

References to St Mary's church from the Bridgwater newspapers, 1831-1880.

By Tony Woolrich

This listing has been made in the course of working through the microfilms in Bridgwater Reference Library whilst engaged on another project, [Carried out in the early 1990s] investigating the state of public health and the formation of the Bridgwater Corporation Water Company in 1876.

St Mary's is of relevance to this because until 1854 the churchyard was the main place of burial for the town's dead. It was grossly overcrowded and the burial practices used were thoroughly unsanitary. This undoubtedly contributed to the high rate of mortality in the neighbouring streets during the cholera epidemic of 1849.

The full story of the public health problems and the long-drawn-out gestation of the water company is more fully discussed at http://www.bridgwaterheritage.org.uk/bridgwaterarchives.org.uk/public_health/. It was my original intention only to note material about the parish churchyard and the burial grounds attached to the other places of worship, as well as the establishment of Wembdon Road Cemetery in 1851, but I quickly realised that this was also the period of the restorations of St Mary's in 1849-53 and 1876-77, and the need to read every page of local news in the papers anyway presented a golden opportunity to record material about this as well.

It is impossible to be certain that every scrap of information about the church has been recovered from every issue. Not all volumes of the paper are complete, and in many instances the microfilming is very poor, so that tiny print is difficult to read and cannot always be reproduced legibly with the equipment at present installed in Bridgwater Reference Library. However, all the leaders, readers' letters and the reports of the vestry and town council meetings have been examined, since they were printed at fixed places in each issue of the paper. I am reasonably sure that the feature articles about the church have been picked up as well. The advertisement pages have not been examined as much I would have liked, due to the problems of illegible type. At one stage it was the practice to print contentious letters to the editor as paid advertisements, and it is probable that not all of these have been picked up. Most contentious events ran over several issues, and once the press got its teeth into a good story the most was invariably made of it.

If St Mary's wishes to produce a more detailed history of its life in the C19, then these newspaper accounts are the only source the writer would have. It would, I feel, be useful to have a file of copies of the major articles in the church, but that will depend on funds being made available to pay for the copies, and for someone to be found who would be willing to make them. Ideally this indexing ought to be continued until at least the end of the Great War

From the material so far seen a useful series of booklets could be written dealing with:

- 1) The restorations and the concerns over the architect's bill.
- 2) The organ and the choir. There is much detail about the repertoire at various services and concerts.
- 3) The government and administration of the church - rating, the Vestry and the seatholders.
- 4) Frances has a lot of biographical material about the clergy for this period.

The history of Bridgwater newspapers may be discovered in the introduction of Brooke, *Somerset Newspapers, 1725-1860*, and published by Somerset County Council in 1960. The chart is based on this.

Bridgwater & Somerset Herald
1825-August 1831
Renamed *Alfred*
10 August 1831-31 December 1833

No newspaper published in Bridgwater for the next twelve years

<i>Bridgwater Times</i>	<i>Bridgwater Mercury</i>
1 January 1846 - 31 September 1861	25 June 1857 - 2 May 1859
Renamed <i>Western Counties Herald & Bridgwater Mercury</i>	
9 May 1859 - 27 July 1860	
Renamed <i>Bridgwater Standard</i>	
16 October 1861 - 26 May 1870	
Renamed <i>Western News & Bridgwater Mercury</i>	
4 August 1860 - 7 October 1860	
Renamed <i>Bridgwater Gazette</i>	
1871 - 4 July 1885	
Renamed <i>Bridgwater Independant</i> 1 July 1885 - 10 June 1933	
Renamed <i>Bridgwater Mercury & Western News</i>	
13 October 1860	
Continues to the present day	

The Alfred was in fact a party newspaper, funded by the Conservative Party, and was not locally owned. It formed part of a chain publishing mostly high quality standardised news and was extremely hostile to Reform and Radicalism. This was the period of the Bristol Riots and the Reform Act. The standard of typesetting and printing is very high, and John Bowen, the local editor, was supplied from London with printed sheets for the body of the paper, and simply had to print the local advertisement and news pages which in effect formed the cover. Most of the local news related to politics, and if one imagines a paper which was a cross between today's *Telegraph* and the *Sun* in the ferocity of its language and totally uninhibited by any libel laws, one can get an idea of what it is like.

It can be seen that after local newspapers for the years 1825-1833 there was a gap when no newspaper was published in the town until the beginning of 1846. From then until May 1859, when the *Bridgwater Mercury* series commenced, the only newspaper was the *Bridgwater Times*. It, with its successor titles, ran until the middle of June 1933, when it was absorbed by the *Bridgwater Mercury*.

There was much rivalry between the proprietors of the Bridgwater and Taunton papers in the 1850s, which frequently became personal.

It has been impossible to read the microfilms of every paper—there were two titles being published in the town simultaneously, so for the period after May 1859, when the *Mercury* titles commenced, the information from those papers has been the one examined. It is essential, however, to look at Bridgwater newspapers being published at a particular time if this material is used as the basis of further research. The local *Bridgwater Standard* (successor to the *Bridgwater Times*) in the later period of the investigation is very sparse indeed, and has only been resorted to as an issue missing from the bound volume of the *Mercury*.

The problem of how to cover the period 1834-1845 when no local was published has not yet been resolved. Undoubtedly there were local correspondents writing for the Taunton and other Somerset papers and also the *Sherborne Mercury*, and perhaps one day time might become available to look at these papers as well. [This can now (2016) be done via British Library's Newspaper archive which has digitised all Somerset newspapers with the exception of Bridgwater's]. The local news reported there is more likely to have concerned death and disaster in the town, rather than the daily routine news which makes up so much of the locally printed papers.

There is a great deal of material in the papers about the activities of the Council, the Board of Guardians and paupersim, about the Bridgwater Infirmary, and much debate on the best means of improving the drainage of the Levels. There is much material on the problems of local agriculture and on the Bridgwater Bay fisheries, which had been over-fished through the use of nets with too small a mesh.

The November 5th bonfire celebrations were regularly reported, and during the 1870s a couple of excellent articles appeared describing in detail the costumes of the revellers.

There is material also about local railways and the canal, and court cases are reported in considerable detail. Probably as a result of Bridgwater's coastwise sailing ships, there is frequently material about events in South

Wales and in towns along the coast of the Bristol Channel and the Forest of Dean.

Parliamentary and international news featured prominently, especially after the introduction of the telegraph. Much was made of the Crimea and the Indian Mutiny in the 1850s and the Balkan Wars of the 1870s. An interesting feature was the occasional printing of letters from Bridgwater and Somerset migrants to America or the Colonies describing their new homes. Letters were also sometimes printed from soldiers or sailors describing the actions they had taken part in.

The papers rarely used illustrations. One or two local firms, such as the Bridgwater Ironworks, used blocks in their advertisements, and occasionally the editorial pages would include maps to illustrate complicated foreign news stories.

Contrary to modern perceptions of the Victorian respectability, it is clear they had far stronger stomachs than us for reading explicit detail of hangings, murders, accidents and post mortems. In many accident inquests are very detailed reports of the injuries and of the surgical operations carried out on the victims in Bridgwater Infirmary. There was also reported a fair number of cases of child cruelty and neglect. Several of the sexually explicit advertisements for patent medicines would not get past the Advertising Standards Bureau today.

As well as the graveyard there is much more material about the church, including the usually verbatim and highly detailed reports of the vestry meetings, during which decisions about the administration of the church were taken. Many meetings were noisy and sometimes acrimonious - far cry from the decorum with which they are conducted today. These newspaper reports should be used in conjunction with the manuscript minute books of the Vestry and the Seatholders meetings which are deposited in the County Record Office in Taunton. Sometimes the full church accounts were published as advertisements in the newspapers. The readers' letters about St Mary's frequently provide a highly detailed and amusing background to the sometimes sparse detail recorded elsewhere.

Church affairs, mostly concerning the chancel, tower, spire and clock and chimes, frequently appeared in the deliberations of the Town Council, since they made themselves responsible for paying for much of the work done there. The events surrounding the restoration by Brakespear, particularly the work done on the Chancel are specially interesting. The newspapers contain what appear to be the only accessible texts of the architect's and surveyor's reports on the state of the fabric at various times then.

The story of the restoration work 1849 - 1853, and the additional work of 1878 together with the events surrounding the funding and the acrimony over the architect's bill would make a useful booklet for somebody to produce, especially if it could be illustrated with some of Brakespear's drawings which are in the County Record Office.

There is much valuable detail about the finances of St Mary's, St John's and Holy Trinity, especially in the earlier period when the historic parish had not been formally split into three.

In the middle 1850s there was much discussion about the setting of a church rate in the town to pay for fabric repairs in St Mary's. This was the period when the whole question of rating attracted much national attention. A court case in Braintree, Essex, which found that dissenters could not be held liable to pay rates for the upkeep of a building they did not worship in, was taken by Bridgwater dissenters to mean they need not support the local Anglican churches. There is a comment from the Bishop that of all parishes in the diocese Bridgwater was particularly contumacious about this.

The churchwardens of Holy Trinity took defaulting dissenters to court, but in the case of St Mary's the problems over getting the dissenters to pay a parish rate led to the setting up of a seatholders committee, distinct from the Vestry. This seatholders committee of churchmen charged pew rents, and the reports of the seatholders meeting begin with a report of 'the Expenditors which must have been the Victorian equivalent of the PCC Finance committee. They are extremely detailed and show income and expenditure. One report has the comments of a churchwarden over the problems of trying to collect pew rents. Pew rents continued to be levied in St Mary's until the 1960s, when Stewardship became fashionable.

Both the vestry and seatholders meetings were frequently noisy and uproarious. It was common to read of 3-400 parishioners attending. A continual grouse at the seatholders meetings was the need to reserve so many free seats for the poor, which many seatholders viewed with extreme hostility. One report has details of how many seats were in the church before and after the restoration, with a list of how they were apportioned by way of profession, with the numbers for bankers and lawyers and other tradesmen. The hotels and big houses held substantial blocks. There is much detail of the legal requirement to have free seats for the poor under the terms of the various grants the church received when the 1849-53 restoration occurred. At the time of the re-pewing there were letters about how uncomfortable the new ones were, compared with the old box pews.

It is evident that John Bowen, editor of *The Alfred*, and Conservative churchwarden at St Mary's was hostile to seats being rented. He produced a survey and report about it during the 1830s. It is probable there is material about this, and more about St Mary's, in the Bowen collection in the County Record Office.

Much material is recorded about the fund-raising efforts undertaken to pay for the restoration work. This included concerts and bazaars, and a month-long exhibition of arts, crafts and local manufacturing held in Town Hall to which 17,000 people were estimated to have come. There are frequent letters asking for the accounts of the restoration to be published, and some bad tempered ones from Rev. James in response.

Bridgwater Reference Library has a copy of a long poem, published in pamphlet form, describing the church and the restoration, which was issued at the time of this exhibition. The library also has a broadside doggerel poem about the various candidates at an election of the churchwardens.

The Anglican clergy seem generally shadowy. Only Archdeacon Dennison, reviver of the Harvest Festival at East Brent, and scourge of Bishops and clergy alike on liturgical matters comes over with any force, and even then his dealing with St Mary's are very slight.

It is clear that the impetus for restoration and change in St Mary's occurred before Rev. James was appointed, and much work by way of tearing out galleries and moving the organ from the West End Gallery had occurred before Brakespear was appointed architect. Rev. James appears to have been largely an absentee vicar, and the day to day work was done by his curates, who were well regarded in the town, especially for their work among the poor in the various epidemics. James's successor, Rev Sadler, had a much higher profile in the town.

Throughout the reports the various church officers are much in evidence. This was the time, of course when the Vestry had important functions in the town government additional to simply being concerned with the running of the Parish Church. One of the wardens served as the vicar's warden, and the other three acted for the people. In addition there were paid church officers — the Parish Clerk, the organist (at one time with a choirmaster as well) and the sexton, who at one time was a woman. The descriptions of the meetings in the 1830s in which John Bowen and his fellow wardens took part are extraordinary, for elections of parish officers then were held on party-political lines. According to his account Bowen was a lone conservative pitchforked into a nest with three radicals, who did not hesitate to pack vestry meeting with brickyard workers and quay porters to heckle and intimidate timid voters. The appointment of minor functionaries, such as the Parish Clerk and keeper of the parish fire engine were also done on party lines.

Later on, during the restoration work in the church in the 1850's, a furious row broke out between the wardens (different ones) over the re-hanging of the picture. One warden set about restoring it to the usual position, only to be verbally and physically assaulted by the other three in the Sanctuary, his workmen were threatened with being tipped off their ladders, and eventually somebody turned off the gas at the meter and removed the key, so that work was forced to stop because of bad light. This was referred to the Archdeacon and in the end the affair was resolved peaceably.

During the end of the period I have been examining the dominant personality among the churchwardens was Alderman F. Smith. He was evidently a very forceful man, and from his remarks not only here but in the reports of the Town Council, the Board of Guardians and various public meetings about the town water

supply was a thoroughly unpleasant and selfish individual, who had no time for the poor. He was the man who made remarks at a seat-holders meeting about the poor being flea-ridden and so, not wanted by respectable people at St Mary's. He also had much to say about the iniquity of ratepayers funding the cost of burying paupers at Wembdon Road Cemetery.

Another area of frequent contention was the activities of the choir. At one Stage there was a separate organist and choirmaster, who did not get on. There were complaints about over-flowery repertoires at services, and the need to play a series of voluntaries while the collection was being taken, presumably because of the numbers in the church. The choir finances were often discussed in minute detail. There is a lot of material about the state of the organ which was located in the West Gallery before the restoration, and its relocation in North chapel until the installation of the Father Willis organ in the 1870's. There are a couple of anguished letters from Mr Acreman, the local piano and organ builder, about it being left exposed to the weather and the builders when the church was being rebuilt by Mr Brakespear, and the organist having to sometimes remove half a barrow full of brickbats and dust from the internals before it could be played for Sunday services. Acreman had to wait a long time before getting paid for his work.

Normal church services were rarely reported, but specials, such as the harvest festival were covered in depth, with lists of the flower ladies and a description of the arrangements, lists of the music, and verbatim reports of the sermons. At one meeting there was an appeal from a warden for the ladies of the parish to refrain from hammering nails into the walls and woodwork when they were arranging flowers.

The church was the venue of diocesan conferences of various kinds which were also fully reported. There are few local birth, marriage or death notices in the paper for the early part of the period under investigation, nor very many reports of weddings or funerals, other than for the more important members of the community.

There is also material about the original Holy Trinity Church, and about the construction of St John's Church. This includes reports of the activities of an incumbent of Holy Trinity who frequently did not turn up for services without notice, and of services being abandoned because of bad light due to unpaid gas bills. Little is reported, however, about Chilton Trinity and Durleigh churches.

The problems of Wembdon Road Cemetery occupied much space in the newspaper in the 1870s. This had been established in 1851, when St Mary's cemetery was shown to be a health hazard. Evidently it had been laid out on ill-drained land, with the result that graves were frequently water-logged. Various ideas were put forward for draining the land properly, and this is of relevance in any work on the history of St Mary's church, since the Churchwardens were responsible for administering it at that time.

On the wider story of Bridgwater church life, there is a vast amount of material. It is my impression that the various Dissenting congregations were much more lively than St Mary's congregation. As well as the regular services, they ran various lecture programs, including a series about Ritualism in the Church of England! They also seem to have been more active in fund raising for good causes and in rallying round at times of crisis. There does also seem to have been a spirit of co-operation in Bridgwater amongst the various denominations. At one Harvest festival, St Mary's choir was augmented by members of various dissenting choirs, and included at least three organists! At one stage it looks as though the Bridgwater Harvest Festival was held by different churches in turn.

It should not be forgotten, however, that this apparent apathy on the part of St Mary's congregation may not be true, but might be more a reflection of the preconceptions of the newspaper writers. Some of the headlines in leaders about St Mary's are a little extreme — one Easter Vestry was described as 'Saturnalia' for example.

In wider church life the local papers reported in depth the activities of Rev. Prince and the Abode of Love at Spaxton, on the Gorham affair, on Rev. Hunt and the scandal of Moorland church, on the activities of Archdeacon Denison who took his bishop to court, on the spread of organised Catholicism in Britain, following the Catholic Emancipation Act and a great deal about local education and the church's responsibility for it.