as far as we can tell) until Richard de Clare decided in 1254 it was a good site for a borough.

## Roman Fort?

## Book review by Derek Thomas

ress, known as St. Quentin's Castle, I support Brian James's plea for some expert care and attention for the splendid gatehouse. Still privately owned, it has ony Grade 2 listing as a building of architectural and historical interest. Yet it is probably the oldest building of any substance in the area and I share Brian James's concern for its future.

The past is our heritage and it is sad to see ancient relics submerged under modern developments — Bowman's Well, for instance and the 14th century building in the High Street which disappeared virtually overnight.

By 1300 Cowbridge had grown into one of the largest and most flourishing towns in Wales, a prosperity largely based on markets and fairs. The guild, says Brian James, would have been an association of the burgesses for the regulation and control of the market (only in larger towns were there separate guilds for individual trades and crafts). By a lucky chance the Ordinances or bye-laws have survived, but Brian James does not say why. As a young reporter I interviewed the gentleman who actually saved this valuable roll of parchment for posterity as it was about to be consigned to the rubbish dump.

Brian James doubts the authenticity of the local tradition of a battle involving the forces of Owen Glyndwr on Stalling Down, while other ex-

set up his printing office in Cowbridge in 1770, probably near the present shop of D. Brown and Sons.

It is refreshing too, to find such a fair account of the activities of Iolo Morgannwg who has been so unkindly treated by many academics. Surely it is unjust to condemn a man in his entirety because of a few transgressions, even if it may be difficult to distinguish fact from fantasy on occasions. Brian James admits Iolo was a romantic and a dreamer and that his undisciplined imagination led him to embrace strange theories and to fabricate documents but, Brian James emphasises, Iolo WAS the most learned Welshman of his day with unrivalled knowledge of manuscripts.

The heyday of Cowbridge, for long one of the four chief towns of Glamorgan, lasted until about 1830-50 when the formerly bustling market town became "old fashioned". It was by-passed by the main railway line, partly due to the opposition of leading local citizens, and this resulted in hopeless isolation — in the words of a contemporary newspaper. Yet by 1821 the population of the town was again approaching the level reached in the early 14th century.

In the 19th century a number of courts of small houses developed through infilling, access being obtained through narrow passages and archways. They contrasted

Cowbridge Grammar School at Cowbridge on November 21st, 1/874.

In those days the rules did not call for a referee, but each side paraded an umpire. An article published at the time records that there were constant arguments during which "the game was stopped and spectators joined in the general debate".

This fine book gives much to debate — I thoroughly recommend it as a present for anyone who knows and loves the Vale... or why not treat yourself to a jolly good read? This is a volume which will stand out in any bookshelf and I am sure it will be referred to again and again.

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### Roman Fort?

Brian James speculates whether Llanblethian was in fact the successor of the primitive Roman-British hamlet represented by the Iron Age hill fort at Caer Dynnaf. He suggests that the slight traces of settlement may be relics of a group of small farmsteads.

As for Roman Cowbridge, there have been a number of discoveries and one significant archaeological dig since Brian James says the site of the sites seems to confirm the existence of a Roman settlement at 350 yards on either side of the High Street for most of its length. He discusses the claims by the town to being the site of the Roman fort Bomium and points out that the recovery of a roof tile stamped LEG II AUG (the name of the Second Augustan Legion) is visible proof of a military presence.

Bomium or Camden's Boylum? The question remains unresolved, but I feel Brian James could have further investigated the possibilities of Welsh mutation. The Roman settlement at Cowbridge, like many others over a period of years, was largely destroyed by fire, which is not surprising in view of the proximity of the warlike Silures tribe.

Historians have often commented on the striking similarities between the subsequent design of the town and the normal pattern of a Roman settlement. One wonders of the ruins of the Roman fort were used as foundations for the borough of Richard de Clare.

Like Brian James I have always been intrigued by Wade-Evans' observations concerning the isolated church of Llanfrynach (derived from St. Brynach, who was associated with a cow and a wolf) Llanblethian (derived from Bleiddan, wolf cub) and COW bridge. Could there be some pre-Christian explanation?

After the dark ages the Normans gradually subdued the Vale, establishing corn growing manors like the manor of Llanblethian (Brian James is uncertain of the location of the arable land). The first Norman

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Brian James doubts the authenticity of the local tradition of a battle involving the forces of Owen Glyndwr on Stalling Down, while other experts have already debunked the legendary links between Cowbridge Grammar School and earlier monastic establishments.

The depredations of the Black Death and Great Plague are likely to have reduced Cowbridge's population from over a thousand to 450 in 1546, but Welshmen seem to have begun moving into the town.

In identifying nationalities, however, I thought perhaps Brian James could have researched the Flemings more thoroughly. They had a relative importance in the trading community equivalent to Pembrokeshire and the style of architecture of many of the earlier Cowbridge buildings clearly suggests Flemish influence.

Brian James describes the Great House or Ty Mawr, Aberthin, as the most outstanding house of the 17th century. I have the fondest memories of many conversations on historical matters there with the former owner, the late Mr. W. H. Fisher, a most distinguished antiquary. Great House was a worthy house for such a lover of history. It was built between 1625 and 1650 and was assessed as ten hearth in 1671, by far the largest in the parish, says Brian James. Great House, Llanblethian, was not built until 1700.

Cowbridge was a centre of law and order in the 18th century and both the Great Sessions and the Quarter Sessions were held there. Convicted felons were hanged on the Stalling Down — another site at the other end of the town is still called Gibbet's Hill.

In 1820 the old town hall, together with the market house and cross, were demolished to widen the High Street and the former House of Correction or Bridewell was enlarged as a new town hall and market place.

The ballroom or assembly room of the then Spread Eagle Inn was the centre of the social activity of the town in the 18th century and it must have been a colourful spectacle when the gentry of the area danced away the hours to the melodious

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In the 19th century a number of courts of small houses developed through infilling, access being obtained through narrow passages and archways. They contrasted with the opulence of the neighbouring town houses of the wealthy.

If you care to explore beyond the confines of the main street, you can still find some of these courts today.

### Clatter of hoofs

A marvellously varied list of occupations and crafts could be compiled in 1851, and there were numerous public houses. David Francis continues Brian James's survey by comparing the position in the 20th century. He features numerous personalities, including my father, grandfather, great grandfather and other relatives. Vintage photographs of remarkable quality tell their own story, complementing the well written narrative.

David Francis relates: "The scene in the High Street before the advent of the motor car was very different from today. The surface of the road, which resounded with the clatter of horses' hoofs, was far from smooth, being flanked by gutters on either side and liable, most winters to heavy flooding near the Town Hall. The road had to be tarred regularly with a horse drawn machine and on these occasions Old Trott's cry of "Coal, fine sand" was more than welcome".

David Francis refers to the decline of the Welsh language in the area, to which I can personally testify. My great grandparents were fluent Welsh speakers, but few of their eight children acquired more than a smattering of the language as they grew up in the latter half of the 19th century. My grandmother spoke Welsh eloquently, but she came from the Cynon Valley!

An important figure in the first nine years of my life, she never spoke Welsh in my presence. I was told of her ability as a Welsh speaker many years after her death. There are fluent Welsh speakers in Cowbridge and Llanblethian again, but most are newcomers to the area, which now boasts Welsh nursery and primary schools.

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After the dark ages the Normans gradually subdued the Vale, establishing corn growing manors like the manor of Llanblethian (Brian James is uncertain of the location of the arable land). The first Norman knight at Llanblethian was probably a St. Quentin, hence St. Quentin's Castle which is of much later date. Brian James quotes a survey of 1602 which mentions the lands of Evan Rosser as a means of pinpointing the manorial boundary.

This Evan Rosser may be of the same ilk as those who gave their name to Tyle Rhosyr, the ancient title for the field on which the estate is built. As for the uncompleted 14th century for-

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The Spread Eagle was one of Cowbridge's leading hostels in the 1780's, but by the beginning of the 19th century the premises had become the Academy, a famous educational establishment which rivalled the Grammar School.

Brian James gives understandable prominence to the fact that the first printer in Glamorgan, Rhys Thomas,

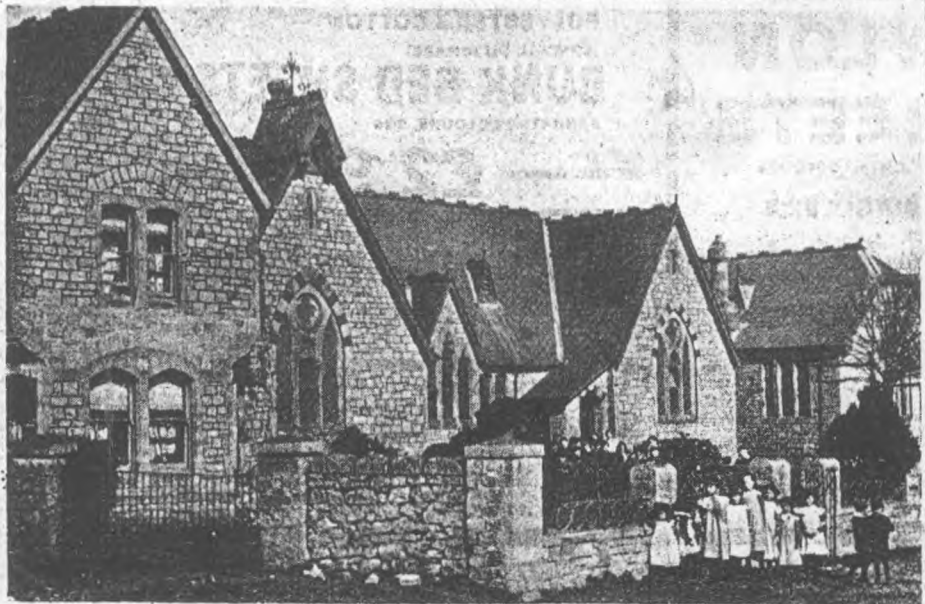
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The book gives a fascinating account of leading citizens and memorable characters, and present times are not forgotten. This is clearly recognised not only because of what it owes to the past, but because it will become an invaluable source for future historians. David Francis devotes a considerable amount of space to sport and recreation in the locality, which has an enviable reputation for both rugby and cricket. Indeed, the first rugby match played by Cardiff Rugby Club was against



THE COUNCIL SCHOOLS, COWBRIDGE.

# Two friends unite — to write a book about Cowbridge

