

# FORMER COWBRIDGE COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL, ABERTHIN ROAD, COWBRIDGE - AN HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL APPRAISAL



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This appraisal of the heritage interest of the former comprehensive school at Aberthin Road, Cowbridge reassesses reports from various parties including the planning applicant, Cadw, the Vale of Glamorgan Council and the Victorian Society. Extensive research has produced a fascinating wealth of new information which underpins the very high architectural and historical importance of the school not just in a local context, but critically, in a national one. Whilst the building is undoubtedly a candidate for inclusion within the register of 'county treasures', it is also an obvious candidate for statutory listing.

The importance of the school may be summarised thus:-

### Historical Importance.

- Cowbridge was the first girls' intermediate school to be built (1895-6) in Wales and England, under an Act of Parliament that was of seminal Welsh importance.
- The school was built amid notorious local acrimony, which resonated at a national scale, Glamorgan being the last county in Wales to adopt the county schools scheme as a result.
- Amid its contemporaries, Cowbridge was highly unusual in including accommodation for boarders at the outset and for being funded to a great part, by private patronage (not strictly in the spirit of council-provided education).

### Architectural Importance

- The original character of Cowbridge School survives intact to a very high degree, externally and internally. It retains its original plan-form and was extended in 1909 in a remarkably sensitive manner.
- Only 5 comparable (of some 95 in total) schools are listed across Wales. A survey of them all confirms that Cowbridge survives to an equivalent degree to some and to a better degree than others.
- The architectural style of Cowbridge School is of greater quality than the majority of intermediate schools built across Wales, constructed of carefully-dressed limestone and designed with some flair as a picturesque and striking group. Certain details such as the unusual dormers, 'baronial' hostel range (with crow-stepped detail and pretty oriel window) and prominent corner chimneys, are atypical of the standard 'county' school vocabulary. Its immediate setting within its original railed forecourt survives intact.
- The sensitive design and siting of the school was no accident. The architect of the original school, Robert Williams, is a figure urgently deserving of greater recognition. He was a renowned radical, prominent (and rather early) advocate of building conservation, a national pioneer in terms of social housing (in Wales and England), archaeologist and early promoter of the Welsh School of Architecture (and in tandem, a noted critic of contemporary building design and practice in South Wales). He was also a proponent of the

Welsh language in building literature, and designed some prominent buildings in South Wales. In his later years, he was central to the Welsh community in Egypt, designing buildings for the Davies Bryan family, who were prominent in the promotion of Aberystwyth University. Rhys S Griffiths, architect of the extensions was a prolific and talented architect in South Wales, who eschewed his typical classical manner in response to his predecessor's work at Cowbridge. Robert Williams especially emerges from the shadows of history as a key figure in the history of late Victorian industrial Wales - he urgently deserves a biography.

### **Historical, evidential, aesthetic and communal values**

- The schools survive as a prominent and attractive testimony to a specially Welsh education Act of Parliament. Its exterior character and interior plan-form and fixtures intact to a very high degree, as recognised by the Victorian Society. The school is central to the history of Cowbridge and plays a significant part of the educational history of Wales. Its communal importance is evidenced by the level of objection raised at the proposed demolition of the school.

### **The setting of Cowbridge Conservation Area**

- A separate study by Dr Tudur Davies demonstrates that there is inter-visibility between the school and the nearby conservation area, and as such, the demolition of the schools would affect the setting of the conservation area.
- In terms of relevant Welsh policy guidance, the 'sensory' implications of demolishing the schools on the setting of the conservation area are also relevant. The history of the school is intrinsically linked to that of the town in educational and social terms, and was clearly designed as an 'eye-catcher' building prominently set along one of the main routes into Cowbridge. Its loss would be of great detriment to the setting of the conservation area - and indeed, there is good argument for the inclusion of the school within the conservation area itself, notwithstanding modern infill between it and the historic town.

### **Condition and viability**

- The structure, layout and construction of the schools would confirm that any structural problems would be localised and largely associated with post-closure neglect (typically blocked gutters and gullies, failing flashings etc). The buildings appear to be in sound structural condition and readily capable of conversion to a new use.

All of these aspects are considered in greater detail within the body of the report.

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1.** An application (reference 2018/01408/FUL) has been made by Hafod Housing Association to demolish the existing school along with the development of 48 dwellings (43 flats and five houses) and associated works.
- 1.2.** Concerned at the loss of the vacant Victorian/Edwardian buildings, prominently sited at the edge of the town, local residents requested that Cadw spot-list the schools. Cadw responded via email on 5th February 2019, concluding the schools are not of sufficient architectural and historic merit to consider statutory protection via listing. On behalf of the applicant, the Environmental Design Partnership (EDP) concluded (in the context of an appraisal of the overall heritage values of the site) that the schools are 'a low value historic asset', a conclusion strongly coloured by their interpretation of a consultation response from Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust that in the event of development being permitted, the buildings need not be preserved 'in situ'.
- 1.3** In objecting to the proposed development, the Victorian Society (letter dated 8th March 2019) noted the original school as representative of a rural school established under the 1889 Welsh Intermediate Education Act .The Society noted that the EDP assessment does not provide detail on the layout, both historical and current, of the school or an analysis and interpretation of its interior, or indeed an appreciation of the wider political and social context which influenced the establishment of the Welsh intermediate schools and their construction but rather, references Historic England's study on England's schools.
- 1.4** In his objection to the proposal, the Senior Planning (Conservation and Design) Officer for the Vale of Glamorgan Council considers the buildings to be of local significance warranting inclusion within the County Treasures list; and that the proposal would result in the loss of a locally significant historic asset.
- 1.5** This report provides a reassessment of the schools in the context of the criteria for listing buildings of special architectural or historic interest, the Cadw Conservation Principles and the setting of the nearby Cowbridge Conservation Area. It also considers the proposal within the context of local plan policy and considers other issues of relevance. The report concludes that the schools fulfil the criteria for listing, that they should be included within the Vale of Glamorgan County Treasures list and that any redevelopment be considered under Policies SP10 and MD8 of the Vale's Local Development Plan. These policies require the preservation or enhancement of locally listed buildings and their settings.
- 1.6** In terms of qualifications and experience, I am a full member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation and have served as a local authority buildings conservation officer for 24 years. I worked on the Cadw Resurvey of Wales from 1993-95 and was a Cadw inspector of historic buildings in 1999-2000. I

am joint author of the Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire & Ceredigion volumes of the Buildings of Wales series, the revising author of the Powys volume, the researcher for the Gwent volume and a contributor to that for Glamorgan. I am also a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.

## 2. The history of the site

- 2.1 Of the 95 or so schools built in response to the 1889 Welsh Intermediate Education Act, Cowbridge had the honour of being the first in Wales and England to provide such a school for girls. Tenders for the new buildings were advertised in the *South Wales Daily News* on 1st August 1895. The architect was Robert Williams ARIBA of Effingham Road, London (of whom, more below). Works were evidently proceeding well, for on 30th January 1896, the same newspaper reported that Mr Martell (presumably the clerk of works) was leaving the works. He was evidently held in high esteem, being presented with a gold signet ring and various books by the architect and contractors on site. The newspaper on 17th September 1896 recorded the opening of the schools, which comprised classrooms, schoolroom (for 40 scholars) and dormitories for 12 boarders. The total cost was £2500.



Figure 1- Cowbridge Intermediate Schools, 1907 (shortly prior to extension) Author's collection.

- 2.2 The site chosen was typical of the new intermediate schools, in that room for future expansion on the site was essential. On 26th February 1909, the *Evening Express* reported that the school had been extended, providing 3 extra classrooms, a gym, laboratory and an extra dormitory added to the hostel. The cost was £4000. The contractor was W.H. Evans of Cardiff, the architect, Rhys S. Griffiths of Tonypany.



Figure 2 - Cowbridge Intermediate Schools, 1930 (c. Glamorgan Archives)

- 2.3** The later history of the site is of less consequence here. When Cowbridge Comprehensive School opened in 1974, the former girls' school was retained as the sixth-form building, the new school occupying three separate sites in town. The site at Aberthin Road was chosen for the present school, which opened in 2010. The old girls' school now stands vacant, but still secure and reasonably weather-tight.

### **3. A reassessment of the buildings**

- 3.1 Assessments have been made to various levels of detail by the Vale's Senior Planning (Conservation and Design) Officer, the Victorian Society and EDD (as mentioned in Section 1) all in tandem with the current application. Cadw has reported on the buildings, following a request for spot-listing. This report seeks to provide a detailed appraisal of the building in its architectural, historic and social context. As well as introducing new information, it address various points raised within the reports mentioned above. My assessment will, for the sake of clarity, be based on the criteria for listing buildings in Wales, as set out in Annex B of Technical Advice Note 24 (The Historic Environment), May 2017. The criteria are historic interest, architectural interest, close historic associations and group value. In addition, it would be useful to evaluate the school in the context of the heritage values contained within Cadw's *Conservation Principles*. These include evidential, historical, aesthetic, and communal values.



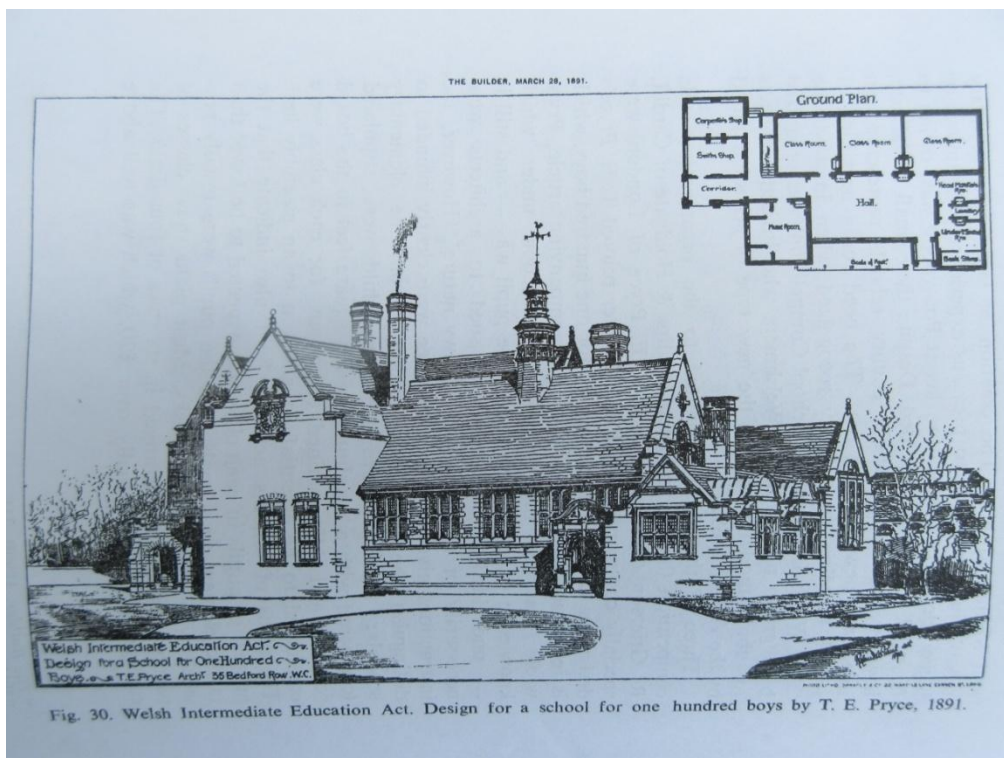
## 4. Historic Interest

- 4.1 The Welsh Intermediate Education Act.** In a post-devolution age, it is remarkable how little seems to be appreciated about the early developments in education in Wales. Two aspects stand out. Firstly, the circulating schools, started by Rev. Griffith Jones of Llanddowror in the 1730s were among the most successful educational movements in Europe, let alone Wales. Through the use of visiting teachers and temporary premises, it is thought that these schools taught some 250,000 individuals in Wales to read. Secondly, the Welsh Intermediate Education Act pre-dated similar legislation in England by 12 years. The act was revolutionary in terms of British history in that for the first time, education was offered to all children, regardless of wealth or ability, at the stage between primary and potential further education. The Act was adopted immediately by County and County Borough Councils. The schools were controlled by the Central Welsh Board (set up in 1896), which approved new schools, and (sometimes controversially, as at Beaumaris and Bangor) recommended the designation of existing endowed schools as intermediate schools, which were also typically termed 'county schools'. Some older establishments such as Ruthin successfully resisted re-grading, others such as Brecon College and the Howells Schools at Denbigh and Llandaff were never serious contenders for the scheme. In political terms, the Act was a triumph for Nonconformists, underlining the emphasis on non-denominational instruction established by the Elementary Education (Board School) Act of 1870. Moreover, the County Councils, anticipated by the Local Government Act of 1888 and realised by the 1894 Act (which created urban and rural districts) were themselves increasingly controlled by nonconformist members.
- 4.2 The new Welsh Intermediate Schools.** Some 95 schools were built across Wales under the new Act. The 1890s according to Seaborne, were 'one of the most successful decades in the history of secondary education in Wales'. Over 90 of the schools had been completed by 1900. In densely populated areas, the trend was to build separate schools for boys and girls (e.g. Carmarthen) on a shared site. Elsewhere, 'dual' schools were built under a single roof, with separate entrances for boys and girls. In rural areas, the new schools were often of mixed status. The new schools were usually small (by 1900, only 9 of the schools had over 150 pupils on their registers, mostly in industrial South Wales). The first school to be completed in Wales was at Caernarfon, in 1894. As stated above, Cowbridge was the first town to have an intermediate girls' school.



Figure 3 - Caernarfon County Schools, completed 1894

- 4.3 The planning and design of the new schools were influenced by the Tate Intermediate School Competition, which invited architects to submit model plans for the new type of school advocated by the Act. The competition laid down a number of requirements for architects designing the ideal Welsh 'county school', including 15sq. feet of space per pupil, self-contained classrooms for each class, single locker desks, specialist facilities for scientific and practical subjects and an assembly hall – a structure which was replacing the central place of the main schoolroom. Three of the plans submitted (by J.H. Phillips of Cardiff, R. Grierson of Bangor and T.E. Pryce of London) were specially commended.



The original intention was to emphasise more technical aspects of education, with workshops, laboratories, music rooms, art rooms and gyms advocated. In reality, those schools more distant from industrialised areas tended to emphasise the academic rather than technical aspects of secondary education (influenced by both conservatism and the lack of funds for the necessary facilities).

The majority of the new schools were day schools, with only a few (including Cowbridge) providing for boarders. Most were designed by local architects, two in particular - J.H. Phillips of Cardiff (commended in the Tate Competition) and Harry Teather of Cardiff - specialising in designing new county schools across Wales. Good open sites were vital - almost all of the schools were built on open sites for aesthetic/health considerations and the ability to expand later (which most did). Many of the schools were single-storey, those on constricted urban sites or within more populous areas rising to two storeys. Typically the schools were symmetrical, comprising a central hall (often with a cupola or lantern) flanked by gabled ranges providing classrooms. The largest schools were in Glamorgan and Monmouthshire, usually two-storey (and in the case of Tredegarville, Cardiff, three).

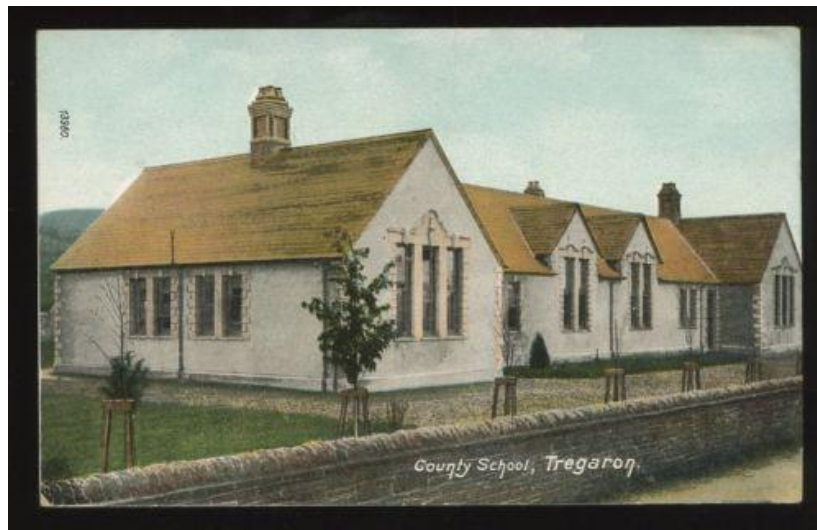


Figure 4 - Tregaron Intermediate School (1898 by L. Bankes Pryce) - typical single-storey design



Figure 5 - Barry Intermediate Schools - 1896

Cowbridge School is an excellent survival of the single-storey 'Tate Competition' type, as shown above, the 1909 extensions preserving the original building intact. More will be said about the architectural importance below.

A final word needs saying here about the hostel, which formed part of the original school (the tall south range with crow-stepped stairwell). Most of the new county schools did not take boarders (Bangor was an exception), thus there was rarely provision for residential pupils and indeed, master's houses were not included in the design of a county school. Cowbridge was a rare exception in that a hostel was provided for children who lived too far from school to travel daily, hence the need for lodgings during the week. This element was endowed by John Bevan (see below).

**4.3 The Cowbridge Crisis.** Of historic interest is the row in Cowbridge, which resulted in the county of Glamorgan being the last in Wales to have its intermediate schools scheme approved by the Charity Commissioners. The main issue was the grammar school, both poorly endowed and on a cramped town-centre site. It refused to join the county scheme (it wasn't until 1919 that it was taken over from Jesus College by the county council). This resulted in a late-night row in parliament (2nd March 1896) between James Mackenzie Maclean, Conservative MP for Cardiff and David Thomas (Liberal: Merthyr, later Viscount Rhondda) about the religious status of the school and its association with the Anglican church.

The interesting upshot of the ongoing controversy was the appearance and determination of a local benefactor for the girls' school at Cowbridge, John Bevan. The need for appropriate education for girls had been recognised by him in 1888, and although his scheme was cut short by the 1889 Act, he provided the hostel of the new school which accommodated twelve girls, undertook the cost of laying out the grounds, gave £10 towards the formation of the school library and £50 towards the expenses of poor scholars from the outlying area. Bevan was a native of Cowbridge, a solicitor, who despite retirement abroad, continued to support educational and temperance initiatives in the Cowbridge and Llantwit Major areas. He died in Nervie, Italy in 1897, aged 94.

The story of the funding of the school is therefore an interesting one, in some ways counter to the spirit of public funding for the new intermediate schools, but one that nonetheless resulted in the provision of the first intermediate girls' school in Wales in the face of local opposition to the county scheme.

The contention by EDP that *'within the wider historic context, the school is not considered to be particularly important, being one of 13 Intermediate Schools in Glamorganshire, and one of many constructed across Wales'* and their conclusion that *'this aspect of its value is considered to be only of local interest, reflecting a low degree of heritage significance'* is surely questionable. The Victorian Society in contrast, rightly highlights the school as evidence of Bevan's philanthropy. The information above hopefully adds

further context locally (the politics of the time) and nationally, in that the school is an excellent survival of its type (which will be further expanded below).

## 5 Architectural Interest

- 5.1 It has been noted above, that the Tate Competition set out the basic plan-type for the intermediate schools in Wales. Most of the schools were initially small, typically single-storey symmetrical ranges with central hall and gabled classrooms each side, as at Cardigan.

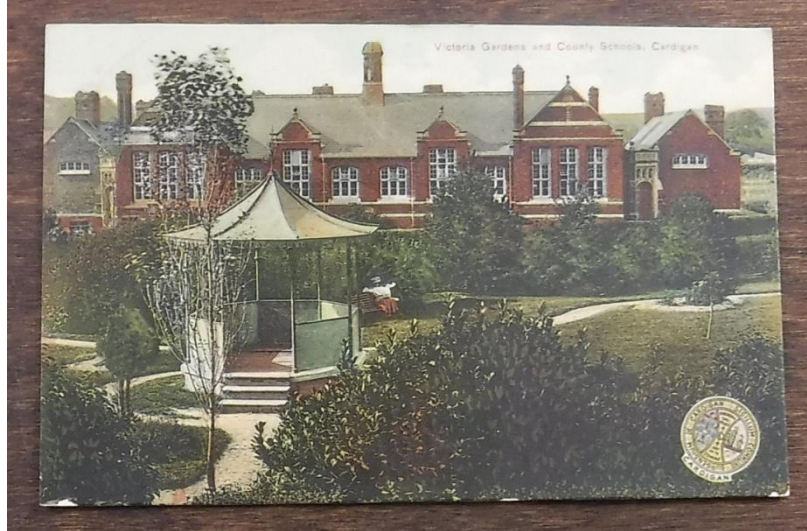


Figure 6 - Cardigan Intermediate Schools - 1895-8 by George Morgan

In terms of style, architects showed some invention, evidently where funds allowed. Many of the schools were relatively plain, built of local stone or brick (or both), rendered for economy in some examples (e.g. Tregaron, Aberaeron and Fishguard). The biggest architectural 'play' was embellishment of the gables, which were often shaped and usually provided with copings, for example Llangefni, Abergele and Ebbw Vale, among many others.



Figure 7 - Llangefni Schools (Penrallt Centre) 1900 by H. Teather



Figure 8 - Abergele Schools (Ysgol Emrys ap Iwan) built 1899



Figure 9 - Ebbw Vale Schools, 1899 by Phillips and Baldwin (dem)

The central hall - usually topped by a cupola or lantern (somewhat reminiscent of the influential Queen Anne style of the London Board Schools of the 1870s) is typically either treated as a central block countering the gabled classrooms in a Puginian manner, as at Cowbridge or Bala or is given more prominent gables instead, as in the cases illustrated above.



Figure 10 - Bala School (Ysgol y Berwyn), 1899, H Teather

As well as the cupolas/lanterns (many later shorn off), other elements were reminiscent of the London Board School style, as advocated by the prolific architect E.R. Robson (who designed at least 289 schools in London). These include the stepped windows, originally fitted with sashes, and tall chimney stacks to help draw the classroom fires.

Entrances were generally low-key (a few schools had porches or entrance towers). The central element was usually the hall, the entrance (or in the case of dual schools, entrances) set to a side elevation, which conveniently provided a new internal access in the case of lateral extensions. At Cowbridge, the entrance was enhanced by being within the porch to the tall hostel range, emphasized further by the crow-stepped stairwell adjacent. This somewhat counters Cadw's disappointment on the lack of a formal entrance at Cowbridge. Despite one or two examples to the contrary (e.g. Llanfyllin), most county schools deliberately lacked a showy entrance and/or architectural inscriptions.

Contrary also to Cadw's response that the school lacks a distinct plan form, the interior is well-preserved (and better so than most of the surviving county schools). The 1890s central hall with its open roof remains as a feature, despite the addition of a new hall to the north end in 1909. The entrance and stair-well of the 1890s survives, and the corridor-and-classrooms plan is preserved within the 1909 extensions. Several fixtures remain, including the attractive staircase, glazed door-screens and simple brick fireplaces.

The Cowbridge schools then may be regarded as a very good survival of the main type of intermediate school built in the 1890s across Wales. It would be unjust to compare Cowbridge to the larger storied schools built on smaller/awkward sites in populated areas, such as Cardiff, Brecon or Bangor. These form a category of their own within the genre.





Figure 11 - 1896 'baronial' entrance range



Figure 12 - rear elevation of hostel block showing unusual dormers and attractive oriel



Figure 13 - open roof of original hall



Figure 14 - well-preserved interior layout and screen-doorways



Figure 15 - 1896 staircase



Figure 16 - classroom (showing survival of historic ceilings, doors and fireplaces)

**5.2** In terms of architectural style, the school architects were evidently permitted free rein as far as the budget allowed. Curved or coped 'Dutch' gables characterise many schools, an echo of the revival of Flemish and North-German Renaissance architecture in the 1870s and 1880s, the 'Pont Street Dutch' of the Kensington and Knightsbridge area that became so influential across urban Britain. Both Ruabon and Aberystwyth have Gothic touches and at Cardigan, the versatile George Morgan worked in an attractive Queen Anne style. Harold Road Schools at Abergavenny has Tudor touches, whilst Tywyn is in a cheerful free style. The larger schools allowed for even more architectural individuality, as at Cardiff, Brecon and Bangor. In this context, the Cowbridge School also has architectural individuality, including the unusual serried dormer gables to the hall block, and most especially in the tall hostel block with its gabled porch and unusual crow-stepped stairwell. The 1909 additions perpetuate the fashionable curved gables in the storeyed classroom block, the large Diocletian window to the new (north) hall emphatically Edwardian 'free style'. The series of chimney stacks are striking (which miraculously survived the usual local authority lopping, as did the cast iron ridge-vents), both phases of building characterised by the use of rock-faced limestone and sparing use of ashlar (instead of the yellow or red brick trim so typical of South Wales).



Figure 17 - rear elevation showing survival of chimneys and ridge-vents

**5.2 Cowbridge School in the context of listed equivalents.** Setting aside the earlier buildings at Llanwrst, 5 (of some 95) former intermediate schools are listed, including Bangor, Pontypridd, Abergavenny, Welshpool and Llanfyllin, the last four providing the closest comparables to Cowbridge. They are all excellent examples and worthy of listed status. Cadw's contention that they are better examples than Cowbridge is arguable, but not in itself reason to decline listing at Cowbridge. It has been demonstrated that Cowbridge School is of *both* architectural and historic importance (and more information is to follow below). Cadw's contention that '*Cowbridge by comparison is a school that lacks a distinctive plan form and appearance*' requires qualification. The original plan form survives intact, as do many fixtures including open roofs, staircase, fireplaces and part-glazed classroom doors with side and overlights. These are features noted in the list descriptions for the four listed schools - all of which note later alterations (as is typical in historic public sector buildings). Llanfyllin for example retains '*few original fittings*' and both this school and Pontypridd are noted as having internal alterations. The interior at Abergavenny was not inspected, the description based on anecdotal information. Pontypridd is now in such a poor condition, that it is doubtful whether anything will survive. In short, Cowbridge's plan-form and internal detail survive at least to an equivalent degree as other listed examples.

Cadw's statement that '*the school would have been considered - and rejected for listing – in 1999 when Cadw undertook a community resurvey to identify historic buildings*' is unclear. In the absence of evidence that it was rejected, might it have been simply 'missed' in such an architecturally rich town? Regardless, our appreciation of buildings like Cowbridge School is likely to be greater and better-informed than at the time of the original survey, two decades ago.

**5.3. The architects of Cowbridge School - Robert Williams FRIBA.** Robert Williams is a fascinating and little-studied figure in Welsh architecture and archaeology. His name appears rarely in the Pevsner Guides, yet as a devout socialist with a deep concern for social welfare, made a strong contribution to the buildings of later C19 Wales and beyond, as we shall see. Williams was born near Cowbridge in 1848. The Williams were of old local stock, his father Rhys a carpenter and grandfather Robert, a farm worker. Robert studied at the Eagle School, Cowbridge and then started work with his father in the local building trade. He then worked for a local building contractor, John Morgan of Pontyclun, before studying architecture and construction at South Kensington and Reading. Serving as Clerk of works to both Piers St Aubyn and then Maurice B Adams (both prominent Victorian architects), Williams entered the offices of Waller, Son and Wood, of Gloucester. By 1887, he was an associate of the RIBA (becoming a full member in 1896), commencing his practice in London, as well as travelling extensively in Europe, Asia and North Africa. Williams became well-connected in London socialist circles. His daughter Margareta Travers Symons (a famous suffragette who burst into the seated House of Commons in 1908 - apparently the first woman ever to speak

in that establishment) was secretary to Keir Hardie, the founder of the Labour Party and M.P. for Merthyr and Aberdare from 1900. Williams himself was a prominent socialist Councillor on the London County Council and an acknowledged expert on the problem of working class housing. Two of his large temperance halls (sponsored by local philanthropists) survive, the People's Hall in Olaf Street, Kensington, and the Grade II listed Wheatsheaf Hall, Vauxhall. He also designed working-class housing and a small hospital in London, according to his RIBA file.



Figure 18 - the Wheatsheaf Hall, Vauxhall (1896) - copyright Wikipedia

**5.4** Williams maintained his connections with Wales via family and Keir Hardie and some of his works are listed below. As interesting however, are his publications, which included:-

*London Rookeries and Collier's Slums* - 1893

*The Collier's House or Every Collier his own Architect* - 1893

*More Light and Air for Londoners* - 1894

*The Labourer and His Cottage* -1905

The *Pontypool Free Press* advertised the publication of '*The Collier's House*' on 20th January 1893. It stated that the book was to contain drawings and details of cottages suitable for colliers, where the iniquitous collier's tub was to be substituted with a proper bath. Remarkably for the time, Williams insisted that the book be available in both English and Welsh.

No doubt influenced by his old master, F.S. Waller (antiquarian and architect to Gloucester Diocese), Williams was a member of the Cambrian Archaeological Association, preparing beautiful sketches at the 1897 field visits in Cardiganshire, published in both '*Arch Camb*' and '*The Builder*'.

Williams may also be regarded as an early conservationist in Wales. He frequently wrote to the local press lamenting insensitive new buildings and alterations. In the *Evening Express* of 28th December 1895, Williams urged developers to 'respect the character of old buildings and proportions in new ones'. The target of his criticism was Llantwit Major, where he pleaded that the new railway bridge be built of stone, not brick. The same town figured in his letter to the *South Wales Daily Post* on 14th February 1896. That the railway bridge had been built in iron was just the start of matters - worse still was the demolition of an old cottage and the building of a new pub 'profusely ornamented with red brick and adorned with a portico in front which looks like the hind part of a half-tester bed, the attenuated posts of which look likely to snap at any moment'. Williams wrote in support of a Welsh School of Architecture (eventually founded in 1920, two years after Williams' death). To him, architecture was 'art by the people, of the people and for the people'. Old buildings he felt, 'should be carefully maintained and recorded and old architectural features preserved'.

In the *Weekly Mail* of 1st October 1904, Williams was highly critical that despite the fortunes made in coalmining, so many hovels still existed, lamenting especially the resultant high infant mortality. Towns and villages in Wales, he felt, should be better planned - and one of the worst new towns, Williams argued, was Barry. Williams' views and insistence on fair play evidently needled some people - amid some controversy, his designs for the truant schools at Port Talbot came second in the architectural competition, despite being reported in the press as having been the best plans.

- 5.5** Despite practising from London from 1887, Robert Williams designed several buildings in South Wales. The most prestigious included the Pontypool Market Hall (1893-4, with D.J. Lougher as engineer), listed Grade II. Another major work was the old hospital at Pontypool (Pontnewynydd) of 1903, a massive and elaborate Gothic edifice.



Figure 19 - Pontypool Market 1893-4



Figure 20 - Pontypool Hospital (1903)

**5.6** In 1914, Robert Williams left London to practise in Cairo. In his four remaining years, he designed several buildings there, including banks, the Bible House, the soldiers' home and the Marconi Tower and buildings. He also continued to write (his *Notes on the English Bond* was aimed at the local masons, translated into French and Arabic). Of greatest interest in a Welsh historical context is the reason that brought Williams to Cairo in the first place - the designing of a shop for John Davies Bryan, who had emigrated from Caernarfon, originally setting up a drapery stall within the Continental Hotel. Joined by his brothers Edward and Joseph, he opened a larger premises on Cherif Pasha Street, Alexandria, which was refurbished by Williams, using red Aberdeen granite and Doulting stone.

Most notable of all is the St David Building in Cairo, a massive emporium designed by Williams in 1910 for the Davies Bryan brothers. The building still stands, inscribed 'ygwiryn erbyn y byd' (truth against the world), along with the logo of the Gorsedd. The link with home remained strong - Joseph Davies Bryan had, in 1928, presented Aberystwyth University with 85 acres of land for new college buildings and after his death in 1935, left £5000 to the National Library of Wales.

Williams' position within the small but significant Welsh community in colonial Egypt is both interesting and important.





Figure 21 - The St David Building, Cairo (1910)

**5.4 The architects - R.S. Griffiths.** Rhys Samuel Griffiths, designer of the 1909 additions to the school is an easier figure to track down. Better known as R.S. Griffiths, he was born in Llannon, Carmarthenshire in 1859, son of Samuel Griffiths, master mason. By 1891, he was living at Llwynypia, described in the census as 'architect and land surveyor'. He was a local figure of some importance, serving as J.P. as well as a councillor for Rhondda District Council. Griffiths was a prolific and competent local architect, relied on for designing chapels, the municipal buildings at Pentre and the police station at Tonypany. He was a staunch Classicist (as his chapels show). As well as Cowbridge, Griffiths designed the intermediate schools at Whitland (1896) and extended the boys' intermediate school at Gelligaer, in 1903.



Figure 22 - Bethania, Tonypany (1908 by R.S. Griffiths)



Figure 23 - Whitland Intermediate Schools (1896)

Whitland was a typical smaller intermediate school, Griffiths clearly following the Tate Competition guidelines. The door-cases are the only concession he made to his favoured classicism. The Gelligaer buildings, now demolished, were plain and neatly done. At Cowbridge, Griffiths showed real sensitivity to Williams' work, continuing the use of dressed masonry with ashlar dressings, copying the existing chimney stacks in their striking corner positions, and neatly shoe-horning in the storeyed classroom block to picturesque effect. The classroom block picked up on the dormer detailing of Williams' hall, the central shaped gable almost a leitmotif of Welsh intermediate schools. With Gelligaer demolished and Whitland heavily altered and extended, the extensions to Cowbridge remain as the best-preserved school work of a talented local architect.

6. **Close Historical Associations** with people or events of importance in Wales. As outlined above, the girls' school was built amid some local controversy, which delayed the adoption of the county scheme in Glamorgan. The provision of intermediate education in itself is an event of which Wales should be justly proud - and Cowbridge was the first girls' intermediate school to be built in the whole of Wales.
7. **Group Value.** This is something of an anomaly, given that intermediate schools were nearly always sited on an open airy site just outside of a town or village. Thus - as at Cowbridge - the intervening years have witnessed infill development between school and town, with nothing historic to form a good group with. Intrinsically however, the buildings form a fine and prominent group facing Aberthin Road, retaining its original forecourt, enclosed with stone pillars and railings.

8. **Evidential Value.** As set out above, the school retains its original form, plan and fixtures to a very good degree. Apart from the fitting of upvc windows within the existing openings, little has changed and the character of the schools as built 1895-6 and extended 1909 remains. The interior retains several interesting fixtures, including glazed doorways, staircase, open timbered roofs and fireplaces. It has escaped lightly from the usual local authority modernisation.

The EDP Archaeological and Architectural Assessment needs mentioning here. Whilst it includes some basic information about the schools and a rather hazy architectural description, it provides no architectural or historic context within the relatively short period of intermediate schools provision in Wales, it does not provide detail of the interior layout and beyond noting the two phases of construction, no further information is given in this regard - points all noted by the Victorian Society. The Assessment shows a lack of familiarity with the architectural history of Wales (and beyond), ignores the political and social context of the intermediate schools and makes no attempt to explore and evaluate the output of the architects of the Cowbridge Schools.

9. **Historical Value.** The schools were prominent in the context of the provision of intermediate education in Wales and provide an unusual example where hostel accommodation was provided from the start, the philanthropy of John Bevan also being unusual in the new context of state-funded education. Robert Williams as architect is a figure deserving greater research and accolade as a leading and well-connected socialist strongly involved with conservation, archaeology, design and social conditions in South Wales.
10. **Aesthetic Value.** As outlined above, the schools stand as a relatively unaltered example of the intermediate school movement in Wales. It's form is strongly influenced by the 'Tate' rules, yet its style is quite unlike any other of its type in Wales. Williams' strong ideas on sensitive construction is evident in the dressed stone elevations and avoidance of 'cheap' brick. The dormers of the hall block are unusual, the hostel block with its crow-stepped stair-well and rear oriel even more so. The school has a mildly picturesque, slightly Scottish domestic look about it, and was clearly designed not only for utility, but as an eye-catcher - and perhaps even making a political point in terms of the schools controversy in town. The schools have strong aesthetic value and survive as one of the relatively few intact examples of the 95 or so intermediate schools in Wales.
11. **Communal Value.** The objections raised in several quarters to the proposed demolition of the schools says it all - the schools are valued within the community both for their obvious historic interest and their architectural/landmark value. It stands as one of the few later Victorian 'public' buildings to survive in town. The research above reinforces the school's communal values as the first of its type in Wales, part sponsored in the face of local adversity and designed by an architect of significant importance in Wales.

EDP's contention that 'as a local school, it is unlikely that the school was especially well-known beyond Cowbridge and its locality, and as such its communal value is likely to be relatively low' rather falls flat on its face. Their contention that as the school is disused, its communal value 'is restricted to representing a feature of local people's memories' makes little sense, given the prominence of the standing buildings.

The failure of EDP to adequately understand the importance of the schools - identified by others as a historic asset of local importance (on which there is site-specific local plan policy) - makes it impossible to appropriately consider the impact of the proposal in the context of government guidance, as set out in TAN 24 and Cadw's *Conservation Principles* (which consider all historic assets, designated and non-designated).

- 12. Cowbridge Conservation Area.** The site lies some 140 metres north of Cowbridge Conservation Area. In his consultee response, the Vale's Senior Planner states that due to the modern infill between the schools and historic town, the impact of the proposal on the setting of the conservation area should be considered negligible. EDP's assessment in this regard concludes that *'the school buildings are not considered to represent part of the setting of the Cowbridge Conservation Area and make no contribution to the conservation area's 'special interest''*.

It is not the remit of this report to consider anything beyond the importance of the existing schools. However, it may be reasonably argued that the proposed demolition itself will have an adverse impact on the setting of the conservation area. Government guidance is found in Cadw's *Setting of Historic Assets in Wales* (2017) which notes that *'setting often extends beyond the property boundary of an individual historic asset into a broader landscape context. Intangible as well as physical factors can be important to understanding the setting of a historic asset. These may include function, sensory perceptions or historical, artistic, literary and scenic associations'*.

A study made by Dr Tudur Davies (*Old Sixth Form, Cowbridge: Heritage Visual Impact Assessment - January 2019*) concludes that contrary to EDP's assessment (and indeed that of the Senior Planning Officer), the school buildings are visible from several parts of the conservation area, both at street levels and from upper storeys of historic buildings. That there is inter-visibility immediately implies that the demolition will have some impact on the setting of the conservation area.

The sensory context needs stressing here too. The schools are an obviously integral part of the town's history, bound up historically with the town's ancient grammar schools and the place where until recently, many local residents were educated. The fascinating history of the girls' school and the quality of its architecture serve to underline the cultural and historical links between the site and conservation area, and the very design of the buildings as an eye-catcher along the northern approach to the historic town reinforces this further. It could be readily contended that the proposed demolition of the schools will have an adverse impact on the setting of the conservation area,

within the context of specific government guidance relating to the setting of historic assets.

- 13. Vale of Glamorgan Local Development Plan Policy.** Policy MG2 (18) relates specifically to the school, stating that the '*Victorian school building has some architectural merit and lends itself to conversion*'. The Vale's Senior Planning Officer recommends that the building be designated as a 'county treasure' which would then invoke policies SP10 and MD8, resulting in the potential loss of a locally significant historic asset. This is a commendable course of action.

Given the increased knowledge of the buildings as set out below, the designation of the schools as a 'county treasure' must be pursued parallel to statutory listing. Invaluable extra information has come to light since Cadw's response to possible spot-listing, which gives a nationally important historic and architectural importance to the buildings. In this regard, The Vale should strongly reconsider serving a building preservation notice, thus conferring interim listed status.

- 14. Condition and viability.** There appears to be very little information on the structural condition of the schools and how this might justify their loss. In my view - and long experience of writing structural reports on historic buildings - the structure, layout and construction of the schools would confirm that any structural problems would be localised and largely associated with post-closure neglect (typically blocked gutters and gullies, failing flashings etc). The buildings appear to be in sound structural condition and readily capable of conversion to a new use.

- 15. Conclusion.** Further research has revealed that Cowbridge was the first girl's intermediate school built in Wales within an interesting political context. The architect of the first phase was a figure of pioneering status in Wales in terms of conservation, design and social conditions, which coloured his later career. He was also central to the Welsh community in colonial Egypt. It has been demonstrated that the schools are among the best-preserved of the few intermediate schools to remain intact in Wales and that the plan-form and fittings are as complete and important as existing listed examples. I would have no hesitation in recommending that the schools be immediately re-considered for spot-listing, in the light of the new evidence to hand. In tandem with this, the Council should consider serving a building preservation notice as well as designating the school as a 'county treasure'.

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