

History on my doorstep. (S.W. 1959)

COWBRIDGE GRAMMAR SCHOOL

by

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IN Church Street, Cowbridge, standing between the Church of the Holy Cross and the ancient South Gate of the town, is a building which, by the battered and yet dignified outlines of its grey stonework, proclaims itself to the passer-by as an ancient seat of learning. It is, in fact, the School House of Cowbridge Grammar School; and a Latin inscription on the wall records that it was erected in the year 1847. It replaced an earlier building which had done service since the year 1609. Extending from the 1847 building, which consists of the Headmaster's house, Schoolroom, Dormitories and other accommodation, is a wing which was added in the closing years of the 19th century.

The School building was designed to accommodate some thirty-five boarding pupils and an equal number of day boys. As the School has at present some three hundred and eighty pupils all told, it has had to expand beyond the limits of the School House building. The old mansion known as Old Hall, fronting on the High Street and possessing a large and charming garden, is now in use as part of the School. As the coat of arms over the front door proclaims, it was at one time the residence of the Edmondes family. The modern side—in more senses than one—of the School buildings is to be seen beyond the South Gate of the town. Constructed just before the 1939-1945 War, and augmented since, this section of the School contains the Chemistry and Biology Laboratories, the Gymnasium, and the Day Boys' Dining Hall.

The official date of the foundation of Cowbridge Grammar School (known in former days as Cowbridge Free School) is 1608. This is early enough to enable the School to claim to be the oldest educational establishment of any kind in the County of Glamorgan. However, in reviewing briefly the history of the School, it is necessary to refer to a strong tradition that has existed in the locality for at

least a hundred years, claiming that the original foundation was in fact much earlier than 1608—so early, in fact, as to be shrouded in the mists of medieval or even remoter antiquity.

This tradition rests on the undoubted fact that in the period immediately following the Roman occupation of Britain, a great centre of religion and education flourished, which is associated with the name of St. Illutus or Illyd. There is reason to believe that this early "university" was situated at Llantwit Major, of which the real name is Llanilltyd Fawr, "the Great Church of St. Illyd." This academy, already in decline, was, so the tradition tells us, transferred from Llantwit Major when, in early Norman times, the old monastery there was dissolved. At Cowbridge, where it was re-established, the ancient school lived on, and was still in existence until the Reformation. Since it was a monastic foundation, it was suppressed, along with so many others, by King Henry VIII; and although there was an interval between this event and the present foundation, it is claimed that the School established in 1608 was in a real sense a continuation of the old monastic school. A manuscript noted by Iolo Morganwg is adduced to suggest that the School was in existence in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and, as it were, to narrow the gap between suppression and re-foundation.

Such a theory derives credibility from parallels such as that of Christ College, Brecon, founded in 1541 on the transfer to Brecon of the "College" of Abergwili; or of King's School, Canterbury, re-founded by King Henry, but claiming to date originally to a foundation by St. Theodore of Tarsus in the middle of the 7th century. As one of the traditions about the Llantwit Major "university" has it that Saint Patrick and Saint David were both educated there, some have gone so far as to say that this gives Cowbridge Grammar School the right to claim that in addition to being the oldest school in the world, it has the unique distinction of being able to include two Patron Saints among its Old Boys.

This audacious tradition may be studied more fully, if further information is sought about it, in the pages of the late Dr. L. Hopkin-James' book, *Old Cowbridge*, published in the early nineteen-twenties. Dr. James was convinced that in principle the tale was true. My own opinion is that it is entirely fictitious, as Dr. James must have realised had he not been so eager to believe it. There is no worth-while historical evidence whatsoever to support

it ; and the fact that it was so widely canvassed at one time is explained by the controversy which raged in the later years of the 19th century, over the question whether this School was originally a Church foundation or not. I hope soon to be able to publish more fully the reasons for my arrival at this conclusion.

Cowbridge Grammar School is, none the less, an old foundation and the facts of its long history from 1608 to the present day are amply sufficient in themselves to make the School an object of considerable interest. Credit for the foundation at that date is given to Sir Edward Stradling, of St. Donat's Castle, a great scholar and patron of learning. Towards the end of his long life he conceived the idea of endowing a Grammar School at Cowbridge, and possibly had in part carried this idea into effect before his death in May, 1609. The task of completing his plan was verbally bequeathed by him to his nephew and heir, Sir John Stradling, who built the first School and School-House on the site of the present School, appointed a Schoolmaster, and endowed him with a modest salary of twenty pounds a year. On September 23rd, 1618, he paid an official visit to his School, and a Latin oration, delivered before him on that occasion by one of the boys of the School, still exists. This oration was made by one Evan Seys, a member of the Seys family of Boverton. Its preservation, by a remarkable accident which brought it into the possession of the Rev. Daniel Durel, M.A., Headmaster of the School, in 1739, is responsible for all that we know of the foundation and early years of the School.

Unluckily, such accidents have not been as common in the history of the School as one could wish. The rest of the 17th century, and a considerable part of the 18th and 19th centuries, are largely blank. We have no complete list of Headmasters further back than 1663. However, one event of cardinal importance in the School's history in the 17th century is well enough documented. This is the transfer of the administration of the School from the Stradling family to the Principal and Fellows of Jesus College, Oxford.

Sir Leoline Jenkins, the dark-haired aquiline Royalist whose portrait hangs today in the Headmaster's study at the School, was a native of the Vale of Glamorgan, educated at Cowbridge in the sixteen-thirties. He went on, as so many Old Boys of the School have done, to Jesus College ; and returned at the Restoration, after many adventures, as Principal of that College. At his death,

in September 1685, he bequeathed "a certaine Schoole," which was of course Cowbridge Free School, to the Governing Body of the College, who were for nearly two and a half centuries to be the Governing Body of the School also—a situation which was described as unique by one of the witnesses who testified before the "Aberdare Commission" on Welsh Education in 1880. Sir Leoline had previously, by the legal process known as "fine and recovery," bought the School as a going concern from the Stradlings of St. Donat's.

The Will of Sir Leoline was, in effect, the Foundation Charter of the School from 1685 until 1919. In it the learned Judge confirmed the dispensation made by Sir John Stradling, that the Schoolmaster for the time being should have the use of the School House, and a salary of ten pounds a year; this would be increased to twenty so long as the master, who would in those days of course always be a clergyman, did not receive any Church living, but devoted himself wholly to the business of his School. Further provision was made for the endowment of "pensioners," boys to the number at any one time of five who would receive six pounds a year apiece to assist them in obtaining their education at the School. In addition to these, another ten boys might be educated gratis. It is an interesting fact that the sum of thirty pounds a year was still being paid out to boys in the School, on the bequest of Sir Leoline Jenkins, up to the year 1949, at which time, on the completion of the transfer of the running of the School to the responsibility of the Glamorgan County Council, the payments were discontinued. In the latter years of the continuance of the custom, School Prefects were being paid, out of this legacy, one pound each per term. During the years after 1685, Sir Leoline was always alluded to as "The Founder," and the earlier connection with the Stradlings was almost forgotten.

The best-documented period of the earlier years of the School is the long reign of the most distinctive, and in some ways the most distinguished, of its Headmasters. The Rev. Daniel Durel, a native of St. Helier, Jersey, taught from 1721 to 1763; and there is in existence a mass of manuscripts, in his own crabbed script and the more legible hands of those who sometimes copied his letters for him, which illustrate most vividly the years he spent at the School. Many of the letters which he sent to the Principal of Jesus College from 1727 to 1763, Dr. Paul Pardo, are included; and since Dr.



Cowbridge Grammar School (from an old print)



Cowbridge Grammar School, 1959

(Photo by Haydn Baynham)





The South Gate, Cowbridge

Photo by Hadyn Baynham, Cardiff

Pardo was the Chairman of the Governors by the will of Sir Leoline, these throw a great amount of light on the administration of the School at this time. They show, for instance, that the " pensioners " of the School were normally expected to proceed to Jesus College when they left School—indeed the " pensions " were granted on the understanding that they should do so. They show also that the Headmaster was held responsible for the maintenance of the School buildings, which were by now in need of extensive repairs. Over a period of years, Durel had to pay sums out of his own pocket totalling some three hundred pounds on their upkeep—a very considerable figure by the standards of those days.

We find, in addition, many references to the pupils of the School. One of these may be singled out for special mention. This was the Headmaster's own nephew, David Durel, who, in spite of having run away twice from School, went eventually to Pembroke College, Oxford, and in a short time reached the exalted position of Principal of Hertford College in the same University. It was his fortune later to become Vice-Chancellor of the University, in which capacity he was remembered as having expelled certain Methodists of St. Edmund Hall, who had been brought to his notice for indulging in " the absurdity of extempore prayer."

The education given to boys at Cowbridge, as indeed everywhere else, in those days, was of course predominantly Classical. But Durel was in advance of his time. If it was ever true anywhere (which true Classicists will dispute) that the Classical system of education was unduly narrow and specialised, it was not so at Cowbridge in his day. He taught Hebrew in addition to Latin and Greek ; boys wrote essays and verse in English for him, and also studied Geography. David Durel probably obtained at School the rudiments of Arabic, a language in which his uncle was proficient ; and, since the latter was by his upbringing a speaker of French, he was well qualified to instruct his boys in this language also—and we know that he did so. Science at that time had not yet become recognised as a normal academic study for schoolboys—but had it been so recognised, I do not doubt that Durel would have combined it with the study of language, ancient and modern, as was done so successfully in the 19th century in the better schools.

Happy, they say, is the land that has no history ; and we can conclude, if this aphorism is true, that the century which followed the

retirement of Durel at the end of 1763 was peaceful and contented enough. It contained the protracted reign of the Rev. William Williams ("The Old Doctor," as he was affectionately known in his later years) which spanned the almost unbelievably lengthy period of fifty-nine years from 1787, as his memorial tablet in Cowbridge Church tells us. It saw, also, the brief Headmastership of the Rev. Hugo Daniel Harper, who was in charge when Jesus College, at a cost of some five thousand pounds, replaced the School building with the one which still stands today. Harper's term of office, had he stayed longer, might have ushered in great developments at Cowbridge. But he chose to leave, in 1851, to become Head of Sherborne. That school had fallen on bad days. A total of only two boys awaited him there. But a number of his loyal pupils transferred with him to Sherborne, and in the years that followed he built his new school up into what it is today—one of the leading Public Schools of Britain. He might have done the same for Cowbridge, but it was not to be.

In 1862 the Charity Commissioners, the fore-runners of the modern Ministry of Education, drew up a new scheme for Cowbridge School, having regard to the need to provide more opportunities for the poorer boys of the district. Yet, in what was to prove the real hey-day of the English Public School, Cowbridge remained in the running with the larger and more famous schools across the border. In the years 1870-1875 the Headmaster, the Rev. J. C. F. Morson, M.A., was a brilliant teacher, whose pupils scored an impressive number of successes in the examinations for Open Scholarships at Oxford. And, as the great cult of Athleticism engulfed British education, Cowbridge was well to the fore in the field as well as in the classroom. In those years, Rugby Football was introduced at the School; possibly this was the first place to see the game in Wales. Certain it is, that when the Cardiff Rugby Football Club was formed in 1876, its first away match was played against Cowbridge Grammar School. In maintaining so strongly its proficiency at rugger, as the School has done in recent years, Cowbridge is but living up to an historic tradition. Since the last War, no less than five Old Boys have obtained Senior Caps for Wales. In the first-ever Welsh International team to play England, two boys who had not yet left School were included.

The old harmonious relationship which had existed for so long

between the School and its Governing Body, Jesus College, Oxford, was largely destroyed through the fault of the Rev. Morris Price Williams, the Headmaster who succeeded Morson in 1875. His contention was that the College ought to assign to the School a very much larger annual grant than the will of Sir Leoline Jenkins empowered them to do, or than they were at that time able to do. Williams left the School in 1889, but the College determined, when the Welsh Intermediate Education Act became law in that year, to take steps to transfer the School to the newly-constituted Glamorgan Education Authority. A scheme was worked out in the years immediately following, which was to the satisfaction of the College and the County, and which had ample regard to the need for preserving the characteristic qualities of this ancient School. But at the last moment, due to the agitation of certain local clergy who feared that the School would lose its close connection with the Church of England by such a change, the provision for the transfer was struck out of the Act by a vote of the House of Commons in March, 1896.

Under the Headmastership of the Rev. W. F. Evans, M.A., who had succeeded the Rev. M. P. Williams, the School remained independent, as a small Public School, up to the end of the 1914-1918 War. A number of factors combined, in 1919, to bring the School to a major crisis in its history. Evans had decided to retire; and in its form as it then was, the School could not continue. A scheme was drawn up, at the urgent request of Jesus College, whereby it was placed in the care of the Glamorgan Education Authority as a "transitionally assisted maintained Grammar School."

The last of the long line of Headmasters appointed by Jesus College now took control; the first layman to have charge of the School in more than three centuries. This was Mr. Richard Williams, M.C., M.A. a Jesus College man whose father had been a pupil at Cowbridge, and who came straight from his demobilisation to revive a dying School. The extent of his achievement in restoring the School to its rightful place in the educational pattern of the County of Glamorgan, and of Wales, is indeed deserving of the highest praise. A Classicist himself, he maintained and enhanced the School's Classical tradition, at the same time making possible that development of the modern and scientific sides that are an essential part of Grammar School education in this progressive age. During his time the School increased rapidly in the numbers of its pupils and in

the diversity of subjects offered. This development has been maintained and enhanced under the leadership of the present Headmaster, Mr. J. Idwal Rees, M.A. In this year of our three-hundred and fiftieth anniversary, we look back with pride on our eventful past, and with optimism to the future. *Stat fortuna domus, et avi numerantur avorum.*

In these days when so many long-established principles of education are being called in question, it is gratifying to know that those who control the destiny of this School are well aware of the need to conserve what is good among the things that are old, while incorporating the good things that are new. The present Governing Body of the School, on which, happily, Jesus College are still represented, are determined to preserve the distinctive character of Cowbridge School in the future. The School is the only one in Wales maintained by a public authority which still has boarding pupils in addition to day boys. So far from dispensing with this important feature of the School, the Authority intends to increase the number of boarders by providing additional residential accommodation as soon as the opportunity occurs ; and the School will continue to be a Grammar School in the true sense, offering its pupils a choice between the traditional Classical studies on which it was founded, and the other courses which have now joined them on the curricula of our modern schools. Under this enlightened dispensation, may the "College," as Cowbridge people have always called it, long flourish.

