

## Former Girls School, Aberthin Road, Cowbridge – Response to Listing Assessment of March/April 2020

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### **Executive summary**

This report has been compiled in response to assessments by Judith Alfrey (Cadw) and Richard Hayman (independent consultant) which were commissioned by the Deputy Minister of Culture Sport and Tourism in March 2020. Both Alfrey and Hayman advise that the former Intermediate School for Girls does not meet the criteria for listing. Their assessments do not recognise the extent to which the original 1895-6 school building survives and overlook the historic value of the school despite the fact it was the first purpose built intermediate girls school across both England and Wales. These views are contested as being inaccurate and highly subjective in nature. Our rationale for objecting to these assessments are described according to the four forms of heritage value outlined in Cadw's Conservation Principals (2011).

### ***Evidential value***

Alfrey and Hayman claim that the school does not survive as originally built and that it has been excessively altered such that it no longer retains the character of the original 1895-6 building. However, new research undertaken in preparation of this report demonstrates that to the contrary, the original girls' school in Cowbridge survives to a very high degree retaining more than 72% of the façade around its original perimeter and more than 84% (possibly even 100%) of the original footprint of the building. Internally, changes to its original layout have been minimal, consisting only of the removal of one partition wall and the removal of part of an external wall from the 'professor's room' to create a corridor leading to the classrooms and hall of the 1909 extension. Numerous original features still survive within the building, including original fireplaces, staircase, roof-beams and the original 1895-6 water cistern located above the servants' bedroom.

The claim that the school has lost its original character as a result of the 1909 extension is contested, given that the majority of that building work was undertaken in identical style to the original school. The old entrance wing was partially demolished as part of the 1909 works, but new evidence suggests the retention of the internal walls, the majority of the external ground floor walls, windows and doorway, demonstrating a continuity in style between the two phases of building. Indeed, from both an internal and external perspective, it is very difficult to differentiate the two phases of building. Given the skilful manner in which the 1909 extension blends with the original structure, it is argued that the unfair criticism of the 1909 work as being without 'special architectural interest' is entirely misleading, as is the claim that it has lost its original character. It also is noted that several buildings across Wales have been listed despite more extensive modification (including replacement of fenestration).

### ***Historical value***

Both Alfrey and Hayman contest that there is any significance to the fact Cowbridge was the first purposely built intermediate girls' school across both England and Wales. They claim that other schools built at the same time are better preserved (without substantiation) and suggest that schools such as

Abergavenny and Cardiff girls' intermediates 'illustrate this important aspect of cultural history'. However, the current examination of the historical contexts of these schools suggests that Cowbridge is as well preserved if not better than the examples given by Alfrey and Hayman and have very different social contexts that contributes to its genuine significance. Hayman also subjectively contests that mixed schools were symbols of greater equality, yet historical sources also suggest that mixed schools were often prejudicial in the implementation of the curriculum. From an architectural perspective this is also immaterial given that Hayman himself notes differences between the designs of mixed and single sex schools. Early schools built specifically for girls are also very rare, especially one like Cowbridge which had purpose built science facilities built from their onset.

Richard Hayman's assessment questions the extent to which Robert Williams, the school's architect should be recognised for his design skills. Although the extent of Williams' surviving work is uncertain, this report provides prominent examples of his work across the world that survive because of the use of quality materials and his prizewinning designs.

### ***Aesthetic Value***

Although the old girls school in Cowbridge is an architecturally attractive building, Alfrey and Hayman claim that the loss of original fenestration has resulted in a loss of architectural character. This is both subjective and inaccurate as there are in fact original stained glass windows retained within the school's hostel range. Furthermore, the replacement of other original windows by UPVC frames does not negate the character of its standing masonry and original internal features. Such UPVC windows are easily replaced to restore the character of the building and there are many examples of buildings that have been listed throughout Wales despite replacement of some or all of the original windows.

### ***Communal Value***

Even if Alfrey and Hayman think the school is unworthy of listing based on its architectural and historical merits, their opinions are contrasted by more than 20 senior academics and specialists with more specific experience in the history of education in Britain. The communal value of the building is also demonstrated by over 5,500 signatures calling on the Welsh Assembly to urge the Welsh Government to intervene to save the building. Their views are as valid, if not more so than Alfrey and Hayman, and should not be brushed aside.

This evidence is discussed in greater detail within the report to support the conclusion that the school should be considered as having a high national significance and should be reconsidered for listed status.