

## Cowbridge History Society - 40 years old.

40 years ago on 25 October 1974 more than 50 people met in the Council Chamber of the Town Hall to found the Cowbridge Historical Society at a time when Cowbridge was fighting to retain its ancient Grammar School and Harold Wilson was taking the country into the Common Market via a referendum in which 67% said 'yes'! The influential figures behind this local venture included Norman Williams, then mayor of Cowbridge and Miss Maud Gunter, senior geography teacher at the Girls' High School. Norman recalls that the Rotary Club, of which he was a member, decided to support local initiatives to develop community activities. "I proposed a history society and Cecil England chose a gardening club". The constitution said the new Society would "foster interest in history of Cowbridge and District", "promote research into local history" and "preserve documents and other records". Annual subscription would be one pound but OAPs and students could join for 50p. A small committee was elected with Norman Williams voted as President and Miss Gunter as Life Vice President. The chairman was to be John Hollings of 26, High Street. Letters of support were received from the Town Council and from the South Glamorgan County Council. Initially the Society focused on a series of monthly talks but with the intention of setting up specialist study groups to look at specific aspects of local history such as archaeology and the history of buildings.

For its first season of talks the Society hoped to invite the well known broadcaster and writer Wynford Vaughan Thomas to open proceedings but unfortunately this came to nothing. Nonetheless the programme included talks on the history of the Glamorgan Constabulary, folk medicine and a study of Llanblethian Church.

In 1977 Miss Gunter died. It was agreed that an annual lecture be given in her memory, a tradition that holds good today. Another early stalwart of the Society was Yvonne Weeding as excursions secretary. She was already well known locally for the series of classes she gave on local architecture so it was no surprise that the first trip was to Beaupre Castle; members were asked to bring a picnic tea. In 1977 she was to become the Society's chairman a post she was to hold for more than 20 years.

By 1978 membership had doubled to over 100. In these early years it met in the town library largely because one of the members was the librarian but in 1977 the County Council withdrew this facility quoting the usual bureaucratic excuses: fire risk, insurance and "interfering with the cleaner's duty schedule"! Luckily the Town Council came to the rescue with the offer to meet in the Lesser Hall - for a fee, of course - where the Society has met ever since.

A formative influence on developments was the fact the Cardiff University's Extra-mural Department began classes in local history in Old Hall, the first series given by Philip Riden in 1977 and later in 1999 by Jeff Alden, then senior geography teacher in the comprehensive school. From fairly early on Jeff had been a member of what was by now known as the Cowbridge and District Local History Society but it was his classes that exposed the need for detailed research on Cowbridge, especially on its town plan and its wealth of ancient buildings. This resulted in the founding of the Cowbridge Record Society with well known local historian Brian LI. James as a leading light. Its

main purpose was to research and record the history of people and places in and around Cowbridge and to publish the results in a series of books. Its work involved the examination of hundreds of manuscripts, wills, probates and maps many of which were held in the Glamorgan County Record Office, then in Cathays Park. Jeff and Betty Alden soon became the repository of many such documents and photographs, so much so as Betty recalls, "they occupied most of our spare bedroom". In 1979 the Society was actively involved in the establishment of Cowbridge Museum, helping to provide some early financial support and many exhibits. Following the exhibition in the Town Hall of a recently discovered contemporary copy of the town charter in 1976, Charter Day (13 March 1254) was to be celebrated each year, usually to the accompaniment of wine and beer. Today, it is celebrated by a visit to a place of historical importance, followed by a good lunch. Here was, and is, a society that knows its priorities!

From the very beginning the Society had adopted a brief to examine local planning policies and plans and to comment on them. In order to try to influence planning policies with respect to conservation the Society successfully sought membership of the Vale Council's Conservation Advisory Group, one of only a handful in Wales. Originally David Busher represented Cowbridge but for many years George Haynes took responsibility for this area of work within the Society. In addition to commenting on individual planning applications local area plans and policies were also scrutinised, one example being the 1980 Cowbridge District Plan. The Society's minutes reveal the following areas of concern in this plan's proposals: car parking and its effects on trade in the town, resistance to additional, inappropriate house building, the poor local bus services and the upkeep of local footpaths, many of ancient usage. The Society's objections to the most recent LDPs of 2011 and 2013 reflect almost exactly the same concerns: *plus ça change!*

One historic building in the district that attracted particular attention was St Quentin's (Llanblethian) Castle which had been acquired by a local property developer and shamefully neglected. The Society advocated compulsory purchase but by 1990 nothing had happened despite the Vale's MP (John Smith) asking questions in the House. But local pressure was maintained and eventually the Castle was taken into the public domain by CADW and restored as a controlled ruin.

Through the 1990s and early 2000s membership fluctuated, sometimes up, sometimes down. Clearly new forms of entertainment and diversion were opening in the town with many clubs having some overlap with history. Home based entertainment was increasing through television, video rentals and on-line. At the same time the population of the town was changing; it was attracting more of the professional classes as commuters, and the elderly as retirees, many of whom did not necessarily have their roots in the Vale. Young people seemed to have much less interest in history. Sadly in 2007 the Society lost the services of its long standing chairman, Jeff Alden. His enthusiasm, detailed knowledge and general dynamism had kept the society on its toes. The books he wrote and edited with colleagues, the articles he produced for the Gem and the Society's newsletter and the talks he gave to neighbouring historical societies kept concern for local history in Cowbridge healthy. His death meant the town's history society would have to pass into fresh hands. When Dick Buswell took over as Chairman there was

considerable overlap in membership of the two existing societies. It is not perhaps surprising that one of his first tasks was to oversee their merger and the creation of the new Cowbridge History Society with a new constitution and charitable status. It was important for Jeff Alden's contribution to be marked, and in a very practical way. He and Betty had long campaigned for the establishment of a permanent archive of Cowbridge material so it was fitting that with the support of Creative Rural Communities and Old Hall Community College that the Jeff Alden Study Room was opened in 2009. It is now embarking on the electronic digitization of its resources, a step into future technology that Jeff would surely have approved.

Today, this new society has a membership of about one hundred, remarkably similar to that of 40 years ago. It is as strong as ever in spirit but always welcoming of new members, especially those of a less advanced age! As in the beginning we still meet on the first Friday of each month between October and June in the Lesser Hall. Membership may now be £7.50 but in real terms that is not much more than the original £1.00 of 1974! In the words of the old Harrow School song: *Forty years on, growing older and older, Shorter in wind, as in memory long... Twenty, and thirty, and forty years on!*

*Written by Dick Buswell*