

Cowbridge Museum – a talk given in the 1980s by Mrs Marion Eveleigh (the museum was founded in 1981)

As this is the first time I have spoken in public to a strange audience, I hope you will forgive any mistakes I make. Mrs Carthew has asked me to tell you about the little museum we have in Cowbridge and how it came into being.

Unlike the chicken and the egg, we know the History Society came first. This was started in 1974 and was an instant success. I think 90% of the membership are newcomers to Cowbridge. I suppose when you are in the midst of history and have grown up with the stories and legends, you have little need to learn about it in later life. The members who are from Cowbridge have been invaluable to the society, not only for their own recollections, but for their contacts and the knowledge of where and to whom to go for information.

We started in a small way by being asked to do displays for various shows. Our first major venture was for the Glamorgan Show at Penllyn. It was in a small tent and it poured with rain the whole of the previous day while we were setting up, but we were lucky the day itself was fine and our display was very well received. This gave us confidence to accept the challenge of providing an exhibition in the council chamber and cells during the next year's 'Cowbridge Week'.

Mr Norman Williams was Mayor during this period and he had been one of the Founder Members of the History Society, and our President ever since. Someone had given him an old Waterman pen show case which he passed on to us, and this was our sole piece of equipment. We used it in our first 'Cowbridge Week' exhibition, and the following ones, for displaying the Mayor's regalia.

Meanwhile, I had always been a museum fan since at the age of 9 my father had taken me on wet Sunday mornings to the Science Museum at Kensington. It was always the Science Museum. I cannot remember now whether this was because it was the only one open, or because my father was an engineer and therefore this was his favourite, but I do know my brother and I loved the working models.

During my growing up years, I visited nearly all of the London museums and spent many happy hours in the National Museum in Cardiff. I watched St Fagans grow from just a lovely house and gardens to the excellent Folk Museum it is today.

Newport was the first local museum I discovered. It was above the library, and my husband and I popped up there one day when we had an hour to spare and I was hooked, as the modern expression goes. This was intimate history, something to identify with as opposed to Kings and Queens. From then on, wherever we were we looked for the museum. We found them in all sorts of odd and interesting places, always with dedicated people willing to talk about their town.

I think I bored people to tears after that first successful week, saying wouldn't it be nice if Cowbridge had a museum.

Then things started to come together. The caretaker of the Town Hall found a pile of photographs of ex-Mayors and other dignitaries gathering dust in a corner; with the help of the town handy man she hung them in the cell corridor. The Town Clerk thought it was a shame the cells weren't being used, especially as people often asked to see them. The outcome of these small events was that the Town Council asked the History Society if they would be interested in staging a permanent exhibition in the cells.

Our chairman, who is an excellent organiser, didn't have time to take it on herself, but she thought of the person who was always nagging about a museum – me. A committee was formed of interested society members, and we were under way, with our one ancient show case, a funeral bier that filled nearly half a cell and a lot of enthusiasm.

Our basic idea was to tell the story of Cowbridge in 3D as it were. We made a rough plan for each cell, the first to be a cell with prisoner and warden if possible. We were tied on the 2nd cell by the bier, so we thought of modern history of trade, commerce and local personalities. We had learned from past displays that people loved old photographs. The 3rd cell was to start the Cowbridge story in pre-historic times through the Roman and medieval to the present day.

Two of our members, Mr & Mrs Keay and a visiting sister took over the prison cell, and their search for exhibits took them to the Police Museum in Bridgend, Cardiff prison and the R.A.F. station in St Athan. Mrs Keay had quite a shock when a Cardiff departmental store quoted her £200 as a basic price for a broken model. Mr Baker of the Police Museum came to the rescue and gave us one, also the warden's uniform to dress him in. Mr Baker had also been surprised at the price of models, but he had had an inspiration and sent off one of the police Cadets out on an initiative test to the shops in Bridgend. He thought it would be worthwhile if he brought back one figure – he returned with twelve. Mr Bakr showed us his storeroom where the shelves of assorted heads, legs and torsos made it look like something out of the Chamber of Horrors.

Mrs Keay used a bit of poetic licence in portraying a woman prisoner, as in reality our block of cells is the men's section. The women's cells are on the other side of the corridor wall. The decision to create a woman prisoner was decided by two factors – 1. being that a female figure was easier to mock-up and 2. Mrs Keay had been much impressed by a book she had just read, 'Welsh Convict Women' by Dierdre Beddoe.

When it came to the middle cell, I felt we must portray in some way the Taff Vale Railway. The railway in Cowbridge had had a comparatively short life. It was late starting and finished in 1950. Now there is very little trace of its existence. Our problem was that dedicated railway enthusiasts weren't about to loan their treasures to us, but here knowing the right people came into its own. One of our staunchest helpers, Mrs Viv Whythe, knew the daughter of the guard on the last train from Cowbridge and we now have the last ticket issued and buttons and badges of the T.V.R.

The drum that is in this cell was found by the caretaker at the back of a store room, completely unrecognisable. A good deal of work and research has gone into restoring it.

Research is the most time-consuming of the activities, with perhaps just a card with half a dozen words on it to show for it. A good example of this is the Roneo machine donated by a member. Roneo is now amalgamated, so a trade directory had to be found and the new name traced, then a letter sent off. Nearly three months later, when we had given up, a reply arrived. The letter had been passed from branch to branch and office to office till it finally ended up on the right desk. It was very kind of all these people to go to the trouble for our reward, not even publicity. We would have taken a guess at the date, but we now have the satisfaction of knowing the date is as accurate as possible.

Another problem is that most of my material is on loan, therefore I cannot secure it permanently, so in the humidity of the cells photographs and such like are forever coming unstuck, and therefore generally something is hanging spooked or slipping down.

The Porthcawl Museum Society was very helpful with advice and practical help. At first we thought our show case problem was solved, as they had progressed to a grant and beautiful new show cases,

leaving their old ones available at a reasonable price. But we hadn't taken into account our old doorways and narrow corridor, and no way could we squeeze the cases in. One of our local craftsmen was consulted, and he agreed to make a case and assemble it in the cell for £120. This was very reasonable but we had no money. Nothing daunted our chairman, Mrs Yvonne Weeding, who decided on a book sale. Peter Alan had a shop vacant which he said we could use the following Saturday. After many telephone calls and much running around, by 10 on the Saturday morning we had a shop full of books, and by 5 o'clock we had made about £150.

My right-hand helper, Mrs Dorothy Sewell, is very keen on archaeology, and she has helped on some of the digs in Cowbridge; so she approached the Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust and they loaned us Roman and medieval exhibits found during the excavations in the High Street and behind the Bear Hotel, also plans and photographs of these sites.

Mrs Keay, in her quest for exhibits, contacted the photographer at the National Museum, and to our delight he offered us photographs of all the Cowbridge exhibits owned by the museum. As these included the finds from the Breach Farm Bronze Age Round Barrow, we now had the bases for a display of pre-historic life in the Cowbridge area.

A week before the first viewing of the cells by society members, my husband was frantically constructing a case for exhibits which had suddenly started to arrive at my door.

A museum is generally thought of as being dead or at best moribund, but this is far from the truth. New exhibits and information are arriving at each opening, and in the short lifetime of our society it has been proved there was some kind of Roman settlement in Cowbridge, whereas up to very recently historians had considered Cowbridge had been merely medieval.

I hope you will come out and visit us, but please do not expect beautiful treasures or professional display work. I do think though you will increase your knowledge of Cowbridge, the medieval borough and Roman settlement.

Transcribed by Betty Alden, October 2020. Marion Eveleigh died late this summer.