

Glamorous legends have grown up around one of the oldest grammar schools in Wales. A history published today separates fact and fantasy.

# A school for poets and rugby players

**C**OWBRIDGE Grammar School's chief claim to fame in the eyes of many Welshmen may well be its reputation as the first home of rugby football in Wales.

As far back as 1874 the school team was able to take on the newly-formed Cardiff rugby team. Among many other absorbing details of information about the game in its infancy are those concerning the informality of the players' dress.

Most of them did no more than remove their jackets. One is said to have played in evening dress, and nobody ever thought of discarding his bowler hat. Halcyon days!

But Cowbridge has other more solid claims to distinction. The oldest grammar school in Glamorgan, it celebrated its 350th anniversary in 1958. Out of those celebrations grew this full-scale history of the school.\*

It is a comprehensive and detailed account such as we do not have—probably could not have—for any other school in Wales with the possible exception of Friars' School, Bangor.

It is a handsome volume, beautifully printed, well bound and charmingly illustrated, with a more than ordinarily attractive dust jacket designed by Miss G. M. Davies.

It has been produced, most appropriately, by a Cowbridge printing house on whose skill and standards it reflects great credit.

There have been those—Iolo Morganwg, as might be imagined, foremost among them—who traced the school's origins back to the misty dawn of Celtic Christianity in Wales.

It was, they averred, the direct descendant of Iltyd's famous fifth-century school at Llantwit Major. Others have tried to connect it with the old Roman site of Bovium. Hence the name given to the school magazine, *The Bovian*, and the reference to its former pupils as Old Bovians.

These glamorous legends are dispelled by the stiff dose of astringent criticism administered by Mr. Iolo Davies. Nevertheless, he can trace an authentic origin to the school which is both

honourable and in 1608-09 it was that renaissance as part of led to the creation of a whole series of similar schools in England and Wales.

The behind the Cowbridge school were those ornaments of renaissance culture in Glamorgan, Sir Edward

By Professor GLANMOR WILLIAMS

Stradling of St. Donat's (1529-1609) and his heir, Sir John Stradling (1551-1623).

Another Glamorgan luminary, Sir Leoline Jenkins (d.1685), made such generous provision for the school in his will that he can virtually be regarded as its second founder.

He it was who linked the school with Jesus College, Oxford, a miniature version of the kind of connexion existing between Winchester and New College or Eton and King's.

An association which lasted until the twentieth century, it was to be nearly as productive of acrimonious dispute as of fruitful contact.

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries Cowbridge remained a typical small country grammar school, grounding—sometimes grinding—a small number of boys in classical grammar and preparing them for the university or the professions.

Despite its air of relaxed, unhurried, bucolic charm, it often produced men of distinction like David Durel, vice-chancellor of Oxford, Charles Williams, principal of Jesus College, or those brilliant scholars, the Walters brothers, John and Daniel.

## Upsurge

By the middle of the 19th century Cowbridge had begun to feel the pressures of a rapidly-changing world. This was the era when the demands of a new middle class created the new-style public school.

Cowbridge, with its long boarding-school tradition, might have been thought to have been well-placed to share in such an upsurge.

It had as its headmaster in 1847 Hugo Daniel Harper, the headmaster who virtually created Sherborne as a public school. Given more encouragement, he might have done for Cowbridge what in fact he did for Sherborne.

Towards the end of the century when the new "county" schools were being mooted, the destinies of Cowbridge became enmeshed in a long, bitter and ultimately futile sectarian wrangle.

The prejudice of what the author rightly describes as "irresponsible bus-bodies," wrecked a promising scheme for co-operation between the school, Jesus College and the county authorities.

Cramped and constricted by inadequate funds, in competition with other rate-maintained schools, Cowbridge could not hope in the 20th century

to maintain indefinitely its old position.

After each of two world wars it had, perforce, to yield more of its independence until by now it is in its constitution not significantly different from other grammar schools in the county, except that it still maintains some boarders

These bare bones of the school's history cannot, however, convey anything like adequately the fascination of Mr. Davies's book. There is first of all the remarkable succession of headmasters, including such richly diverse and well-defined characters as Daniel Durel (1721-63), a Huguenot from Jersey, the brilliant but short-lived Morson (1870-75), the spiky and ineffectual M. P. Williams (1875-89) or the nature-loving sturdily-muscular Christian, W. F. Evans (1890-1918).

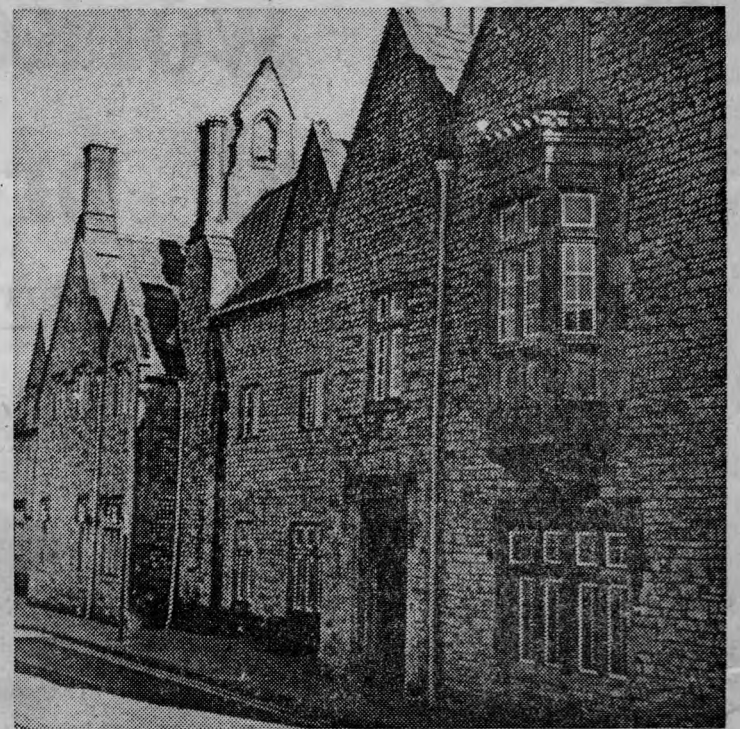
Not the least of her benefactors have been the school's most recent heads, Richard Williams (1919-1938) and Idwal Rees (1938-).

Another arresting feature is the long and persistent capacity of its boys for self-expression. The number of gifted poets in their midst must surely surpass that of any other Welsh school.

They begin with the classicists who copied their epigrams and hexameters into the *Golden Book* of the 17th century and come down through the Walters brothers (Daniel also wrote a splendid diary as a 14-year-old) to Alun Lewis in our own time.

*The Bovian*, too, founded in 1894, has provided some more than averagely good prose and verse as well as the more banal offerings usually to be expected from schoolboy pens.

Taking advantage of all these unusually full and varied sources Mr. Iolo Davies has skilfully included all kinds of minor ephemeral details that go into the making of school



Cowbridge Grammar School today.

life in any age, but usually leave little or no trace behind them; the pranks and the punishments, the food and the frolics, the games, formal and informal.

All kinds of unexpected and delightful touches abound; an 18th century scholar's bill of 10s. for "shaving and powdering his head" and 9s. for a wig, or the prescription of "a decoction of snails with cows' milk to drink early every morning in bed."

## Tempestuous

Or there is that Dickensian scene of Victorian boarders pouring beer on their rice pudding to cool it, and the wild Pickwickian tobogganing from the top of Stallingdown to the village. Such fascinating glimpses could be multiplied almost indefinitely.

Not that in giving us minutiae of this kind the author has neglected major themes. The dramatic and tempestuous passages of the years from 1880 onwards are fully documented.

The politics of the relations between the school, Charity Commissioners, Jesus College, County Council, House of Commons and the local "church party" headed by that stormy petrel Edward Jenkins, as irresponsible as he was irresponsible, are explored in detail.

Indeed, though Cowbridge became a *cause célèbre* in the conflict between the old world and the new, my own view is

that these controversies have perhaps been too elaborately written up.

All in all, however, one cannot but feel profoundly grateful to the author. Himself a graduate of Jesus College and for many years a master at Cowbridge, he brings an admirable equipment to his task.

He has that shrewd, lucid, urbane quality of mind that a classical education is traditionally supposed to develop.

The book appears at a time when Cowbridge like many other grammar schools is facing drastic transformation. This makes it all the more opportune.

For it stresses some of the more fundamental and perennial values for which the school has always stood: the importance of character-building, moral discipline and a sense of genuine community.

Mr. Davies would, I think, be less optimistic about the potential of the new regime than I. But I feel sure that we should both agree on the necessity of thinking hard and long about the best means of transplanting the old values of schools like Cowbridge into the brave new world of the comprehensives.

**\*A CERTAIN SCHOOLE: A HISTORY OF COWBRIDGE GRAMMAR SCHOOL, by Iolo Davies; Brown and Sons, Cowbridge; 35s.**