

# Public Health and Water Supply in Bridgwater, Somerset

by Tony Woolrich

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## 1) Introduction

1

**B**RIDGWATER is an ancient town and since 1974 has formed part of the district of Sedgemoor in Somerset. It is situated on the River Parrett, on the border of an alluvial plain which extends for some miles on the eastern side. On the western side are the Quantock Hills, about six miles distant. The town is divided into two unequal parts (eastern and western) by the River Parrett, which after leaving Bridgwater, runs a tortuous course for ten miles in a north-westerly direction, and empties itself into the Bristol Channel.

The east side of the town is flat, the west on rising ground, and there is a marked difference in the geological features on the two sides. On the eastern side the loamy surface soil, varying in depth from a few inches to two or three feet, rests on a stratum of clay from four to twenty feet in thickness, which contains pockets of peat, and is, to a certain extent porous. Beneath this clay are found various strata of slime, sand, marl and red sandstone conglomerate; the upper layers are bisected by the river, but the gravel, marl and conglomerate pass under its bed, and are contiguous with the strata on the western side. On the western side the subsoil is gravel, resting on marl, and the red sandstone conglomerate, save in the immediate vicinity of the river, where the upper strata, as on the eastern side, consists of clay, slime and sand.

The origins of the town of Bridgwater can be traced back to 1200, for in that year King John granted to William Brewer two Charters: one permitting him to build a castle and the other creating a borough outside its walls. The new town depended on trade for its success, and a licence to hold weekly markets and an annual fair accompanied the grant to build the castle. It is probable that the early plan of the town allowed for a large piece of land below the castle wall between the river and the church and connected by a stone bridge over the river to the new suburb of Eastover. This river crossing was essential for the success of the market.

In the succeeding centuries of the middle ages Bridgwater grew in importance, as its foreign trade developed and ships traded with ports in France, Ireland and Spain. Town houses, shops and stalls were built, some to accommodate the merchants who wished to settle in the town.

By Tudor times the castle had become ruinous, as had some of the houses, due to the economic difficulties then. During the Civil War property was again destroyed. In the early eighteenth century industrial developments were started by the Duke of Chandos, but all of these collapsed within fifteen years. Ship-building was more successful, as was brickmaking which during the nineteenth century became

Bridgwater's main manufacturing industry. However, it was the port which fueled the economy of the town, not only for overseas but also the coast-wise trade.

The Bridgwater buss *Emanuel* accompanied Martin Frobisher on his third voyage to Baffin Land in 1578, and in the 1588 Armada battle thirty Bridgwater men under Captain John Smyth sailed in the bark *William*. The early records show that Bridgwater did not have a large fleet of deep-sea vessels, and by the seventeenth century the town had a fleet of smaller, open vessels, suitable for short sea passages and for carrying coal from South Wales. The south-west of England was early converted to this fuel for domestic purposes, and the cross-channel trade grew greatly. It was on this foundation that Bridgwater grew. In the days before the railways the navigable rivers and canals were the means by which most of the nation's goods were transported, and goods could be brought by water from the heart of the industrial midlands, down the Severn into Bridgwater, and then on to the other ports of the Bristol Channel.

Bridgwater's trade increased by more than 50% in the seven years preceding 1830: in 1822 the tonnage was slightly more than 75,000 tons, while in 1832 it had reached to above 113,000 registered tons. The *Alfred* newspaper noted on 9 and 16 Dec 1832:

*The trade of Bridgwater was principally confined to London and the ports of the West of England, some few voyages are made to Liverpool, Dublin and Belfast, and probably three or four voyages in the year to the Baltic for timber and tallow. The staple articles of export of the port itself are scouring bricks, bricks for building and pantiles; to which may be added the surplus agricultural produce of the western part of Somersetshire, as wheat, malt, flour, barley, beans, wool, cheese and cider. In addition to these may be mentioned a few cargoes of elm and oak timber, but principally the former.*

*Among the articles of export scouring bricks take the lead; of these, which are made in no other part of England, immense quantities are sent to London, Bristol, Liverpool, Dublin and other large places. Bricks for building and pantiles, and shipped in large quantities to Dublin, Belfast, Penzance, Falmouth and Newport — wool is shipped for Gloucester chiefly; malt and flour; with wheat, beans, and barley to Bristol, and the several ports of Wales.*

*Amongst the articles of import into the port of Bridgwater, coals form the principal; the greater part of these are brought from Newport, and some from Cardiff and Lydney in Gloucestershire; culm is*

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2

*likewise imported in large quantities from Swansea, for the use of the limeburners; roofing slates are brought from Beaumaris and Port Madoc in Wales; salt, the produce of the Worcestershire brine pits, from Gloucester; groceries and spirits, the latter being chiefly British gin distilled at Bristol, and rum from Bristol; oats from Cardigan and Carmarthen; and some oak bark from Minehead. There are various other articles imported, but the abovementioned are the principal. Besides the above there are four schooners of about 120 tons burthen each, employed in the trade between London and Bridgwater; and four others in the trade with British America.*

The vessels travelled anywhere. Before the First World War the ketch *Florrie*, for example, in one year sailing to Dublin, Glasgow, Newport, Porthleven, Newlyn, Limerick, Llanelli, Guernsey, Rotterdam, Caen, Alderney and Southampton.

With coal from South Wales it was the practice to unload it at Bridgwater into small lighters which could pass the stone bridge and up to Ham Mills on the Parrett in the parish of Creech St Michael. From here it was transported by pack horse to Taunton, North Curry, Langport and Wellington. After the coming of the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal in 1827, Taunton was served directly; in 1832 35,000 tons of coal were imported by the town annually, or nearly 700 tons weekly. In the same year Bridgwater imported about 100,000 tons of coal, and the amount was constantly increasing.

Although the extension of the canal into the new Bridgwater dock was opened in 1841, and the Bristol and Exeter Railway reached Bridgwater in the same year, the water-borne coal trade began to fall away. Bridgwater's coal imports were badly hit by the opening of the Severn Tunnel in 1886, since it could be moved directly from the pits by rail into the South West, without requiring transhipment by sea.

Bridgwater was thus firmly always a working town, whose economy revolved around the port and manufacturing with only a small minority of inhabitants being gentry, professional men or merchants. The local standard of living has always reflected this, and although in numerical terms nowhere near as bad as the large manufacturing towns and cities of the industrial midlands and North, the quality of life of many of the inhabitants was just as dreadful.

Few records have been found about the state of public health and sanitation in Bridgwater before about the middle of the nineteenth century, but from that time they describe in graphic detail the horrific living conditions of the poorer parts of the town, the revolting state of the town's graveyards, the frequent epidemics and the thirty years of agitation which finally led to the provision of a proper water supply and improvements to the drainage from the late 1870's.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the research for this book has been the discovery of how little of the story of Victorian public health and living conditions ever appeared in contemporary published histories; indeed the economic and social history of the town was largely ignored. Virtually all the nineteenth-century histories described in depth the medieval town and the events of the Civil War and the Monmouth Rebellion to the exclusion of almost everything else. In turn this has blunted present-day perceptions of what living and working in the town then was really like.