COWBRIDGE certainly has got an interesting history as it is one of the oldest towns in Wales. A new book published by the Vale of Glamorgan Borough Council called 'Cowbridge Town Trail' certainly gives an interesting insight into the town over the centuries. In this edition of the Star we publish extracts from the book (Reproduced by kind permission of the council Cowbridge and District History Society and the Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust).

The Guild Hall and Town Cross prior to removal around 1830. At the same time the County Gaol was moved to Swansea. All this allowed the inhabitants to modernise the town.

The making of Cowbridge

ROMAN Cowbridge is one of the oldest towns in Wales. Its origins are in the first Century A.D. and lie in its central location in the fertile Vale of Glamorgan along the Roman road from Carmarthen to Caerleon.

Though definite structural, military remains have not yet been found, it is increasingly thought that the missing Roman fort of Bomium, a 5-6 acres camp, may have been here at Cowbridge. The town was halfway between the Roman administrative centres at Caerwent and Carmarthen and opposite Caer Dynnaf, the large hill fort on Llanblethian Hill of the local Celtic tribe, the Silures.

They had vigorously resisted the Roman advance through South Wales, and Caer Dynnaf has been described as "the first capital of the Vale." A widening range of Roman discoveries suggest the Roman fort generated an urban settlement to administer the surplus produce of the three dozen farmstead-villas already discovered in the Vale. It is thought that Roman Cowbridge may have extended for some 800 metres along a main road corresponding to the present road. Remains have been found at Hopyard Meadow, Westgate, and behind the Town Hall.

It was probably a "vicus" the smallest unit of urban administration, and seems to have thrived from the end of the first century A.D., to approximately 350 A.D. By 400 A.D. only three Roman garrisons remained in Wales. These urbanised forts facilitated the control of the natives, the exploitation of local resources, and permitted surplus agricultural produce to be marketed.

THE unstable conditions of the post-Roman period, the Dark Ages, may explain the lack of archaeological evidence of any substantial settlement at Cowbridge.

Celtic society was non-urban and civilisation mave retreated to higher ground in the vicinity. However, following the spread of the Norman occupation from the end of the 11th Century, the new Borough of Cowbridge, "Longa Villa," was founded in 1254 by Richard de Clare, who became perhaps the greatest magnate in England.

It was unique in South Wales in being an economic venture developed without the immediate protection of a castle. It was "a planted town" within a newly acquired manor, the Castle at Llanblethian not being commenced until 1307. The new town did, however, have protective walls and ditches with four entry gates.

These walls enclosed 13½ acres of the 85 acre Borough. Such medieval towns have been described "as non feudal islands in the feudal seas" (Poston) of the surrounding manorial system. The inhabitants or burgesses were freemen who enjoyed a monopoly of trade within the towns and enjoyed a degree of self-government and privilege.

Cowbridge would appear to have been a planned town, laid out in burgage or property

A scene from today's Cowbridge, a town with an interesting historical past.

strips. These narrow strips, rented from de Clare by the burgesses, straddled the old Roman road and their form is still evident in the layout of the town 500 years later. Initially some 80 to 90 plots may have been constructed within the town walls but the success of the venture is reflected by the 276 plots existing in 1314.

By this time it seems probable that plots had developed outside both the west and the east walls, and the shape of the present town has largely been determined by its medieval plan.

Space was saved by having the market area and shambles (slaughter house) located alongside the Old Guildhall in the middle of High Street. At its peak in the 1320s population must have reached 1200 persons, a figure not exceeded again until this century. Cowbridge was among the largest and most flourishing towns in Wales for only Cardiff was distinctively bigger.

The late Middle Ages were times of political unrest, economic recession, and, from 1348, the Black Death. Consequently the development of the town was not continuous. Eastgate was developed and, though the number of plots increased, it appears probable that many were empty, especially in Westgate. Overall there was a substantial fall in the population of the town. However, the fact that a degree of prosperity remained is indicated by a new Charter granted in 1421 to Cowbridge by Beauchamp, Lord of Glamorgan. It confirms four previous Charters which had given a wide range of liberties to the town's burgesses. They were to enjoy immunity from:
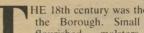
"toll, murage, pontage, panage, terrage, quayage and picage," throughout Beauchamp's Lordship in England and Wales. This meant they were exempted from tax for the upkeep of the town walls, a toll to cross a bridge, and were able to pasture pigs in the lord's woods, to occupy ground at a fair or market, and had the right to break ground to put up a stall. They also did not have to pay quay dues or the dues levied at markets for the upkeep of roads and bridges. The Charter was recently discovered in Somerset after being lost for 300 years.

In the Charter of 1460 the origins were established of the administrative system which was to guide the affairs of the town into the 19th Century. The Charter allowed the creation of 12 aldermen for the town and the annual nomination by its burgesses of the two bailiffs to serve as town magistrates. Under the latters' presidency the aldermen really controlled the business of the Borough as the Lord's representative, the Constable, was somewhat remote in Cardiff. Remains of buildings, which date from the medieval period are still visible, in parts of the Bear Hotel, The South Gate and Town Wall, and, especially, Holy Cross Church, which dates from the early 14th Century.

"the shire runneth directly westward, and giveth entrance and passage to one river, upon which more within, standeth Cowbridge, mercate town. (William Camden 1610)."

IN the 17th century the population rose slowly and did not exceed 500 persons, yet Cowbridge was one of only 4 sizeable towns in Glamorgan.

The Century was one of quietly advancing prosperity for the town, the Civil War had little impact and many buildings in High Street originated in this period. Cowbridge School was founded in 1608 by Sir Edward Stradling and later sustained by Sir Leoline Jenkins, an old boy of the school, who became Secretary of State under Charles II.

In 1681 the latter granted a Charter of incorporation to the "very ancient and populous" town. A self-perpetuating Corporation was established with the addition of 12 elected burgesses to the aldermen to form a Court of Common Council, and the mayoralty of Cowbridge was separated from Cardiff. Control of the town by the Corporation was to last until 1886.

THE 18th century was the heyday of the Borough. Small businesses flourished — malsters, flour mills, smithies and a woollen and tallow factory, the latter producing soap and candles.

Shops and other establishments expanded. Improved communications and increased sophistication of life allowed the town to develop as a centre for local fashions, social life and culture. The wealth generated from new forms of agriculture in the fertile Vale, gave the local gentry additional wealth to build town houses, such as Woodstock and Caercady House, and to embellish others.

To exploit the improved road and trading conditions four tolls were established at the boundaries of the Borough, and the East and West Gates were removed.

The Bear Hotel expanded as a coaching stop, new inns and hotels were developed and, by 1781, the population had reached 705 persons. Cowbridge was generally regarded as the most convenient location for social, judicial and political meetings. Two additional annual fairs occurred and Eastgate became continuously built up.

However, the opulence that existed in the town did not give the whole picture. In 1789 a visitor described the town:

"Cowbridge is distinguished by its Grammar School, which is the most flourishing of any in Glamorgan. The Town Hall, in which the assizes for the County are sometimes held is a tolerable building; but as it stands in the High Street, it conveniently narrows a part of it. The Church is a heavy, ill-built structure with a tower resembling that of a castle. There are many good houses in this town but these are frequently disgraced by the immediate propinquity of wretched hovels."

A Census of 1801 indicated a population of 759 persons which, by 1821 had risen to 46% to 1107 persons.

The removal of the County gaol to Swansea in 1829 allowed the inhabitants to modernise the town by purchasing and enlarging the former House of Correction into the present Town Hall and removing the Old Guildhall and shambles from the High Street.

These building operations were supervised by Isaiah Verity. Ironically the long awaited improvements in local communications seem to have given a greater fillip to Bridgend, which prospered from the diversion of the main road through Bridgend (1832) and the arrival of the South Wales Railway in 1850. Cowbridge had lost its coaching trade by 1850 and also its livestock market predominance. The growth of the large industrial towns of the County, such as Merthyr and Cardiff, eroded other functions of Cowbridge. By 1850 the Quarterly Sessions' visits to Cowbridge had ended as had the Assize Court visits earlier in the Century.

The opposition of the Corporation to accepting the route of the main London-Swansea railway (1850) confirmed that Cowbridge would become a backwater in the County. Writing of the town in 1860, David Jones contrasted the rest of the week with the busy market day, Tuesday,

"when all come who have farming stock and produce to sell, or require to buy household necessaries, on the remaining six days of the week the long single street might be used for rifle practice, with but small danger to any of Her Majesty's subjects."

ONLY since the 1950's, with the growth of private transport and prosperity, has the Cowbridge area revived.

It is now an important District shopping centre and commuter settlement.

The population of the old Borough area in 1981 was 1200, not having increased greatly in 150 years, but adjoining areas have been swallowed up by suburban houses as the town expanded beyond the old burgage plots.

Llanblethian's population has tripled in the last 30 years to 2700. With the opening of the town by-pass in 1965, the Roman Road had been superceded after 1900 years of almost continuous use.