



ABOVE: Artist's impression of the development

LEFT: The old school, as it is today

RIGHT: The Black and White Minstrels



New role for Hopkins's old school

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Millionaire unveils apartments scheme for historic building with a host of famous alumni

PLANS to turn Sir Anthony Hopkins's old school into luxury housing have been unveiled by a millionaire businessman.

Cowbridge's Old Grammar School has fallen into decay and disrepair since the *Silence of the Lambs* star boarded there in the 1950s.

But businessman and Bridgend county councillor Mel Mathias has just revealed his plans to turn the Grade II*-listed building and nearby land into 13 two-bedroom apartments, two two-bedroom cottages and four four-bedroom detached houses.

Mr Mathias, 67, said, "It's a privilege to have had the building to do.

"So many people stop you when you're there and say they were old boys at the school and that it's nice doing something with it."

Mr Mathias enjoyed early success as a singer, at one time taking to the stage as part of a *Black and White Minstrel Show* in London's theatreland, before forging a successful career as a building developer.

His involvement in the Old Grammar School scheme follows a string of projects in Bridgend and Porthcawl.

If Vale of Glamorgan approve his plans he says the apartments could be ready for their first occupants within 18 months.

The Old Grammar School occupies an important place in the area's history.

Jeff Alden, a former teacher at the school and joint chairman of Cowbridge Local History Society, said, "I think it's one of the major buildings of the town and it's one of the reasons why Cowbridge is so well known.

"So many old boys have played such a large part in the life of Wales and beyond.

"I'm delighted the building will be used and the facade retained."

Lying between the old town walls and Holy Cross church, the school was originally founded as Cowbridge Free School by the Stradling family in 1608.

It was taken over by Jesus College, Oxford, in 1685 after it was bequeathed in the will of Sir Leoline Jenkins.

The present building dates from the mid-19th century since which time it has produced a host of famous alumni.

Sir Anthony Hopkins endured a famously miserable time at the establishment in the 1950s.

War poet Alun Lewis also went there along with several members of the 1950s Welsh



BOARDER: Sir Anthony Hopkins left school with one O-level, in English

rugby team including Roddy Evans and Haydn Davies.

Broadcaster and journalist Patrick Hannan boarded at the school from 1952 to 1959, at around the same time as Hollywood star Hopkins.

"It was a very primitive place," he said yesterday.

"We lived in our classroom, it was very dismal and it had very little by way of facilities.

"It had something of the workhouse about it and it's very funny to think of it being turned into very expensive flats and apartments for the wealthy of the Vale of Glamorgan, of whom there are quite a lot and I'm sure they'll be snapped up.

"Maybe they'll be haunted by the ghosts of hungry boys who once lived there."

The building has been

boarded up and derelict since a youth centre last closed its doors in 1994.

The school boasts an impressive roster of former masters, including head teacher and former Welsh international from the 1930s, Idwal Rees, and broadcaster Roy Noble who briefly taught at the school in the 1960s.

"You would have thought people of influence in the Vale would have been powerful enough to have done something superb with that building many years ago," said Mr Noble.

"It would have been nice if it could have become some kind of cultural place but if the bottom line is apartments or nothing then that's fair enough."

For health and safety reasons, work has already started on repairing the dilapidated roof.

Architects Davies Sutton of Cardiff aim to preserve many of the building's historic features, and have set up an exhibition showing the proposed scheme in Cowbridge Library.

Unhappy memories

OSCAR-WINNER Sir Anthony Hopkins, arguably Cowbridge Grammar School's most famous ex-pupil, has consistently painted a depressing picture of life as a boarder there.

A dyslexic, he was poor academically, once saying of himself, "I was lousy in school. Real screwed-up. A moron. I was anti-social and didn't bother with the other kids. A really bad student. I didn't have any brains. I didn't know what I was doing there. That's why I became an actor."

After he failed badly at Port Talbot's Central School, in 1949 his parents sent him to boarding school in Pontypool. After five wretched terms, they placed him at Cowbridge Grammar. Here he spent another unhappy four years, leaving with a solitary O-level, in English.

Future of Old Grammar School is still uncertain

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THE future of the old Cowbridge Grammar School is still uncertain, a year after it was sold by the Vale of Glamorgan Council.

The school was bought last June by Centre Great, a specialist development company based at Laleston, Bridgend.

Centre Great, a multi-purpose company that specialises in the refurbishment of unique buildings,

originally intended to convert the old school into three apartments and two flats. The exterior was set to remain relatively untouched.

However, 12 months later and work on the building still hasn't started.

Centre Great's proprietor, Mel Mathias, a Liberal Democrat councillor on Bridgend County Borough Council, told The GEM: "At the moment, I am still in discussions with the Vale Council over developing the Old Grammar School.

"I myself want it to be an exceptional building when it is eventually finished, but I can make no further comment at the moment."

ADVERTISEMENT FEATURE**HOW OLD SCHOOL WAS TRANSFORMED FROM A RUIN INTO UPMARKET HOMES AT COWBRIDGE**

A RESTORATION project which has seen one of the most historic buildings in Cowbridge returned to its former glory is nearing completion.

Work is due to finish in October on the £7million scheme which has transformed the old grammar school from a crumbling ruin into a series of up-market homes, and the completion will coincide with the 400th anniversary of the opening of the school in 1608.

The man behind the project is Garw-born businessman Mel Mathias, who owns the company Centre Great.

He bought the old school from the Vale Council in 2002. Work got under way three years ago.

"It has been a fascinating project. We had restored some properties in the past like the Westward Ho in Porthcawl, but there had been nothing as prestigious as

this or on this scale," he said.

"The school had fallen into a terrible state of disrepair with big holes in the roof. Water was pouring in, rotting much of the woodwork and causing huge damage. Most of the floors had gone.

"We have had to rebuild huge chunks of the building. A lot of the wall has been taken down and then rebuilt painstakingly.

"No stone has been imported onto the site - we have re-used all the stone that was here."

The tall chimneys on this Jacobean building were taken down and completely rebuilt - allowing them to put stainless steel rods through the building to strengthen it.

Huge oak beams which were in place have all been refurbished and returned into position.

Original cast iron windows and bath stone mullions have been restored and inside, solid oak floors have been laid.

The original oak doors and frames have been restored and retained. A new Welsh slate roof has been put in place.

"This is a Grade 2* building and there are not too many of them in Wales," said Mr Mathias. "This was on the verge of being lost when we took over, but I am very glad that we have been able to save it for future generations."

Work on the oldest part of the school is complete and workmen are now finishing the Victorian school buildings behind. Between the two, a courtyard garden will be created. All the stone walls surrounding the site will also be rebuilt.

"We had conservation architects in to excavate the site before we could start work," he said.

"We found the original Roman walls which are the oldest part of Cowbridge underneath the building. They used stone from these walls and also from the town walls to build many of the houses in Cowbridge."

A line of 300-year old copper beech trees remain at the back of the school and every care has been taken to protect them.

The entire project has seen the creation of 17 properties - 13 on the grammar school site and four on land opposite, next to the Physic Garden, which was bought at the same time from the county council.

The apartments and houses range in price from £440,000 to £1.2m. Only three remain unsold.

"We learnt a lot from working on this building," he added. "It is the oldest one we have tackled and it was wonderful to peel away the layers and see exactly how it had been built. It was like living history.

"I have taken much more interest personally in this project, because it was so complicated and so special."

Mr Mathias has worked closely with the Vale's conservation officers and with CADW, to ensure that everything complies with their requirements.

"We have managed to save a fabulous old building and yet give it a modern use that's viable. Hopefully, this building will now be cared for and protected for another 400 years," he added.



ABOVE: Developer Mel Mathias outside the Old Grammar School, the exterior of which remains unchanged despite a massive restoration project.

Cowbridge's Physic Garden

Garden earns its spurs from tourism in Wales

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