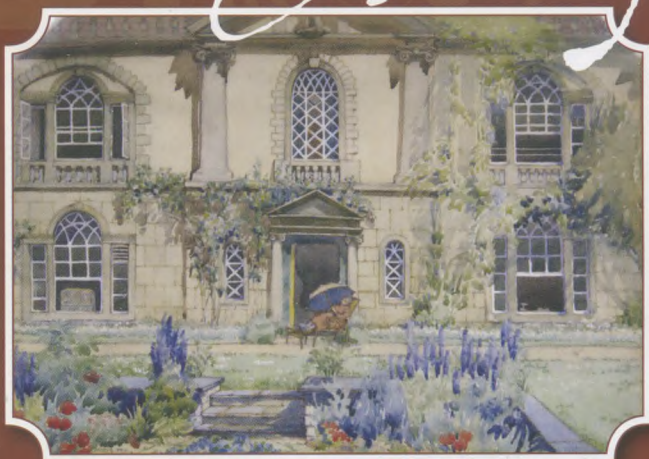


Old Hall Grounds
Cowbridge

*A Brief
History*



Eleanor Edmondson *Old Hall*, watercolour, 1929
By kind permission of the Edmondson family

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2014

Old Hall Grounds



The Town

The history of Old Hall and its gardens is the story of the town in miniature: periods of prosperity and hardship are reflected in the use of the gardens and the occupation of the house.

There is archaeological evidence for a substantial Roman presence at Cowbridge which extended from the river along the High Street as far as Old Hall. This followed the alignment of the Via Julia, the Roman road which linked the Roman fortress at Caerleon with Carmarthen, and is now the line of today's High Street.

Cowbridge as we know it today dates from Anglo Norman times when Richard de Clare, lord of Glamorgan, founded a 'new town' on the old Roman road where it crossed the ill drained valley of the River Thaw.

The borough was established largely for economic reasons. The first charter granted in 1254 refers to the settlement as 'Longa Villa', a description evocative of the layout along the Roman Road. A walled settlement with gates at the four compass points was built, the East and West gates being along the line of the road.

The walls protected the market rights of the burgesses (exclusively Anglo-Norman at first) by controlling access to the town: burgesses paid no taxes or market rents and had monopoly rights to trade, benefits which were jealously guarded. The area within the walls then became profitable real estate: it was divided into 90-100 burgage plots, narrow strips of land roughly 8m x 60m, at an annual rent of one shilling each. On these plots, the burgesses built houses and developed businesses.

Situated at the centre of the fertile Vale of Glamorgan, the town flourished thanks mainly to the success of its markets and fairs, a tradition that survived throughout the C20th with weekly markets that brought sheep and cattle and the tang of manure into the town's streets of a Tuesday morning. An archway under the battlement, under which animals could be driven to be watered in the market area, is now blocked up and home to a synthetic calf. The markets faded in frequency in the C21st as the internet took over most trading functions.



By the end of the C13th Cowbridge was expanding beyond the walls. Thereafter its population declined – a possible consequence of the impact of the Black Death of 1348-9 on its economic life – but it remained an important market town.

The Walls

The walls date from the charter of 1254 and probably had a symbolic rather than a defensive function as an enduring reminder to the Welsh of the Anglo-Norman conquest, that they were 'outsiders' subordinate to English control.

The only surviving sections of the Town Walls now form the southern and western boundaries of Old Hall Gardens. Of the four town gates, only South Gate at the end of Church Street survives; walls elsewhere in town were either viewed as useful quarries for dressed stone or were incorporated into garden and house walls.

Archaeological work in the last few years has revealed a great deal about the walls of Cowbridge. The bastion in the SW corner of Old Hall Gardens was found to have its medieval core intact whereas the crenellation of the battlement leading to it dates from the C18th remodelling of the gardens by Thomas Edmondes. The original walls might have been crenellated but it is more likely that such features were the product of a later, Romantic, imagination. As this battlement overlooks The Butts where the Welsh archers at Agincourt were said to have practised their skills, the flight of fancy seems totally appropriate.



The south wall was rather crudely rebuilt, at half its medieval density, and augmented by two gateways with Classical pillars and ball finials. The original medieval width can still be seen in the south-east corner (adjoining the Physic Garden) where it was excavated during the archaeological survey prior to Cowbridge Charter Trust's restoration project. This section has been planted with Creeping Thyme to stabilise its loose masonry and provide an attractive and fragrant carpet.

The Town Walls were restored by Cowbridge Charter Trust in 2011 using original building materials where possible and are now listed.

❁ Old Hall

The present site of Old Hall probably contained about ten burgage plots, some perhaps fronted by merchant houses with workshops behind and a 'shop' to the street; others likely to have been rather poor stone-built thatched cottages. In the long gardens behind there would have been privies, middens, pigsties, stables, workshops, orchards, chicken runs, vegetable plots (like today's Transition garden) or even a rabbit warren.

A deed of 1639 refers to a mansion house, with two new houses built together fronting the road, owned by a Thomas Andrewe, who also owned the land to the south of the house. This land 'commonly called the Cuningor' (a rabbit warren) was, by 1639, an orchard.



Old Hall Facade: Venetian window

a classical façade and Venetian windows fronting the gardens, which were also being laid out at this time.

Evidence indicates that for much of the C18th and early C19th the west side of the property was occupied as a separate house but in the 1840s the Reverend Thomas Edmondson (vicar of Cowbridge with Llanblethian for 46 years) moved into the main part of the building which he then upgraded to reflect his considerable wealth, mostly derived from rich coal seams he owned in the South Wales Valleys.

After Thomas Edmondson's death in 1893 the two properties were combined. The street frontage was rebuilt in mock-Tudor style with a stone porch and the house acquired additional rooms.



Cowbridge.

West End.

Old Hall with mock-Tudor frontage



Old Hall before late C19th 'Tudor' embellishment

❁ The Edmondson Family

The Edmondson are the heroes of this narrative as it is thanks to this family we still have the surviving stretches of town walls and the spacious gardens. They had settled in the Cowbridge area sometime in the late C17th, the family fortunes following a trajectory towards gentry status which began with trade followed by estate stewardship followed by the legal profession until they achieved prominence as landowners and public figures. They were one of the most colourful of C18th and early C19th century families in Cowbridge and the Vale. Thomas Edmondson founded the Michaelmas Fair at Cowbridge in 1750 and became Under-Sheriff of Glamorgan in 1752. With a reputation for unwise spending and a somewhat racy way of life, he was often in debt.

The Edmondson family continued to live at Old Hall until 1932 when it was taken over by Cowbridge Grammar School and used for class rooms, a library and a staff room. There was little income for upkeep and the building gradually deteriorated and was declared unsafe in the early 1960s.



Old Hall demolition c 1973

The Grammar School left in 1964 and nearly ten years later most of the rear of the house was demolished, including the whole upper storey of its fine classical façade, and left as a controlled ruin. Parts of the building were refurbished for community use and today it houses Cowbridge Community College and offices of the Vale of Glamorgan Council. Cowbridge library and the health centre, two unlovely buildings designed by students of the Welsh School of Architecture, were built in the garden around 1974, the latter now a private children's nursery. A new health centre has been built near the Leisure Centre.

❁ The Gardens

To create his Georgian garden, Thomas Edmondson bought the land adjoining the town walls to the rear of the burgage plots on which Old Hall was built and which were described as an orchard in the deed of 1639. He then laid down a series of landscaped gardens, creating a prospect to be enjoyed from the house's Venetian windows.

The rampart was reconstructed at this time and was in effect 'a mount': topped with a fashionable gazebo/ summer-house/folly, probably octagonal in shape with 'gothic' door and windows and with a fireplace inside. This created a vantage point from which to view the gardens as well as the fields to the south – a prospect of Llanblethian, increasingly a village for fashionable summer residence.

Unfortunately there has been no archaeological analysis of the gardens but their design was probably in accord with late C18th fashion: mature trees, gravelled walks, formal flower beds. In keeping with the demands of a substantial town house, there would also have been a kitchen garden to supply fruit and vegetables, probably on the site of today's Physic Garden.

An inventory of 1762 lists '2 Boxes with Orange trees'. These would have needed winter shelter but are significantly aspirational, orangeries being a fashionable feature of the great Georgian house, like that at Margam which dates from 1787. A lease of 1778 exhorts the incoming tenant to continue 'the preserving, cherishing and encouraging the fruit trees and other trees of ornament and profit' and to manure and cultivate such areas of the garden as are laid out 'for garden ornaments and yearly crops for the supply of the House and the Kitchen'.



Rampart crenellation, redundant market shed behind 2013



Rampart with lavender border 2013

The C19th Garden



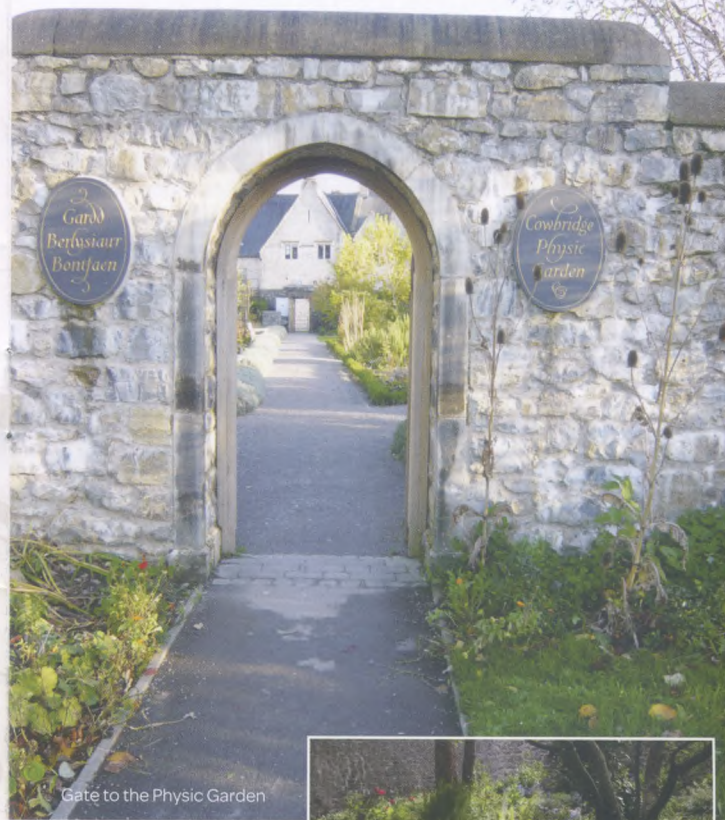
Old Hall rear elevation in 1898
By kind permission of Catherine Clay

By the late C19th tastes in garden design had changed. The diary of the Venerable Frederic William Edmondson (1840-1918) in the 1860s and 1870s mentions laburnums and plane trees and tennis, a fashionable pastime for ladies (the courts were on the site of the present library), and a croquet lawn in front of the house before the sunken garden, now the pond, was created.

Photographs taken in the late C19th show immaculate flower beds, clipped greenery, and roses trained against the house walls. The area now occupied by the Physic Garden was also part of Old Hall's gardens and was probably a kitchen garden with colourful floral borders laid out with formal paths and beds, to which the Physic Garden's present layout pays homage. The main pathway through



The pond with new island 2013



Gate to the Physic Garden

the Physic Garden is on the line of the walk Mrs Edmondson would have taken to occupy the family pew in Holy Cross Church, where her husband was vicar.



Bluebells and Ferns/Spring 2013

The Gardens in the C20th

When the Grammar School took over the house in 1932 the gardens were well maintained. The diary of Richard Williams, headmaster, describes 'massed crocuses, nodding daffodils and bluebells ... and glorious beeches with chequered light and shade in summer and delicate tracery of slender boughs in winter'. The area now occupied by the Physic Garden became the school's kitchen garden under head gardener Harold Penney, and was described by a master as a 'beautifully kept walled kitchen garden with its neat rows of cabbages and carrots, and its well-disciplined espalier apples' supplying all manner of vegetables and fruit for the boarders' meals. Transition Cowbridge's permaculture garden against the south wall continues the tradition of growing food crops within the walls, like the medieval burgage plots, Old Hall's C18th kitchen garden and two centuries later the Grammar School's garden.

When the Grammar School closed in 1974 this kitchen garden was taken over by the County Council as a tree nursery but was neglected and quickly became an impenetrable wilderness until the creation of The Physic Garden in 2005 by the Cowbridge Physic Garden Trust and the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust.

The Town Walls were not maintained by the County Council and vanished beneath a canopy of ivy and other destructive vegetation which was nevertheless a haven for wildlife; a magnificent ancient copper beech that had graced the main garden of Old Hall was felled despite much local opposition.

While the succeeding Vale of Glamorgan Council carried out minimal maintenance from 1983 onwards, it was not until Cowbridge Charter Trust in partnership with the Vale Council restored the Town Walls between 2008 and 2011 and then took over care of the grounds that Old Hall Gardens once more became an asset to the town.

Cowbridge Charter Trust's aim is twofold: to restore the gardens of Old Hall to a semblance of their former beauty and to replace the habitat lost when the walls were repaired by planting (mostly native) wildlife-friendly plants (for more details please see the Biodiversity Leaflet). It is also the Trust's intention to maintain the walls and structures so that these precious historical features are preserved for the delight of future generations.



Written by Dick Buswell and Linda Osborn

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