

GENERAL HISTORY (1860-1889).— SAD FATALITY AT DUNBALL— BURNING OF WEMBDON CHURCH— DISASTROUS FIRE ON THE CORNHILL— A CHAIN OF OFFICE FOR THE MAYOR— COLLAPSE OF THE BALTMOOR WALL— TERRIBLE FIRE AND LOSS OF LIFE— OPENING OF NEW TOWN BRIDGE— ROYAL MAJORITY FESTIVITIES — THE “ GEORGE WILLIAMS” MEMORIAL HALL— QUEEN’S JUBILEE DEMONSTRATION — FLOODS.

IN the evening of Saturday, October 7th, 1865, a very melancholy accident happened at Dunball, resulting in the death of Private Walter Locker, of the Fifth Somerset Rifle Volunteers. The poor fellow was marking for Sergeant Mansfield, when an accidental bullet from the latter’s rifle struck him, and killed him on the spot. The jury returned a verdict of “ Accidental death,” but thought there had been negligence by both parties.

1866.—Monday, October 22nd, a new life-boat was launched at Burnham. The occasion was one of much interest, and the little town was crowded with visitors from all the country round. The Bridgwater Volunteers, with their band, took part in the ceremony.

1867.—In this year subscriptions were obtained for erecting a new clock in the Church tower, and adding another bell, the eighth and largest.

Sunday, March 8th, 1867, is memorable on account of the burning of Wembdon Church. The Vicar (Rev. C. W. Alston) had just given out the text at the morning service, when a man named Thomas Lynham rushed in, crying “ Fire! fire !” Great consternation at once prevailed, although no smoke or fire could be seen, and it was at first surmised that Lynham was a madman. Some of the congregation left the building, when it was at once seen that the roof was on fire, at the western end. The Church was speedily cleared, and a messenger despatched to Bridgwater for the fire engine. Some buckets of water were also got, but it was soon seen that the sacred building was doomed. An attempt was made to save the fine old carved oak pulpit (of the same character as that in St. Mary’s Church, Bridgwater), but a portion of the roof fell whilst it was being removed, and led to a wild stampede from the Church. Successful attempts were then made to save the tower, but of the Church itself very soon nothing remained but the walls. The cause of the fire was supposed to be an over-heated flue. It was very unfortunate that the insurance policy on the fabric had, through an error on the part of the Churchwardens, been allowed to

lapse. The Church was afterwards thoroughly restored, and was re-opened in 1870.

1869.—The Bridgwater Oil Mills were started, worked by a Company. At first only fifteen workmen were employed; but now the number ranges between fifty and seventy, and the yearly output of cake is about 300 tons, consumed locally and in neighbouring counties.

1870.—A destructive fire occurred on the night of February 7th on the Cornhill. The alarm was raised about eleven p.m. on the premises of Messrs. Moore, Blacker and Blacker, drapers, and spread so rapidly that the adjoining shop and dwelling-house of Mr. John Whitby were soon in flames as well. The inmates were just retiring to rest, and fortunately no lives were lost, but Mr. Frank Whitby and an assistant named Miss DeBac had a very narrow escape, being rescued from the roof of Mr. Moore’s house by means of ladders, thanks to the courage of Henry Wills, a chimney-sweep, and a strolling player, name unknown. Both houses were burnt to the ground, and quantities of valuable goods were lost, the total damage done amounting to between £10,000, and £12,000.

1871.—A new organ was erected in St. Mary’s Church, at a cost of nearly £1,000.

1874.—This year witnessed the formation of the Bridgwater Training Home for Girls. It has proved itself an admirable institution, and up to the present time (1889), it has been instrumental in effectually helping over 100 young girls to a good start in life, and showing them how to earn a living in domestic service.

1875.—On the 19th May the present commodious Corn Exchange was opened in the Market House.

1878.—Some alterations were made in St. Mary’s Church Bridgwater, between February and July, at a cost of about £2,000.

1879.—In May a fire-escape was presented to Bridgwater by the Royal Society for the Protection of Life from Fire.

1881.—In this year the Bridgwater Bicycle Club was started, and has since been well patronised in the way of members. The Club has organized many successful social events, such as open-air concerts in the summer, and balls, “ smokers,” &c., in the winter. It is still in existence, and flourishing.

May, 1883.—The advisability of removing the railings around the Market-house (designed and erected by the late Mr. Jno. Bowen) was considered, and petitions for and

against were presented to the Council. It was decided to retain them. They were afterwards gilded at the expense of the then Town Clerk (Mr. James Cook).

In the same month Bridgwater was honoured with a visit from the Bath and West of England Society, which body held its annual show in the town. The affair was most successful throughout the week, and the attendance of visitors far exceeded the most sanguine anticipations. The town was beautifully decorated, and a large amount of enterprise and enthusiasm were displayed by the inhabitants.

1883. — In the spring of this year a causeway known as the Baltmoor Wall broke in three places, in consequence of, the pressure of flood waters; and the result was that a vast track of level land — “*the moors*” — was covered with water to a depth varying from eight feet downwards. The railway between Bridgwater and Durston was flooded, causing great inconvenience; whilst the loss to farmers and occupiers was very considerable, several thousand acres of good land being covered at a time when it needed attention. There were two or three narrow escapes from drowning. The Somerset Drainage Commissioners afterwards raised a road which ran almost parallel to the wall, to the highest point reached by the floods, in order to guard against a similar disaster in future.

On Sunday morning, July 29th, 1883, a terrible fire occurred in the town, resulting in the death of four persons. About one o'clock a.m. the publishing office of the *Bridgwater Mercury* in Fore-street was found to be on fire, and the flames spread with such rapidity and obtained such a hold on the lower portion of the house that the family of Mr. Dunsford, the editor and manager, could not descend, and before assistance arrived three of the children were burnt to death. Mrs. Dunsford endeavoured to save her life by throwing herself from one of the windows on to a bed, but she fell on the pavement and sustained such terrible injuries that she died on the following Wednesday. Mr. Dunsford had a narrow escape, and but for the brave assistance of two Post-office clerks, named Friend and Cull, who took him from a window, he would doubtless have perished or sustained serious injuries. For their conspicuous gallantry these young men were afterwards presented with marble timepieces, by public subscription, and they also received £5 each and a certificate from the Royal Society for the Protection of Life from Fire. As a mark of sympathy with

Mr. Dunsford in his irreparable loss, subscription-lists were opened in the town, resulting in the sum of £447 being subscribed.

November 5th, 1883, witnessed the opening of a new town bridge — an undertaking remarkable if only for the fact that its provision was accomplished without the necessity of increasing the rating of the borough. In view of the visit of the Bath and West of England Society with their annual Exhibition in May-June, 1883, it was thought that the old structure was not sufficiently strong and commodious to carry the largely-increased traffic expected; and again it was found that for ordinary traffic it was not sufficiently wide, and was also so steep that much extra horse labour was caused in conveying loads from one part of the town to another. A proposal to widen it happily fell through, and a decision was unanimously arrived at by the Council to replace it by a structure to suit modern requirements, at an estimated cost of £3,200. The Lords of the Treasury sanctioned the appropriation of £1,500 accumulated from the Port and Navigation Fund during many years, and the selling out of £1,700 invested in the three per cents, by the Corporation. The tender of Mr. George Moss, of Liverpool, was accepted, the amount being £3,214, and the contract (which was entered into towards the close of 1882) stipulated that the new bridge should be ready by the 1st May, 1883. High water caused by floods rendered difficult the initial work of construction, however, and the new bridge could not be used for the show and was not finished until October.

The new bridge is scarcely so ornamental as the old one, at the same time it is of handsome appearance and sound substantial construction, the latter being of far more importance than any structural beauty. It is 75 ft. span and 36 ft. wide in the clear; consists of seven wrought iron arched ribs, drawn together by transverse and diagonal braces, and rests upon and is built into solid abutments of masonry, of which the old abutments form a part. On either side are ornamental cast-iron railings, and at each corner is a Ham Hill stone pillar, surmounted by a gas lamp of improved manufacture. The borough coat of arms finds a suitable place on each side of the bridge, together with plates bearing the date of erection, and the name of the then Mayor (Mr. W. T. Holland). The weight of wrought iron used was about 93 tons, of cast iron about 15 tons, and on the roadway and footpaths over 90 tons of metalling and penant stone were used. The new bridge is 12

feet wider than its predecessor, and has the immense advantage of being crossed nearly on a level, whilst the waterway underneath is at the same time less obstructed for navigation purposes.

The opening ceremony was a most imposing and successful one, and was made the occasion of a general holiday. A silver key was made for the purpose and presented to the Mayoress, who opened the new structure in the presence of the Corporation and a vast assemblage of the inhabitants. Amongst those taking part in the ceremony were the county and borough magistrates, the clergy and ministers, members of the Friendly Societies of the town, in full regalia, &c. A largely-attended luncheon was afterwards held at the Town-hall to celebrate the auspicious event. In the evening the bridge was again "opened" by the annual Guy Fawkes Carnival procession, and received a "baptism of fire."

Whilst on the subject of the new bridge, doubtless the following apostrophe to the old bridge, from the pen of Mr. E. H. Burrington, will be read with interest

OUR OLD BRIDGE.

IN MEMORIAM.

Betwixt its shores, in restless ebb and flow,
I see the tawny Parret moving fast,
Whilst thou, old friend, art gone, as old friends go,
Into the silent memories of the past.
If the returning hull, and sail, and mast,
Could see the might of time as I have seen,
If they could view thee broken up at last,
Then they, I think, would gaze with mournful mien
Upon the vacant place where thy embrace hath been.
Go down to the sea, the mystic sea,
Thou tawny Parret with thy slimy trail,
And tell the coming ships, where'er they be,
That all Town Councils wear a coat of mail.
So, *cap-a-pie*, they fearlessly assail,
So *cap-a-pie*, they cover human failings
(If borough records have such word as "fail"),
And in the tourney, spite of all bewailings,
Strike ancient bridges down, or
tilt at market-railings.
Let me be just, for justice is a queen,
And loyalty to her hath been my creed;
At least I hope so, which may only mean
That I, like other men, have found the need
Of putting "*make belief*" in place of deed.
Let me be just, and in the plainest letters
State for the benefit of those who read,
That had I power, in spite of all regretters,
I would have knocked thee down, old Bridge, as did
my betters.
If you want reasons, seek them in my rhyme,
For rhyme hath been a solace unto me.

Old Bridge ! thou hast outgrown both use and time,
Or rather time and use have outgrown thee.
Twas said of Cleopatra (happy she !)
"Time could not wither her, nor custom stale,"
But thou, old Bridge, stood'st not in that degree,
For commerce coming fast by road and rail,
We found thy brow too narrow and thy feet too frail.
Yet for lang syne I would have had thee stay
In honoured age, if sentiment should guide
The current of our thoughts ; for in decay
There dwell fond memories which backward slide
Into the fantasies which youth supplied.
Thus through thy age I see thee far behind,
So far that time, like a retiring tide,
Leaves on the strand of life to please the mind,
What may be weeds or shells—for what we seek we
find.

Back through thy years I see thee *long ago*,
For here thou stood'st when noble Nelson died;
When England mingled her colossal woe
With the wild shout of her colossal pride.
And longer still! for here thou did'st abide
When men were human only in the name,
When license took foul murder for his bride,
And Robespierre's and Danton's hateful fame
Made God a mockery and fairest France a shame.
' Old Bridge ! my facts grow dim, my fancies stray,
I care not for thee now—perhaps no one cares—
But I am thankful, in a modest way,
That Councillors, and Aldermen, and Mayors,
Blossom perennially! Thus our affairs
Will still go on as they have gone before;
Bargemen will curse, and lovers walk in pairs,
And noisy boys will play upon the shore,
With tawny Parret flowing—flowing evermore.

Many inhabitants obtained pieces of the ironwork of the old bridge as souvenirs, and Mr. Alderman James Leaker, proprietor of the "Royal Clarence" Hotel, was presented by the contractor with an interesting relic—the borough arms and inscription "*R. C., Mayor, 1795*"—and it was placed over the balcony of the Hotel: The initials stand for "*Robert Codrington*," who was Mayor, in 1795.

1885.—On January 8th, the day Prince Albert Victor came of age, there was a public demonstration in honour of the event. All the aged people in the town were treated to a substantial dinner in the Market House, and (the weather being very inclement) those unable to attend, and the sick and infirm, had dinners sent to them at their homes. The Mayor sent a congratulatory telegram to the Prince, which was afterwards duly acknowledged.

1885.—On the night of the 14th February a girl named Alice Musgrave fell into the river,

and was rescued with some difficulty by Mr. Richard Popham. The latter was afterwards awarded a bronze medal and certificate by the Royal Humane Society, and a presentation (consisting of a handsome tea and coffee service) was also made him by the inhabitants.

1886.— On Saturday, September 11th, the memorial stones of the “*George Williams’ Memorial Hall*” were laid on the site occupied by the ruins of the “*Globe*” Hotel (destroyed by fire some years previously), near the town bridge. This memorial hall forms the headquarters of the Young Men’s Christian Association in Bridgwater, and commemorates the fact of Mr. Williams being the founder of that valuable organization, which has now more than three thousand branches in various parts of the world. Bridgwater was selected for it as being the place where Mr. Williams begun both his business and his Christian life. He was born at Dulverton in 1821, and when about sixteen years of age he became an apprentice to Mr. Holmes, draper, on the Cornhill, Bridgwater. He afterwards became a most earnest Sunday-school teacher, and did a great amount of good in the town. He left for London in 1841, and three years afterwards he formed the first Young Men’s Christian Association. As is well known the movement has wondrously flourished, and Mr. Williams now enjoys the distinction of being the president of the parent association in London, succeeding the late Earl of Shaftesbury. The cost of the Bridgwater building was .£4,000, subscribed to from all parts of the world. It was opened the following year (1887) with much *eclat*, the occasion being almost regarded as a public holiday. The building is of handsome appearance and comprises on the ground floor a reading-room, Secretary’s office, meeting room, junior room, and gymnasium ; upstairs being a good-sized lecture-room (intended to seat about 500) a parlour, and some class-rooms. The cost of the building was over .£4,000.

1887.— In April a gold chain of office was provided for the Mayors of the borough, at a cost of £170. Mr. A. Peace, the then Mayor, was the originator of the idea, and gave a splendid pendant, whilst Mr. E. J. Stanley, M.P., gave a handsome badge, made in the form of the old Civic Seal of the borough. One of the links was presented by the Rev. T. H. C. Ruddock, inscribed “*Humphrey Blake, 1612*” (father of Admiral Blake).

On May 10th, 1887, the Somerset Agricultural Society held its third annual show in

Bridgwater. The Society owes its existence in a great measure to this town, and it was originally intended to hold its premier exhibition in Bridgwater, but for various reasons it was postponed until 1887, when a highly successful show was the result.

On Monday, June 20, 1887, was celebrated the Jubilee of Queen Victoria, and the occasion was marked in Bridgwater — and indeed throughout the neighbourhood — with every demonstration of loyalty. Some months previous to the day a representative Town Committee was appointed at a public meeting, when the question as to how the Jubilee might best be commemorated was earnestly discussed. It was then agreed that an effort should be made to mark the occasion by establishing public baths in the borough, the cost to be provided by public subscription. Alderman E. J. Thompson generously offered £100 towards the cost, but the public appeal for subscriptions was so disappointing in its result that the proposal had to be abandoned. It was then agreed that the funds collected should be spent in a general demonstration. There was a grand procession through the town, including the Mayor and Corporation, Rifle Volunteers, three Bands, West Somerset Yeomanry Cavalry, Magistrates, Fire Brigade, Friendly Societies, and general inhabitants, and all attended special service at St. Mary’s Church, which was crowded. The Vicar (Rev. W. G. Fitzgerald) read the special prayers compiled for the occasion, and an appropriate sermon was preached by the Rev. Prebendary Robinson (Vicar of North Petherton), who selected as his text Ecclesiastes iii., 8— “*A time to gather stones.*” Those taking part in the procession afterwards assembled on the Cornhill, where the National Anthem was sung by the multitude, and the Volunteers fired *feu de joie*.

At one o’clock a free dinner was provided at the Market House for 700 poor persons over sixty years of age. About half-a-ton of beef and mutton was cooked, and about the same weight of potatoes. A great number of plum-puddings were kindly given by residents of the town, ready cooked.

The children of the town, to the number of over 3,000, were provided with tea in Mr. J. H. Waddon’s rope-walk, followed by various games and amusements, which were greatly enjoyed by the youngsters. They were also presented with Commemoration Medals, as were many who did not attend, the total number distributed being about 4,000.

In the afternoon a public fete took place at

Blacklands, nearly 2,000 persons being present. A variety of entertainment was much enjoyed, and a military tournament attracted much interest.

The day's proceedings passed off most successfully.

1888. — On Saturday evening, March 24th, two hobblers named George Creedy and James Bale, both of Bridgwater, were drowned in the river at Pawlett through the capsizing of a boat, and a companion named William Martin had a most providential escape.

1889. — On Friday, March 8th, Bridgwater, in company with other places in the neighbourhood, was visited with a flood. Owing to the rapid thaw of a deep snow, the Durleigh Brook and some other watercourses overflowed their banks, inundating Hamp Ward, and damaging cottage property, and also flooding several villas and houses in Taunton road, which was rendered impassable to pedestrians for some hours. The inhabitants of a portion of Wembdon-road were also much inconvenienced. A considerable amount of alarm was manifested, but the waters fortunately subsided without loss of life or serious damage.

Monday, April 1, 1889, witnessed the official inauguration of the Somerset County Council. There was a contest for the election of two representatives for Bridgwater, with the result that Messrs. P. J. Thompson and W. L. Winterbotham were elected.