

# 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.