

The Castle of Bridgwater
Chapter VI of Sydney Gardner Jarman. *History of Bridgwater*, 1889

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THE CASTLE OF BRIDGWATER — THE
CHARTER RELATING TO IT — DESCRIPTION OF
THE FORTRESS — CONFINEMENT OF PRISON-
ERS IN ITS CELLS — HONOURED BY ROYALTY
— ORDERS FOR ITS DISMANTLEMENT — RUIN
AND DECAY.

With cannon in front and cannon in rear!
The Castle was kept by William Briwere ;
And high on the keep daily floated his banners,
For the Castle was reckoned the head of his *Manors* ;
Which proved that his *manners* were not very gentle—
In fact they were physical rather than-mental.
But why should I tell what would pain you to know—
The horrors the Castle concealed, or could show?
Damaged legs, damaged arms, damaged heads,
damaged noses,
Results which *arose* with the Wars of the *Roses*.
Burrington's Serio-Comic History.

The Castle of Bridgwater, to which frequent reference was made in the preceding chapter, and of which almost every vestige has now disappeared, was destined to play an important part in the history of the town. It was built between the years 1200 and 1202, by the Lord William Brewer beforementioned, and must have been an important undertaking in those days. The following is a translation of the Latin charter granted for the purpose by the King :—

"John, by the grace of God, &c., to all to whom the present letter shall come, greeting. Know all of you that we have given to our well-beloved and faithful William Briwere leave to fortify three castles in England — one in Hampshire, that is to say at Eslege or at Stoke; and one in Somerset, that is to say at Brugewaterii; and one in Devon, that is to say on any of his estates wheresoever he will. Wherefore we will and ordain that the aforesaid William may fortify the aforesaid castles well and in peace, happily and quietly, without any hindrance soever. Given at Anjou (?). on the sixth day of June. Witness, T. H., Archbishop of Canterbury, our Chancellor."

At a period so remote from the time of its construction it is almost impossible to form an accurate idea of the size and extent of Bridgwater Castle. From the slight reference we find to it in history, and from the ruins which existed until the early part of the present century, as well as from the few indications which still remain, it is evident that it was a most imposing structure, if not an impregnable fortress. It stood close to the Parret, a colossal mass of high walls and strong tow-

ers, commanding the passage over the river at a point where the only ford is known to have existed. The whole site was surrounded by a deep, broad ditch, or moat, thirty feet wide, the water in which was kept to a uniform depth by the spring tides. Before the principal gate was an outlook called, a barbican, with turrets, designed for the defence of the gate and drawbridge. The wall surrounding the castle is variously estimated to have been from twelve to fifteen feet in thickness, and between twenty and thirty feet high. At intervals on the walls were built square towers, two or three stories high, which served not only for lodging for the numerous retainers, but as granaries and storehouses, and lastly, but by no means least, as watch-towers, commanding a view in each direction; thus the Castle kept watch and ward over the surrounding country. On the top of this wall and on the flat roofs of these towers the defenders of the Castle were wont to stand in time of siege or battle, their position of vantage enabling them to discharge with deadly effect arrows, darts, or the missiles common to the time. In later days forty or forty-four cannon were mounted on the ramparts. The great gate of the Castle stood in the centre of this wall, and was strongly fortified with a tower on each side and a chamber in the centre closed with thick folding doors of oak, plated with iron; with a portcullis of immense strength let down from above, corresponding in direction with the drawbridge which spanned the moat or fosse. Within the enclosed wall was a space or court, called the ballium, in the centre of which stood the Castle proper, the residence of the lordly owner or governor. Underneath were cells or vaults for the confinement of prisoners of war, and which were only too frequently occupied.*

We have no precise information as to the area covered by the Castle and its walls, but judging from the traces of the structure and of the moat still to be found, it would appear that the walls stretched from within a few yards of the river facing east, running in a line with and reaching nearly into the present Fore Street on the south, up by York Buildings on the west, and stretching from a point on the outside of King Square by Northgate to the river again.

In all its vicissitudes up to the time it was dismantled, the Castle had the honour of be-

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ing a "virgin fortress" (as befitted a royal appanage, held by Queens of England as a dowry). Through the centuries succeeding its erection it was the seat of a noble family in time of peace, or the rallying point of forces in time of war. It was the centre round which a township gathered, at first composed of the keepers of cattle, and the other vassals employed on the lands of the manor; and afterwards (when serfdom became extinct, when villanage fell into disuse, and when the feudal system was a thing of the past) composed of freemen who, gradually acquiring, portions of land, extended the *ville* into the dimensions of a town, and built up an important trade of agriculture and home pursuits, succeeding to commerce through the medium of the river Parret, and causing the port to be early regarded as one of no small consequence.

The Castle was occasionally honoured by the presence of Royalty, even as late as the spring of 1645, when Prince Charles summoned a "*council of loyal justices*" within its walls. During the period of the Wars of the Roses the Castle was sieged, but successfully withstood the shock of its invaders.

Towards the end of 1645 an order was issued to dismantle the Castle (the circumstances leading up to which will be dealt with at length in a future chapter, to be devoted to the Siege of Bridgwater).

Since William Brewer raised that noble pile,
Oft had it witnessed might wage war with right,
In many conflicts had it borne a part,
And shared the struggles of the Red and White.
Erect it stood, through many a changeful day,
Till this reverse, the herald of decay.

Then on it fell the with'ring hand of Time —
Its honours faded, and its glories fled,
The storm against it swept remorselessly,
Its friends and former inmates, all were dead!
But ivy, which before had decked its halls,
Clung lovingly around its tottering walls. — S. G. J.

[Sydney Gaynor Jarman TW]

In the carrying out of the instructions for dismantlement some differences arose, and bloodshed was the result. The soldiers were apparently wishful to allow the works to remain, in contravention of the orders, but the people, either through fear that they would be visited with some punishment unless the parliamentary orders were carried out in their entirety, or smarting under the indignity offered to the town by the order of disman-

tlement, "coming in to insist on the destruction, were shot down in various ways, and so began to learn that they, were no longer the leaders in political affairs."

The further history of the Castle is a chronicle of gradual decay. For generations it became the playground of the youth of Bridgwater, who, fired by the stories of its greatness and its vicissitudes told them by their sires, were wont to engage in mimic warfare among the ruins. The walls, lacking the strength of cohesion, gradually fell, or were removed as being dangerous to life and limb. By degrees also most of the site was built over — Castle Street, King Square, a part of Fore Street, Queen Street, and a portion of York Buildings. The ornamental garden in the centre of King Square is probably the only portion not covered. As late as 1810 some of the walls of the Castle were erect, and for years even after that several pits (probably the remains of the donjon keep or vaults) might be seen around the foundations. A few years since a portion of the roadway on the higher side of the Square suddenly gave way, and disclosed what was thought to be part of the foundations. An old spoon was the only relic which came to light. The stones taken from the ruins served to build portions of the walls of new premises, and in more than one instance parts of the ruins themselves were built in, in running up new structures. The wide moat was filled in at intervals as it interfered with traffic or building operations; the north portion went by the name of Bailey Ditch, a designation by no means forgotten even now. Some of the houses in Fore-street were built *over* the moat, and as late as 1884, when rebuilding operations were going on behind Messrs. Hook's Golden Key Grocery Warehouse, the workmen made the interesting discovery of a portion of the moat, filled with black mud and refuse.

The last wall which stood was on the spot now occupied by the large house on the north-east corner of the Square, and it ultimately had to be removed as being dangerous. Of the few well-documented traces which now remain of the stone structure is a stone arch on the Western Quay, which there can be no doubt was a water-gate entrance. There is also an archway in the cellar of a house on the corner of Castle-street, which has been regarded as indicating a subterranean river passage, leading to the opposite

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side. This is, however, mere conjecture. For many years one portion of the ballium was used as a timber yard ; whilst the old gate-house, in earlier times, was converted into a dwelling-house by a member of the Harvey family.



* Under date Kirkham, August 6th 1323, a writ was sent to the Constable of Bridgwater Castle, directing him " *to keep the prisoners in his castle in safe and sure custody, so that he may be able to answer for them at the King's command.*"
— (*Rot. Claus.*)

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