

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

Bridgwater

The East Gate Press

1927

1

A compressed local history such as this is more than liable to be scrappy and the modern portion is assuredly rather thin.

For all that I hope that the booklet will supply what is often sought—a short and inexpensive story of the borough.

I think it will be found to be truthful, inasmuch as it is based on some years of study of the local archives which date from the first half of the 13th century. These I have transcribed as far as the middle of the 16th century and have indexed to the close of the 14th. There is therefore much still to transcribe and index and it will be readily understood why more is said of the earlier than of the later period.

I had hoped that Mr. Maurice Page's history of the Battle of Sedgemoor would appear simultaneously with this booklet, but that is something to which we may still look forward.

T.B.D.

June; 1927

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

IN the pleasant autumn weather, long, long centuries ago, long before the waters of Parrett were walled in from the moorland or ever a bridge bestrode them, "some grave Tyrian trader, from the sea," was cautiously threading his way up the river channel. A wild duck scurried away from the unwonted and disturbing sight, and a man standing on the prow drew his bow and shot the bird, and put off in a small boat to pick up his quarry. As he lifted it out of the water, he uttered a cry, for he had dropped something of yet greater value, and without hope of recovery.

I dreamed this because, more than 2000 years afterwards, some one found "a piece of gold Phoenician ring-money at Bridgwater seven feet below the surface," first token of civilized man's presence in this corner of English soil.

Then, at some time, no one knows when, no one knows by whom, a bridge was thrown across the river here. It was a suitable spot for such an undertaking, for at this point the waters wash the furthest bluff of marl projecting beyond the

foothills of the Quantocks, and in the river-bed is a "hard," or rocky bottom. Possibly the timbers of that bridge might, like the famous jewel in the Bodleian, have borne carved on them, "Alfred had me made," and I like to think our bridge once served Alfred. Possibly his children built it as part of the far-flung defences with which they ringed their Kingdom of Wessex. But these also are dreams.

Then we come to hard facts written on parchment. We begin to learn something of our story. The bridge we have pictured has, it would seem, given a name to the cluster of farmsteads which have sprung up on the high ground by the river and which form a Saxon manor belonging to Merleswain, lord of broad acres in north and west. Brugie, or Bridge, as it was called later, grows its own corn, its own meat, its own wool, spins its own yarn, weaves and dyes its own cloth, in fact is self-supporting, save that it has to bring in from outside iron for its tools and weapons, and salt wherein to lay down its winter's meat.

When the Normans swept the land, Brugie suffered little change except that Merleswain was deposed and the lordship was given by the Conqueror to his own man, Walter of Douai. It is quite possible that the manor folk never set eyes on either of these lords and that the daily routine went on very much as usual whatever king might reign. Yet one thing was no longer the same. As at Stoke Courcy (Stogursey), Charlton Mackrell, Shepton Mallett, and elsewhere, the new lord's name was added to the old place name. Bridge became Bridge Walter, or Bridge Water, for in those days Walter was pronounced and sometimes spelled Wauter or Water. And that is the plain answer to a question often asked.

Judged by the increase in its taxable valuation, the manor would seem to have been growing in productive power in those years. This development may have continued through the century following, but we have no evidence either way, and though we know something of the lordship, our knowledge throws no light on the question. Walter's son, Robert of Bampton, bibulous, quarrelsome and

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

1927

2

turbulent, was a sore trouble to King Stephen in his much troubled reign. After him the manor passed by marriage to the Paynel family, a form of whose name survives later in Penel Street, now absorbed in Penel Orliou. Eventually Fulk Paynel's difficulties exercised a decisive influence on the fortunes of the place. For in order to put himself right with the lord king, he sought the favour of a highly-placed official and to that end made over to him his manor of Bridgwater. This is how William Briwer's name comes into our story, a name of far more importance to us than Walter's, which is daily on our lips. Our godparents ought really to have called us Bridgebriwer!

William Briwer was statesman, ambassador, justiciar, and confidant and servant to four successive kings of England. He had accumulated wealth and power, and, as we have seen, had acquired among his many properties the marl bluff by Parrett waters. He saw the advantages of the site, its access to the Bristol Channel, its elevation above the level of the neighbouring moors, its strategic qualities, and he determined to build a feudal castle on it. The royal licence was obtained—probably bought, for King John needed money—and, as it was desirable to have a market and a port at the castle gates, a few weeks later Briwer received at the same hands a charter, whereby Bridgwater became a free borough. This was sealed on the 26th of June in the year 1200, while John was making a progress through Touraine.

The three parties concerned all profited by this arrangement. The king presumably enriched his treasury, Briwer attained his market, and, which most concerns us, the men of the manor stepped into a larger freedom. What their actual condition had been it is difficult to say, but legally they had been bound to the soil, and had been shackled by all manner of irritating obligations. Hitherto they had been bound to do a share of the lord's ploughing and: reaping, possibly on the very days when they ought to have been working on their own strips. If a villain or husbandman wished that his daughter should marry, he must obtain his lord's consent. If he died, his heir must forfeit the best beast or some equivalent.

But all these services were now exchanged for an annual money payment of one shilling for each burgage, and as many tenements were no larger than a half-burgage, sixpence, that is a skilled artisan's day's wages, saw the tenant through as a rule. This shilling burgage-rent is not yet quite extinct and there are four or five tenements which still pay it. The two officers who collected this rent and who stood as it were between lord and burgess, were known as the provosts or reeves of the borough. They had their own seal, a beautiful representation of two men hauling a rope on a one-masted galley.

The newly enfranchised burgess was now free to go where he would, to plead in his own borough court, to trade in accordance with the borough customs, and generally to enjoy an altogether wider and freer life.

A new earth, if not a new heaven, was now open to him. Enter, if you can, into the wonderment of that mind, hitherto knowing nothing but the life of field and barn and byre, as he watched the master-builder unfolding his plans and directing the energies of mason, carpenter, plumber and other craftsmen. Never had he seen such traffic on the river—boats laden with stone from Ham floating down with the ebb, and boats bearing lias coming up from Downend on the flood. The wains bringing in stores of timber from Petherton forest ploughed deep ruts in the ways. Day by day the walls of the great castle rose, the quay grew on the river bank, the piers of stone took the place of the old wooden bridge, the church changed out of all knowledge, and by the east gate was built a hospital to receive a convent of the Canons of St. Augustine. All this activity meant a large influx of artificers, and a new population differing in habit and outlook was intermingled with the old agricultural element.

The Hospital of St. John the Baptist was only one of Briwer's religious foundations. Its purposes were to provide food and shelter for wayfarers, help and care for the sick, and education for the young, particularly the poor. It was endowed by the founder with the living of St. Mary's, and the Master and Brethren, being thus the rectors of the parish,

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

Bridgwater

The East Gate Press

1927

3

nominated the vicar. They also held the living of Wembdon and served the Castle chapel as well as their own.

The chapel on the bridge was served by the Grey Friars or Little Brothers of St. Francis, who came to the town in 1230, six years after the first Franciscans had landed in England. The great William Briwer had died four years earlier, and it was his son, of the same name, who built them a house within the borough.

We cannot call Bridgwater a walled town. About 70 years after the charter was granted, the beginning of a town wall was made and for a short space starting from the west gate in a northerly direction some progress was made. But there the wall ended, and for all defence reliance was placed on the broad, deep ditch or foss which was dug round the borough save only where Durleigh brook served as a sufficient protection. Four gates, north, south, east and west, with draw-bridges, gave access to all comers by road.

In the first hundred years of the borough's existence, the main street, running from the Bridge to West Gate, was known as the Great or Chief Street. In the section we call High Street, the left and right sides were distinguished as South Street and North Street. Friarn Street and St. Mary Street are named, and Orlove Street ran from the cattle market to the Castle Ditch, parallel to High Street. Frog Lane seems to have run by the river where Blake Gardens now are. Outside West Gate, the ways ran in three directions, towards Kidsbury, towards the Park, and towards the West *Wayhur* or horse-pond. There was a second *Wayhur* near the Friars, where the name Horsepond lingers. At the close of the century the authorities allowed West Gate to be built over provided that, if ever it should be necessary for the defence of the town, armed forces might occupy the building. On such terms Chaucer lived over Aldgate in London.

Of the space within the Town Ditch west of the river, Briwer's strong castle occupied about a fourth. The river protected it on the east, the Common Ditch on the north, while the Castle Ditch washed against the walls along the other

two sides. The main entrance, approached by a drawbridge, looked on the Cornhill. The Water Gate, giving access to the riverside, stands with its triple arch to this day.

Under this strong defence lived the castle folk. Before the end of the century, owing to a division in the inheritance, they were not under the same lordship as the greater part of the town. The castle was in the hands of Lady Maud de Mortimer, whose grandson, Roger, played so ignoble a part in our history, while the La Zouche family was in possession of two thirds of the town. The castle had its constable and he governed all within it. It lived its own life apart from the borough and yet, depending for supplies on its traders and artizans, must have contributed in some degree to their wealth.

Within the bounds of the Common Ditch, except for the Castle area, lived the commonalty of Bridgwater. The parish church was its spiritual, moral and, in some sense, social centre, the Gildhall its common court of justice and seat of government, the Market its resort for buying and selling. Round these pivots turned the borough's leisurely active and self-centred daily life.

The Church, the Gild, and the Court emerge as the three radiant points of power out of what seems a somewhat confused system of authority. Even to-day there is something medieval in our mingling of official duties. We choose yearly a head of the town government, and straightway he becomes ex-officio the chief magistrate. At the same time the port and market come under his control, and no doubt he interests himself in promoting the trade and commerce of the borough. But strangest, legacy of all from his medieval forerunners, he still claims among the borough properties the rectorial tithes of Bridgwater and the chancel and clock of the Parish Church!

Even so the burgesses of the 13th century chose annually from among their number two men to be the Seneschals or Stewards of their Gild Merchant, and until Edward IV established our mayoralty, these seneschals presided over the Borough Court, and to them the wardens

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

1927

4

of the chantry of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the Holy Rood in the church, and of the Bridge were responsible and must present yearly accounts.

So far as piracy, rife in those days, and practised not only by foreigners against us, would allow, the port and shipping of Bridgwater were growing and we catch a glimpse of our ships, with those of Totnes and Dartmouth, carrying supplies to the king's troops fighting in Wales against the last of the Llewellyns. While we must not forget that agriculture was not laid aside when the place became a borough and that the common fields were still tilled by the burgesses, we find that the chief industry of the town was now the manufacture of woollens. The Weaver or Webbe with his loom, the Fuller or Tucker with his teasels, the Dyer with his vats, were conspicuous among the burgesses. At the beginning of the next century wealthy tradesmen are specifying among their legacies rolls of cloth, white and russet and mixed in colour. In time the word *Bridgwater* became attached to the cloth we exported and we read in the customs list of Barnstaple among many other items "kersies, the pack is iiijd ; bridgewater, every piece is 6d. ; iron, every tonne is viijd."

We shall see something presently of the operation of the monthly Law Court over which the seneschals presided. But there belongs to this earlier time a very important ordinance which the burgesses promulgated, and from this we learn something of its powers. You must not, it tells us, bring an action against a fellow-burgess in any other court. He need only answer you in Bridgwater, and you are liable to a penalty if you summon him elsewhere. If you call him a murderer or a thief or anything else of a disagreeable nature, you are liable to be brought before the seneschals and punished, and this is just as well, for in those days, no action for slander lay in the King's courts. Occasionally the King's justices on circuit held an assize here, but this of course was for cases rising in the district and not specially for Bridgwater.

The ordinance referred to bears the seal of the Burgesses, the original of the Borough seal of our own day. The device is a wooden bridge under which flows the

river, surmounted by a massive castle with triple battlements and a gateway. When acting in their capacity of trustees, if that be the right word, of the properties of the Chantry of the Blessed Virgin Mary, they use another seal. This represented the Virgin seated with the Holy Child on her knees. In the 13th century burgesses left houses and lands for the repose of their souls to the maintenance of this chantry and of the light before the Great Cross which stood on the rood-screen with figures of the Virgin Mother and St. John on either side. The large iron hook fixed in the ceiling to which the Cross was attached can still be seen *in situ*.

Among these donors to the chantry was William, vicar of Bridgwater some time prior to 1276. James was vicar in 1245. At the close of the century, Walter of Stoclinche held the benefice.

The most prominent burgess in Henry III's days seems to have been Walter of Kentelesbere. He was succeeded in the next reign by William the Large, Richard Maydus and Hugh Godwin, the last of whom left all his tenements on the west side of the bridge to one son, and all on the east side to another, a very simple division!

Many bells have been cast in Bridgwater, but the earliest recorded founding takes us back to the first quarter of the 14th century when a bell about the weight of our largest but one was cast. It looks as though the medieval peal consisted of three bells of which this would be the heaviest. Full details have been handed down to us of its composition and cost.

Among the burgesses of the first half of Edward III's reign; David the Palmer and John and Thomas Boye appear to lead. The Boyes disappear from the records about 1348, the year of the terrible visitation of plague known as the Black Death. It was in August that it crossed the sea and appeared at Weymouth. It is believed that Bridgwater lost half its inhabitants, In December of that year a poor clerk named Richard of Exebrugge succeeded John of Torrebrian as vicar. It is significant that in the March following the bishop instituted John Butleigh in Richard's place. Benefices changed hands quickly in that year.

With the knowledge of the awful

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

Bridgwater

The East Gate Press

1927

5

devastation wrought by this sickness it is somewhat difficult to understand how the town was able so soon to enter on a large building operation. Possibly it was due to a quickening of the religious impulse, but even then folk were fewer and wages tended to be higher in spite of royal orders and the Statute of Labourers.

Within twenty years of the first coming of the plague a beginning was made on the spire which has been the town's glory ever since. Timber was felled in North Petherton forest, stone and rubble were carted into the town, a "cable" was bought at considerable cost, "an instrument called a 'crowe'" was brought from Downend, and a horseman was despatched to Bristol to fetch Nicholas Waleys who seems to have been placed in charge of the work. The 28th of June, 1367, saw the first timber hoisted on to the tower, and bread, meat and beer were abundantly provided on the occasion. The ratio of the height of the spire to that of the tower is large even for an English church, but one grows to like it and it is a conspicuous landmark for many miles round. The clock is first mentioned in the churchwardens' accounts for 1383-85, where a payment to a clerk is recorded for taking care of it. He received a mark (13s. 4d.) yearly.

The aftermath of the Black Death was not all gathered for many years. Wat Tyler's rising in 1381 was the culmination of much sporadic unrest all over the country. It seems strange that the pulse of a community so far west as Bridgwater should be beating in harmony with that of Kent and Essex and Hertford. There was a growing antagonism against the lordship of the religious houses in the country. As the abbey was an object of detestation to the men of St. Alban's, so was the Hospital of St. John to those of Bridgwater. In both towns the mob carried a banner flaunting the royal arms that their loyalty might not be suspect. In both they burned the houses of the scribes who drew up the parchments they dreaded. In both they sought to demolish the religious buildings. The mob in Bridgwater was led by one, Thomas Ingelby, a prominent burgess, and Nicholas Frompton, the vicar, who may

possibly have been a provisor or clerk who had received the benefice from the Pope instead of from the Master and Brethren of the Hospital. Victory seems to have rested with the rioters. Both Frompton and Ingelby were however condemned, but were afterwards pardoned. Frompton was still vicar in 1383, and Ingelby after a sojourn in Ireland returned to the ordinary life of a Bridgwater burgess.

Through the latter half of Edward III's reign, Robert of Plympton was our leading burgess, and in Richard II's time was succeeded by Wm. Crich and John Cole. We are fortunate in possessing a fair number of public records for the latter reign, and can construct public affairs more clearly perhaps for this last quarter of the fourteenth century than for any other period of the middle age.

From a roll dating from 1387-88 we can learn something of the proceedings of the Law Court for a whole year. The Court sat monthly on a Monday and received the reports of the burgesses responsible for the peace of the twelve wards into which the borough was divided. There were two wardens for each and the wards were called Without East Gate, Eastover, Above the weir, Damyet, Twixt church and bridge, St. Mary Street, High Street (North Side), High Street (South Side), Orloue Street, Friarri Street, Without West Gate toward the park, and Without West Gate toward Kidsbury. Generally the report is that all is well; sometimes all is not well. For example :— "*Orloue Street*, John Aubyn and Wm. Bakere report that all is well. *Friarri Street*, John Vickery and Richard Dobull, wardens, report that Alice the Breweress justly raised the hue and cry on John Bailly ; he is therefore fined 3d.; sureties, the wardens. And that the same John committed an assault against the peace" — possibly he had smacked her cheek — "on the same Alice; he is therefore fined 1d.; surety, John Tannere." On one occasion the whole commonalty of the town is fined 3d. because it has not put in order the bed of the stream running from the High Cross on Cornhill to the Great Bridge. Twice a year, at Hocktide and Michaelmas, two special courts were held with what was known as View of

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

1927

6

Frankpledge and at these times, in addition to the ordinary routine of the Court, twelve freemen present a number of cases, such as obstructing the way with rubbish heaps, allowing the roadway to become deep in mud and impassable, disturbances of the peace, breaking the laws of the market, small thieving, and so forth. Through the year, from time to time, the Provosts present the accounts of the Piepowder Court, which was held for non-burgesses who came to fairs and markets; The "Tasters" also report cases in which unsound food or beer has been offered for sale. Dorneday or Durneday Court was held yearly. It is apparently unique, though its procedure is not unlike that of Preston and the Cinque Ports. It looks as though all holders of burgages, including abbots and priors, were summoned and were fined 6d. each if they failed to attend. On the "durne days" if a burgess had failed to pay his burgage-rent, the shilling rent which has been mentioned, it seems that the provosts sealed his door up, and if he broke the seal he was liable to fine.

It was in Richard II's reign that the Great Bridge was rebuilt. Sir John Trevet left 300 marks toward this desirable object and, says Leland, the traveller, "the Trivetes, beyng the armes that Triveth gave, appere there in a shield yn the coping of the chekes of the bridge."

In this reign too the ancient Chantry of St. Mary was re-founded. The chaplain, Robert Northover, was nominated by the Seneschals of the Gild and instituted by the Bishop. The King's special licence was obtained, at a price, to lay aside the statute of Mortmain and endow the chantry with tenements and lands. The duties of the chaplain were carefully prescribed and the Master and Brethren of the Hospital with the Vicar agreed to make a special grant toward his maintenance. The erection of chantries generally seems to have received a special impulse at this time and while the chantry of St. Mary preserved its place behind the high altar, the church was widened to receive under its roof the chapel of Holy Trinity on the north of the chancel and that of St. George on the south of it. The Chapel of the Holy Rood and that of St. Katherine were between Trinity Chapel and the north door, and during the coming century we read of those of All

Saints, St. Ann and St. Erasmus. There were altars also to St. James, St. Sunday, and St. Gregory. ,

When the town received its pardon for its share in the Peasants' Rising I have not yet found. It was one of the first to be proclaimed and one of the last to be pardoned. But we possess a pardon granted in 1402 by Henry IV to the Seneschals and the Gild for any trespass they had committed against certain mercantile statutes.

From the time of Edward III through the succeeding reigns till we reach Edward IV's we have a number of accounts—borough bailiff's, church wardens, chantry wardens'—throwing light on the daily life of the burgesses. Some day their story must be told, but meanwhile among a thousand items here are some. We are told how they paid their members of parliament and how they feasted them before and after their journeys; how they gave pottles of Malmsey and gallons of white wine and red to the Master and Brethren of St. John's and to the Friars, as well as to distinguished men such as the Archbishop, the Bishop of Winchester, the Lord of Botreaux, Humphry Lord Stafford and others; what a trouble the maintenance of a house on the Great Bridge was to them; what money they spent on Lime Bridge; how they sent for the Prior of Taunton to come and bless the town; how they provided the town piper with a new cloak; how they bought a pair of shackles; how they entertained the King's players; how they made great preparations each year for the observance of Corpus Christi Day; how pipers came from Ash Priors for the festival; how the parish included Dunwear, East Bower, Horsey, Hamp, Haygrove and Chilton, and how all these hamlets contributed their quota; how they repaired the bellows for the organ; how they bought soap, white, grey and black; how the church had odd possessions bequeathed to it such as a cow and an anvil; what was paid for burial inside the church; how they fetched stone from Rokecastell," near King's Cliff, and sand from "Boreshed"; how they received 12d. for torches when Sir Hugh Luttrell was borne here forth; how much the seats in the church were sold for; how they repaired the starred

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

Bridgwater

The East Gate Press

1927

7

vestments ; how six elms were felled in the town ditch ; how they kept the Easter Sepulchre; and how they burnished the jewels of the church.

The share of the town that had been Lady Mortimer's came by descent through the Earls of March to the House of York. There was evidently some difficulty in getting the burgage rent from the provosts and Richard, Duke of York, sent a commission to enquire into the condition of the burgesses. The report his commissioners made to the Duke shows that they were satisfied " that the rentes and revenues of the hool Burgh ar dymynysshed yerly " and that the burgage holders had suffered from overtaxation. After the Duke's death and after his son had become king as Edward IV., the Duchess, now the Queen Mother, became lady of the town and she in turn enquired into the question of the town's decay. Then comes a sharp letter from one of her commissioners, who threatens that if the reeves do not appear with the £8 0s. 0½d. due, they will have to make a reckoning " that shalle turne you to lytelle ese."

Presumably Bridgwater sided with the White Rose in the famous war between York and Lancaster, but there is no evidence that the town became involved in the fight. There is one bit of parchment which suggests a connection with the struggle. It contains a safe-conduct given to a prominent burgess, named John Davy, by the Earls of March, Warwick, and Salisbury.

From the reign of Edward IV we mark a definite step in the development of our town government. In the previous reign there is already a tendency to write of the Seneschals of the Gild Merchant as the Common Seneschals — an important point for students of medieval town history. Edward gave us a new charter and henceforth Bridgwater is governed by a Mayor with, at first, two bailiffs, and later in Elizabeth's time, two aldermen. Further changes in the number of these aldermen followed in due time. But ever since 1468 we have a continuous succession in the Mayoralty. Tradition says that John Kendale was the first. He certainly was a most important burgess, and was one of

the executors of the will of the unhappy Humphry Stafford, who was governor of the Castle, and was beheaded here for high treason.

Edward's charter enlarged the boundaries of the town which were now fixed at Kelyng Cross on the east, where the Russian cannon stands to-day, Lymebrigge on the south, near the lime kiln, St. Matthew's field on the west, and Crowpill on the north.

The vicar of these times, who had succeeded Wm. Hurst and John Cors, was John Colswayne. He is noteworthy in Bridgwater history, for it is through him that the borough came into possession of its lands in Dorset. Here it is sufficient to say that he left the rent of those lands to pay for his yearly *obit* and for the maintenance of a light to burn perpetually in the church.

As with Bristol so with Bridgwater, Ireland had considerable intercourse. With much buying and selling going on, occasional friction was inevitable, and we have a strangely worded letter from the Mayor and bailiffs of Youghal, inviting our Mayor and Burgesses to a better understanding. This document is dated 1475, and bears a beautiful impression of the seal of the Irish town.

There was already an almshouse without West Gate, but in 1482, we read of another which is to be built for thirteen poor men and women. Robert North was the founder, and possibly it was the house without South Gate.

A useful work for the improvement of the port was carried out in the autumn of 1488, when a new slip was built on the south side of the bridge. The Abbot of Glastonbury was among those who contributed to the fund. The stone was brought down the river from Pibsbury, near Langport, and the building account carefully and fully recorded, week by week, has been happily preserved.

The port in these days was busily occupied. Not only English and Irish ships were there, but we read how a Venetian vessel was wrecked in the river near Huntspill and how the captain of a Portuguese bark died here and was buried

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

1927

8

in the Friars' burial ground. Many of the yearly books of Water Bailiff's accounts during the reigns of Henry VII. and Henry VIII. have come down to us, and are mines of information. From them we learn of the presence of other nationalities, Gascon, Breton, and Spanish traders. We learn the names of some of the vessels trading in our port, the *Trinity*, the *Saviour*, the *Mary*, the *Gabriel*, the *Patrick*, the *Margaret*, the *George*, the *Andrew*, the *Katherine*, the *Sunday* and the *Brandon*. We learn the kinds of merchandise handled on our quays— wine, woad, orchil, madder, freestone, mill-stones, grinding-stones, coal, iron, lead, wheat, barley, rye, green peas, corn, malt, beans, pitch, tar, resin, salt, cider, fish, salmon, herrings white and red, salt, sugar, swarf, alum, oil, cork, soap, fruit, frails of raisins, fardels of linen cloth, packs of wool, and bells for neighbouring churches, such as North Curry, Durleigh and Kingston. From the same source we learn that the Mayor's yearly salary was £5, the Recorder's 20s., the Town Clerk's, 26s. 8d., and the Water Bailiff's, 13s. 4d. It is a record of all sorts of purchases down to the Bailiff's "papur and yngke." The presents of wine have grown larger. A whole hogshead is given to the Abbot of Glastonbury, and even the Grey Friars now get their three gallons. One party of minstrels after another is entertained—the King's and the King's Mother's, my Lord Derby's and my Lord Shrewsbury's, the Earl of Bath's and the Marquess of Dorset's. We hear of a Christmas play at Master Mayor's, of a Shepherds' Pageant on Corpus Christi day, of a rent paid for his gown by the beadle, of a payment for "mendying of Champyn's mase to the golle smyth." There are two entries that are slight echoes of the dissolution of the religious houses. One announces the arrival of lead from Muchelney, no doubt stripped from the abbey roof, the other that St. John's bells have been sent to Charlynch.

The end came in 1538. The Hospital, after its 300 years and more of service, ceased to exist, and the brethren were pensioned off. The Grey Friars also were dissolved. Finally at the beginning of Edward VI's reign, the chantries disappeared and with their disappearance came the end of the middle age in Bridgwater. A new era had dawned, and

the life of the community affected by the religious changes, the discovery of new lands and the spread of the new learning, was strangely altered.

The chantry lands went to the Crown but were restored by Queen Mary to the town, and thus it came about that the Dorset property left by John Colswayn for the benefit of his soul became an asset of the Corporation and to-day brings in a quite respectable income. Instead of the Master and Brethren, the Mayor and Burgesses became the owners of the rectorial tithes. They do not to-day present to the living. That is in the hands of the Crown, and in practice the Bishop nominates the vicar.

The liability of the borough to help in the armament of the country is reflected in two documents of this century. A list of the inhabitants is thus headed, "In this boke ys conteyned as well the Weapons and harness as the sommes of money taxed upon the ynhabytantes of Bridgwater for the setting furth of souldyers the vij daye of ffebruary anno 1557 yn which yere Calyse by the ffrench men was taken." Against each name is set the weapon or weapons which the owner is prepared to furnish—bills, bows, sheaves of arrows (*i.e.*, 24 in number), odd arrows, swords, daggers, guns, glaives, quivers, harness, jacks, pole-axes, skulls, sallets, splettes and gorgets. You could give a quarter harness or half a sheaf of arrows, but every arm either of offence or defence was welcome. Later, in Elizabeth's time, weapons of a larger calibre, were furnished by a joint effort of the burgesses. These were two "Costelottes" and two "Calyvers."

Reflections of the great Queen's more peaceable acts are shown, one in a minor matter, the other in one of major consequence. Early in her reign, in May, 1564, Elizabeth issued a proclamation against extravagance in the fashions of the day. This sumptuary law quickly reached Bridgwater and we possess a number of bonds, each of £40, given by the individual tailors of the town to observe the Queen's proclamation "touchynge hosen." Towards the end of the reign came the Poor Laws, and we find a number of indentures declaring the apprenticeship of some small orphan by the Mayor and the

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

Bridgwater

The East Gate Press

1927

9

Overseers of the Poor to some craftsman to be taught his "mystery," or, in the case of a girl, to learn the mystery of "Oconomie" or "huswiferye."

In this reign the Blake family became prominent in Town affairs, Robert Blake, the elder, was thrice mayor, in 1574, 1579, and 1587. He left in trust twelve score pounds, whereof the interest was to be paid to his widow Margaret, and after her death to be used by the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses, "for the reliefe' of sixe or more poore people of the said Burgh and Reparation of the said Cawsies." Margaret herself left ten pounds to the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses, the interest of which was to be spent on six smocks for six poor women. About the time of the death of Robert and Margaret Blake, their famous grandson, Bridgwater's most distinguished son, was born. Presumably he spent his childhood and youth here until he went to Oxford. Recent research has found records of a Robert Blake who played an important part in Barbary. If this is the future admiral, we can now account for his knowledge of seamanship and of sea-fighting. The great deeds of his life were not done here, but he represented this borough in Parliament and in his will followed the example of his grandparents and left £100 to be distributed among the poor of Bridgwater.

In the Civil War in which Blake played a notable part in his dogged defence of Taunton, his native town had an important share. We have said that Wm. Briwer built his castle here because of the strategical situation of the marl bluff on the Parrett. His foresight was at last to be justified more than 400 years after his death.

After the King's heavy defeat at Naseby, Fairfax had determined that his next step should be to subdue the royal army in the west, and in the battle of Langport he completely crushed Goring. Even then, if only Wyndham could hold out in the strong fortress of Bridgwater, and communication with the west through Bristol be maintained, Charles hoped to be able to come to the rescue of what remained of his forces in the west.

Fairfax therefore resolved to attack

Bridgwater. His men succeeded in crossing the deep ditch near the river into Eastover and lowered the drawbridge of the East Gate. Cavalry entered and Eastover was in the occupation of the Parliamentarians. But the Castle was quick to reply, and by means of red-hot shot Wyndham reduced all the houses on the East side of the river to ashes, save three or four. Fairfax allowed time for the removal of women and children to a place of safety and then proceeded to retaliate on the western portion of the town. The burgesses were not prepared to see their property destroyed and appealed to the Governor to surrender. It seems strange that in the stress of war their appeal should have succeeded, for Wyndham was well supplied with food and ammunition. Yet he yielded, and Fairfax now possessed a chain of fortresses from one Channel to the other, and the king's last hope was gone.

So great were the losses sustained by Bridgwater in this short siege—the assault lasted only three days—that we find Fairfax praying the Commission of Assessment in Somerset to lighten the town's financial burden in proportion to its suffering. The letter in his own handwriting has been preserved among the borough archives.

It was in the year succeeding the siege that Bridgwater puritanism having ejected its vicar, the king's nominee, and setting aside royal and episcopal authority, took to itself Master John Norman as its spiritual teacher. The appointment was made by the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses, and is signed by Humphrey Blake, Mayor, the brother of Robert Blake. Humphrey's daughter was the second wife of the newly appointed minister. Norman's first wife was sister-in-law to the celebrated Joseph Alleine, minister at Taunton. By these family connections and by their strong common puritanism the Blakes, Normans and Alleines were closely bound to each other. A third puritan clergyman used to travel between the two towns in order to help Alleine and Norman, preaching almost daily. This was John Wesley, the grandfather of the famous John and Charles Wesley.

When the Restoration was effected,

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

1927

10

both Alleine and Norman suffered persecution and were committed to the notorious county gaol at Ilminster. George Wotton, who had meanwhile been acting as a teacher at Williton, was reinstated in Bridgwater vicarage.

Benjamin Blake, another brother of the Admiral, was mayor in the Restoration year, and his name appears in "A Book conteyninge the free voluntary offerings and subscriptions of his Matyes good subjectes in testimony of their Affections," which is among the Borough archives. Probably "free" and "voluntary" were merely ornamental qualifications!

Bridgwater will ever be closely associated with the story of Monmouth's rebellion. On Sunday, June 21st, 1685, the Duke was at Taunton, and decided to march on Bridgwater, and when his troops entered the town the same day, they are said to have been 6,000 strong. Monmouth was received by the Mayor, Alexander Popham, and his brethren, and was proclaimed King on the Cornhill. The camp was pitched in Castle Field, while the Duke was entertained in the Castle. Money was forthcoming too. Indeed there was nothing to detract from a most favourable reception.

After the futile march to Keynsham, Monmouth was on July 2nd again in Bridgwater. Feversham now came in sight and was encamped four miles away at Westonzoyland. With some of his officers, the Duke mounted the steep steps of St. Mary's tower and from that point of vantage observed the King's troops through a telescope. Sunday was spent in the Castle Field much as Cromwell's Ironsides would have spent it, and the soldier-preachers sought to stimulate their troops with harangues borrowed from the days of Canaanite exterminations. At night Monmouth led out his men to attack the royal camp, and John Oldmixon, who was Bridgwater born and then a mere boy, tells us in his History of the Stuarts that he witnessed the departure of the Duke and "observ'd an Alteration in his Look, which I did not like, for not being able to judge of the Goodness or Badness of his Cause, I ran down with the Stream, and was one of its Well-wishers."

The story of the fight will be told in another of this series of handbooks. The

next morning, the fugitive rebels were pouring into the town, pursued by the royalist cavalry. Bridgwater never saw Monmouth again, but in his cause suffered with him. The barbarous Kirke and the unspeakable Jeffreys left names ever to be execrated in the West of England. It was chiefly those of more humble position whose lives were sacrificed. Victims of Jeffreys' wrath who had the means, were allowed to pay a ransom. Roger Hoare, a Bridgwater merchant, who had been chief among the Duke's supporters here, was able to escape a traitor's death by the payment of £1,000.

In the previous reign when the question of James' succession to the throne was being hotly debated, Bridgwater had begged their representatives, "to do your utmost to secure the King's person, with the Protestant religion (which we apprehend, with deep sense of mind, to be in eminent danger) from all popish attempts and conspiracies whatsoever," and now that James had resolved to remodel the boroughs, Bridgwater was among the first to be so treated. On the 4th December, 1687, came a command from the King in Council that the Town Clerk and six other capital burgesses, or as we should say Councillors, were to be removed, and two days later their successors were appointed. Following this action the charter was forfeited and surrendered. A report dated a fortnight later states, "It hath all wayes been disputed by the magistrates and the populace who should have the right of choosing burgesses. Sr John Bawden, lately made alderman of London, hath a sufficient interest to be chosen here. This corporation must be totally altered." From a later report we learn that the number of electors was about 240. It can be well understood that the coming over of William of Orange was very welcome to the burgesses of Bridgwater, and they may well be right who see in the celebrations still maintained on the 5th of November, a local survival of the rejoicings which recalled from year to year his landing in Torbay on that date.

Following the Stuart rising known as The Fifteen there was evidently some trouble in 1718 among the "politicals" of Bridgwater. Roger Hoare, possibly the

BRIDGWATER IN BRIEF

by

T. Bruce Dilks

Bridgwater

The East Gate Press

1927

11

younger, and John Oldmixon were both concerned, and informations and affidavits were made to declare or contradict that Joel Gardner did not pray for the King in Church, or that Wm. Prior drank the health of "the King on the other side of the water," or that the music at the Swan Inn played at the Mayor's request included, "The King shall enjoy his own again."

Parliamentary elections through the 18th and 19th centuries until the rude awakening of 1868 kept the old borough replete with incident. Among the candidates who sought its suffrages the names of Charles James Fox, Walter Bagehot and Alexander Wm. Kinglake are the most significant. The close and, I fear, corrupt corporation was reformed by the act of 1835, and since then the government of the borough has advanced in efficiency and wisdom.

The movements of the Victorian era—religious, educational, philanthropic, hygienic—left their impress on the life of the town. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century it was felt that the parish church was not adapted to supply the needs of all the parishioners and the church of Holy Trinity was built and opened in 1839. The immediate result was not successful. The church was too near to St. Mary's, and a wiser step was taken when the Rev. J. M. Capes offered to build at his own cost a church on the east side of the river where there was a considerable population more remote from the mother-church. This building was the first in the land to embody the principles of the Oxford Movement. By its dedication to St. John the Baptist it keeps alive the memory of the Hospital of the Augustinians and is now the centre of a wide parish.

Other religious communities, having their origin in the 17th and 18th centuries, continued to flourish and maintain their various places of worship in the town.

Education has received an immense impulse and the last sixty years have witnessed the gradual transfer of its care from private individuals and trusts to the State. Dr. Morgan, a physician of the early 18th century, founded a school for boys which still flourishes and has absorbed the

grammar school founded in 1561, while the Girls' Secondary School belongs to the present century. The elementary schools have brought a free and sound training within reach of every child.

A wonderfully good water supply, from the pure streams of the Quantock Hills, a modern system of drainage, and the maintenance of open spaces have helped to promote the general health and longevity of the inhabitants, and have made those endemic diseases which decimated our medieval population almost unknown.

Casualties are probably more common than they were formerly. Our rapid rate of living in these latter days invites them, and it has become increasingly necessary to provide public institutions in order to give all the aid that science can devise and careful nursing afford to restore the sufferers. For more than a century the Hospital, our chief centre for such help, has been the scene of much devoted and successful healing work.

The large traffic carried on through the port was partly diverted by the boring of the Severn Tunnel. Against this may be placed the construction of the two lines of railroad which keep us commercially in constant touch with the world outside. Last of all the through road traffic from north to west has revived and grown enormously and once more the Bridge has come into its own. How greatly would the men who built the first wooden structure marvel, could they but stand during the hours of a summer day and watch the ceaseless succession of horseless traffic which rushes over the latest successor of Walter's Bridge!

Edited by Tony & Jane Woolrich,
20/09/2019