

# NEWSLETTER

of Cowbridge History Society



*Autumn/Winter 2020*



*Cheer up - it's virtually Christmas!*

## Hard times, harder times

Our sharp-eyed members will be able to guess the year in which the cover photograph was taken from the clothing of the fashion-conscious mother and daughter seen here tackling the streets of Cowbridge in somewhat unfavourable conditions. That's right, it was January 1982, when blizzard conditions made life extremely difficult for the people of South Wales.

The snow began on 7 January and continued for 36 hours in many places, leaving motorists stranded, households without basic supplies, and the Australian rugby team stuck in their hotel in Porthcawl. In rural areas, helicopters and army patrols were called out to assist the population. There was no internet, e-mail or mobile phones to enable us to call for help; many people still did not have telephones installed at home. I remember queueing to use a red telephone box, only to find that it was out of use because the compartment that held the coins was full and couldn't be emptied. People queued in the streets for bread and milk, and many households were even worse off, losing their electricity and other vital services.

In 2020 we have been asked to endure the lesser hardship of staying at home and having our groceries delivered by supermarkets or helpful neighbours. We've been made to avoid playing with our grandchildren or visiting our elderly friends and relatives. It has been difficult, not because of the physical effort, but because of the long period of time involved. (At the time of writing, many are not even sure whether we will be able to see our families at Christmas or whether we will need to celebrate the holiday by "virtual" means.) Yet there are still many Cowbridge residents who have clear memories of wartime, a period when the hardship suffered by families and individuals was far greater than anything we have to endure today, or even the events of January 1982.

Whatever we may think about the reasons for the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures that have been taken, or sometimes not taken, to deal with it, most of our members have done their best to abide by the guidelines and in general have done so with little complaining. What will we remember about this historic event in years to come? The yellow arrows on the pavement in Cowbridge's High Street that so many people choose to ignore?

Members are welcome to write down their thoughts (no politics, please!) about the significance of this time in national and local history and send them to us, for inclusion in the CHS archive or perhaps in a future edition of this newsletter. Whatever we may be feeling, let's not forget that we are all in it together.

*Deb Fisher  
Publications Officer*

## Navigating the River Thaw - in print

The committee recently met to discuss our contribution to the publication of the new book, *A Journey down the Thaw Valley*, which has been published by its authors with financial assistance from CHS and Llantwit Major Local History Society. We have been very pleased with the response so far.

The book is an account of research carried out by Betty Alden, Jo Banning, Mary Wallis, Jo Williams and Christine Young, all familiar names to our members, with the assistance of local wildlife experts Rob and Linda Nottage. It is an attempt to explain the landscape in terms of its geology, history, land use and wildlife, and was written with assistance from people who live in the Thaw Valley. It is essential reading for anyone with an interest in the area, particularly if you want to find the most interesting historical sites to visit.

Members still have the opportunity to order a copy of the book at the discount price of £8 (representing a saving of 20% on the retail price). Please send your orders, together with the relevant payment (cheques made payable to "Cowbridge History Society", please) to the Treasurer at Porth y Felin, Town Mill Road, Cowbridge, CF71 7BE (tel. 01446 772704) and arrange to collect.

Members who live outside the district and need to have the book sent to them by post (UK only) will need to include an additional £2.50 to cover postage and packing, bringing the cost up to £10.50 per copy. Deliveries by hand may be requested by anyone living within 5 miles of Cowbridge, but are not guaranteed.

## AGM Report

The Annual General Meeting took place via the “Zoom” platform on 2nd October 2020, and we were pleasantly surprised by the number of members who made the effort to join. Under the circumstances, the business of the meeting was completed in record time. The present officers and committee were re-elected to their existing roles, thus your committee for the next year consists of the following:

**Chair** - Dick Buswell

**Secretary** - Dick Tonkin

**Treasurers** - Beverly Tonkin & Keith Jones

**Publications Officer** - Deborah Fisher

**Other committee members:** Betty Alden, Brian James (co-President), Don Gerrard and Chris Turner

## Talks of the season

Because we are unable to use the Lesser Hall at present, “Zoom” talks have been arranged this autumn, and the first of these took place on Friday 6th November, when Chris Turner gave a fascinating illustrated talk on the subject of the Rebecca Riots of the 1840s. This is a subject most people know *something* about, but most of us don’t realise how little we know until we hear an expert like Chris talk about it. Everyone used to complain about the tolls on the Severn Bridge, but just imagine being a poor agricultural worker and having to pay tolls to take your produce in a handcart through a tollgate every day - worse still, a tollgate owned by an Englishman!

Harriet Martineau, a contemporary writer, described the Rebecca Riots as “the strangest series of riots that has occurred in our time”. Chris’s talk reinforced this impression, and his talk was very well attended, with about 30 members signing on to Zoom to hear it and view the excellent slides. “Rebecca” got her name from a Bible story, but there is also a theory that “Big Becca” was a local woman who supplied the outsize clothing to one of the rioters’ leaders, Twm Carnabwth.



Since 2008, there has been a wooden sculpture on display at St Clears to commemorate local participation in the Rebecca Riots, which you can see in the photograph. The Rebecca Riots were of course not the only sign of popular unrest during the early Victorian period. Chartism, the

anti-Corn Law League and other movements all affected Wales, but “Rebecca” was a uniquely Welsh protest.

The second talk of the season was given by the ever-popular Dean Powell, who used his own experience as a member of local male voice choirs to talk about the history of Welsh choral music under the title “Wales, the Land of Song”. The title is a reference to a quotation from one of the pioneers of Welsh choral music, “Caradoc” (real name Griffith Rhys Jones, 1834-1897), who described Wales as “Gwlad y Gân”. Caradoc took a huge choir to Crystal Palace, winning a national competition and the approval of Queen Victoria!

We resume in January 2021 with talks on Zoom, but we hope it will not be long before we can all meet in person once again.

## The “Twt Beech”

Members will recall the large and very old beech tree that was removed from the Twt park in 2018 for safety reasons. Cowbridge History Society is one of several local groups that have been consulted about the design of decorative panels that are to be created from slices of the tree for local display. Sculptor and community artist Ami Marsden has been talking to the committee about possible themes that might be suitable and we are hoping to have some face-to-face sessions with her in the New Year.

## From the archive...

Cowbridge in 1789 – taken from ‘C.C.’s Tour In Glamorgan 1789’, edited by T.J. Hopkins, B.A. in Stewart Williams’s *Glamorgan Historian, Volume II* (1965)

“Cowbridge is distinguished by its grammar school, which is the most flourishing in Glamorganshire. The school room is a handsome stone building at the back of the master’s house. The town hall, in which the assizes for the county are sometimes held, is a tolerable building, but as it stands in the high street of the town, it inconveniently narrows a part of it. The church is a heavy, ill-built structure, with a tower resembling that of a castle. There are many good houses in this town, but they are frequently disgraced by the immediate propinquity of wretched hovels.

Near Cowbridge is Llanblythian, a village lying in a bottom, between a high hill on which its parish church stands and a lower one on which are the ruins of its castle. This fortress now exhibits only a part of the walls, and some remains of a tower, now converted into the dwelling house of a rustic. It has a pleasing effect, as viewed from Cowbridge, from which it is not above half a mile distant...”

‘C.C.’, the author, has not been able to be identified, but his journal appeared in four instalments in the monthly *Gentleman’s Magazine* between 1789 and 1790. His home is thought to have been in London. He travelled via Reading, Bath and Bristol to Newport, Cardiff, Caerphilly, Pontypridd and Llantrisant; after visiting Cowbridge, he moved on to Ewenny and Bridgend, then Pyle, Margam, Aberavon and Neath, returning home via Cardiff.

*Betty Alden*

## Newton House

*Helen Tinsley, the author of the following piece, contacted the Society in June to buy some of our publications, one as a birthday present to her brother who was a pupil at Cowbridge Grammar School. Over the course of a few telephone calls, letters and emails Helen mentioned that she had written about Newton House (which lies halfway along the road from Aberthin to Llansannor) and her family's life there between 1944 and 1963, for the children of the family. Helen very kindly agreed to make her account available for publication in the Newsletter.*

*Dick Tonkin  
Secretary*

Newton House was built in 1795 for Mr. William Gibbon on the Newton Estate, a very large area of land near Cowbridge, which he owned. In 1795 George III was on the throne and Britain was at war with France. During the previous year, and for a large part of 1795, Britain experienced a variety of extreme weather conditions. Several months of severe cold were followed by flooding, and then a drought. These overwhelming conditions killed off crops in many areas, causing shortages and crippling high food prices. This resulted in rioting - the Bread Riots.

Portraits of family groups show that not only the adults wore wigs, but some children did too. Powder was required to deter lice, and sometimes to introduce colour. In 1795 the Hair Powder Tax was introduced to raise money for the war effort. Poorer people such as clergymen were exempted from paying. A notable event which took place in the same year as the completion of Newton House was the Gorsedd, a gathering of Bards, on Stalling Down near Aberthin. This eventually became the Eisteddfod, a regular celebration of poetry and music. The Gorsedd had been founded three years earlier by Iolo Morgannwg, who lived much of his life in the Cowbridge area.

A large number of papers relating to Newton House are lodged in the Glamorgan Archives: business transactions, purchases of land and properties, and rental agreements. Papers dated 1858 relate to the renting out of land by William Gibbon to four small railway companies. From information relating to the Newton Estate, gathered from many sources by members of Cowbridge History Society, it is possible to have glimpses of the lives of some of the occupants of Newton House. After William Gibbon vacated the house there were several years when a number of people occupied it, some of them being tenants. Two census entries list Newton House as being occupied by two servants and a groom in 1861 and by just two servants in 1871.

The Newton Estate had land covering a large area - including Llanharry, Llanblethian, Penllyn, Llansannor and Penylan. At one time John Samuel Gibbon, JP, was in the Glamorgan Light Infantry Militia and he was a magistrate and bailiff. There are papers in the Glamorgan Archives dated 1878 granting mineral rights so a small coal mine could be opened on land near Llanharry. There was also a clay pit on land he owned. It was not possible to find out much about later residents, but there is evidence that a Richard Thomas Samuel of Newton House had signed a legal document, and there are also papers relating to the estate of the late Mrs. Emily Samuel. In 1876 when John Samuel Gibbon was in residence, parts of the house were renovated. There is an architect's drawing of the front. David Vaughan of Bonvilston was the architect.

A sale catalogue in the Archives gives a description of Newton House as it was in 1909. Ten years earlier £500 had been spent on renovations - over £45,000 in today's money. There is a list

of rooms and a description of the gardens. There were pleasure grounds, a shrubbery, a walled garden and stabling for seven horses.

There is a lot of information on Newton House in the archive created by members of Cowbridge History Society so I shall fast forward to the middle of the 20th century when the house was rented to my father Lt. Col Noel Whitaker, from 1944 - 1963. By then the house had been partitioned so that two families could occupy it. We lived in the grander part, with views over countryside from the front. There were five bedrooms, a hall, dining room, sitting room and small kitchen with a large white butler sink and a wooden draining board. The coal fire, which was lit every day in winter, had a small oven at its side. A passage connecting the two parts of the house was blocked by a cupboard. A longer passageway upstairs was part of the corridor which originally had bedrooms opening off it all along the second floor. There was a locked door at the end of the passage which was opened on rainy days so that my brothers and I could go through to play with the children next door.

Next door had been mainly servants' quarters and had only a small garden, whereas the grounds on our side were vast - two lawns, one large enough to be used as a tennis court, an orchard, a walled garden and two wide gravel drives. The main drive was never used and weeds had grown over it. Outside the back door was a pantry which had a large slate slab for keeping meat and milk cool. I can remember seeing a dead rabbit hung up outside, ready for skinning. The coal house was beyond the pantry. Steps from the garden led to a large cellar beneath the other side of the house. One autumn it was flooded by heavy rain and all the apples stored on the lower racks were floating around.

The inside of the house was beautiful, with high coved ceilings in the drawing room and dining room. These rooms both had two large sash windows, which had wooden shutters as well as curtains. There were fireplaces in all the downstairs rooms except the hall. The drawing room had a very wide marble mantelpiece on which my father stored his homemade wine. Streaks of light brown staining up the wall above it were evidence of a cork being exploded out of at least one of the bottles. The hall was uncarpeted and the floor was laid with enormous flagstones. Over each doorway were mounted heads of deer my father had shot during his time as an army officer in India.

There was no heating system in the house. Fires laid in the kitchen and dining room were occasionally supplemented by a paraffin stove. Winters indoors were bitterly cold and we sometimes wore mittens when we were upstairs playing or doing homework. Soon after my parents moved out, the house was sold and renovated. The new owners installed central heating. In 2018 I visited Newton House to ask the present owner if I could check the date on the plaque on the front of the house. As I walked down the restored main drive I recalled my father mowing the weeds covering it. The grounds were beautiful and, as I looked at the neatly kept lawns and shrubs, I felt that even if the design of the gardens might be different, the appearance of Newton House in its setting must be very similar to that of the home William Gibbon had lived in just over two hundred years ago.

*Helen Tinsley*

*More about John Samuel Gibbon in our next edition.*

## Cowbridge Museum

*Our previous issue included an obituary of Marion Eveleigh. Here are extracts from the text of a talk Marion gave to a local group during the early days of the museum.*

[...] 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 [the former Cowbridge & District Local 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 showcase 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 handyman 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 society if they would be interested in staging a permanent exhibition in the cells.

Our chairman, who is an excellent organiser [Marion is referring to the late Yvonne Weeding], 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 showcase, 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 warder 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 prehistoric times through the Roman and medieval to the present day.

Two of our members 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 warder'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 Baker 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 this 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: a female figure was easier to mock-up and Mrs Keay had been much impressed by a book she had just read, *Welsh Convict Women* by Deirdre 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 crooked or slipping down.



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

*Visitors to Cowbridge Museum in the 21st century will find that, whilst the museum has been extended into the second block of cells and many of the exhibits have been modernised and made to look highly professional, there are still restrictions on what can be achieved, as a result of the environment and limited spending power. They will also find that a team of volunteers still works tirelessly to keep the museum open to the public in normal times.*

# COWBRIDGE HISTORY SOCIETY

## PROGRAMME FOR 2021

At present we are making the assumption that it will not be feasible to run live talks at the Lesser Hall within the next three months. Talks in the spring session this year will therefore be by Zoom invitation on the first or second Friday of each month starting at 7.30pm. The speakers and topics for the next three months are:

**8th January** “Welsh Heroes; the statues in Cardiff City Hall”

Brian Davies

**5th February** “You in your small corner, me in mine.” Some history of The Limes, Cowbridge

Dick Buswell

**5th March** Early Medieval Landscapes in the Vale

Andy Seaman

Note: Membership fees for 2020-21 have been waived for existing members, and there will therefore be no charge for viewing any of these talks.

This newsletter is issued approximately three times a year. Local history news items can be sent to [dicktonkin@btinternet.com](mailto:dicktonkin@btinternet.com) for potential publication in the next newsletter.