

EDITORIAL NOTE

Most of the newspapers mentioned here have been microfilmed and may be consulted in the reference section of Bridgwater Library, as well as the Somerset Studies Library at the Somerset and Dorset Heritage Centre, Taunton.

But it should be noted that Jarman's own newspaper, the *Bridgwater Gazette*, does not exist in any Somerset library.

The British Library's Newspaper Library at Colindale lists the following Bridgwater titles in its collection. They are in chronological order. The dates are of the copies the library possesses, and are not the dates the newspaper existed, and there are name changes of the same publication.

1831-1831 *Bridgwater and Somersetshire Herald*, *The*
1831-1833 *Alfred London Weekly Journal*, etc, *The*
1846-1846 *Bridgwater Times*, *The*
1846-1861 *Bridgwater Times and Somerset County Chronicle*, *The*
1857-1857 *Somersetshireman and Leader*, *The*
1857-1859 *Bridgwater Mercury*, and *Western Counties Herald*, *The*
1859-1864 *Western Counties Herald*, and *Bridgwater Mercury*, *The*
1861-1870 *Bridgwater Standard*, *Burnham Times*, and *West of England Gazette*, *The*
1862-1862 *Somerset Chronicle*, *Commercial and Literary Gazette*, *The*
1864-1886 *Bridgwater Mercury*, etc, *The*
1874-1885 *Bridgwater Gazette*, *Somerset and Devon Chronicle*, and *West of England Advertiser*, *The*
1885-1933 *Bridgwater Independent*, etc, *The*
1984-1991 *Bridgwater Journal*
1986-1986 *Bridgwater Mercury*, *Burnham & Highbridge Gazette*
1986 to date *Bridgwater Mercury*

The British Library's British Newspaper archive has just begun digitising the *Bridgwater Mercury*, but so far (November 2019) only 1857-1897 has been completed. More is sure to be added later.

No more of the Bridgwater newspapers mentioned here have been digitised so far.

There was no Bridgwater-based newspaper of any importance published before the mid nineteenth century, and none have been digitised for the twentieth century, but Bridgwater news can be found in the pages of earlier and later Somerset papers online.

Bath Chronicle & Western Gazette, 1760-1950

Bristol Mirror, 1810-1842

Sherborne Mercury, 1748-1867

Taunton Courier & Western Advertiser, 1810-1963

Wells Journal, 1851-1990

Weston-super-Mare Gazette & General Advertiser, 1845-1910

Advertisements, Birth, Marriage and Death notices and the like frequently appear in multiple titles. The *Taunton Courier & Western Advertiser* is very good for news stories and reports of Borough Council business in the twentieth century

Digitised and edited by Tony & Jane Woolrich,

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WE have not been able to discover any newspaper connected with Bridgwater before the present century, but at the same time it is very probable that the town, seeing its importance in the Eighteenth Century, possessed a journal of its own.

In 1825 or 1826 the *Bridgwater and Somerset Herald* was started, a four-page weekly, price 7d., printed and published by George Aubrey, Fore-street. It was a "newsy" paper, particularly with regard to election matters, and warmly supported the candidature of Mr. Astell on more than one occasion. In August, 1831, it was succeeded by a local organ bearing the long title, *The Alfred, London Weekly Journal, and Bridgwater and Somersetshire General Advertiser*. It was a small, eight-page journal, published on Mondays, price 7d. The name "Alfred" was apparently given to it from the connection of the district with King Alfred. It was partially printed in, London, and thus contained much general news. Advertisers were not plentiful in those days; the first number contained but seven advertisements, and the second only five. It is believed that Mr. John Bowen was the proprietor; the editor was Mr. Harry Clement Heard, son of a chemist in Fore-street (successor, Mr. J. A. Basker). It was vigorously carried on in the Conservative interest, but a lot of money was lost over it. The offices were in St. Mary-street, nearly opposite the present Young Men's Association rooms. With the

issue for December 20th, 1883, the *Alfred* came to a sudden stoppage, being incorporated with the *Dorset County Chronicle and Somersetshire Gazette*.

January 1st, 1846, witnessed the starting of *The Bridgwater Times*, a small eight-page weekly, about the size of the old *Alfred*, and published at 5d. The first number contained a full page map of the railway system of the county. A Town Council meeting is referred to in a note, but no report is given, it being stated that the representative of the journal was not allowed admission to the meeting, "not being a burgess." The publisher was Mr. Samuel Bowditch West, Fore-street, and Mr. John Bowen is said to have been interested in the venture, and to have been a constant contributor. Within a month it had so firmly established itself that it was enlarged, and took the form of a fair-sized four-page paper, at the same price. The average circulation was then 1,200. In July, 1846, its price was reduced to 3½d., "in consequence of its great success." When it had been in existence fourteen years (1860) its price was placed at 2d.

The year 1857 witnessed the commencement of two new journals, at a period when the *Times* enjoyed a monopoly. On June 10th there appeared *The Somersetshire-man and Leader*, and its opening article expressed surprise at hearing that another paper was about to be started—the *Mercury*—and "sincerely hoped that Mr. Woodley would not dare attempt it"! The *Leader* (as it was best known) was partly printed at Bath, the localization being performed in the dome of the present Market House. Mr. John Charles Webber was the publisher, and the price of the journal 2d. weekly. It was indifferently managed, Bath news predominating over Bridgwater, and it is therefore no surprise that after a thirteen weeks' struggle it ceased to appear. The last number contained no valedictory address or announcement of its demise, but in an editorial there was a bitter complaint as to lack of support.

The *Bridgwater Mercury* was the other journal referred to, and it first appeared on June 25th, 1857. It was then a four-page paper, less than half its size to-day, price 3d. It opened under favourable auspices, with a subscribers' roll containing over 300 local names, "comprising nearly every Liberal elector in the borough," and most

of the other principal inhabitants. It was printed and published in Balls-lane (now George-street) by Mr. James Brown Morgan, Mr. W. A. Woodley, of Taunton, being proprietor. In the following November the editorship was taken by Mr. George Thomas Donisthorpe (afterwards part proprietor of the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*). The *Mercury* went to the front at the outset, and even in its earliest days it showed great capacity for local news—a feature that soon carried it far in advance of its two rivals. The trivial occurrences that make up the social life of a country town were faithfully chronicled, and the more important events were given at a length that was quite unique in local journalism. In this respect the *Mercury* has never at any period of its existence lost its front position. It was well supported by advertisers, and in the year following its introduction it was enlarged to eight pages; success still attended it, and a year later (1859) the price was reduced to 1½d., and another enlargement took place. Its circulation had extended far beyond the town, and the name was altered to *The Bridgwater Mercury and Western Counties Herald*, a title which it retains to the present day.

In the earlier days of its existence there was an amount of acrimonious feeling between the *Mercury* and the *Times*, and it is most amusing to read some of the personalities indulged in. The *Times* is frequently referred to as "the crooked and decaying old lady in St. Mary-street," and the editor (Mr. H. G. Heard) is held up to ridicule as a "scribbler and sauce vender"! The *Mercury* was also frequently attacked on political grounds. In 1864 the editorship of the *Mercury* was entrusted to Mr. J. T. Dunsford, and under his able guidance the journal has built up the high reputation it now enjoys. The Bridgwater public on one memorable occasion showed in a remarkable manner their appreciation of his worth by making him a handsome presentation. In 1884 Mr. Dunsford was admitted to partnership, and still conducts the *Mercury*.

Other candidates for local favour were *The Bridgwater Standard*, printed by Mr. Conrad Stokes, stationer, Fore-street; and a revival of *The Bridgwater Herald*, published by Mr. Ingram, in High-street (his printing office being subsequently utilized as the armoury of the Bridgwater

Volunteers), but the careers of both were short, and by no means brilliant.

In 1871 another paper was started — *The Bridgwater Gazette*, It was printed at Tiverton, and at first locally conducted by Mr. George Bookes (now part proprietor of *The Stamford Post*), and as it appeared on Saturday (the *Mercury* being a Wednesday paper) it met with a fair measure of support. It may be incidentally mentioned that it was whilst conducting the journal in question that the author conceived the idea of compiling this History.

In 1885 the *Gazette* was bought by a Mr. James Bulgin, who altered its title to *The Bridgwater Independent*, and printed it in the town, at a small office in York Buildings. It languished for a time, when it was sold to the Liberals, and run on party lines under Mr. Bulgin's management. A year afterwards it was disposed of to Messrs. Whitby and Sons, Cornhill, who have since spared no pains to make it a good local Saturday paper. It is now the recognised organ of the Liberal party.

The latest candidate for public favour was *The Bridgwater Guardian*, a localized Wednesday edition of a Taunton paper, and which curiously enough was published at the same office as the old *Gazette*, in George-street. It was issued in the Conservative interest, in September, 1885, but it utterly failed to reach the standard of a *local* newspaper and therefore its struggle for existence was a brief one.