

## **Former Cowbridge Intermediate School for Girls Assessment**

### **Background**

In February 2019, we responded to a spot-listing request for this building, the former girls' intermediate school, by concluding that whilst of local interest, it did not meet the criteria for listing and did not compare favourably when benchmarked against other examples of this important building type which are already listed. Our reasons for not listing cited alterations to the building, including the replacement of most of the windows with UPVC, and noted also that the original building had been very quickly and heavily extended.

We have now been asked to reconsider this recommendation, in the light of new information presented in a detailed assessment prepared for a local residents group by Robert Scourfield.

I have considered this report carefully, but have concluded that the new information presented does not add up to a strong enough case to overturn our earlier position.

### **Assessment**

The salient points from Mr Scourfield's report are as follows

1. *It was the first girls' intermediate school to be built in Wales (1895-6) under an Act of parliament of seminal importance.*

The Welsh Intermediate Education Act of 1889 was pioneering legislation in making provision for education for girls and boys beyond primary age by county and county borough councils. Separate schools for girls and boys were provided in some areas, but in others, dual or mixed schools were established. The importance of the Act is recognised in several other listings, including most recently Ysgol Maesydre, Welshpool. Listed examples include both mixed and single sex schools.

In my view, there is no special significance attached to the fact that Cowbridge was built as a girls school, as education for girls was envisaged by the Act, and it was a matter of local choice as to how it was delivered. In any event, as a girls' school, Cowbridge was very swiftly followed by what is now Harold Road Junior School, Abergavenny, built as an Intermediate Girls school in 1897, and listed as such in 1998.

2. *The establishment of the school (and of intermediate education in Glamorgan more generally) was in the teeth of local controversy generated by the refusal of Cowbridge Grammar School to join the county scheme.*

Whilst this is interesting, it is not the only instance of local controversy: for example, the establishment of the listed County Intermediate School in Llanfyllin was only carried through by public support.

3. *The school is unusual in that it accommodated boarders, and the boarders' block is a distinctive element in the architecture of the school.*

This is indeed unusual, but I am not persuaded that 'unusual' necessarily equates to 'significant'. Although the boarders' block does retain distinctive architectural features, they are insufficient in my view to tip the balance in favour of listing. Friars School, Bangor, which is listed, included dormitory accommodation, and is a design of real distinction.

4. *The original character of the school survives intact to a high degree externally and internally, including retention of original plan form, and is of greater design quality than most other intermediate schools, designed by an interesting and under-valued architect.*

The extent to which the original character of the school survives intact is a debatable point. The building was massively extended not long after it first opened (in 1909). Although these historic extensions were sympathetic in character to the original, they overwhelm the original in terms of scale. Some detail from the first building survives (and was acknowledged to do so in our original assessment), but in my view, the dominant character of the school is of a building of 1909.

The Cowbridge school does not compare particularly favourably with other listed examples – the schools in Llanfyllin and Welshpool, for example, both retain their original form without substantial alteration, and are both fine examples of Queen Anne and baroque revival styles popular at the turn of the century – are in my view, of greater architectural distinction than the school at Cowbridge.

Like Cowbridge, the listed Harold Road School in Abergavenny was also built in two principal phases, but is also a building of greater architectural distinction: the second phase did not apparently overwhelm the original building to the same extent.

More problematic is the loss of detail through replacement of the windows with uPVC. This is not mentioned in Mr Scourfield's report but was noted by the then Assistant Inspector of Historic Buildings when he visited in February.

## **Conclusion.**

Mr Scourfield's report makes the point that even if better examples have already been listed, that is not in itself reason to decline to list the Cowbridge school. He claims that it is among the best-preserved of surviving intermediate schools in Wales, and that the plan form and fittings are as complete and important as existing listing examples.

I cannot agree with this assessment, which overlooks the replacement of the fenestration, and blurs the distinction between the building of 1895-6 and the extensions of 1909. It is reasonable for us to use existing listed buildings as a benchmark for assessing this example of an Intermediate School, and I am satisfied that in terms of its architectural quality it falls short. On the principal point of historic

interest – that it was the first intermediate school for girls in Wales – I do not find this a compelling argument in favour of listing, since the principle of education for girls was enshrined in the 1889 Act, and other listed examples reflect the diversity of arrangements for providing education for both girls and boys according to the terms of the Act.

Although the building does not meet the criteria for listing, as our earlier assessment made clear, it is of obvious local importance and might warrant inclusion on the Vale of Glamorgan's County Treasures list.

Judith Alfrey

1 August 2019