

800 years of Christianity in Bridgwater by Tony Woolrich

This account was written to accompany the exhibition mounted in Saints Mary's Church in May 2000 to celebrate the 800th anniversary of Bridgwater's first Charter. It was later reprinted and sold in aid of Saint Mary's Restoration Fund.

THE ROMANS

Bridgwater did not exist in Roman times. The landscape between the Quantocks and the Mendips was largely fen, with the exception of areas of higher ground where the inhabitants lived. A Roman port was situated at Crandon Bridge, near Puriton, reached by the Roman Road from Ilchester along the top of the Poldens. This road continued to the ford across the Parrett at Combwich and then passed along the coast into North Devon. There is some slight evidence of settlement at Cannington, on land between the present village of Wembdon and Bridgwater and of salt production on the levels near Burnham.

Individual Romans and natives may have been Christian believers, but there was no organised Christian religion until the third century, and in 314 three British bishops attended the Council of Arles, in France.

Pagan cults would have been usual among the native Britons, and the official religion of worshipping the emperor would have been practised by Roman officials. The army had its own cults, centred around the worship of Mithras.

Rome officially withdrew and Britain gained independence in 410 and the country was run by a succession of petty tribal chieftains. It was frequently invaded by waves of Saxons and Vikings.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Somerset was a Christian society, but little is known about how it was organised before the Anglo Saxon invasion. Celtic missionaries flourished, and their presence has been found on the coast of west Somerset at Saint Decuman, Porlock and Timberscombe.

After the arrival of the English, monasteries began to be founded. The early Saxon churches were missionary centres, the priests making journeys into the neighbourhood to preach. These churches were known as minsters.

Monasteries – about 681

Glastonbury founded late seventh century
Machelney in existence

Minster Churches – Early eighth century

Saint Andrew, Wells
Banwell
Congresbury

Saint Augustine came to England in 697 to oversee the development of the English church. With the invasion of Somerset the existing Saxon See established at Win-

chester became unmanageable and in 705 Aldhelm was appointed bishop at the newly created West Saxon see of Sherborne, whose area of responsibility included Somerset. Under Archbishop Plegmund the Wessex bishoprics of Winchester and Sherborne were split in 909 into five new ones, including Wells, where it was based in the old Minster church.

THE NORMANS

1066 saw the Norman invasion, when the old ruling aristocracy was replaced by Norman barons.

1086 The Domesday Survey shows that the population of the county was around 65,000. Farming was widespread. Most of the lowlands were ploughed, the central wetland was undrained and there was about twice as much woodland as there is now.

The Normans built castles to control the population, but these later formed the centres for advancing the political ambitions of the new aristocracy.

A century later the king's possessions in Somerset were small. Lesser families who were the tenants of the major landlords emerged as the most important local people on a day to day basis. In 1086 the Manor of Bridgwater was held by Walter (or Walscin) of Douai, and between 1088 and c. 1107 he had given the church at Bridgwater with all its tithes to Bath Abbey. This means that the church was already in existence, but whether it was on the site of Saint Mary's is not known. About 1214 the link with Bath Abbey was severed and a new link was established between the church and the newly-founded hospital of Saint John, Bridgwater. The living remained in their hands until the Dissolution of the Monasteries three and a half centuries later.

By 1199 the Manor passed to William Brewer. The town of Bridgwater had developed by then, and the Castle was built soon after. In 1200 King John granted the Borough its first charter.

The population growth of the early medieval times meant that the main preoccupation was to increase food production by finding suitable land. Woodland was cleared, wetland began to be drained and hill land was reclaimed.

THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

In the middle ages the Christian Church was an international, centralised institution, whose focus was Rome, but most people's attention was on their own parish church. It was involved in all stages of life from birth to marriage to burial. In addition the church was at the heart of the social, educational, charitable and cultural life, and the cycle of festivals, feasts, saints' days and holy days provided the pattern for daily life. There were no fixed pews in Saint Mary's. People brought a stool or stood and watched the service. Money was raised by the renting of seats for church

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services - the closer you were to the front, the more you paid. The space within the church was regularly used for non-religious activities, for meeting and feasts.

The church was thus central to parish life and the rebuilding, decoration and furnishing of the building depended on the parish alone. Quite respectable sums were raised in even small parishes.

Money was raised by various means, including the church ales, fees for the use of bells, hire of weights and measures as well as gifts both in money and kind. Various theatrical performances were held and in some parishes unofficial groups of young people were allowed to raise money by singing and dancing on behalf of the church.

The most usual source of money was the church ale. Several parishes, possessed a church house: Bridgwater's was on the High Street where brewing implements were kept and where meetings were held. Much effort was made to provide entertainment at events and the accounts record payments for plays and players and also minstrels.

The surviving churchwardens' accounts show that the local people equipped the churches with elaborate painted woodwork, statues, wall paintings, pews, vestments, bells, organs and plate, nearly all of which was destroyed in the Reformation.

The accounts for 1447 list silver crosses, candlesticks, censers, chalices, embroidered vestments in blue, green, white and gilt, altar hangings and illuminated service books.

Finding the money for this expenditure was the responsibility of the churchwardens. Most churches had 2 (but Saint Mary's has always had 4) and they were elected annually. The numbers reflect the fact that the parish included many of the villages surrounding the town. They managed the finances and arranged for the architects and builders and other craftsmen.

Little is known about the parishioners' beliefs. Surviving carvings suggest that in early medieval times it was centred on the struggle between the forces of good and evil. In later medieval times different subject matter appears, relating to the saints and the Virgin Mary, and the need for intercession to achieve salvation from purgatory. This in turn led to the erection of chantries in churches, funded by pious families or fraternities of parishioners.

Saint Mary's Chantries and Altars

Blessed Virgin Mary
All Saints
Holy Trinity
Holy Cross
Saint Anne

Saint Catherine
Saint George
Saint James
Saint Saviour
The Rood

Towards the end of the middle ages a few people were unwilling to accept all the teachings of the church then. John Wycliffe, who originated the Lollard heresy, died in 1384 but a few of his followers were active in Somerset in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Despite these doubts the massive amount of building done in numerous Somerset churches in the decades before the Reformation shows the strength of support. Many of the finest Somerset towers were built then.

Such support came to a sudden end with the changes of the Reformation, when Henry VIII took the title of Supreme Head of the Church in 1534.

The Reformation resulted in the wholesale destruction of things of great beauty. It came in successive waves driven by the twists and turns of government policy, which the churchwardens were compelled to enforce. Screens, bench ends, wall paintings and windows which only recently had been installed were ruthlessly ripped out. Wall paintings were obliterated by whitewash. The sheer waste of money this meant beggars belief. There was no overt opposition.

With all the colours, lights and symbolism removed, the new Protestant Church had a different ethos and a totally changed appeal.

THE REFORMATION

Protestantism, beginning in northern Europe in the early sixteenth century in reaction to medieval Roman Catholic doctrines and practices, became one of the major forces of Christianity. It became firmly established in Europe and North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and from the nineteenth century it spread rapidly throughout the world and wherever it gained a foothold it influenced many aspects of the life of the area.

Martin Luther (1483-1546), who had been instrumental in formulating a protest against current religious practices, was agitating for reform. Two versions of protestantism evolved: the Lutheran - in Germany, and the Reformed, in Holland, England and Scotland. The latter in turn evolved into "orthodox Protestant" - the Anglicans, and the "unorthodox", such as the Baptists and the Quakers.

BIBLE TRANSLATION

The Hebrew scriptures, the Old Testament, were the only bible the early Christian church knew. The books of the New Testament began to be written down in Greek, starting in the late first century AD. and the

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spread of Christianity required further translation into other languages. In 405 Saint Jerome wrote a Latin version, the Vulgate, which was to become the standard for Western Christianity for the next thousand years.

The first complete English-language version of the bible dates from 1382 and was made by John Wycliffe and his followers. It was the work of William Tyndale who from 1525 to 1535 translated the New Testament and part of the Old Testament that became the model for all subsequent English translations. These earlier translations culminated in the King James Version (*The Authorised Version*) of 1611, and was the principal bible used by English-speaking Protestants for 270 years.

New translations of the bible have burgeoned in the 20th century. The Authorised Version was revised in 1881. It was later revised as

The Revised Standard Version (1946-1952)
The New Revised Standard Version (1989)

A completely new translation into British English, the *New English Bible* was first mooted in 1946. The New Testament appeared in 1961 and the Old Testament and Apocrypha in 1970.

Other translations were produced for the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

The Growth of Translation

1450 - there were 33 full translations
1800 - 71 full translations
Now - 250 full translations plus
1,300 partial translations.

Bibles were originally hand written, and elaborately illuminated in colour and gold leaf. The spread of printing from 1454 meant that the Bible and other religious literature became more widely spread, and was of great influence in the growth of the Reformation.

In 1455 the bible was the first substantial book printed from moveable type. Known today as the Gutenberg Bible, after its printer, it had forty two line of type in most of its columns and was in Latin.

In 1457 appeared the Psalter in Latin, printed by the successors to Gutenberg. This was a much more accomplished work being printed in two colours with elaborate initials.

The first bible printed in English, at a Scottish press, was published in 1579, and was a translation of the Geneva Bible of 1561

THE PURITAN REVOLUTION

Henry VIII was responsible for the Dissolution of the Monasteries, (and the stripping of churches of Catholic symbols), the introduction into parish churches of the Bible in English and for giving the clergy permission to marry.

During Edward VI's reign, the church was systematically reformed towards a more Protestant ethos.

England returned to Roman Catholicism in 1553 under Queen Mary Tudor but from 1558 under Elizabeth I it changed back to Protestantism again. This was enforced by stating that the Queen was "Supreme Governor" of the Church of England, and that all worship should follow the Book of Common Prayer. During her reign there was controversy about church government, some holding that bishops should be abolished.

Under James I in the early seventeenth century there was a mood in the Church of England against nonconformist sentiments.

Under Charles I, religion played a major factor in Parliament which had become dominated by Puritans, and in the Commonwealth parish churches were led by men of Presbyterian, Independent, Baptist and other sentiments.

Under Charles II there was a return to strict Episcopal ways and almost 2000 Puritan ministers were ejected, including Bridgwater's John Norman. The use of the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 became mandatory. There was a period of persecution of nonconformists after 1664 which persisted for the next twenty-five years.

Under James II there was a fear of the return of Roman Catholicism, which led to the Monmouth Rebellion. Under William and Mary the Toleration Act of 1689 stabilised religious observance, with both the established church and the means for dissenting congregations to have licensed chapels.

The major impact was on the internal appearance of Saint Mary's. The rood screen across the Chancel arch was allowed to remain, but the various chantry chapels had been removed by about 1550. Nothing is known about the destruction of wall paintings and statues or the disposal of vestments and plate.

Preaching was given great importance and the new pulpit was placed against a pillar in the middle of the church. Pews are presumed to have been fitted as well.

Early in the seventeenth century part of the nave adjoining the chancel arch was ornately screened to accommodate the Mayor and Corporation. Various galleries were erected in the church, and an organ was installed on top of the rood screen in the chancel arch.

Little is known about the religious life of the town, except that this period saw the growth of nonconformist churches, such as the Baptists, Independents and Quakers.

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THE VICTORIAN REBUILDING OF SAINT MARY'S

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, changes started to be made to the interior of Saint Mary's. In 1828 the organ was moved from above the rood screen to the west gallery of the church.

By the late 1840's the increasing population of the town caused some thought to be given to adding another gallery, but instead the inside of the church was remodelled to incorporate more pews.

Work of repair began in 1847, and the organ moved to its present position; it was reopened in July 1849. From 1850 the galleries were taken down and the present pews installed. In April 1850 it was discovered that the church structure was unsafe, and wholesale rebuilding was called for. Several of the external walls were taken down and rebuilt, as were all the roofs.

The church was remodelled to serve the liturgy of the Tractarian movement, which was a harking back to the medieval form of service, including a cathedral-type choir, which was established in 1849. The architect planned to rebuild the tower and spire in a decorated style, and also to paint and gild the interior walls in full medieval splendour. In the event there was no money, and only the east wall was embellished.

During the 1870's more improvements were done, including installing gas lighting and central heating.

During the twentieth century the interior has been simplified, and much decoration removed. The Nave Altar was installed in 1996.

More details of the re-building of Saint Mary's can be found in the companion booklet *Saint Mary's Bridgwater: how it came to be the way it is today*. (2003)

OTHER BRIDGWATER ANGLICAN CHURCHES Holy Trinity Church

The population increase in the first third of the nineteenth century meant that Saint Mary's was held to be overcrowded. The historic parish was therefore split up and new churches built in the suburbs.

The expanding southern part of the ancient parish was served by the building of Holy Trinity Church, Saint Mary Street which was consecrated in 1840 and in 1841 became a district chapelry.

This church continued for some 118 years, but during the 1940's, there was a need for a place of worship closer to the Hamp area, which had become a residential suburb. A large private house in Hamp Street, Greenfield House, and its grounds were purchased by the diocese.

From 1953 worship took place on two sites, old Holy Trinity and a daughter church established in Greenfield

House, the Church of the Good Shepherd.

Old Holy Trinity was finally closed and demolished in 1958 to make way for the Broadway relief road and worship continued at the Good Shepherd whilst a new church was built alongside. The foundation stone for this was out in place in April 1960 and the new light and airy church dedicated to the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity was consecrated on 23 September 1961.

Holy Trinity today includes home groups, a healing prayer group, a singing group, Beavers, Cubs, Scouts, Brownies and a rambling group. Worship is also offered at La Ciotat House, Gibb House and Oaktrees Home. Holy Trinity became linked to the other East Bridgwater Anglican parishes in 1988 as part of a Group Ministry with Saint John's and Saint Francis.

Saint John the Baptist, Eastover

Saint John the Baptist, Eastover, serving the eastern part of the historic parish, was consecrated in 1846. It was built at the instigation of Revd. J. Moore Capes, who in the same year became a Roman Catholic; it was one of the first in the country designed for the liturgy of the Oxford Movement.

In 1882 Saint John's opened a mission church, All Saints, off Weston-zoyland Road.

In recent years, the rear of Saint John's church has been re-modelled with the insertion of a two story suite of offices and meeting rooms within the body of the church itself.

Saint Francis of Assisi, Saxon Green

Saint Francis of Assisi, Saxon Green was begun in 1960 as a district church for the housing estate being developed in the southern part of Saint John's Parish. It became a parish in its own right in 1965.

After these changes to the map of the parishes, Saint Mary's serves the Town Centre and the housing estates along the Durleigh Road.

NEIGHBOURING ANGLICAN CHURCHES

Outside the historic parish boundary to the north and west are neighbouring parishes of Chilton Trinity, Durleigh and Wembdon.

Chilton Trinity dates from the eleventh century and was combined with Saint Mary's in 1749.

Durleigh church dates from the twelfth century and was described as a chapelry. In 1976 it became part of the united benefice of Bridgwater, Saint Mary and Chilton Trinity with Durleigh.

Saint George's Wembdon dates from the twelfth century. A fire destroyed the nave roof in 1868, after which the church was virtually rebuilt. The parish includes a number of the suburbs of Bridgwater.

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To the south lies the parish of North Petherton and to the east are the parishes of Bawdrip, Chedzoy and Puriton.

THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS (QUAKERS)

The Quakers rose in mid seventeenth century England as the result of the zeal of George Fox (1624-1691). They were dedicated to living according to the “Inward Light”, or a direct inward knowledge of God, without creeds, clergy or other ecclesiastical forms. Their worship is conducted in silence, as each person awaits God. Quakers are renowned for their work in furthering peace, and in succouring prisoners.

At first the Quakers were centred on Lancashire, but from 1652 sent travelling ministers around the country. Within a decade perhaps 40,000 had been converted.

John Anderton, a Bridgwater goldsmith, became a Quaker in 1658 and held meetings at his house by 1670. He spent several years in Ilchester Gaol for his views, and on several occasions meeting houses were vandalised at the instigation of the magistrates. A meeting house was licensed in 1689 and a Quaker burial ground soon afterwards. In 1722 a meeting house for 200 people was built in Friarn Street, which was enlarged and improved in 1801, and was still in use until 2014, when it was sold to a congregation of Muslims as a prayer hall.

INDEPENDENTS(CONGREGATIONALISTS)

Independents arose in England in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Many adherents were active in the Civil War and Commonwealth.

Congregations of Independents were established in Bridgwater at the end of the eighteenth century, meeting in various places including a malthouse in Friarn Street.

The Friarn Street meeting house, known as Zion Chapel was enlarged by a Sunday school and was rebuilt in 1822. It closed in 1865 and was taken over by the Salvation Army in 1881, and has since been demolished.

A new chapel was opened in Fore Street in 1864 as Fore Street Congregational Chapel. It was demolished after closure in 1964, and the Congregation moved to a new building now known as Westfield United Reformed Church next to Saint Matthew’s Field

THE BAPTISTS

There was probably an Anabaptist congregation in Bridgwater by the end of the sixteenth century, established by Dutch and Flemish migrants, and the present Baptist Church celebrated its fourth centenary in 2000. The early records of Bridgwater Baptist Church were destroyed in a fire in the nineteenth century.

The first Baptist church to be established in Britain was at Spitalfields, London, in 1612 by a group of migrants from Lincolnshire who had gone to Holland in 1608 to

flee persecution.

Baptist preachers gained many adherents from Cromwell’s army and at that time the church was split between General Baptists and Particular Baptists. The present Baptist Church began in Bridgwater by 1640. The pastor, Rev. Tobias Welles was imprisoned in Ilchester goal in 1663, together with 13 other ministers, 17 Baptists and 50 Quakers. A successor, Revd. Edward Elliot, later moved to Wapping, London, where he played an important part in the introduction of Thomas Newcomen’s steam engine.

The Baptists had a chapel in Saint Mary Street in 1692 and by 1712 had 200 members. During the eighteenth century the congregation declined, and the chapel was demolished and rebuilt in 1837. Some members left for the Unitarians in 1853, but from the 1870’s groups were active in Albert and Union streets.

A mission was started in West Quay in the 1880’s and another in Northgate in 1914.

A chapel built by the Mariners’ Christian Society in Moorland Road was acquired by the Baptists in 1965, and closed in 1972, when it was acquired by the Salvation Army.

THE METHODISTS

Methodism began in the eighteenth century as a religious society that wished to reform the Church of England from within.

George Whitefield came to the town in 1739 and John Wesley preached several times between 1746 and 1769. He upset the Vicar of Saint Mary’s, who had the townsfolk turn the fire engine on him. A house was licensed for worship in 1753. By 1800 a chapel with a Sunday school was in use in Eastover. A chapel was built in King Street in 1816, and was twice enlarged by 1860. A Sunday school was added in 1924, but the chapel closed in 1980.

A Primitive Methodist chapel was opened in Angel Crescent in 1851. Chapels at other locations opened later, but the cause had died by 1881.

Wesleyan reformers met in the town in 1851 and in 1857 joined the United Methodist Free Church. This in turn joined the Bible Christians and met at their chapel until 1911, when Monmouth Street Chapel was built. After Methodist union in 1932 Monmouth Street Chapel was the base of a small circuit which was incorporated with the circuit based at King Street in 1951.

THE BRETHREN

The Plymouth Brethren originated in Dublin in 1826 and take their name from a group formed at Plymouth by J. N. Darby (1800-1882). Although since undergoing changes in organisation, including a split into the Exclusive Brethren and the Open Brethren, the

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Plymouth Brethren are perhaps the most faithful latter-day representation of the Puritan tradition. Though numerically small they have supplied numerous biblical scholars and scientists, charity administrators, missionaries and leading military figures.

A congregation was established in Bridgwater in 1840's, in Gloucester Place and by 1868 they had moved to Friarn Street Other meeting rooms were in use at different times, including the Gospel Hall in West Street Recently a new meeting house was opened at Huntworth for the Exclusive Brethren, and Friarn Chapel remains in use by the Open Brethren.

THE SALVATION ARMY

The Salvation Army was founded in 1865 in the East End of London, by William Booth, a Methodist Minister, who ran an evangelical mission there. It was set up on military lines, with each unit being known as a corps, under the command of an officer of rank ranging from a lieutenant to brigadier, who is responsible to a divisional headquarters.

The movement spread rapidly, and the first Bridgwater corps was formed in 1880, established in the former Primitive Methodist chapel in West Street In 1881 the Zion Chapel in Friarn Street was taken over, remaining the citadel until 1970. In 1972 the Army moved to the former Baptist Chapel in Moorland Road.

The Salvation Army is well known for its social concerns and for its ministry among the underprivileged. It is famous for its musical tradition, making great use of brass bands and vocal music.

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

There was a handful of Catholics recorded in Bridgwater in the three centuries after the Reformation. Following the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, from 1845 Mass was said in a private house in the town. After the conversion to Catholicism of J. Moore Capes, founder and first minister of Saint John's Church, a Catholic chapel, dedicated to Saint Joseph, was opened in 1846 at Gordon Terrace. It was first run from Cannington, but in 1851 it had its own resident priest.

In 1850 a small group of Dominican tertiaries attempted to establish a house in the town. In 1882 a new Catholic church, dedicated to Saint Joseph was built at Binford Place, and was extended in 1982. The Sisters of Mercy occupied a building in King Street between 1885 and 1891. Sisters of the Holy Rosary opened a convent in Durleigh Road in 1939, which remained until 1990.

THE PENTECOSTAL CHURCH

Pentecostalism grew out of the Wesleyan Holiness movements in America at the end of the nineteenth century. Bridgwater Central Mission was established Saint Mary Street in 1937 and by 1954 had moved to Green Dragon Lane where it was run by the

Independent Pentecostal Fellowship.

By 1973 Elim Pentecostal had opened in George Street, and later moved to Penel Orliou.

THE UNITARIANS

The Unitarian congregation traces its origins to the supporters of John Norman, Presbyterian Vicar of Bridgwater, who was ejected from his living (1660) and imprisoned 1663-4 for nonconformist preaching.

A Presbyterian meeting house (much rebuilt in the eighteenth century and now known as Christ Church Chapel, Dampiet Street) was erected in 1688, during the ministry of another ejected Presbyterian minister, John Moore. Daniel Defoe described the building as 'fine new meeting house' and noted 'an advanced seat for the mayor and aldermen' who sometimes attended. John Moore established an academy to provide professional training for nonconformists. The theological shift towards Unitarianism began during the ministry of John Moore jun. (1717-1747)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who considered becoming a Unitarian minister, preached several times in the chapel (1797-98). Thomas Watson, Minister 1755-93 established the first Sunday school in the town. A fine organ, still used, was given to the chapel in 1853 by William Browne, Mayor of Bridgwater.

As descendants of the English Presbyterians, who valued learning, openness to new ideas and tolerance in matters of faith more than attachments to dogma, present day Unitarians emphasise their freedom of belief and a concern for all that leads to harmony with others and the world.

MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

Music has always played an important part in Christian worship. Organs in Somerset can be traced back at least to the tenth century when one was in use at Glastonbury Abbey. Anthems and canticles were sung in the middle ages in Cathedrals and monasteries. In most parish churches then, any singing, such as carols, would have been unaccompanied.

Bridgwater churchwardens' accounts for 1448-9 show that 18s. 3d. was paid for the repair of two organ bellows. Plainsong would have been sung in Saint Mary in medieval times by the priests as they celebrated Mass. Leaves from plainsong service books from Saint Mary's have survived.

After the Reformation the liturgy changed, and singing was discontinued, indeed hymn singing during a service in Anglican churches was illegal until 1820. Instead, the psalms were sung to metrical chants, a practice introduced by the Puritans in the seventeenth century from Geneva. Cathedral choirs continued the medieval

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practice, but with modern music written by composers like Tallis and Byrd.

The Sherborne Mercury for 1739 advertised for an organist at Saint Mary's and at the end of the eighteenth century the organ was on a gallery in the Chancel Arch behind the Corporation pews.

The organ was moved to the West Gallery in 1828 and remained there until 1849, when it was moved the present location in the north chancel chapel. A new organ was made by the famous London maker, Father Willis in 1871 and this has been periodically modernised or rebuilt.

The Lutheran hymn-singing tradition was introduced into England in non-conformist churches by Isaac Watts. A generation later the Wesleys wrote many hymns for private devotion and open-air services.

In Anglican churches such singing as was done was led by a choir with simple instrumental accompaniment - today known as West Gallery music, because the choir and band were usually located in the West Gallery of the church.

The spread of the Oxford Movement in the middle nineteenth century and the revival of medieval liturgical practices meant that many churches established choirs, usually of men and boys, who were trained to sing in the cathedral manner. The present Saint Mary's choir was formed in 1849. Women were permitted to sing in it as full members as recently as 1996.

MUSIC AT SAINT MARY'S TODAY

The choir at Saint Mary's today is a mixed group of adults of both sexes. In addition to the singing of the service, the choir anthems and motets, to illustrate the theme of the service, or to create a worshipful atmosphere. Saint Mary's choir is affiliated to The Royal School of Church Music.

CHURCH SCHOOLS

A church school existed in the town in medieval times, and in 1561, following the Dissolution of the Monasteries, became the Free Grammar School. By 1819 it had no pupils, but had been overtaken by Dr Morgan's school, founded in 1723, which in 1888 received the endowments of the Free Grammar School.

Various schools were established in the town during the seventeenth century. These included the renowned Dissenting Academy of John Moore, at Christ Church which continued into the eighteenth century. Christ Church Sunday School was founded in 1780 and there was a Wesleyan Sunday School by 1800.

Early in the nineteenth century, conflicts grew up between the Church of England and Nonconformists about how children should be educated. This resulted in

the formation of two competing societies which funded the building of new schools. These were;

Church of England: National Society for promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Church of England.

Nonconformist: British and Foreign Schools Society Between 1824 and 1870 several schools were established in Bridgwater by the two competing Societies, and the period is littered with closures or amalgamations. In addition, many churches had Sunday Schools.

National Schools

Infants' school near Angel Crescent, 1830. By 1891 amalgamated with the Girls' National School. Boys' school, Mount Street, 1839. Merged with Dr Morgan's school by 1825

Girls' school, Northgate, 1830. Known as St Mary's Church of England School by 1937. By 1947 assumed Voluntary Controlled status. From 1961 infants only; 1973 moved to Park Road; 1977 amalgamated with St Matthew's School in Oakfield Road.

Boys' and girls' school at Eastover 1847. Known as St John's (Eastover Parochial) School. In 1975 transferred to new buildings in Westonzoyleland Road and known as St. John and St. Francis C. of E. School.

West Street Ragged School, 1860. By 1875 known as West Street National School. By 1947 adopted voluntary controlled status. 1958 renamed St Matthew's C. of E. school. 1964 moved to new site in Oakfield Road and was joined by St Mary's school in 1977.

British Schools

School in Mount Street, opened 1824 and ran until 1852.

Girls' school in Friar Street, by c 1860. Transferred to the Bridgwater School Board in 1878 and closed in 1879.

Catholic Schools

School in Gordon Terrace by 1850. Moved to new premises in Binford Place, 1883. After some years of decline, it revived from the 1940's as St Joseph's Roman Catholic aided primary school and in 1963 moved to new premises in Park Avenue.

Sunday Schools

Independents, founded 1819 2 Baptist schools, founded 1835 St Mary's, founded 1823 Unitarian, founded 1830 In 1878 a School Board was established in Bridgwater and it found there were 27 public and private schools in the town and that new ones were needed in the newly developed east and west parts of the town.

Eastover School opened in 1873 and by 1899 had an attendance of 1334 pupils. This figure declined during

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the next forty years, and, after the war the school was reorganised into junior and infants departments. From 1969 the school has been known as Eastover Primary school.

Albert Street School opened in 1880, and by 1906 the attendance was 718.

Today there are four comprehensive schools and Bridgwater College serving the needs of secondary and higher education.

FINALLY

There is much more to be written about the history of church life in Bridgwater - The controversies of the seventeenth century between the Puritans and the Anglicans. The fist-fights which regularly broke out at the vestry meetings in the early nineteenth century. The riot of the 1830's when the mob broke into the house of the churchwarden John Bowen, and assaulted him. The ongoing rows between the nonconformists and the parish church over paying tithes. The insanitary burials in Saint Mary's Church yard and the sorry saga of the establishment of Wembdon Road Cemetery. There are biographies to be written about the town's clergy and ministers, several of whom were nationally famous.

Bridgwater's Christian community is fully justified in celebrating its past.