

## **FORMER COWBRIDGE INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL FOR GIRLS - A RESPONSE TO CADW'S REASSESSMENT OF 01/08/2019**

Cadw responded to a request for spot-listing the above building in February 2019. Their conclusion that the building did not meet the criteria for listing led to local residents commissioning me to write a detailed report on the heritage merit of the building. This included a large amount of new material, largely based on primary research. The report concluded that the building fulfilled the criteria for listing as laid out in government guidance.

In particular, the school was of historic interest as the first girls' intermediate school built in Wales, the cause of parliamentary debate and unusual in its original construction of accommodation for boarders and part-patronage by a private benefactor.

In terms of architectural importance, the school was found to retain its detail and plan-form to a very high degree (and certainly comparable in this respect to the few intermediate schools listed across Wales), being a building of strong character, the nods towards Scots Baronial and the striking array of chimneys of special note. The construction of local limestone (eschewing the typical brick trim) reveals the ideals of the original architect, Robert Williams, 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. The extensions of 1908 by R.S Griffiths are remarkably sensitive to the original design concept.

In this context, Cadw's response of 1st August 2019 is disappointing and to be blunt, very subjective and in part, inscrutable. It pays little demonstrable heed to the evaluation of Welsh heritage as laid out in TAN 24 and its relevant annexes, where the four heritage values (historical, evidential, aesthetic and communal) provide a wider context for the appreciation of our built heritage in addition to the formal criteria of historic interest, architectural interest, close historic associations and group value.

I would respond to Cadw's latest submission as follows:-

1. It is very disappointing that Cadw has not recognised the contribution of Robert Williams, as a pioneering Welsh architect, a figure urgently requiring a short biography. He has emerged from the shadows as an important and highly influential figure and a talented designer. His practice extended to London, and later, Egypt. He is one of a very few Welsh 'exports' in terms of architects - yet only one building by him is listed in Wales. Buildings by non-native architects such as Scott, Street, Butterfield, Herbert North and Coates Carter are listed as a matter of course. In this respect, Robert Williams' work surely deserves recognition in this post-devolution era.
2. Cadw's response to the school being the first intermediate school for girls in Wales is inscrutable - '*In my view there is no special significance attached to the fact that Cowbridge was built as a girl's school, as education for girls was envisaged by the Act and it was a matter of local choice how it was delivered*'. However one interprets that statement, the fact remains - Cowbridge was the first girls' intermediate school

to be built in Wales, in 1895-6. The Welsh Intermediate Education Act of 1889 in itself was pioneering and specifically Welsh. In terms of education for girls, the school at Cowbridge is a very important aspect of Welsh history, surely resonating strongly with the aspirations of the Welsh Government with regards to gender equality. Put simply, it is a moment of Welsh history to be proud of.

3. In terms of the (unusual) provision of the boarders' block, Cadw's comparison with the Friars School at Bangor is misleading. The scale of this building is atypical of intermediate school design and in any case, its predecessor grammar school had always provided boarders, such provision made in the plans for a new school in 1888, prior to the 1889 Act. As such, the new school at Bangor *'was designed as a traditional boarding school and was not of the pattern followed by most of the county schools'* (M Seaborne, *Schools In Wales*, 1992 p . 210). Cowbridge was indeed unusual in introducing boarders within the new ethos of intermediate education. Even more unusual was the acceptance of private funding to make this possible.

4. Cadw is quite right to state - as indicated in my report - that Cowbridge was not the only instance of local controversy when built. However, apart from Ruthin, Cowbridge as far as I am aware was the only specific school to be debated in parliament (as opposed to on a more local level), so strong was the opposition of the grammar school to adopting the county scheme. This resulted in Glamorgan being the last county to adopt the provisions of the 1889 Act and it was this controversy that propitiated the foundation of the new girls' school.

5. Cadw's contention that the school has lost much of its original character is a matter of debate. The majority of the building comprises the original structure, extended by three gables to the right-hand with a two-storey range added within the left-hand return. The attractive dressed limestone elevations of the original structure were followed meticulously in phase 2, which occurred only 12 years after the school opened. Cadw's stance that the 1908 extensions effectively overwhelm the 1896 structure is debateable, but also distracting. Many historic buildings, including listed ones are the result of extension and alteration. The majority of chapels for instance were refitted internally in the later C19. Most parish churches were extensively restored, many country houses extended or re-fronted and many smaller farmhouses and cottages altered and improved in line with fashion and convenience. The Cowbridge school was extended tactfully and skilfully in 1908 - the proportion of 1896 work to that of 1908 therefore seems to be splitting hairs and not relevant to the principles of listing. At the listed Coed-y-lan intermediate school Pontypridd (1893-4, now roofless and derelict) *'additions were made to the school almost as soon as it was open, of which the present science block and gymnasium were built in 1910'*. This is a very relevant comparison.

Inside the Cowbridge school, the historic layout and features survive well, including the 1896 hall, staircase and 1908 classrooms. Cadw disagrees with the statement that the plan-form and fittings are as complete and important as other listed examples. Yet, this contention is not supported by the list descriptions of the relevant listed schools. 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 actually inspected by Cadw, the description based on anecdotal information.. In short, the fact is that Cowbridge's plan-form and internal detail survive at least to an equivalent degree as other listed examples.

6. Finally, Cadw contends that *'the loss of detail through replacement of the windows with upvc'* is problematic. This is interesting, in that a good number of buildings in Wales were actually listed with modern glazing in situ, be it upvc or otherwise - and not just in the context of group value (say a few altered examples in an otherwise intact terrace of houses). A trawl of the Cof Cymru website reveals a number of buildings where Cadw has listed buildings with modern fenestration. These include farmhouses such as Tre-prsg (Nevern), Neuadd (Llanelly, Mons) and Penlasgarn (Torfaen) to C20 houses such as Ty Gwyn, (Caldey Island). Some 'municipal' buildings such as the Old Surgery in Tredegar fall into the same category, and even some schools, including the former National School in Pembroke Dock. Whilst the loss of fenestration is a reduction of evidential value, it must be evaluated in the other heritage values of the building. It may be reasonably be argued that the strong architectural character of the Cowbridge school - which relies on solid mass/ construction and a dramatic roofline rather than prominent fenestration (e.g. the highly glazed mid C20 schools) - still scores very high on aesthetic value and even more so in terms of historical and communal values.

**Conclusion.** I remain of the firm view that the school fulfils the main criteria for listing in terms of architectural and historical importance, as well as scoring high on the historical, evidential, aesthetic and communal values as enshrined within Cadw's Conservation Principles.