

LETTERS FROM THE PAST

with Eunice Shanahan



Cowbridge Church Appeal, 1848

This month's 'Letter from the Past' was written by **John Powel**, of Cowbridge, a town about 5 kms west of Cardiff, South Wales. The letter is dated November 17th 1848 and addressed to his aunt, Mrs Grosvenor, Leek, Staffordshire. There is no adhesive postage stamp, but it is marked 'Prepaid', and a manuscript '1' has been inscribed in red ink. The three circular post marks show the route taken: (Figure 1)

- 1) the office of posting, a black, COWBRIDGE NO 17 1848 with a letter A in the lower arc.
- 2) the transit office, a blue NEWCASTLE STAFF NO 18 1848, with a letter A above the lower arc.
- 3) the receiving office, a black LEEK NO 18 1848.

It is a chatty family letter, and begins somewhat formally:

"My dear Mrs Grosvenor,

I was glad to learn from Kate's letter that you returned safe and improved in health. I am sorry to find that Mrs Holt's eldest boy has been unwell, I presume that by this time Mr & Mrs Holt and his little family are safely arrived at home.

I am happy to say that Mr E. Ballard and self returned and Mr E. Ballard seemed in better health and in spirits and I am thankful to say that my leg is much better for the last week. I can assure you that I enjoyed myself very much the short time I was with you and did much good to my health and spirits.

I send you a printed circular respecting the Repairs and Improvements purported to be done to Cowbridge Church, if we can raise the money."

The letter is in fact written on one side of a printed circular and list of subscribers, headed COWBRIDGE CHURCH. It begins with a statement that the church is presently inadequate for the wants of the parishioners, and that the fabric is in need of restoration and the seating in need of rearrangement...."TO GIVE THE PARISHIONERS OF EVERY DEGREE, THE OPPORTUNITY OF ASSEMBLING IN THE HOUSE OF GOD."

The letter then gives a breakdown of the report by the Diocesan Architect and a competent Builder for the necessary repairs. From their report, it seems as though most of the building is in a state of disrepair: the windows, the watertables of the Buttresses, the Quoins, String-courses and Plinths; Copings and Crosses are required, Ridge-

tiles and Eave-courses to all the roofs, all the roofs require to be re-slatted, and the timbers repaired at the same time; the whole of the exterior needs scraping and repointing, and the Porch to be rebuilt; the interior freestone work needs scraping, cleaning and repairing, all the paving to be relaid and made good and the whole of the pews replaced by new seats.

However, at this point of the report, finance takes over, and the committee adds a cau-

tion note that while these items are desirable, they are unwilling to bind themselves to carrying out all of the work, but that the essential parts cannot be effected without an outlay of a very considerable amount of money.

"THEY THEREFORE VENTURE TO APPEAL WITH AN EARNESTNESS SUITED TO THE EMERGENCY FOR THE ASSISTANCE OF ALL THOSE WHO MAY BE INTERESTED GENERALLY IN THE RESTORATION OF THE "HOUSES OF GOD IN THE LAND", OR MAY BE LED BY PRESENT RESIDENCE, OR ASSOCIA-



TIONS, OR RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLIER DAYS, TO AN ESPECIAL LIBERALITY TOWARDS THIS CHURCH IN PARTICULAR.'

It continues with the information that the parishioners have already agreed on a rate of two shillings in the pound, and in subscribing to the fund, but the parish is so small, and the expense proposed so very great that the Committee feel they can do but little unless assisted very largely by general contri-

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butions. The sum quoted for the repairs is £1450, and the donations listed on the other side total £558.11.6d, about a third of the required amount.

The complete list of subscribers is printed beginning with the Right Rev. The Lord Bishop of Llandaff £30, and includes sums from: the Venerable the Archdeacon of Llandaff £5, the Right Honourable John Nicholl M.P. £50 (presumably the local Member of Parliament), Miss Bevan of Newton House £100 (for architectural restorations), The Masters of Cowbridge School £75 (towards accommodation for the boys), and the Rev John Powel, £10 (in addition to restorations already effected), Mr E Ballard - Bailiff £3.3.0. - are these two subscribers the writer of this letter and his travelling companion? Of the entries that appeal to me one is the traditional one of "A Widow's Mite", which is something I expect to see only in the Bible, and one for "Three Ladies per the Rev Hugo D. Harper £10." The appeal ends with details of where monies can be paid, including the National Provincial Banks at Cowbridge, Cardiff and Bridgend.

The letter continues:

"I fear that we are attempting too much and that we have been too sanguine for I cannot see where we are to get it from. When I look at the list of subscribers it appears to me that we have promises in this neighbourhood from all that are likely to subscribe.

I feel much interested in the undertaking and I trust we shall, with aid of good friends, be able to accomplish it. Cowbridge is very much endeared to me by residence of more than twentyeight years and the home of those that I loved most. Although at present I feel quite forlorn as if I had outlived all my friends for there is no joyous and merry countenances to well-come my home-ward weary footsteps, I love it still. You will pardon me in giving expression to the feelings of an overflown heart."

I have found this kind of emotional out-

burst common in many of the old letters in my possession, which is quite unlike the generally held opinion of the English as being cold and repressed. He then continues with information about all the local people:

"Mrs Leigh, the only daughter of the Revd. Richard Bassett of Colwinstone died the beginning of this week in her confinement. It must be a great shock to the father. The Revd. Wm. Couzens of Ynis-Plume died rather sudden and his wife Buried him at the Baptist Chapel at Llantrissant, greatly to the annoyance of his relations."

That is a reference to the difference in the religious observance amongst the Welsh people, a very great division between those who attended Church and those who went to Chapel - and never the twain shall meet!

*"Mr. Horsman was here a fortnight ago, he was very well and looked very well, but getting quite grey. Mrs Horsman and children were very well. He made great enquiries after you all. Miss M Ballard is very well and all at Llwnphellig. I hope that Mrs Powel is improving. Thomas and children are pretty well, I presume that you have had snow, but we have not seen any. But cold and frosty morning. There is a grand Hunt Ball at Cowbridge sometime in next month under patronage of Lady Morgan of Tredeger. Please to give my kind love to Miss Thomas, Kate and Hellen, and accept the same yourself, from your affectionate nephew
John Powel"*

So, as a matter of interest, and because of my Welsh heritage, I wrote to the Glamorgan County Archivist in Wales, to find out if this appeal had been successful, whether the necessary work was carried out, and if the church is still standing, and in use. Her reply included a picture and some relevant pages from "The Cowbridge Story" by John Richards, and "Cowbridge and Llanblethian Past and Present" by Brian LL James and David J. Francis".

Cowbridge church has a long history. The

earliest written reference is in a deed drawn up in 1443, but there is evidence that it was more than 200 years older than that. The tower is a striking feature, thought to have been built in the 14th century had a lead-covered wooden steeple, but this was struck by lightning and destroyed in 1480 and never replaced. The south aisle added in the 15th century by Lady Anne Warwick. In 1484 King Richard III, as lord of Glamorgan issued a charter to allow provision of a chaplain to administer the sacraments. There are various written records from then.

Restoration work has been carried out many times:

- 1722 - repairs to tower and 4 cracked bells replaced with eight new ones;
- 1766 - roof of north aisle repaired;
- 1849 - restoration as reported in this appeal;
- 1852 - gas lighting installed;
- 1923-1933 extensive repairs to the south aisle costing £4000, but further £1200 required to complete the work, including the bells and bell tower, unsafe due to death watch beetle - entire structure removed and replaced.

The bells, which were those replaced in 1722, were worn and out of tune with each other, hardly surprising, as they were in constant daily use. Until 1896 the tenor curfew bell was rung for five minutes up to 8 pm, and then the treble bell tolled the day of the month. While these repairs were carried out the bells were silent for 2 to 3 years.

Many years ago, I was driving my father in that area, and while trying to cross from one side of Cardiff to the other, ended up in Cowbridge, but that was before I obtained this letter, so had no reason to notice if the Church was there or not!

Surprisingly, the Archivist advised me that they have no copy or any record of this appeal, and are interested in it for their archives. Who would have imagined that a copy would be in Australia nearly 150 years later.

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