

# Cowbridge Action Group Newsletter August 1996

As promised, we are now in a position to report regarding progress to-date. In answer to numerous inquiries, this is the first CAG newsletter.

## Who Are We?

We are a group of local citizens who are approaching these issues without any political or partisan leanings. We are mostly professional people. Some of us are able to offer the benefit of our profession to the tasks involved. Our declared objectives remain:

~ To save the Old Grammar School building so that it can be returned to viable public use.

~ To secure a Conservation Plan to protect Cowbridge and Llanblethian from future major developments.

~ To obtain proper school buildings so that 400 children can be educated in decent conditions instead of 30 year old "temporary" classrooms.

In the past, some of us were able to demonstrate that a local historical asset can be saved as was St Quentin's Castle. Against a lot of opposition and indifference it was possible to have the castle taken into care by CADW, who now state that it is probably the finest example of a stonemason's art of any building in their care. Their plans are to open the grounds in the summer of 1997 to the public and also the gatehouse in 1998 when the specialist work is finished.

## Where Are We So Far?

### School Lands

With your help and that of some important national organisations, the Charity Commission has deferred an application to allow the Council permission to sell the Old Grammar School and seven acres of land. The facts are these: on the 24th January, the County Council, in an application signed by the Director of Legal Services, sought the Charity Commission's permission for Charity No 525559 (the Cowbridge Comprehensive School Trust) to be

altered so that Clause 4A should read: "Sale. The Trustees (the Council) may sell the whole or any part of the land and buildings belonging to the Charity".

Puzzled by the legalities, Town Councillors asked us to look into the matter. We found that "land" included the Town Mill Road site of Lower School and also the playing fields opposite the Butts.

The Town Council, the School, the MP, organisations such as the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and Save Our Heritage, plus scores of Cowbridge people either wrote directly or signed petitions to the Charity Commission, protesting at this move. Many even telephoned, which the Commission say is most unusual. Swayed by public opinion, the Charity Commission refused the requested change. Furthermore, the Action Group hold a letter from Richard Fries, the Chief Commissioner, promising that any future change in the status of the Trust will not affect the land.

Some are now saying that the Council did not really intend to sell the land. If this is so, why did they try to get permission to do so?

Cowbridge memories are good and many recall how in 1990 the Council sought to give itself planning permission to build houses on some of this same land.

## The Old Grammar School Building

As promised at the 1st April public meeting, we have worked hard on the possible options for the future viable use.

To provide a solution we have set up a separate organisation; it is called the Cowbridge Old Grammar School Building Trust (COGS-BT for short). Its role is to bring about the emergency repairs, the consolidation and the refurbishment of the building. It is also taking care of establishing the uses and the running of the building. Professional project plans together with designs and drawings are currently being put forward to the local authority, bankers, institutions, end-users and other interested parties.

We are delighted to have secured the involvement of probably Wales's leading conservation architect and also the most qualified and experienced Building Conservation organisation in the UK who propose to carry out the restoration work. They have already done the same thing on nearly 400 similar type of projects.

We believe that the plans for the future running of the Old School are forward thinking. Furthermore, they are based on Cowbridge's own ideas. Above all they do not depend on public funds (or even winning the Lottery) and provide an exciting and financially viable future for the Old Grammar School. Education, training, leisure and entertainment are all covered in the plan.

We will keep you informed of progress.

## School Trusts

During our investigations into the School Trust, we discovered the existence of a second School Trust, No 525600, called the Sir Thomas Mansel Franklen Trust. Franklen was a local benefactor and also a Governor of the School. In 1922 he endowed very important assets to the School and the income from these assets was intended for the pupils and former pupils of the school to help them financially with their further education. Later the Trust was legally changed so that this benefit passed to pupils of the Comprehensive School. The Managing Trustees are the Governors of the school.

Our research revealed that some serious questions needed to be raised regarding the running of the Franklen Trust. The School Governors should have been responsible for making the fund's investments and deciding on how the income should be distributed, but several Governors told us that they were totally unaware of their position as Trustees and what were their duties. Although it was not amongst our original objectives, the Action Group decided to further investigate the position.

In February we passed to the School and to the School Governors copies of the Trust documents and details of the financial position. We met the Charity Commissioners and we provided the

Commission with fifty pages of evidence.

Using our evidence, the Charity Commission has now opened its own enquiry and they have written at length to the Governors enclosing two pages of very searching questions regarding the past administration of the Trusts.

Additionally, the Local Authority Ombudsman has confirmed his willingness to investigate separately the past administration of these trusts. We have also been asked to provide evidence for this enquiry.

We will keep you informed although this information may need to be restricted in view of the official enquiries.

## Conservation Planning

The Action Group has obtained the names, addresses and details of two developers who have targeted three sites within Cowbridge. One wishes to build a supermarket, and the other a shopping Mall. We have seen the considerable offers made for the land. The developers have already spent large sums in preparing their plans.

To the best of our knowledge, no formal planning application has yet been made but we believe that the town should be aware of the threat; too many small towns like Cowbridge have been devastated by over-large developments of this kind.

Most Cowbridge traders are against such a move and some even fear for the future of their businesses; empty High Street shops are often a feature of such developments.

## School Accommodation

We find that the question of the "temporary classrooms" of The School is the height of anxiety shared by parents, teachers and pupils alike. We also find that some of the huts are nearly forty years old.

The most important confirmation of this dreadful situation comes from the School Inspectors themselves. In their report dated 9th May 1996 they are highly critical of most of the school's accommodation. Quoting from the Inspector's Report "*over a third of the teaching accommodation at this school is in temporary structures*", "*the condition of some of these buildings, erected in the 1960's to have only a*

*short life span, is poor*", "*communication between staff is hampered*", "*...place considerable pressures on teachers and result in some loss of teaching time*", "*the school suffers from having a number of small classrooms*", "*Physical education facilities ... are inadequate*", "*two gymnasia ... in a poor state of decoration*", "*changing rooms... are of a poor quality*", "*deficient drainage*", "*geography is taught in shabby temporary buildings*", "*study facilities for the sixth form are inadequate*", "*conveys an air of long standing neglect*", "*corridors and stairways are narrow*", "*dining facilities extremely congested*", "*some of the toilet areas in the middle and sixth form buildings are in a very poor condition*". (The report does not mention the problem of the overloaded Aberthin sewer. After heavy rainfall the manhole outside the Geography block is forced up and raw sewage spills out).

The report goes on to praise the school's staff for their efforts in seeking to cope with the difficulties.

The Gem reported on 6th June, following the Inspector's Report: "**SCHOOL NOT TO JOIN 'SELFISH' OPT OUT**" we quote from the Gem: "*...Governors believe that the overwhelming majority of parents are against opting out ... generally there is a strong belief that opting out is a selfish act, that the large pot of money which the school would initially get would come from the education purse, depriving others*".

Who will be deprived? Not the two Cardiff Schools who received in March over one million pounds each to replace unsatisfactory classrooms. Llandaff High School was also heavily criticised in an Inspectors Report for its accommodation and they had only been in temporary huts for ten years. However, St Cuthberts had waited twenty three years. Other schools in the area shared a further £5 million for building improvements.

We are pressing the local authority as to what percentage of children in the Vale are currently taught in temporary buildings and of this number, how many are in Cowbridge? We believe that, if obtained, the figure will be more than 50%.

## Fighting Fund

Many thanks to all those who have contributed to the Fighting Fund. To-date, none of this money has been touched, it is safely banked and earning interest.

All expenses, so far, have been met from the Action Group members' own pockets. These include: printing, copying, telephone, correspondence, travelling to London, Somerset, the North of England and elsewhere.

We are now entering a period of higher expenditure and will need to start using the Fighting Fund. If you feel that our aims are worthwhile, please contribute. Cash or preferably cheques made to to the "Cowbridge Fighting Fund" can be left with the following: Keith Brown & Sons, Fine & Evans, Treharne Cleaners and Chamberlains, or sent to the PO Box below.

## Information

We are extremely grateful to all those who have come forward with information, assistance and constant encouragement. If you need to contact us either to provide or to receive information, you can do so in the following ways.

- BY WRITING TO: The Action Group, PO Box No 34, Cowbridge CF71 7UZ

- BY FAXING: 773095

- BY TELEPHONING: 772415 or 773913 or 774765

**WE ALL KNOW THAT COWBRIDGE AND LLANBLETHIAN ARE FINE PLACES AND THAT WE ARE LUCKY AND PRIVILEGED TO LIVE HERE. HOWEVER, THIS SHOULD NOT PREVENT US FROM SEEKING TO KEEP IT THIS WAY AND GO AFTER IMPROVEMENTS WHICH ARE LONG OVERDUE. TO MAKE SURE THAT AMENITY ENTITLEMENTS ARE FORTHCOMING, ESPECIALLY THOSE FOR OUR CHILDREN. WE ARE ENCOURAGED THAT WE ARE NOT ALONE IN SEEKING TO OBTAIN SUCH THINGS.**