

Who put the 'cow' in Cowbridge?

NESTLING in a green valley with lush pasture-lands to the north and almost within sight of the Bristol Channel to the south, stands the ancient town once called the Capital of the Vale of Glamorgan.

Drive past signs like *L'Epicure of Cowbridge* or *Fish and Charcoal Grill*, at the bottom of a steep hill and you are in a busy town with 2,000 years history and a modern reputation for friendly people; even those who refer to their ancient Town Hall and Council House as 'The Grumble Box'.

Yet most of the townsfolk seem to have at least one close member of the family who is — or has been — on the council.

The kindly David Tilley, for instance, admits that although his forbears once came over from Wiltshire his grandparents became involved in local affairs when Cowbridge, Llantwit Major and Llantrisant lost their Charters as 'Rotten Boroughs'. "Cowbridge went to London to protest and got a new Charter in the 1880s," he explains. "My father was one of the first elected members of the new borough council."

Full score

Did any of the family become mayor of the borough?" I asked and got the teasing reply, "Do you want the full score? Father was mayor three times, mother twice and son once."

From a glass case in their home the smiling Mrs Tilley produces a copy of the Freedom of the Borough presented to David's mother — and also the shining brass fireman's helmet of years gone by. "Father founded the town fire brigade which was first funded by E H Ebbsworth, the Squire and great benefactor around about 1895. He married a White Russian aristocrat, she was very rich but the money dried up after the Revolution. They lived in the castle at Llandough." (This Llandough is pronounced to rhyme with 'off' — not with 'dock' as the one nearer Cardiff famed for its hospital).

Until the building of the by-pass in the 1960s all East-West traffic passed, painfully slowly, through the town's one main street which is actually three streets: Eastgate, High Street and Westgate. "The by-pass will make this a ghost town," complained some of the tradespeople and it did become comparatively quiet for a while until motorists realised the value of a good-class shopping centre with ample parking.

The David Brothers, Herbert and Edward, "*Family Butchers — Noted for Home Killed Meat*" have their own views about the town's busy-ness. "Today more people come to shop from miles away from Cowbridge; lots come from Cardiff, Dinas Powys, Pontyclun and the Rhondda." What about the recent 'mad cow' scare and the sale of beef in this cattle market town?

"There are no mad cows in Cowbridge" Herbert's wide grin almost fills the shops, then, seriously, "It is true that people have not bought so much beef since last month but it is the time for new season Welsh lamb, which is so popular at this time of the year and we would expect to have less demand for beef."

One lady didn't want steak,

because of the scare, so she ordered mince instead.

"Ours has been a family firm since 1909 and, although youngsters are not as loyal to their tradesmen as their parents and grandparents, we still have an amazing friendship with customers over the years."

Friendliness seems a byword in the town, as you will find if you call at David Brown and Sons, the printers and meet Sandra Dickens. "Steven, my husband, and I came here 22 years ago from Wiltshire and found the folk so welcoming and friendly. There is everything here, leisure centre, health centre, library and it's near some beautiful coastline and countryside."

Famous writers

Sandra welcomes you to the shop, once part of the printing works which produced books by some famous Welsh authors like Gwyn Thomas and even the John Edwards booklets on the art of speaking Wenglish — the local lingo of South Wales. The printing presses have now been transferred to the new industrial estate at Bridgend, leaving the town which was once the home of Iolo Morgannwg and responsible for the first printing press in Glamorgan around 1770.

The family of Roy Griffiths had been blacksmiths at Cowbridge even before Iolo Morgannwg and, in his comfortable bungalow with the long well-kept garden, Roy explains, "This was halfway along the Roman Road from their forts at Carmarthen and Caerleon. The Gruffydd Smithy was right in the centre of the town so they must have been first class craftsmen."

"In the 1920s, however, my parents took the Horse and Groom public house and that's where we remember some characters. There were Tom and Oscar David, the thatchers who put the roof on the famous Dolls' House cottage which was a gift from the people of Wales to the little Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose.

"It caught fire before it reached Windsor. Tom and Oscar were sent to rethatch it. After that they didn't thatch many farmers' hayricks round here; they were in demand by the aristocracy."

But how does a town with the



THE DAVID BOTHERS : Ted and Herbert — *Noted for Home Killed Meat*. LEFT: Mr David Tilley with his mother's Freedom scroll and his wife with his father's firemen's helmet.



Welsh name Bont Faen (Stone Bridge) become Cowbridge? "We don't know" was the usual answer. "Better ask the birds!" Any visitor soon became aware of those birds; a whole family of them.

Roger Bird is chairman of the impressive Garden Centre firm which stands at the heart of town, just within the old stone, walls and near the village church — called The Cathedral of the Vale — with its unusual fortified tower which is both round and square.

Sitting with chairman Roger is son Jeffrey (managing director). Daughter Heather is 'in charge of the garden centre'.

Above them is a fine painting of ancestor John Bird who, in the early 1800s, was secretary to the Marquess of Bute. "Two of his brothers came to Cowbridge as ironmongers selling farming implements like milk churns, pails and buckets, this was before the industrial revolution. Back in 1923 the firm decided to specialise in the new motor lawn mowers," Roger explains.

Young Jeffrey, also shows pride in his old Grammar School, the walls of which adjoin their garden centre. "It has been important since 1608 as a boarding school which was unique in its earliest days.

But I had still not discovered why the town is called Cowbridge. Maybe the mayor would know. Councillor Susan Cox was not in the office. She works for another council — in Swansea. But any questioning visitor to the mayor's parlour in the Old Town Hall, who is not intimidated by the cell doors of the adjacent prison, would be ill-advised to take three backward steps from an audience before the mayor's parlour table. It could mean a 15 feet drop down an open well.

So while I never discovered who put the cow in Cowbridge, I certainly found a lively, interesting and friendly town with an old reading room converted into a colourful mini-mall — with Susan's Designer Knitwear, A Pocketful of Posies, Rhapsody Couture and Kidz Childrenswear — and nearby a wine merchants presenting "Wines from Spain, Italy, France, Germany and Llanblethian — one mile away."

NEXT week I am going west to Tenby and Saundersfoot.



THE BIRDS: John Bird looks down on Mr Roger Bird, his wife Diana and children Jeffrey and Heather.

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