

### **Cowbridge Intermediate School for Girls**

A request that this building should be considered for listing was made in December 2018, in response to a proposal to demolish the building and redevelop the site. An independent visual impact assessment was undertaken by Dr Tudur Davies in January 2019, which was chiefly concerned with demonstrating the building's contribution to the historic character of Cowbridge. Although it only suggested that the building be considered for listed status, the assessment nevertheless recommended that the building should be included in the list of County Treasures. The building was inspected by Cadw in February 2019 and was rejected for listing. The reasons for rejection included substantial extension that overwhelmed the character of the original school and unsympathetic alterations to a building that compared unfavourably with other listed examples of this building type. Subsequently, in June 2019 a report advocating its listing was commissioned by a local campaign group from Scourfield Associates. While this provided much background information, the content and the argument therein was considered insufficient to alter the original decision, as set out in a report by Cadw dated August 2019. Scourfield Associates subsequently submitted a Rebuttal and, in March 2020, a letter of protest was submitted to Cadw, signed by numerous academics and heritage professionals. The content of the letter, however, is largely a paraphrase of the Scourfield Rebuttal, with some escalation of language – Cadw is accused of 'ignoring' the building during Resurvey, while the hitherto largely obscure architect Robert Williams is now described as a man of 'outstanding importance'.

This report comments on the content of the Scourfield Rebuttal, the initial Scourfield Associates Report, and the letter of protest sent in March 2020.

The main points that have been made and reiterated are:

#### **The significance of Robert Williams**

Little of the biographical detail that has been provided is germane to his quality as an architect. The statement that Williams has 'emerged from the shadows' is not substantiated. It would be useful to know who is now interested in his architecture and which of his buildings are now attracting attention. As Robert Scourfield stated in his original report, Williams is rarely mentioned in the volumes of the Buildings of Wales (or England) and it is not clear how his qualities as an architect have previously been misjudged. For example, are there other buildings by him that have hitherto been unattributed, or have his known works been underestimated? The market hall at Pontypool is the only example of his work listed in Wales. It was listed principally as a surviving intact example of a Victorian market hall, rather than for its special architectural interest. John Newman described it as 'utilitarian'.

#### **Cowbridge Intermediate School for Girls was the first example of its kind**

The 1889 Intermediate Education Act made provision for boys' and girls' education, but whether this occurred in a mixed school (with separate entrances for boys and girls) or in separate schools was governed by practical considerations. The date of completion of schools under the Act reflected these considerations. In my opinion, therefore, the

landmark event was the passing of the Act rather than the completion of the first all-girl school built under its terms. In any case, Cowbridge was not the first Intermediate School to offer education for girls. It could be argued that mixed schools were a greater symbol of gender equality in education than single-sex schools. Of the five Intermediate schools that have been listed, two were girls' schools. The County School for Girls in Abergavenny (listed as Harold Road Junior School) was opened in 1897 and the Cardiff Intermediate School for Girls was completed in 1900 (and listed as Coleg Glan Hafren). I do not think they are of lesser historical significance because they happened to be finished later than Cowbridge. They are certainly of superior architectural quality.

### **Provision for boarders**

Provision for boarders is described in the Rebuttal as rare, although no other examples are cited for Intermediate Schools (Bangor had boarders before it became an Intermediate school). Perhaps 'rare' is used as a cautious alternative to 'unique' in this context. However, other types of schools accepted boarders and, given the short lifespan of Intermediate Schools before the 1902 Education Act, this aspect of its history is ancillary to the debate about its historic importance. The state of preservation of its dormitories is not described in the Rebuttal or the previous Report, so the contribution they make to the evidential value of the building is uncertain. Their significance nevertheless seems to be limited and could therefore be used only to support the main argument for listing.

### **Local controversy**

The rebuttal adds nothing new to counter the criticism made in Cadw's initial response. The Scourfield report compared Cowbridge with other listed Intermediate schools but, where it only considered the architecture of the other schools, it included the historical interest of Cowbridge. This unbalanced comparison has not been remedied.

### **Loss of architectural character**

Cadw's main criticism of Scourfield's original Report was that it blurs the distinction between the original school of 1895-6 and the extension of 1909. This was not addressed in the Rebuttal. The interior description in the first Report is vague and relies, in the case of the assembly hall and classroom corridor, on photographs taken in 2017. Furthermore, it is not made clear whether the classroom and corridor belong to the 1895-6 or 1909 phase. Email correspondence with Cadw in 2019 has suggested that the fireplace surrounds in the building have been removed, but the Report specifically cites the fireplaces as part of the surviving fabric. Little detail is provided regarding the plan of the original school, which would be necessary to substantiate the claim that it retains its original plan 'to a very good degree' (although the word 'original' is applied in the Report and Rebuttal to both phases of work). There is evidence that the original plan was changed. A 1907 photograph of the original building shows a projecting gabled bay on the left side of the assembly hall, balancing the classroom wing on the right-hand side. This was replaced by a new two-storey range in the extension of the school in 1909. This is important because it shows that the original

balanced front (it was symmetrical in its mass but not in its fenestration) was lost in the 1909 extension.



this part was taken down in 1909

The most important exterior view of the school is the east front facing Aberthin Road. From here the original school is sandwiched between extensions, the result of which is that the building has more the character of 1909 than 1895-6. The original school comprises a 4-bay range (presumably the assembly hall) and a gabled classroom wing on its right-hand side. The school was extended by three additional gabled bays on the right side, larger in scale than the original work and including a new assembly hall at the right end. On the left side the original gabled wing was replaced by a two-storey block incorporating a shaped gable to the central bay (and which might have incorporated the extra dormitory added in 1909, although Scourfield describes it as a classroom block). This largely obscures the original entrance/dormitory range of the school, which is set further behind and is no longer visible from the road to its best advantage.

The Rebuttal's argument that many listed buildings have been extended, restored or re-fashioned in other ways over time is employed in a misleading way. The important point is whether later work has intrinsic merit and whether it adds to or detracts from the architectural interest of the original work. In the case of the Cowbridge Intermediate School the later work does not have special architectural interest for its date, and by its scale it dominates a view of the school from the road, subsuming the 1895-6 work. This is inadvertently recognised in the Rebuttal where it states that the aesthetic value of the building relies to a significant extent on its dramatic roofline, a clear reference to the triple-gabled 1909 work.

A comparison of the Cowbridge school with other listed intermediate schools was covered in Cadw's previous response and the Rebuttal offers no counter arguments.

### **Replacement of windows**

The Rebuttal rejects Cadw's opinion that loss of original windows is a negative factor in considering the building for listing. To counter it, some examples are quoted of buildings that have been listed in spite of having plastic windows, giving the impression that window alteration is not an important factor. This is clearly wrong. In considering a building for listing the window detail is of varying importance, depending on its contribution to overall character and architectural merit. In a building which has large windows, which the assembly hall and the original classroom wing, as well as the 1909 extensions all do, the original window detail is important to the overall historic character. The Rebuttal plays down the importance of the windows, but Cadw's original site inspection correctly noted that the loss of the original window detail and its replacement using unsympathetic materials is a significant negative factor.

### **Conclusion**

Neither the Rebuttal nor the more strongly worded letter of protest offers any new insights or arguments that make a convincing case for overturning the decision not to list. The Rebuttal does not make a full assessment of the building, as it overlooks or plays down the importance of any negative factors. In my opinion the historical argument that the building represents a significant 'first' is also overplayed.

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