

GENERAL HISTORY — DISMANTLEMENT OF STOGURSEY CASTLE — AN EARTHQUAKE — THE BLACK PESTILENCE — A ROYAL PARDON — WEMBDON HOLY WELL — FIRST APPOINTMENT OF A MAYOR — BEHEADING OF THE EARL OF DEVON — THE FAIRFIELD BIRTHS — SEBASTIAN CABOT'S VOYAGES OF DISCOVERY.

A.D. 1138. — Robert de Curci (son of the holder of Stogursey) who was sewer or chief, butler to the Empress Maud, and "*whose person he attended in the several troubles and distresses which befel her,*" retired to Cannington, and before his death founded the Priory of Cannington.

1201. — Stogursey had the honour of sending two Members to Parliament— John Backeler and Adam Mareys. Only once did it enjoy this distinction, as some say 34 Edward III., and others in the reign of Henry III.

1220. — This is the first clear reference we can find of any Church in Bridgwater. On the foundation of St. John's Hospital by William Brewer, in the early part of the reign of Henry III., the tithes of this parish were appropriated to that institution, and the master and brethren thereof had the advowson of the Vicarage, which, in 1292, was valued at eight marks. The Church had before the latter date been given, by Fulke Paganel, to the foreign Abbey of St. Martin Marmonstier.

1224. — The King (Henry III.) ordered Stogursey Castle to be dismantled, and the necessary steps were taken by the sheriff of the county. The reason of this was as follows :— Falkes de Brente, to whom it belonged through his wedding Margaret de Fitzgerald (a daughter of the Curci family) was violently disaffected against his sovereign, and is also described -as "*a great tyrant, that nother Sparid to spoile house of Relligion or Chirche that he could cum to,*" garrisoned and fortified it, and turned it into a veritable "*stronghold of robbers.*" The depredations from this, one of the principal fortresses of the century, became of such a character as to render the free-booting occupiers a terror to the neighbourhood. Strong complaints being made to the King, he ordered its dismantlement, and sentenced Falkes de Brente to "*abjure the realm for ever.*" The castle was afterwards rebuilt.

1274. — Robert de Pederton, a native of North Petherton, died this year, being Abbot of Glastonbury. His chief characteristic was paying the debts of his predecessors.

1276. — A great earthquake visited this neighbourhood and threw down several buildings and houses. Glastonbury Abbey suffered severely, as did St. Michael's Church on the Tor hill, close by.

1284. — The Church of St. George, at Wembdon, was appropriated by Robert Burrell, Bishop of Bath and Wells, to the hospice of St. John the Baptist, Bridgwater.

1286. — It is recorded that Philip Crese Erl was at this time an influential townsman of Bridgwater, "*who contributed three or four times towards making a new parish bell.*" This is believed to be the earliest record in England of a double Christian name.

1304. — A vicarage was ordained at Wembdon by Bishop Walter Haselshaw, by which ordination it was set forth that Richard de Bridport, the then Vicar, and his successors; should have the house, with gardens, curtilage and all other appurtenances, and 3½ acres of arable land, and four acres of meadow, of old time allotted to the Vicarage of the Church of Wembdon; also all oblations, visitations of the sick, all legacies, trentals, mass-pence, with the anniversary bequests, and confessional pence, and also all the wax accruing to the church of Wembdon.

1326. — A chantry was founded in the Church of Wembdon, Bridgwater, by Henry Matthias, the son of Robert de Cocre.

1357. — The burgesses of Bridgwater paid £26 to the "*Quinzieme,*" which assessment, made by the Abbot of Ford and Sir John Inge, they thought unreasonable, and therefore petitioned Parliament for a mitigation thereof, alleging that they were so impoverished that a great part of the inhabitants had not the means to live, and that the town was on the point of being ruined.

1348. — During the autumn of this year special prayers were made in the Churches in the neighbourhood, that the Plague, which was raging in the East, might not visit our shores. Next year the Great Plague was wasting our land, and many parishes in this Diocese lost their priests, a large proportion of the clergy perishing.

Towards the close of the century the ravages were felt in the West of England of the black pestilence. Some places were nearly depopulated, and the great mortality had so lessened the consumption of provisions that "*a fine ox was sold for 4s., the best cow at a 1s.,*

and the best hog at 5d."

Owing to the great diminution of population from the effects of the plague the payment for labour rose very high. The Bishop of the Diocese published an ordinance regulating the rate of wages, and this seemingly led to an insurrection on the part of the labourers, in 1381. Eleven men were punished as ringleaders, and the town of Bridgwater was exempted from the general pardon.

1396. —John Beaufort, said to have been the eldest son of the celebrated John of Gaunt, was created Earl of Somerset by King Richard II. John of Gaunt was the reputed owner of Pawlett Hams, as well as other lands in the neighbourhood (Stockland being called after him for ages), and the following lines are quoted as portion of his will referring to them:—"I, John of Gaunt, do give and grant, from me and mine to thee and thine, all that portion of land known by the name of Pawlett Hams."

1403. —In this year a body known as "*the Merchant Guild of Bridgwater*," by some means incurred the displeasure of Henry IV. His Majesty, however, extended a gracious pardon, under the Great Seal of England, to William Goss, William Gascoigne, and Richard Dynt, wardens or stewards, as representing the whole Guild. This Royal pardon, a long Latin document, is still preserved among the archives of the town.

1455. —May 23rd. William Lord Bonville, brother-in-law of Richard, Earl of Warwick, visiting this neighbourhood, surprised and took Stogursey Castle from the Percy family, and burnt it almost to the ground. Since then the once important fortress has laid in ruins.

1464. —The ordination of Wembdon Vicarage, Bridgwater, was confirmed by Bishop John Drokensforde, it having been presented to him that there was within the bounds and limits of the Parish Church of Wembdon, a certain well, commonly called St. John's Well, to which an immense concourse of people were in the habit of resorting and making oblations to the honour of God, the blessed Virgin Mary, and St. John the Baptist. It was further represented that many who had for years laboured under various bodily diseases, and had found no benefit from physic and physicians, were by the use of the waters of this well ("*after paying their due offerings*") restored to their pristine health. The Bishop thereupon issued a mandate to Master Robert Hurst, Canon of Wells, his Commissioner-

General, and Thomas Overay, LL.B., to make enquiry into the particulars of this miraculous spring, and to report the Christian and surnames and residences of the persons who had been cured by these waters, the symptoms and particulars of their quondam complaints, and in what manner they found themselves relieved. It is a matter for regret that the report of the gentlemen named is lost in obscurity.*

1468. —Previous to this year the town had been governed by a reeve, or præpositus, in whose room Edward IV. substituted a Mayor and two bailiffs. In King's towns, or towns in ancient demesne, which were held in fee farm, the burgesses were all jointly bound for the true payment of fee farm rent, and chose one of their own body to collect the rents; this officer was called a portreeve, and in time grew to be the chief magistrate of the borough.†

1470. —August 17th. Humphry Stafford, Earl of Devon, was beheaded at Bridgwater. He was killed by order of Henry IV., his offence being: He was sent by Edward [IV] with 600 archers to support the Earl of Pembroke and his brother Richard, who with 18,000 well-furnished Welshmen, were employed to suppress the northern insurrection. They went to Banbury, where they became enamoured of a "*faire damsel*" at an inn; the Earl of Devon was dispossessed by the Earl of Pembroke, which excited so much discord between them that the Earl of Devon departed with his power, and the Earl of Pembroke and Richard his brother were overcome and taken by those of the north, 5,000 of the Welshmen being slain near Banbury. The king, being informed of this disaster, directed letters to be sent to the Sheriffs of Devon and Somerset, "*to make diligent search for Humphry Stafford, Earl of Devon, and execute him without delay.*" He was accordingly found in a village within Brent Marsh, a vast extent of marshy ground between the Axe on the north, the Brue and Parret on the south, the Mendips on the east, and the channel on the west. The unfortunate Duke was conveyed to Bridgwater and beheaded there August 17th, 1470, "*leaving behind him this disgraceful title, 'an Earl of three months' standing and no more'*" The body was buried at Glastonbury Abbey **

1439. —In this year three extraordinary births occurred at Fairfield, near Stogursey. There is now preserved at St. Audries, the

seat of Sir Alexander A. Hood, a glass case, containing some bed linen and long-laced shirts and baby gear, and on them is marked, in the old familiar "sampler stitch," as follows:— "*These are the sheets which took the three sons who were born the three Sundays following, on the 5th, 12th and 19th June, 1489; John Palmer died 1537; Sir Thomas beheaded 1554; and Henry, killed at Guisnes, 1556. They were the sons of Edward Palmer, Esq., and Alice, the daughter and co-heiress of Sir William Clements, of the Moat, in Kent. Worked by Eliza Sandford, of Wilford, when at Fairfield, in August 1776.*" These births are well-attested. The family of Palmers included many ornaments to the county.

1494. — In this year Sebastian Cabot, "*with no extraordinary preparations, sett forth from Bristoll, and made greate discoveries.*" He gathered the men for this expedition from Bristol and Bridgwater, "*the sailors of the latter place being renowned for their love of enterprise,*" and two years later we have record of Cabot's discovery of Newfoundland. That he thereby earned the goodwill of the King (Henry VII.) is apparent from the following entry in the Privy Purse expenses :— "*10th August. To Hym that found the new Isle, 10s*" !.



* Stowe's Annals, p. 422

† Brady - on Boroughs.

** Wilkinsii Concil, Tom. iii., p. 596