

IOLO MORGANWG IN COWBRIDGE

There has been some interest in what I wrote last week about the launch of the book on Iolo Morganwg, particularly about his Cowbridge connections, and so I thought that I could add a little more, especially as we did not cover the topic in any depth in *Cowbridge Buildings and People*, and there is only a short piece about the plaque in our soon-to-be released book, *How well do you know Cowbridge?*

The shop which is today Martins the newsagent was earlier the shop of RS Bird Ltd, and indeed had been owned by the Bird family since 1796 when Edward Bird bought the building and the adjoining field. Edward had bought the property from Isaac Skynner, a hatmaker, whose tenant of the shop occupying the western half was Edward Williams, or Iolo Morganwg.

The shop was a bookshop and general store, and there have been preserved both the licence granted in 1795 for him to sell tea, coffee and chocolate, and a little advertising jingle composed by Iolo himself:

“There are currants and raisins, delicious French plums,
The Christian free sugar from East India comes.”

Iolo of course was a Radical, a strong opponent of the slave trade, and so promoted the sale of sugar from the East Indies rather than the slave-driven economy of the West Indies. It is claimed that he aroused some wrath and indignation by advertising his “East India sweets, uncontaminated by human gore”.

In selling books he could also stir up trouble, and it is said that one occasion he placed in the shop window a book labelled *The Rights of Man*. As at that time Paine's *Rights of Man* was a banned volume, Iolo's opponents thought that they had ammunition to damn him, but on purchasing the book they found that it was the Bible, and he had great pleasure in congratulating them on at last having the Bible in their hands. The book *Old Cowbridge* contains an interesting list of some of the books that Iolo had to order from London, together with his comments:

- Reading made easy for a little boy six feet high and 28 years of age
- A book to learn Algibar (a farmer for his son)
- A book to make cheese and butter (same farmer for his daughter)
- A magazine book about going to the Americo
- A cook book (for a rich farmer's eldest daughter, a blubber-paunched wench)
- A book about gostisis and witchisis (ordered by a Cockney who had retired to Wales)
- A book to make elder wine and pickle cabbage.

This particular enterprise did not last long (neither had an earlier attempt at setting up a monumental mason's workshop in Cowbridge), but he stayed in Cowbridge long enough to know the inns and the notabilities of Cowbridge – he met many of the latter in the former! In his *Song of the Cowbridge Topers* he claimed that the aldermen, doctors and attorneys were all to be found in the taverns, and Cowbridge had

. . . None of your milksop thinkers,
None of your philosophic fools,
But great and glorious drinkers.

Have things changed so much?

Iolo Morganwg had other links with Cowbridge: in 1782, he planned an extension to the old Town Hall – the building which was then in the middle of the High Street, opposite Verity's Court – though the extension was never built. Nearly thirty years later he was able to reassure the churchwardens of Holy Cross, after a survey, that the pillars of the Llanquian aisle were safe enough, though leaning somewhat.

Iolo's forging of the poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym has sullied his reputation; his mixing of truth and fiction in his historical 'researches' has been to say the least annoying. It is difficult to know the truth, say, about his claim that there was once a spire on Cowbridge church, destroyed by lightning in 1473, but now some of his claims are being re-assessed more favourably.

Though there are examples of Iolo's stone carving in various parts of the Vale of Glamorgan, notably a fine wall-memorial to Anthony Jones of Llantwit Major in St Illtud's church (and what a fine church that is: if you have not visited it, do go!), I am not aware of any stone work by him in Cowbridge itself. Nevertheless it is fitting that Cowbridge, the capital of the Vale, should contain the commemorative plaque to one of the Vale's most interesting characters, whose hiraeth for the Vale when he was in London (and hob-nobbing with Coleridge and Southey) was expressed in so many poems.

Jeff Alden

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Magnus Magnusson in the parish of Cowbridge

On Wednesday, June 11th, a number of heads turned in some perplexity, and perhaps dawning recognition, when they saw Magnus Magnusson walking through Cowbridge, with his research assistant, my wife and me.

He had come to do some background research on the life and 'home territory' of Iolo Morganwg, as he was writing a chapter on Iolo as part of a book on 'Fakers and Forgers'. Magnus had got in touch with me because of my local history interests, via the *cowbridge.co.uk* website, and so we worked out a route through the Vale to cover the places connected with Iolo.

Iolo Morganwg was born Edward Williams, at Penonn near Llancarfan; became a stone mason, like his father, but soon became far more interested in books than in manual labour, and in Welsh history in particular. He became a major figure in London Welsh literary society, and inaugurated the first *Gorsedd* of bards on Primrose Hill in London in 1792. On his return to the Vale of Glamorgan in 1795 he organised *gorseddau* on Stalling Down, briefly kept a bookshop in Cowbridge, travelled widely through Wales, and lived until his death in 1826 in a tiny cottage in Flemingston, 'almost buried under a profusion of manuscripts, journals, notebooks, scraps of paper and books'.

Magnus Magnusson's visit started with a look at the plaque on Martins the newsagents' wall - and countless photographs, with Betty stopping the traffic at the pedestrian crossing for a clear photo to be taken. Here, of course, was where Iolo had his bookshop. He was suspected of being a revolutionary; when he advertised that 'The Rights of Man' could be bought in the shop, government agents purchased a copy only to find that Iolo had sold them a copy of the Bible.

We also went to the Bear hotel; Iolo, after all had written the *Song of the Cowbridge Topers*, in which he stated:

Cowbridge hath no sober rules,
None of your milk-sop thinkers,
None of your philosophic fools
But great and glorious drinkers.

The next stage of the day was to visit Flemingston, via Llandough where Iolo's early mentor, Revd John Walters, had lived in The Cottage. Magnus had been in touch with Canon Derek, who had arranged for Dawn to wait for us at Flemingston church. Wait, I fear, was the operative word - but she and Jim Thomas gave us a warm welcome when we arrived. They explained that the later nineteenth-century extension of the church had been built over Iolo's grave; Magnus studied the wall plaque inside the church, and his tape recorder was in use for much of the visit. It was also used when we went on to talk to Barbara and Mary Jenkins, on whose family farm Iolo's cottage had been sited. Nothing of the building was left to be seen - but there were family memories of how scruffy Iolo had been, and how uninterested in practical matters, leaving reeds for thatching on the ground until they became too rotten to use, and leaving a pile of manure outside the churchyard entrance.

On our return journey to Cowbridge, we visited St Marychurch, because this was the church in which Iolo had been married. In addition, his father-in-law was buried here, and on his tombstone on the floor of the tower, the fine carving is almost certainly one of the few examples we have of Iolo's stone-carving work. David Ilsley was, of course, a most informative and charming guide. We drove back via Stalling Down, just to see where some of Iolo's bardic meetings had taken place.

Visits to Llantwit Major, to Boverton Place, and to Llancarfan took up the afternoon - another most helpful meeting with Margaret Rees at Penonn rounding off the day.

Magnus really enjoyed his day, and was very grateful for all the help and the warm welcomes he and his researcher had received. As far as we were concerned, it was a lovely

Magnus Magnusson in the parish of Cowbridge

day - beautiful weather, the Vale looking its best, cheerful people everywhere, and charming guests with whom we immediately relaxed. We look forward to the book!

Jeff Alden