

Cowbridge

One long street, Cowbridge. After walking some distance I came to an insignificant looking little bridge which crosses an insignificant little river. The bridge gets the chief attention of the inhabitants. "So far from the bridge" is the distance to everywhere. A number of public houses come into sight, a few places of worship keep out of sight. I turn from the long street into an old-fashioned hotel where I shall stay a few days.

Saturday morning. A great storm swept over the Vale last night. The street has been washed by the rain and swept by the wind. Signs of another storm before long.

Let us have a look at Cowbridge then. Standing in front of the hotel I could see the whole of Cowbridge nearly. It is one long street with a green hill at each end of it. The road is clean and wide. Enough room to hold fairs and to accommodate crowds going to the races. Not any of the people were however willing to admit that this was the only street although they looked upon it with pride considering it enough of a town of itself. "But" they say "there are two other streets." And seeing my thoughtful gaze, they persuade me to go and see them by saying there is a Methodist chapel in one and the Church in the other.

The first walls built around Cowbridge were raised in 1090 and its charter dates from the time of Charles II. It has a Mayor and Councillors. Its inhabitants still consider Cowbridge a place of great importance. It left to a stranger to perceive the decay spreading over its ancient glory. Opposite I noticed an empty house with 'To Let' in the window which shows that newcomers need not ask and wait for a dwelling place. I walked on the left side towards the bridge. I was filled with astonishment to see the large number of public houses, nearly all of the small and poor to look at. I wonder that so many can make a living with so much temperance in the country. A similar decay is to be seen upon the people too. Among the old people who have been under the discipline of conversions we found intelligent and thoughtful faces. But coming to those of the middle aged, a certain deterioration is noticeable. The face is heavy and dull – the bovine sodden face – as if the flesh dominated the soul. But what will become of the children?

Here I am at the bridge with a street across to the right. This leads to a square called The Limes, where the Methodist chapel is, and where there is no English now. I turned back and followed the other street into the Church. I found the door open as the door of every place of worship should be. After my eyes had become accustomed to the semi-darkness, I could see a man in years, but as light-footed as a squirrel, dusting the seats. He gave me a military salute and a word of welcome. He seemed very energetic despite his age. One of the old inhabitants. "Welsh?" said he "Speak Welsh – I can – I am a Welshman". "Are you the sexton?" I asked him. "Yes, I ring the bells". And to my delight as he gave me his history he spoke the Welsh of the Vale. He was born 76 years ago, married 49 years. Bellringing for fully 15 years. His wife is a Welshwoman from Cowbridge and at home they speak Welsh "And there are my children" he said "I've got nine. The eldest can speak a little Welsh but the others can't speak any." He said that there were many in Cowbridge who could speak Welsh well: Mr Yorwerth, the Mayor, Mr David and many others. But he added sadly that he could remember a lot more Welsh. "Show o hono yr amser fu" (Lot of it in times gone by). It was easy to get him to speak of bygone years. When a young lad he joined the 23rd Regiment of Foot (Cowbridge

Volunteers) – later the Royal Welch Fusiliers. He was at Inkerman, Alma, and before Sebastopol. He was wounded three times. In the attack upon Sebastopol he was struck in his side and severely wounded. His friend by his side, a young man from North Wales was mortally wounded. Here he is an old man, proud of his duties, particularly that of doling out the bread to the poor on the following day.

He showed me what he considered the glory and wonders of the church: the new windows, the seats where the college boys sit, the vestry, the brass candlesticks which are only lit on Christmas night, the William Carne memorial and his wonderful history. I asked if there was any Welsh carved anywhere and he answered in the negative. But near the door there is a Welsh phrase on the crest of Jenkins of Hensol: Fe dal am daro – It will pay to strike. A suitable motto for the hot old Judge who spoke at the parliament of Oliver Cromwell and declared that he would hang, if they would hang him, with the Bible under one arm and Magna Carta under the other. Very suitable to the quarrelsome nature and the garrulity of the family is the sign of the Cock.

There is now no Welsh service in the Church. “I’ve heard many a Welsh sermon in this Church” he said, “but now you only get them in that Methodist chapel. The old man seemed grieved to think that the language of his youth had been consigned to the moles, the worms and the Methodists. And worse than all, neither of these three can speak it. Mixture of names in the churchyard. He advised me to look for the walls and gates of the town “where they could neither come in or go out after eight o’clock at night.”

After getting rid of me at the gate he drew my attention to a list of sermons and addresses on moral topics, suggesting that to hear them would do me good. He then turned back abruptly as if, his whole duty as sexton fulfilled, he had nothing further to add.