

**GENERAL HISTORY (1800-1840).—
DISCOVERY OF HOLWELL CAVERN —
BURNHAM LIGHTHOUSE — THE COMBWICH
SHIP' CANAL — ST. MARY'S CHURCH STRUCK
BY LIGHTNING — CANAL IMPROVEMENT —
ERECTION OF HOLY TRINITY CHURCH —
INTRODUCTION OF GAS — THE BRIDGWATER
THEATRE — PASSING OF MUNICIPAL
CORPORATIONS ACT —. FIRST TEMPERANCE
MEETING IN BRIDGWATER.**

EARLY in the present century some labourers in a lime-stone quarry in the parish of Broomfield enlarged an aperture in a rock where they were working, which was originally of no greater size than would admit a dog or fox. After widening the hole they found it to be the entrance to a somewhat extensive fissure, dividing the rock for the length of about 140 feet, from 3½ feet to 20 inches in breadth, and from 4 to 20 feet in height. This is now known as Holwell Cavern, which is inspected with much interest by numerous visitors. The entrance has its roofs and sides covered with stalactitic carbonate of lime. The roof and sides of the western end are more or less covered with snow-white crystals of arragonite in great and beautiful variety, mostly translucent, rarely transparent. There is also a pool in the cavern possessing peculiar properties.

1801. — The first Burnham lighthouse was built at the expense of the Rev. David Davies, under an Act of Parliament, which enabled him to charge a small fee upon all vessels passing the light. Mr. Davies afterwards (1829) sold his interest to the masters of Trinity House for £13,500, and they demolished the structure and built the present improved lighthouse. In the course of the erection of his lighthouse Mr. Davies discovered some valuable mineral springs.

1810. — The inadequacy of the accommodation of the port of Bridgwater for the trade of the town and neighbourhood, and the obstacles opposed to the navigation of the river Parrett with security and despatch, was much discussed at this time. The suggestion was made to cut a canal between Bridgwater and Combwich Beach, with a view of affording a quicker passage up and down the river, and enable the large vessels which had to stop at Combwich to be brought into the port of Bridgwater. It was ultimately feared, however, that the toll which would be charged would not be sufficient to pay a reasonable rate of interest, and the scheme was abandoned. In 1829 it was revived, and levels were taken and plans

prepared. It was urged that the tonnage had nearly doubled, increasing at the rate of 5,000 tons a year. A public meeting was held, when resolutions in favour of the canal (for vessels of 500 tons burden) and the construction of a floating harbour, were unanimously agreed to. It was proposed to convert a part of the river into a floating harbour, connected with the Taunton Canal, and provide a new course for the river through the town. It was proposed to raise the necessary capital by means of shares of £50, and nearly £10,000 were subscribed at the meeting. The cost of the work was estimated at between £100,000 and £110,000. For various reasons (which we have been unable to trace) the scheme was not carried out. Early in 1835 a committee was appointed by the Bridgwater Corporation to take the matter into consideration, and they instructed Mr. Habberly Price, C. E., to "*take a survey of the river Parrett, and to give a plan, estimate and report, showing the practicability of establishing a floating dock at or near the town, with a ship canal, having 18 feet depth of water, thence to such part of the river, near to its mouth, as would afford a convenient means of access from the sea for vessels of a large class, during neap as well as spring tides, avoiding the present dangerous and dilatory course of the river, having regard both to the east and west side thereof; with a plan for bringing the extension of the Taunton Canal into such floating dock, taking care not to interfere with the public sewers of the town.*" Mr. Price accordingly furnished what was required of him, and presented an elaborate report to the Council on October 25th, 1835. He estimated that an outlay of £103,074 would be required, the ship canal to be 3½ miles long, to a point near Combwich. The scheme was not carried out in its entirety, but a floating dock, basin and harbour were afterwards formed, connected with the Taunton Canal, capable of affording accommodation for a large number of vessels, and providing a considerable line of wharfage. It may be interesting to note that Mr. W. John Ford laid the foundation stone of the docks.

It should here be noted that the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal had been cut in 1825. About 1820 the need was felt of better water accommodation between Bridgwater and Taunton, and a project was set on foot with the view of constructing a canal. The scheme languished for a time, until some spirited individuals came forward and took the matter up, a company was formed, and an Act of Parliament obtained. The river Tone alone had previously been used for

navigation, but much inconvenience was experienced through drought in summer and ice and floods in winter. The canal was cut; notwithstanding the strenuous opposition of the Conservators of the Tone, who afterwards compelled the Canal Company to pay heavy compensation. The opening ceremony took place in 1827. The two navigations were then worked in opposition, and the tolls were consequently absurdly low. The Canal Company felt the strain particularly, and they ultimately applied to Parliament for leave to purchase the interest of the Tone navigation, and thus get the trade in their own hands. The trade done for some years previous to the construction of the railway was considerable, the amount of tolls at one time averaging £7,000 per year; and the canal was mortgaged for £33,000. Some years previously the Bridgwater Corporation opposed a scheme to construct a canal from Taunton bridge, to pass near Bridgwater, and so on, easterly to the river Avon. It was never carried out.

On March 25th, 1841, the docks were opened for traffic, and was made the occasion of a public holiday. At dawn a salute was fired from a battery on the eminence by the basin; and at half-past six o'clock the tide came up, entering the outer dock with great rapidity, amid the cheering of the numerous spectators. The tug *Endeavour* steamed down the river with a party of ladies and gentlemen, and a band of music to meet the first vessel to enter the dock, which happened to be the *Henry*, of Bridgwater. The latter vessel was beautifully decorated, and sailed into the dock amid the acclamations of several thousand spectators, the roaring of cannon, the ringing of bells, and the strains of the National Anthem from the band.

The auspicious event was also celebrated by a dinner at the "*George*" Hotel, tickets of invitation (one of which is now in the possession of Mr. Henry Hayward, Bridgwater) having been issued by the dock-master, Mr. James Ware, father of Mr. Thomas Ware, J. P. of this borough. A public dinner was also held at the "*Clarence*" Hotel. The docks were afterwards purchased by the Great Western Railway Company, who connected them with their line by a telescopic bridge across the river.

1812. — On January 12th there was born at the Vicarage-house, Woolavington, one who was destined to rise to fame — John Jacob, afterwards the famous Brigadier-General. He spent his early days in the neighbourhood of Bridgwater; his first military exploit was in

connection with the Afghan war, and he soon afterwards rose to eminence in his profession. When he died, in December, 1858, the whole Press of Great Britain were unanimous in their sympathetic expressions to the memory of a brave and gallant soldier, regarding his loss as a public calamity. In recognition of his services, Parliament afterwards voted £150 yearly to each of his two sisters, who resided at Cossington.

1814. — In this year a terrific thunderstorm visited the neighbourhood, and the spire of St. Mary's Church, Bridgwater, was struck by lightning, and rendered dangerous. The weathercock was at the same time blown off and fell in Blacklands field, where it was found some time afterwards. In the following year the spire was repaired with great difficulty, the work being done by a Mr. Thomas Hutchings, builder, of the town. A series of poles were lashed to the steeple, and the top was ultimately reached and rope ladders affixed. Mr. George Parker, of Bridgwater, informed us that he well remembered making the ascent, the beautiful view of the surrounding country repaying the hazard of the undertaking. To prevent the recurrence of such a mishap, a long rod and lightning conductor were fastened to the top of the spire inside, and bolted to the centre of the tower in the bell chamber, and a huge weight was also affixed to it, as may still be seen. In this way the electric fluid now runs down on the inside of the spire, and is carried off through the upper window of the tower. The rod also serves to keep the spire steady. After the scaffolding had been removed it was found that the weathercock did not work. A kite was flown over it with a rope attached, and the ends brought down and made secure. An old man-of-war's man, named Gover, climbed the rope hand over hand, until he reached the summit, when he put the vane right and descended in safety. His progress was watched with much interest.

1816. — In this year the Wesleyan chapel was built in King-street, Bridgwater. It was restored, raised and enlarged in 1860.

1817. — The Quantock Savings Bank was started at Nether Stowey, in October, and it soon attained a position of influence in the neighbourhood. From a return made in 1831 we find the funds amounted to £33,058, depositors being allowed 3½ per cent, per annum.

1822. — In this year an Act of Parliament was obtained to repeal the several Acts which

had been previously passed for repairing the roads leading to Bridgwater, and to consolidate and comprise the same in one Act. The roads were then managed by trustees, but at the present time they are under the control of the Town Council and Highway Board.

1829. — In February died the Right Hon. and Rev. Francis Henry, Earl of Bridgwater, who left by his will £8,000 sterling, which paid for the compilation of the celebrated works now known as the "*Bridgwater Treatises*." The works, eight in number, on "The Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God, as manifested in the Creation," were written by notable authors, each of whom received £1,000 and the copyright of his own treatise.

1829. July 13. — At the general Quarter Sessions for the county of Somerset, held at Bridgwater, regulations were made for the better division of the county. It was decided to divide it into twenty divisions, within and for which special sessions, should be held. The order took effect October 11th, 1830.

1830. — An agitation commenced as to the need of increased Church accommodation in the town, and the result was that a few years later Holy Trinity Church was built.

1831. — James Knight, a shoemaker, of Spaxton, drank eleven glasses of gin for a wager, at Pawlett, and died immediately afterwards from the effects.

In the same year a gunpowder explosion occurred at the shop of a man named Bennett, in St. Mary-street, and wrecked it. Much damage was done, and a public subscription was made for the proprietor.

On March 12, 1831, a Commission was issued by King William IV. directing inquiries to be made into the state of the public records, and a series of questions were drawn up, to "be sent to Corporations, libraries, &c. The Town Clerk of every Borough was requested to forward all information possible with regard to any ancient charters, municipal rolls, or registers anterior to the Revolution, &c. The returns were completed February 7th, 1837, and the proceedings of the Commission were afterwards published in several volumes. Nothing appears with reference to Bridgwater, beyond the following letter: — "*Bridgwater, 23rd March, 1833. — Sir, — In answer to your letter of the 28th February last, I regret to say that it is not in my power to furnish the Record Commissioners with any information on the subject of its contents, not having any records or papers of a date anterior to*

the Revolution in my possession. I have the honour to be, &c., John Wm. Trevor, Town Clerk." The writer did not apparently consider that the numerous documents among the Borough muniments were worth mention. Some years later a Government official made a thorough examination of them. (See chapter [27] on "*The Muniments* ").

1833. — Wednesday, January 16, was observed in the town as a day of solemn thanksgiving, Bridgwater having happily been spared the ravages of cholera, which had caused so much mortality in other places. Towards the close of the year, however, the small-pox broke out, and about forty deaths occurred through it.

1831. — On the 22nd of May, in this year, the Royal assent was given to an Act of Parliament for lighting the town with gas. Works were erected on the Taunton-road by a local company, which is still in existence, and the price was at first fixed at 15s. per 1,000 feet. The promoters of the works being encouraged, they afterwards (Midsummer, 1835) reduced the price to 12s. per 1,000. In a circular announcing this reduction it was urged that gas "*is suitable for sitting-rooms, where it may be used with comfort and economy.*" It is interesting to record that the first gas-lamp in a shop of the town was lit by Mr. W. J. Ford, in the establishment of a Mr. Edward Jefferies, chemist, in Fore - street. The town was previously lighted with oil lamps, and a man named John Gillingham and his son were paid for doing the necessary work.

The theatre, of which Bridgwater could then boast (situated in Back-street, on the site now occupied by Theatre-place), was one of the first public buildings in which the use of gas was applied. In an interesting theatre programme, now in the possession of Mr. Spencer Cockings, of Bridgwater (printed on silk for the use of the Mayor), dated Monday, December 4, 1837, it is announced that the building will be "*brilliantly lighted with gas, and every attention paid to the fitting of it up, so as to render it perfectly warm and comfortable.*" The entertainment for the evening was "Messrs. Walters and Co.'s Mechanical and Picturesque Exhibition." It may be here remarked that the theatre was a *fac-simile* of the old Adelphi in London. A great many "*stars*" from time to time appeared there, including Miss Foote (afterwards the Countess of Harrington), Miss Clara Fisher, Miss Love, Mrs. Waylett, Alexander Lee, etc., and Charles Kean is also believed to have paid it a visit. During the management of Mr.

Henry Lee (who built the theatre), Edmund Kean (the father of Charles) was announced to appear, and the house was densely crammed to witness his performances, but for some reason he did not put in an appearance, much to the disappointment and annoyance of the public. Mrs. Leigh Murray, who lately took her farewell of the stage at the Haymarket, is the daughter of the late proprietor of the Bridgwater Theatre, and played there for several seasons. Local talent was largely called upon to furnish the *dramatis personae* of many of the pieces played, and several actors and actresses who afterwards made their mark in London received their initial histrionic training on the boards of Bridgwater Theatre, notably Miss St. Cass, who made a London success. In the latter part of its existence the theatre did not pay, however, and it was ultimately pulled down and a neat row of cottages built on its site, now appropriately known as Theatre Place. A blacksmith's shop on the opposite side of the street is pointed out as the site of an earlier theatre.

1835.—The Municipal Corporations Act was passed. On Christmas-day the old Corporation met at the house of the Mayor (Mr. Anthony Southby) and walked to Church for the last time under the old regime. The Corporation then comprised the Mayor, two aldermen and 21 burgesses, none of whom were tradesmen, but gentlemen of the town; they were also all Churchmen, and had to attest having taken the Sacrament. On a Sunday early in January, when the new Act came into force, the newly-constituted Corporation met at the Town-hall, and went to church in state, amid much excitement. The procession was headed by Webb, the bellman, in a new scarlet coat, knee breeches and cocked hat. Previous to the Act of 1835 the members met at the house of the Mayor, when the Corporation attended Church, and no outsiders were present. The invitations were gradually extended, however, first to old members of the Corporation, and later on to the principal residents and tradesmen, as is the good custom at the present time.

1836.—Aug. 19.—The first temperance meeting ever held in Bridgwater took place on this date. At first the movement received but scant sympathy, and at almost every meeting some disturbance took place, the forms and chairs being repeatedly broken up, and on more than one occasion the pieces were hurled at the speakers and occupants of the platform. The jubilee of temperance was

celebrated in Bridgwater on August 19, 1886, with much enthusiasm. The proceedings included a largely-attended public meeting at the Town-hall, and a tea at the Friends' Meeting-house.

1837.—June 28, being the day of the Coronation of Queen Victoria, was kept as a general holiday, and with much rejoicing. The Corporation, Freemasons, &c., walked to Church, and afterwards went in procession through the streets of the town.

1840.—This year was marked by a fire of some magnitude, two houses opposite the front of the Market-house, on the Cornhill, being burnt to the ground. There was fortunately no loss of life, but a great deal of damage was done.