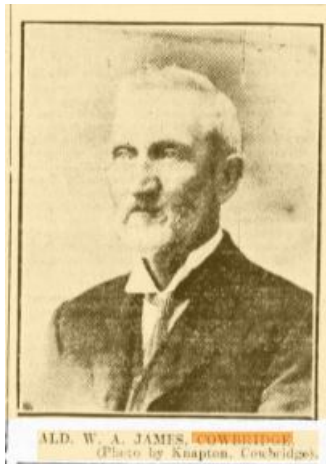


'Weekly Interviews – Alderman W.A. James, Cowbridge' – 3rd July 1914

For our second subject, our thoughts turned instinctively to the ancient Borough of Cowbridge. 'Sleepy old Cowbridge', some call it, but in that old market town there has been more enterprise shown by its public men than in many other places five times its size & population. Who can walk through its main thoroughfare without admiring its cleanly, well-kept appearance? Who can fail to notice the happy & prosperous appearance of its inhabitants, its modern fire station, and – looking over the fields on the left as one approaches the centre of the town – its admirable recreation & sports ground?



Alderman W.A. James, Cowbridge (Photo by Knapton, Cowbridge).

We were fortunate enough to hit upon Ald. W.A. James engaged in a conversation with the popular C.M. minister & his wife, the Rev. Emrys & Mrs Davies, and the subject – Militancy, as it affected the Women's Suffrage movement and the general public – was apparently providing food for mirth. The Alderman was with some force placing anthropological arguments forward & of this branch of science it was obvious he had read much. As politely as we could, we brought the conversation to a close in favour of a more important matter for the moment, and ultimately found our way to Stafford House, the imposing looking residence of the alderman, where he lives in retirement. Strangely enough, the visit was paid at an opportune time, for as a reward for public service rendered, he had, with many others, been elevated to the magisterial bench, a position he undoubtedly deserves. There is some keen, good-humoured rivalry at Cowbridge & especially among the aldermen of the Borough. Alderman James & Alderman Lewis Jenkins both claim to be the senior alderman of the Borough, & no attempt has been made to settle the question either way; both still live with the happy thought uppermost in each of their minds that the laurels belong to himself.

On 9th November 1887, Mr Thomas Rees, now deceased, Mr William Aaron James, Mr L. Jenkins & Mr Edward John were all returned to the council. Mr James polled the second largest number of votes – being second to Mr Thomas Rees – but Mr Lewis Jenkins was the elder in years. Mr Thomas Rees and Ald. James were elected aldermen. We leave it to readers to decide the question.

However, we drew lots & saw Ald. James a good-humoured, grey-haired, & smiling-eyed member of the famed Corporation & as we were ushered into the drawing room, offered him our congratulations upon the honour conferred upon him, which he modestly accepted.

He has reached the age of wisdom & remarked with a smile that he had been told by his friends that they did not mind how he grew in bodily physique as long as he did not take a larger hat. The suggestion was obvious, and his 'leg-pulling' friends will, we are sure, find that Ald. James will be a credit to the Bench, and that he will still take the same size in hats.

Now, Mr James, let readers know something about yourself & Cowbridge. as it was & is. Yourself first.

Well, I have not much to tell you about myself. My life has been a quiet one. I have lived in Cowbridge all my days, having been born here in 1846. My father & mother were Mr & Mrs Wm. James, and my father, who lived here practically all his life, was a builder.

Ald. James was educated at the same school as the subject of our sketch last week, Mr Thos. Rees. This was Eagle School, Cowbridge. It became defunct on the introduction of the Education Act, but during the long time it existed it took a prominent part in the education of many of the leading commercial men of Glamorgan today, as well as Judge Williams & General Knott, the hero of Cabul. Then the Grammar School turned out men like Canon Jenkins of Aberdare, ex-Archdeacon Edmondson, and his brother-in-law, the late principal of Lampeter College.

In 1880 the Alderman entered public life & when the Corporation was formed in 1887 he was second on the poll & has been a member ever since. He & Mr Thos. Rees, solicitor, head of the firm of Messrs. Rees & Gwyn, now Messrs. Gwyn & Gwyn, were the first two aldermen appointed. For many years Mr James as a member of the Old School Board & had acted as chairman. He has been a member of the Board of Governors of the Intermediate School since its formation, & is chairman at the present time, & also is the representative of the Cowbridge Corporation on the Pontyclun group of school managers.

Twice he has occupied the office of mayor of the old borough – in 1889-90 and 1899-1900. His first year of office still brings back pleasant memories, for in that year, on the occasion of the birth of his youngest daughter, the members of the Corporation gave an indication of the esteem in which they held him by presenting him with a silver cradle. Ald. James has since held the position of chairman of the Roads Committee & has been chairman of the Fire Brigade Committee since its inception.

His work of a public nature does not end with the Corporation or School managers. For forty eight years he has been a member of the Oddfellows, and after passing through all the offices of the lodge was appointed to & still holds the post of district treasurer, duties in connection with which he has discharged for many years. For twenty five years he was a member of the old volunteers & holds a long service medal. For the greater part of that time, the commandant was Capt. Evans.

'Ah! Cowbridge was a gay old place in the 50s & 60s', remarked the alderman as he got into a reminiscent mood. Our eyes opened wide at the words.

'Yes, there were good markets here then, bigger than our fairs today. Cowbridge had not the other towns to contend with then and railway facilities did not exist. It was the rendez-vous of all the Vale farmers. We had a very fine corn market. Those days have passed, but we have prospects for the future.

In the early days, the town was ruled by the old corporation, and a very close corporation it was. Its leading members were the Bradleys, the Ballards, the Edmondson & the Llewellyns, and by them the Borough Magistrates were chosen. There were six constables elected every year, three Queen's constables and three parish constables, who used to act as preservers of the peace and attend the Corporation on fete days.

How was the old Corporation elected? – Oh, you could only become a member by being the son of a freeman, marrying a freeman's daughter, or being apprenticed to a freeman, or by being nominated by a member of the Corporation. The residents of the town had nothing to do with the election. The income of the Corporation was derived from certain properties and sums of money were given by the Corporation for the support of the volunteers, and the Town Hall and market were kept under repair. £100 to £250 a year was then received from the market alone. There was no public audit, and the Corporation could spend the money in whatever way they thought proper. This was under the charter of Charles II, afterwards confirmed by Richard II, and by the lords & ladies of Glamorgan under the Earl of Gloucester. But the new charter after the Reform Act altered all that, and the franchise was given to the ratepayers and today Cowbridge is in the position of all other boroughs. We have the power to levy a general district rate, which the old Corporation had not, we have to maintain roads & do all the work of a sanitary authority. It has meant much to Cowbridge in the way of improvements.

'I just remember the last stage-coach passing through Cowbridge', continued the Alderman, 'and my memory of the stocks being used in the town is quite clear. They were in regular use & on market days habitual drunkards found themselves the object of all eyes outside the town hall. The stocks are still in existence – but not used, of course – added the Alderman with a smile, no doubt proudly reflecting on the fact that cases of drunkenness at Cowbridge are not frequent - & in a good state of preservation at Cardiff Museum.

'In those days too, the curfew was rung regularly every night at 8 o'clock, & the Corporation paid a fee of £5 a year to the sexton for ringing it. It was rung no more after 1887, & a custom that had existed probably from the Norman period died out in Cowbridge.

Just before the Crimean War, recruiting was engaged in in the old borough, & we have with us now an old Crimean veteran – Mr William Jenkins, sexton of the Parish Church. He served right through the campaign & is now on pension. The Fall of Sebastopol & the result of the Battle of Inkerman were received with great rejoicing by the loyal residents of the old borough.

I suppose the Aldermen of the borough today are much different to those of Iolo Morganwg's days – I mean those he called the 'Toppers of Cowbridge'?

'To the best of my knowledge & belief', said the Alderman, laughing; 'My father knew Iolo intimately, & he used to tell me that Iolo kept a shop where Mr Bird's the ironmonger's is now. This is how the verses on the 'Toppers of Cowbridge' originated, according to my father. There was a noted man in the town named David Jenkins, a carpenter. My father worked for him, & in the early part of the century he had the job of repairing the church. It was also his custom to work for Dr. Williams at the Grammar School. One day the doctor stopped David & told him that if he would complete the work to be done at the school, he would give him as much of his strongest ale as he could drink. David was a man who did not like to let good ale spoil, so he got the job done, had his fill of ale & went back to the church, where he sat in a pew & went to sleep. He was found helplessly drunk, & the men working in the church suggested they should have a funeral; & bury him. David was placed on a bier & conveyed through the old gateway of the town to the pig market, where he was placed in one of the pig pens. Iolo happened to be on the spot, & was approached to write an epitaph'.

The verse that was written in chalk on a piece of wood & erected above the slumbering form of David Jenkins was certainly not classical, & Iolo's reputation would have suffered if he had devoted his life to the writing of similar verse. As recorders however we give the verse :

“Here lies the body of David Jenkins, who burst his paunch by drinking the parson’s ale & was buried in the pig market : Here lies deceased, A guzzling beast, Who bust his g—s by drinking, A raking blade, A knave by trade, His name is David Jenkin”.

‘After this poor David had a terrible time until it seemed Iolo took pity on him, & turning to his tormentors said ‘There are others in Cowbridge equally fond of their beer, & I will make a song about the lot of you. That’s how “The Cowbridge Toppers” came to be written’.

Alderman James, who is 77 years of age, likes to think of old times, but he does not forget that he lives in the present, & his work on the Corporation bears that fact out. He has two daughters & one son, Mr W.A. James, who came so near winning the championship at Margam recently.

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