

The Changing Face of Town Mill Road, Cowbridge.

Intriguing daily things are happening in Town Mill Road, Cowbridge. The Norman arch at Southgate is under repair and closed to traffic; the former grammar school buildings have been demolished, the site flattened and the pavement in the process of being widened (hopefully). Lorries, pile-drivers, diggers and mud have replaced the quiet pastures which lay to this side of the town, where once sheep and cows grazed, boats were rowed on the river, fly fishermen caught trout and the Thaw flowed gently towards the sea. Few will mourn the loss of those 'temporary' classrooms, installed in the early 1960s for the expanding boys' grammar school, though many of you in the town will still remember how this road has gradually developed. There are photos in the local history exhibition, in the library until the end of this month, showing some of past landmarks.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the road was known as 'The Promenade', inviting a quiet stroll along to the mill away from the busy town. It was lined by massive elm trees, but by the 1920s, these had been cut down, their remaining stumps about four foot across. A floodgate was sited upstream from the mill, and when closed the water was diverted by means of a second gate into a channel which led to the mill. With both gates closed, there was apparently sufficient water for grammar school boys to row boats in single file. Here was the main town mill, around the 1860s, for the production of flour, and a playground for some of the grammar school boys who listened to tales of adventure round the fire from miller William Thomas. (His son, Edward, is supposed to have given rise to the naming of Mount Ida). By the early twentieth century the mill was a ruin, but the old wheel could still be seen, and grammar school boys crept in to have a smoke. The only houses in the road, apart from the mill, were Dynevor and Verlands House. Bowmans Well was good for watercress (and had a spring which never froze or dried up), and the quarry, in what is now Mill Park, was a great children's play area.

Doctor Booth Meller owned a large garden, bounded on the south side by the driveway to Verlands House, exhibited at many a flower show, and was often assisted by a young Ralph Bird, who went on to develop the motor mower business in the town.

John Sanders, the blacksmith with his forge in Eagle Lane, lived in Town Mill cottages, and ran a little sweet shop there. From the 1930s till the early '60s, his nephew Reg kept his apiary of around one hundred bee hives on the land opposite, and won first prize for his honey in the 1935 British Empire exhibition. On September 14th 1938, at the Southgate arch end, the grammar school gym and day boys' dining hall were completed and officially opened. The beautifully polished wood flooring suffered almost immediately under the feet of troops who were billeted and fed there at the outbreak of World War II. Vegetables were provided from the school's kitchen garden (now the Physic Garden) for nearly four hundred meals per week at this time, and senior grammar school boys 'dug for Victory', growing cabbages and potatoes around their gym. Ivor Treharne, who owned much of the land in this road, had a pair of semi-detached houses built in the 1930s – he lived in one and Bill Hinton next door.

In 1956, St Cadoc's Roman Catholic Church was erected on part of the Verlands estate, the land for this donated by the then owner of Verlands House, Mr L.E.W. Williams, a Cardiff solicitor. The old mill was converted to a pleasing house in the late 50s, the mill cottages (originally the home of the miller) divided into two, and the river bridge was re-built to better accommodate the Thaw. By 1966 Verlands House was derelict and was demolished, its porch being re-instated on the Manor House at St Hilary. A row of houses were built opposite the church, and the Verlands estate began. Some of the original trees leading to the Verlands House entrance are preserved to this day.

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Inevitably times are gradually changing. We are lucky we still have fields and so much greenery on the outskirts of the town, and the river Thaw continues to flow gently on towards the sea.

Betty Alden (article for 'the Gem') January 2013