

GENERAL HISTORY (1650—1700).—HISTORICAL MEETING OF BAPTISTS — BRIDGWATER LOYALTY — RAVAGES OF THE PLAGUE — THE “SWANNE” INN — AN EARTHQUAKE SHOCK — QUIANT CRITICISM OF A VICAR — FINDING OF KING ALFRED’S JEWEL.

ABOUT 1655 Dr. Hawley, Dean of Wells, and a nephew of Sir Walter Raleigh, was driven out from Chedzoy, where he resided, for being a Royalist. He was imprisoned at Wells, where he was stabbed by his keeper (a common shoemaker).

1655. — The Baptists of Bridgwater had the honour of entertaining the Western Association of Baptist Churches. It is placed on record that a singular discussion took place at one of their meetings, the question being proposed: — *“Whether a believing man or woman, being head of a family, in this day of the Gospell, may keep in his or her house an instrument or instruments of musique, playing on them, or admitting others to play on them?”* The careful answer given was, *“It is the duty of the saints to abstain from all appearance of evil, and not to make provision for the flesh thereof, to redeem the time, and to do all to the glory of God; and though we cannot consider the uses of such instruments to be unlawful, yet we desire the saints to be very cautious lest they transgress the aforesaid rules in the use of it, and do that which may not be of good report, and so give offence to their tender brethren.”*

1661. — An Act of Parliament was passed for the better regulating of Corporations, *“the effect of which was to expel all the Nonconformists from the various branches of magistracy, &c., and before the close of the following year not a municipal officer was left who was not devoted to Church and King.”* On Oct. 24 of the same year a fund was started in the town, subscribed to by 172 persons, *“as a free voluntary offering of his Majesty’s good subjects in testimony of their affection to his Majesty.”* There is no record as to the spirit in which this remarkable gift was received by the King.

1665. — The town suffered greatly from the Plague, and no market could be held for some time for fear of the infection spreading, the country people being too timorous to venture into the town. For the sake of obtaining the necessaries of life the townspeople went as far as Horsey-lane, on the Bath-road, which was fixed upon as a kind of rendezvous for both country and town. Here the villagers brought their farm produce and were met by the townspeople, who bought their wares and returned to the plague-stricken town. An elm was planted at this spot, long known as

“Watch Elm” The late Mr. Geo. Parker informed us that he remembered, when a boy, having the tree pointed out to him. There is no record extant as to how long the pestilence lasted. The tradition has been handed down that the dead were buried at frequent intervals in one common grave in a waste spot in High-street, nearly opposite the Town-hall (covered with neat buildings in 1884-5). This tradition has of recent years been somewhat discredited, but it is probably true, inasmuch as there were no extra burials recorded in St. Mary’s churchyard at that time, and the numerous corpses must have found sepulture somewhere within the precincts of the town.

1666. — A town piece was struck for circulation by the Mayor and Corporation (as stated in a previous chapter), copies of which are still to be met with.

1672. — This year we find the first reference to the *“Swanne”* (though doubtless it was an important hostelry for many years previously), in the following document — a citation from the King-at-Arms to the nobility and gentry of Somerset: —

“Sir, you are personally to appear before Sir Edward Bysshe Knt., Clarence King-at-Arms, on Saturday next, being the 14th day of September, 1672, eight o’clock in the morning, at the signe of the Swanne, in Bridgwater, and to bring with you such coats of arms and crest as you use and bear; whereof fail not, as you will answer your contempt before the Right Honourable the Earl Marshall of England.”

Mr. Phelps, in his History of Somerset, states that the original citation was in the possession of Mr. Edward Sealey, of Bridgwater. This visitation of counties by the King’s stewards and officers-at-arms, under the special warrant of the sovereign, for the purpose of collecting and recording the pedigrees and arms of the nobility and gentry resident therein, is of very ancient date; and the genealogies and arms thus collected are well known by the name of visitations. *

The Swan was the largest inn in Bridgwater, and, indeed, was one of the most famous in the county. It stood on the Cornhill, on the site of the shops now occupied by Mr. Fisher and Mr. Lewis, and traces of it may even now be found. Building operations in 1884, at the back of the premises mentioned, brought to light several interesting relics, including a brass token, representing the cost of the journey between Bridgwater to London, and bearing the same significance as the railway ticket of to-day. The Swan was the only coaching house up to the time of its demoli-

tion just previous to the present century. The old house played a stirring part in the history of the town for over 150 years.

1674, Sept. 24. — A man named Wm. Rossetter, of Wiveliscombe, fell into the water by the mill in Blake-street, and was drowned.

1681 Feb. 28. — Robert Lush, a schoolmaster, of Bridgwater, committed suicide, and was buried by night.

1682 — Extracts from church register "*In this year Mr. Zaccheus Hooper, of the Swanne, built his brick house upon the Vicarage garden wall, for acknowledgement of which two shillings y^e annum is expected to be paid to the incumbent vicar. At the west end of the churchyard there is a house built by John Hodge, for which he, his heirs, executors, &c., are for ever to pay y^e annum five shillings.* — WM. ALLEN, Vicar."

In this year also the organ in the church was greatly repaired, "*or, as some say, built.*"

A shock of earthquake was felt in the town of Bridgwater, and several places in the neighbourhood, in 1682, and caused much alarm.

1683. — Under this date, the following appears in one of the Bridgwater Church registers: — "*In this yeare the vicar was rated to the poore by order of William Masey, who was then Maior, as he had been three yeares before. In the time of his Maioralty he commanded the Minister to be rated to the poore, tho' it was never known in this parrish, and when he was made Maior in this yeare in perfect spight he commands it again. Whoever judges this man a lover of the church or any thing that relates to it knowes not the man. This man afterwards carry'd himself with that insolency and tyranny to all sorts of people that the inhabitants, whether Churchmen, Presbyterian, or other, joyn'd together to ring out the belles for joy at his departure into Ireland, where he was preferred, and where it was thought he was poysonid.*"

1684, October 29. — It was certified for Geo. Davis, son of John Davis, mariner, that he was "*not at any time touched by his sacred majestie for the distemper commonly called — —, the King's Evill.*"

1687 — In December of this year seven members of the Corporation, including the Town Clerk, were removed from office by a Royal Warrant, their places being filled by seven others enumerated in the same document (still extant among the muniments). Whatever their offence may have been it is not mentioned, and therefore cannot be recorded.

1687. — In September an accident occurred

in Bridgwater, resulting in the deaths of Mary, Anne, and Joan Robinson.

1688. — Dr. Cudworth, the celebrated author of "*The Intellectual System*," &c., "*a man of extensive learning, and a subtle philosopher*," died. He was a native of Aller, his father being rector.

1689. — Sir Halswell Tynte commenced to rebuild Halswell House, and erected several grottoes and temples, at points of vantage. He was the first Tynte raised to the dignity of Bart., 1687. His effigy is to be seen in Goat-hurst church, with others of the family.

The Presbyterian preacher of Bridgwater announced this year that he would "*marry in his synagogue.*"

1690. — In this year St. Mary's Church was whitewashed and the pavement re-laid, which appeared to have been much required, judging from the following remarkable entry in one of the Church books: — "*This Mr. Miles was the honestest churchwarden that hath been this one-and-twenty yeares. He whited the church for 20s., whereas before at several times they paid £5 or £6 for washing. He also new-lay'd the pavement, which no importunity could prevail on the others to doe, tho' they had church monies in there hands. May the curse of sacrelidge lye upon such perjurd wretches as alienate or consume what is given for the reparation of God's house.*"

1692. — The Bridgwater Baptists erected a meeting-house on the site of their present Chapel, which replaced the old structure in 1835.

1693. — In this year "*a little curious amulet of enamel and gold*" was found in North Newton Park, at no great distance from the ancient Isle of Athelney. It is now in the Bodlean Library Museum, Oxford, having been presented to the authorities in 1718 by Thomas Palmer, Esq., of Fairfield. Antiquaries consider it to be an ornament which belonged to King Alfred, bearing a representation of St. Cuthbert, and a Saxon inscription showing it was made by command of the King — *Alfred meo heit Gevorcan*. It is considered by some to be the top of a reading-staff.**

1700, July 8. — Wm. Callen committed suicide by cutting his throat, and to the entry in the Bridgwater church register is affixed the ominous remark, *felo de se*.



* Jeboult's *History of West Somerset*, p. 20

** This illustration is given by the kindness of Messrs. Saxon & Co., 23, Bouverie Street, London.