

A Potted History of Cowbridge – written 2014

Roman settlement – Carmarthen to Caerleon
Caer Dynnaf – iron age fort (Silures)

1254 Richard de Clare - a new Borough (Longa Villa), unique in S Wales in being an economic venture without the protection of a castle (Llb. castle did not commence till 1307).

The new, planned town did however have protective walls around it and ditches, with 4 entry gates, the walls enclosing 13 and a half acres. The inhabitants or burgesses were freemen who enjoyed a monopoly of trade and a degree of self-government and privilege.

The town was laid out with burgage or property strips, narrow strips rented from de Clare by the burgesses and straddling the old Roman road. Initially there would have been about 80 or 90 within the walls, but by 1314 they had increased to 276.

The shape of the town has largely been determined by this medieval plan.

Space was saved by having the market area and shambles (slaughter house) alongside the old Guildhall in the middle of High St. The population of the town in the 14th century must have reached 1200, not exceeded again until the last century. Cowbridge was among the largest and most flourishing towns in Wales, only Cardiff being distinctly bigger.

Despite times of political unrest, the Black Death etc, and a substantial fall in population, the town must have flourished as a new Charter was granted in 1421 by the Lord of Glamorgan., referring to 4 previous ones – gave all sorts of liberties to the burgesses (ie free from paying taxes towards the upkeep of the town, from paying tolls etc.(This Charter was only recently discovered in a solicitor's office in Somerset).

It was the 1460 Charter that initiated the admin system which guided the town right into the 19th century – 12 aldermen, annual nomination by the burgesses of 2 bailiffs to serve as magistrates, for example. All these really controlled the town's affairs. Signs of medieval buildings continue to be uncovered.

In the 17th century, the population rose only slowly, around 500, but this was one of only 4 sizeable towns in Glamorgan, and there were signs of quietly advancing prosperity.

The Grammar school was founded in 1608.

A self-perpetuating Corporation was established with the addition of 12 elected burgesses to the aldermen to form a Court of Common Council, and there was a separate mayor to Cardiff. Control of the town by the Corporation lasted till 1886.

The 18th century marked a prosperity boom for the town. All sorts of small businesses flourished – maltsters, flour mills, smithies, printing, a woollen and tallow factory (producing soap and candles), different shops and other businesses.

The town became a centre for local fashions, social life and culture, and new forms of agriculture in the surrounding Vale provided local gentry with the wealth to build town houses and embellish others.

4 tolls were established at the Borough's boundaries to improve roads and trading conditions; the East and West gates were removed; the Bear hotel expanded as a coaching stop; new inns and hotels developed, and by 1781 the population reached 705. Two annual fairs occurred, and Eastgate became almost continuously built up.

During the 19th century, a new Town Hall was constructed around the old House of Correction; the old Guildhall and shambles being removed from the middle of the High St.; there was a new building for the boys' Grammar School, a fee-paying girl's secondary school later in the century, and buildings were developed along Westgate including Ramoth Chapel and the Police Station. Court yards grew up between the High St and the Bear Lane where the open Town Ditch ran, though these were cursed with poor sanitation leading to a public health scandal.

But by 1850, Cowbridge had lost its coaching trade in favour of Bridgend (where the S. Wales railway had arrived) and also the predominance of its livestock market. Industrial towns such as Cardiff and Merthyr eroded many of Cowbridge's functions. The Quarterly Sessions and the Assize Court ceased to operate here, for example.

The Corporation refused the opportunity for the town to be on the route of the main London-Swansea railway, and so it started to become a backwater. The old Corporation's last fling was to grant a railway station on the Llantrisant-Aberthaw north-south line, but this brought little prosperity to the town other than the building of two streets, a pub and some railway houses at the east end.

The first ratepayers' Council was elected in 1881. It drained the Butts Pool, built the cattle market and restored and expanded the Town Hall.

It is only since the 1950s, with the growth of private transport and overall national prosperity, that the town has revived. In 1981, the population of the old Borough was still only 1200, but several suburban estates and houses have developed beyond the old burgrave plots.

The much-needed by-pass opened in 1965. Flooding has hopefully been controlled. The former Borough Council ended in 1974, a Town Council and its mayor having been retained.

Many voluntary groups help maintain the central gardens and the town walls; they run all manner of organisations including a cinema and a theatre; a leisure centre has been built, this Old Hall community centre, a library and a health centre. Tourism is expanding, hopefully keeping individual shops and businesses as well as coping with incoming 'chains'.

However, the livestock market operates as a shadow of its former self (since Foot and Mouth) and its continuation is threatened. Lack of parking space remains a big problem, as does the threat of extra-large development in surrounding fields. Shop rents are often very high.

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