

## MEDIEVAL COWBRIDGE AND ITS CHARTERS

On 13 March 1254, Cowbridge received its first borough charter from Richard de Clare, the Lord of Glamorgan, De Clare was one of the most powerful barons of the day, having huge estates stretching across South Wales and southern and eastern England. From 1243 he was actively extending his authority in Glamorgan; in 1245 he seized the manors of Llanblethian and Talyfan from Richard Siward, and the lordships of Miskin and Glynrhondda from Hywel ap Maredudd. In Llanblethian he founded the town of Cowbridge and in Miskin he founded the castle and town of Llantrisant.

When, in 1254, Richard de Clare addressed his charter to "our beloved burgesses of Longa Villa", a small settlement probably already existed at Cowbridge, with plans already drawn up to extend it along both sides of what was the main road through Glamorgan. "Longa Villa" (the long town) must have been only a provisional name, since Cowbridge (variously spelt) is found in documents from 1262 onwards. And the town did in fact attract settlers (from England?) and prospered from the trade of its markets and fair. Within fifty years the street seems to have been fully built up as far as the Llantwit road junction to the west and to the junction with the Aberthin and St Athan roads to the east. St Quentin's Castle - although it was more than half a mile away - provided military protection against Welsh attack; walls and gates were built around the centre of the town to give it added security and to allow the lord's officers to control the access to the market place. As far as we know, the rebellious Welsh never attacked Cowbridge, though they regularly sacked the neighbouring borough of Kenfig. A church was built before the end of the thirteenth century; the original stonework from that time survives in parts of the nave and chancel of the present building.

De Clare's charter granted valuable rights and liberties to people who were thus drawn to settle in Cowbridge, in return for the annual payment to the Lord of one shilling for each building plot (the burgage rent, which continued to be paid down to the beginning of the twentieth century). In 1324, by royal charter of Edward II, the burgesses of Cowbridge were privileged to sell their goods free of toll in all markets and fairs in the king's realms, in England, Ireland and France. Later charters issued by Richard de Clare's descendants - the Despencers, Beauchamps and Nevills - in 1340, 1358, 1397, 1421, 1423, 1460 and in 1473 confirmed these rights and gradually enlarged them. By the 1460 charter L issued by Richard Nevill the "Kingmaker", Cowbridge enjoyed self-government by two bailiffs and a bench of twelve aldermen selected from among the burgesses, and the town had its own set of "Ordinances" or bye-laws which all residents had to obey. The last of the medieval charters was granted by George, Duke of Clarence, famous (at least in tradition) for having met his death in a butt of malmsey wine in 1478.

All the medieval charters save one have been lost. There was great excitement in 1983 when the charter of Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Worcester, granted in 1421, came to light in a solicitor's office in Somerset, where it had seemingly been taken by the Gwyns of Llansannor and Forde Abbey. A very important feature of the Latin text, written on parchment and sealed with the Lord's seal in green wax, is that it repeats the terms of all the previous charters back to 1254. The precious document is now in the safekeeping of the Glamorgan Record Office (Ref: DCOW Charter 1), and a photocopy is displayed in the Council Chamber of Cowbridge Town Hall.

[Illus:

1. Sketch of Richard de Clare (1222 - 62) from the stained glass window in Tewkesbury Abbey given by Lady Eleanor de Clare c1340
2. Sketch of the Beauchamp Chantry in Tewkesbury Abbey, built c1430 by Lady Isabella Despenser in memory of her husband, Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Worcester, killed at the siege of Meaux in France in 1422.]

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A slightly different version....

### **Cowbridge 750**

The background . . .

In 2004, Cowbridge will be celebrating the 750th anniversary of its first borough charter, granted on 13 March 1254 by Richard de Clare, the Lord of Glamorgan. De Clare was one of the most powerful barons of the day, having huge estates stretching across South Wales and southern and eastern England. From 1243 he was actively extending his authority in Glamorgan; in 1245 he seized the manors of Llanblethian and Talyfan from Richard Siward, and the lordships of Miskin and Glynrhondda from Hywel ap Maredudd. In Llanblethian he founded the town of Cowbridge and in Miskin he founded the castle and town of Llantrisant.

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## **Cowbridge Charter – 750 celebration**

Most people are now aware that the borough of Cowbridge received its first charter from Richard de Clare, Lord of Glamorgan and Earl of Gloucester and Hereford, in 1254, and so next year we will be celebrating the 750th anniversary of this first charter.

However, this is not to say that this date was the beginning of the settlement at Cowbridge, even if we put Roman Cowbridge aside - and there is much evidence for a sizeable Roman settlement. In the charter, Cowbridge was called Longa Villa - Long Town - which suggests that there were already a fair number of houses lining the main road. This road, of course, was the principal route through south Wales, and followed the old Roman road down from St Hilary Down to cross the river Thaw at the one point where the slopes were gentle but the valley bottom was not too marshy.

Where the road crossed the river, the great stone bridge - alluded to in many later documents - was built. Further west, near the Darren, came a smaller bridge, the Pont y Fwch. Why the first bridge should give the town its Welsh name, Pontfaen, and why the second and less important bridge should be used for the name of Cowbridge, we do not know.

Nine years before the charter was granted, in 1245, Richard de Clare seized the Lordship of Llanblethian from the Siwards, and perhaps the relative stability of the area after that time encouraged him to set up a new town at Cowbridge.

The first houses may well have been of wood, but many were built in stone and were very substantial. One example was found when the building on the site now occupied by the Yorkshire Building Society was knocked down in 1977. This turned out to be an early medieval building, with thick stone walls, round-arched doorways, and a stone wall-safe in a side wall.

The houses were built on the street frontage of narrow plots, about six metres wide and up to sixty metres long. For each of these burgage plots, which are still well preserved in the long narrow gardens behind High Street and Eastgate today, an annual rent of a shilling was to be paid to the Lord of Glamorgan. From the account books which have still survived, we can deduce how many shillings were paid, and thus how many burgage plots there were - and from this we can estimate the population of the town. The population soared from the 59 burgages of 1262 to the 233 of 1295. At four people per household, this would suggest a population of nearly one thousand after just over forty years existence. Indeed as time went on, burgage plots were often subdivided so that more houses - and so more people - could be placed within the town.

The new town was to be essentially a market town, and not a garrison town, and so the creation of a central market, in the middle of the road near the one 'tributary road' from the South Gate, was a major factor. The market cross stood in the middle of the road - and is today marked by a brass plaque in the road surface.

It is likely that the town walls were constructed almost as soon as the charter was granted. The gates in the walls were to control the movement of people into the borough, especially into the market and shops; tolls were to be paid by incomers. We are fortunate in Cowbridge to have such a substantial part of the town walls, including the bastions in Old Hall gardens and in the school grounds, and the raised walkway in Old Hall gardens, still remaining. A number of other towns in the old Glamorgan used to have these walls: now Cowbridge is the only one.

The regulations for the government of the town also make fascinating reading. These are of medieval origin, and include such items as:

- All brawlers or fighters that fighteth or draweth blood, shall pay 3/4d for the blood shed
- No butcher shall cast no heads, feet nor no other garbage in the high street
- There be no tennis playing upon the high street
- If any woman be found guilty by six men of scolding any burgess or their wives, she to be brought to the cucking stool (suspended above the Butts Pool)
- that no inhabitant of the town shall keep no licentious naughtipacks, bawdry or suspected harlots, vagabonds nor loiterers in their houses.

I wonder how many licentious naughtipacks are to be found in Cowbridge today?

*? by Jeff Alden*