

Young Men's Institute

The late Mr Nathaniel Bird of Cowbridge, who had a flourishing ironmongery business, realising the young men of the town had no public accommodation for meeting, and for reading and indoor games, about the year 1873 induced the authorities for the time being to permit part of the western building attached to the front of the Town Hall, now the Council Chamber, to be used as a reading and recreation room. In this project, he took the late Mr Alfred James and myself into his confidence, and commandeered our assistance. Eventually, under his direction, the reading and recreation rooms were duly established. and I was appointed the first secretary.

Some little time afterwards, he felt there should be better accommodation provided, and, as he was nearing the allotted span of life, he handed over £500 to two local gentlemen as the nucleus for a new building. He, however, lived to see his wishes realised, and the present institute was erected and opened in the year 1895. This modest, benevolent gentleman was the only one in my recollection who ever benefited the town with a tangible gift.

'It is not the man who knows the most who has the most to say,
Nor is it the man who has the most that gives the most away'.

..... The pavements within the town walls were evidently sunk cobble stones, much of which remained in my early days, and subsequently paving slabs were placed in a narrow portion near the houses until the year 1885, when granolithic was substituted.

Farmers and their wives used to ride in on their carthorse, the wife sitting behind the husband on a pad, and carrying a large basket of butter, cheese and poultry on her lap, for at that time the ordinary farmer was a 'working man' and the wife a 'working woman', and probably could not afford a spring carriage, although they sometimes used farm carts. Carriages were very scarce and a costly luxury; only a few of the wealthier called 'gentleman farmers' owned a two-wheeled spring carriage.

Many of the public inns provided expensive stabling accommodation, and in the front of their houses were stone steps called 'mounts' at which the wife mounted and dismounted from the carthorse, who knew his business in sidling up to the mount for the purpose without any guidance. These horses were trained to run in a sliding fashion and would travel six to eight miles an hour in that way without jolting or causing the good wife any discomfort.

The butter, cheese and poultry were sold to local shopkeepers and hucksters who came from Cardiff and Pontypridd in spring carts, and the butter etc was received by them in a room allotted in the various inns.

Butchery and pottery stalls were on the western side of the town hall. And flannel wearing apparel and confectionary stalls etc on the eastern side. Vendors came from Cardiff and Pontypridd districts and occupied market stalls. There was no railway communication then and buyers of live stock and produce would come from a great distance the previous day. There were only five butchers selling meat on market days, only at the market stalls. There were no butchers' shops. Three resident butchers – Richard Howe, John Williams (Pelican Inn), David Morgan (Butchers Arms) – and Williams (Llantwit Major) and Thomas John (Trerhyngyll). Very little fresh meat was bought. Only two butchers slaughtered one animal producing beef between them, and supplied the local gentry and a few of the more affluent people of the district. The remaining butchers confined their business to mutton and pork, and not much of that, for the ordinary people could only afford a meat dinner on Sundays.

The chief articles of 'diet' were oatmeal for porridge, then called gruel, bake-stone cakes, home-made bread of luscious flavour, cheese, bacon and vegetables. Most of the cottagers in the town and district reared pigs and poultry, which were allowed to roam at large about the roads, except in the town, with impunity. I remember in folklore.

Unfortunately, I have mislaid manuscripts, but here is a poetic sample :

' If you want good tea, full flavoured and strong,

Don't fail to try what is sold at the Hong Kong.'

'Mr Thomas of the Bear has a stable for your mare.

He will give her oats and hay

But will surely make you pay'.

Although English was the predominant language, most of the tradespeople spoke Welsh. The young people were not generally taught the Welsh language, but could understand it to a limited extent, yet in the villages around there were many monoglot Welshmen. I remember hearing of a workman being sent from a farm to Mr Bird's shop for some hay rakes. He was not familiar with the town, and discovered the shop by enquiring 'Bla mae shop, good y oo?' (meaning 'owl' i.e bird). Iolo Morganwg is reputed to have kept a book shop in High Street many years earlier, at the time when a certain book, entitled 'The Rights of Man', of a seditious nature was banned. He placed a notice in the window : "The 'Rights of Man' Sold Here". A legal official called to arrest him and to confiscate the books, when Iolo produced the bible which relieved the legal officer of an unpleasant duty.

The flour mill was then a great centre for business, when the late venerable Mr. William Thomas controlled it and Mr. James Eddols acted as head miller. Carts and

horses were constantly discharging corn and taking meal away. It is sad to see the building now derelict. I saw the Llantwit Major and Wick windmills working in my childhood days, but they have all now been superseded by steam-mills. The town mill and premises were the playground of the Grammar School day-boys, who were few in number, when the boarders were in bounds at their studies, for Mr. William Thomas, the genial and good-natured proprietor, encouraged his boys' playmates to join them there in the various games of the time. I spent most of my leisure there, and have a happy recollection of the kindly interest of Mr and Mrs Thomas in myself and schoolmates. In wet and cold weather, we would settle down by the malthouse fire at the rear of the mill, and learn the art of malting, and discuss the topics of the time and books of adventure. We had many a scouting hunt over Llanblethian Hill, after a couple of boys who had been told off, and whose practice was to drop pieces of paper as a trail, and as one of the Thomases was called Eddie, we, in some unaccountable way, called him 'Ida', and in one of the proposals for a trail hunt over Llanblethian Hill (which was never previously referred to by any other name), one of the company suggested that we call it 'Mount Ida', and from that time we adopted the name. This was about 1866. I thought nothing of it then, but some years after I left school, I heard one of the schoolboys call it Mount Ida, which led me to think that the name was being perpetuated, and I now find that it is still being referred to in the school by that name. I am quite confident that this is a correct account of the origin of the name and have the impression.....

...going to Penylan Newton when a boy, and visiting a small cottage occupied by an old woman, whose name I with-hold. The front and only door opened into her room on the ground floor, where there was a bedstead with a bed and heap of wraps thereon. Fowls were walking about the room, and a pig seemed to be treated as one of the family. The floor under the bed was stored with swedes or field turnips, which gave a very pungent aroma to the room, but this was an exceptional case and did not typify the cottagers as a class, for they were generally clean and neat.

Cowbridge was the emporium of the Vale. All kinds of commodities in use at the time were stocked or made and supplied by competent, ingenious and practical tradesmen, from a needle and thread to a churchwarden clay tobacco pipe, and from a tallow candle to the full complement of household furniture, and scythes, rakes, threshing flails and wagons. Bristol was the wholesale emporium, and goods were shipped to Cardiff by a regular steamboat service, and then brought to Cowbridge by horse-wagons by the proprietor, who was called 'the currier'.

Donkeys were numerous in the district, and when not in work, would flock together in their district grazing on the waste land or roadside. Many cottagers would bring them to the town to carry home their purchases in sacks, and also coal from Llanharry. Many small villages had cottage-shops, and the proprietor possessed a donkey

and cart. I remember them coming for supplies from as far as Llantwit Major, Llanharan, Llangan and other villages.

The town possessed tradesmen of every description : grocers, bakers, drapers, ironmongers, bootmakers, two hand-loom weavers, tinkers and tailors, medicinal herbalists for internal, and ointments for external cures for all ailments. There were also literarymen, almost equalling my old and present-day versatile friend, 'Silurian'....

During the hay harvest, scythe mowing was very general, and some men would combine in taking contracts for mowing fields of growing grass. It was a pretty sight to see six or seven men swinging the scythe, following each other in adjoining swathes in perfect rhythm when mowing a field, but mowing machines gradually supplanted this practice.

During the corn harvest, a gang of sturdy, sober, respectful and peaceful Welsh reapers would come annually from Carmarthenshire, with their sickles, and assist farmers in corn-reaping, and one or two gangs of men would come from Ireland. Their occupation at home was understood to be sea-fishing. The latter did not, to the best of my recollection, require sleeping accommodation, and when out of work, or on a day of rest, were a nuisance to the neighbourhood, for on such occasions they indulged in excessive beer drinking and practically became unmanageable and offensive. They fought amongst themselves, and in various ways annoyed the peaceful residents, but unfortunately men of the same type lived in the locality, and the locals and the visitors were often in serious conflict.

In those days, beer was 'beer' of undoubted potency.

The ancient town hall (of which there are many oil paintings in the possession of residents) was of the same type as the ancient town hall at Cardiff, and the present town hall at Llantwit Major. It stood almost in the middle of the main road opposite the Duke of Wellington Hotel, then the Black Horse, leaving sufficient open space to permit an ordinary cart to pass on the northern side, and a mere footway on the southern side. It faced west, and had wide stone steps leading up to the hall on the second floor. I believe that there were market stalls on the ground floor. The preacher from the steps of the Ancient Hall was the immortal Christmas Evans.

The county sessions were held there, in the days when men found guilty of sheep-stealing and other offences were hanged in a primitive fashion from the branch of a tree near the Grove, which forms a landmark. The Grove, adjoining the old Roman road on the Stallingdown, is said to have been planted by the Traherne family. This landmark, from which there is an extensive view of the Bristol Channel, can be seen from North Somerset and Devon. I understand that prisoners had to assist in the demolition of the ancient hall and in building the new one (i.e the town hall). An aged inhabitant told me years ago he saw prisoners dressing the stones now to be seen in the front wall of the present Town Hall building.

Weaving and Weavers.

There were two working weavers busy at their craft in the town. One business was conducted by Hannah Howe, in Church St, the other by Thomas Williams in the East Village. I used to see them weaving on their handlooms on many occasions. The women of the time generally knitted their own garments. Silk material was very scarce and expensive, and home-spun was in general use, and would last a life-time. In the summer, many of the women wore thin, white sun-bonnets made, I believe, of material called cambric. There were no spinning wheels here in my days, and I do not remember any complete Welsh costumes being worn, except on the Fair and some Market days when the town would be visited by cockle and oyster vendors, from the Gower district, who wore the costume.

Town Crier and Church Clerk.

The town boasted of a crier called William Norton who wore official uniform. He was a man of fine physique, possessing a pleasant, deep, stentorian voice, and rang a large brass hand bell to attract an audience. It was a treat to hear him announcing his messages, which was the most effective ...

A woman used to drive a herd of about a dozen donkeys from Ogmores Downs with bags of sand on their backs once a week, the latter for sale to householders for sprinkling on stone flag floors in houses which were then general on the ground floor. The animals, like most of their kind, made very slow progress but served a useful purpose at the time. Our local chimney sweep (named Aaron Anderson) owned a remarkably light weight, fast trotting donkey, which was exceptional in every way. Its colour was dark....(difficult to read). It was a high stepper with a long stride, quick...and would travel...in a spirited way like a ...fast trotting pony with ... spring cart with the sweep and ... aboardgood...without....using the whip.

Photography seems to have been introduced about the year 1860. I remember having my photo taken when a small boy by a visiting artist, who rented accommodation at the Ship

Aground Inn for a week occasionally. He was well patronised. The photographs on glass were very inferior when compared with those of the present day.

About the same time, artists visited the town on Fair and Market days, cutting outline profile photographs, known as silhouettes, with a scissors in the public streets while the person stood in front of him. They were cut out of black paper, and pasted on white cardboard. They were surprisingly exact in outline, and cost about 2d or 3d each. I remember having mine done, which only occupied about five or ten minutes. The dexterity displayed in doing the work when standing up had to be seen to be realised. It was indeed a fine art which seems to have been lost.

The Town of Cowbridge

The town was a centre for farm stock sales, and Tuesday was the Market Day. There were no enclosures for live stock except a few hurdles for sheep and pigs near the Butts Pool, by the remains of the ancient town wall, south of the Mason's Arms Inn. The pool was of considerable size, and was filled in during the erection of the new market in the year 1888. It was a favourite resort for skating and sliding when frozen over.

Cattle were shown in groups on the pavement each side of the main road on the western side of the town, which was known as the West Village, being in earlier days outside the boundary of the town wall.

The ancient town was very small, as the wall, 25 feet in height and in parts 7 feet 8 inches in width, only extended from the south gate in an irregular circle to the west gate (which was demolished about the year 1760) on the main road between the present stock market and the Eagle Lane, then curving at the end of the lane in a south-east direction as far as the eastern boundary of the present Town Hall; then turning south across the main road, where the old Eastgate stood, extending to the southern extremity of the Grammar School garden, and then curving westward to the present ancient archway known as the South Gate, surrounding an area of about 10 acres. The East and West Gates are believed to have been demolished about the year 1776, as wheeled traffic had increased over the main road. Mail coaches ran through up to the year 1850.

The ancient town was evidently a fortress, as parts of the wall remaining at this time are studded with battlements, and are about 7 foot 8 ins width on the top. I am disposed to believe it was practically surrounded by a moat, as the never-dry little stream named the Thaw, according to indications, flowed near the site of the East Gate near the present Town Hall, the stream having been, many years ago, slightly diverted to a constructed pond for supplying water to work the now derelict town flour mill.

The whole of the land on the western side is full of water springs – very soft and pungent during rainy seasons.

.....periodical local fairs. Club feast days, or occasional visits of Ginnett's or Sanger's Circus, or Wombell's menageries were great attractions. Ginnett drove twenty piebald horses, drawing the circus band carriage through the town on one occasion. Crowds from

far and near would assemble to view the grotesque processions , and attend the one-day performance as an exceptional treat.

St Valentine's Day, on February 14th – now entirely disregarded – was a popular anniversary. The shops trading in paper and novelties had a large assortment displayed in the windows over every description from a penny single sheet with a handsome, comical, and ugly picture of humanity, with a printed verse below expressing loving, cynical, critical and offensive sentiments, according to the taste of all kinds of people. It was an opportunity to post an anonymous message of flattery, disgust, jealousy and spite. This practice has practically died a natural death.