

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

1

THIS short sketch of the old river-port of Bridgwater is designed to give some idea of the topography of the place in the middle ages. While aiming at conveying the facts in a popular form, I hope I have not failed in accuracy. The basis has been a careful study at first hand of the original documents, which by the courtesy of the Mayor and Council I am in the midst of transcribing.

No local place-name is introduced without such authority. The Park for example is mentioned in 1383, St. Matthew's Fair in 1404. An exception must be made of St. Saviour's Chantry which I give on Leland's authority.

The position of Orloue Street is, I hope, finally determined. Penel Street appears to have been quite a short street, finally absorbed in Orloue Street.

The story of Sir Humphrey Stafford's treachery and death I have taken from Warkworth's chron. of Ed. IV. ed. Halliwell, 1839. I have transcribed a long pardon granted to him at a much earlier date, and a deed of his executors, among whom was the first mayor of the borough.

In attempting a description covering 300 years, the question of chronology is a difficulty. The introductory description of the age is retrospective and comprehensive. But the two days of the pilgrimage may be taken as lying somewhere in the closing years of the XVth Century.

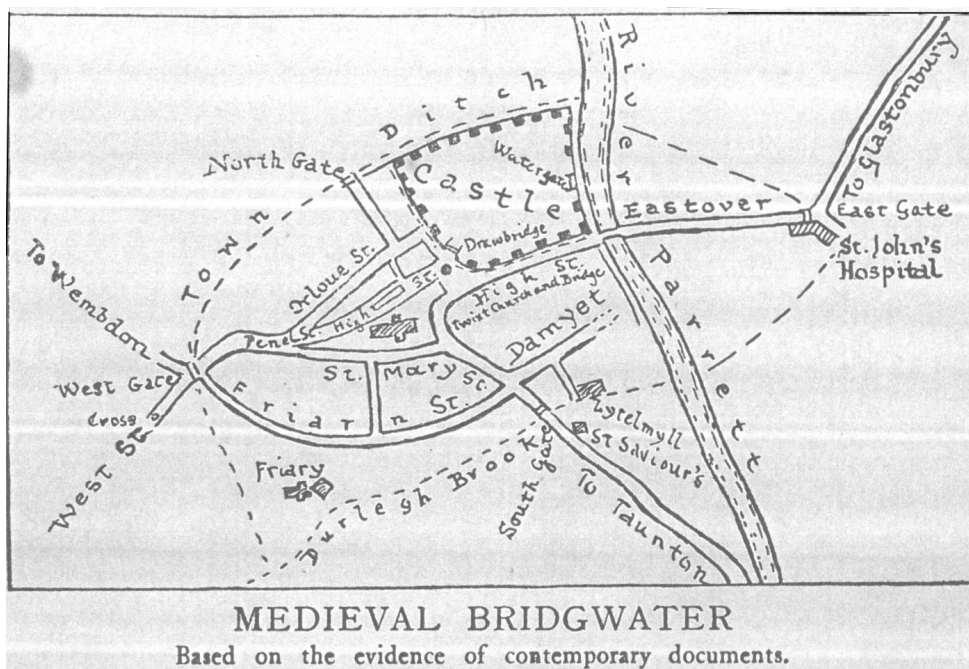
Some of the colour I used in painting the picture I derived from works as Coulton's *Social Life in Britain from the Conquest to the Reformation* and Quennel's *History of Everyday Things in England*.

The Hymn to the Virgin I have not yet come across among the MSS., where it is to be found on the back of a deed of 1471 but I give Mr. Riley's transcript of some of the lines.

Those who desire to know more of our local history I may refer to Dr. Powell's *Ancient Borough of Bridgwater*, particularly for the story of the parish church; Jarman's *History of Bridgwater*, for certain facts and good lists of Mayors and Members of Parliament; Mr. Weaver's article on *Bridgwater in the Olden Time* in the *Downside Review*. [Vol 15, 1896]. Mr. J. Edwin Odgers' "*Short Account of some MS Accounts of the Commonalty of Bridgwater*" in vol. xxiii of the Somerset Arch. Society's Proceedings, and my own *Burgesses of Bridgwater in the Thirteenth Century* in vol. lxiii of the same series.

T. B. D.

East Gate, Bridgwater, June, 1920.



PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

2

A WAVE of the magician's wand, and time has become merely relative ! We are in another and an earlier age.

It is an age when the Church dominates men's minds, and authority prevails over reason; when opinion rashly expressed is punishable by torture and death; when it is believed that the sun moves round the earth and that geese grow on trees; when each borough lives to itself, and no trade is allowed to encroach on another ; when penecraft flourishes, and men create the perfect Gothic cathedral. It is an age of credulity and ignorance, but it is an. age of wonderful artistic creation.

To-day is the feast of St. John before the Latin Gate, and the hawthorn is in full bloom. Early this morning we tasted the hospitality of the Abbot of Glastonbury, and trod the king's road through the monastic manors. Behind us the Polden hills are fretted with the moving arms of a dozen windmills.

We have heard the bell of Horsey chapel calling the hour of terce : we have left behind the old manor-house of Sydenham, finding the way now easier for sore feet by reason of the timely bequest of some pious burgess who left money to pave this causeway.

For some time the spire of the Blessed Mary Virgin has beckoned to us across the moor, the frowning walls of the Castle have grown more and more imposing, and at length we see before us the welcome door of the Hospital of St. John the Baptist, which stands beside the East Gate of the town, and offers the weary pilgrim rest and refreshment within.'

One of the brethren, clad in his over -mantle with the distinguishing black cross on his breast, is just returning under the town gate from the Castle where he has been saying mass in the Lord's Chapel. Short, spare, keen-eyed, and with a whimsical smile, he greets us and himself invites us to enter the Hospital. We follow him under the friendly lintel and he leads us through the refectory, the dining-hall of the Brethren and their guests, to an inviting and restful garden. Here he bids us rest on a broad bench which runs the whole width of the building.

It is a delightful corner, this old garden, stored with the memories of three centuries. The flower-bed is crowded with herbs of healing. The sound of bees is in the air. A row of hives skirts the low wall beyond which lies the garth where the Brethren find their last resting-place. At the far corner of the bench on which we are stretching weary limbs, a Brother sits faced by a dozen small boys reciting with monotonous drone their morning lesson in grammar. These are poor scholars picked out from among his flock by the rector of the schools and sent down to the Brethren day by day for instruction, and, in the case of seven of the poorest, for dinner also. At the other end of the bench sits a Brother deeply buried in his book, to whom comes a woman, soft-footed, somewhat sour-faced, but of decent and most cleanly appearance. Will Brother John say what medicine she is to give old Robert Mustard who is a good deal worse this morning and as yellow as his name.

"Let him drink sorrel, plantain and chickweed tempered with old ale, morn and even ;" answers Brother John gruffly, without moving his eyes off his book, "an if that suffice not to remove the jaundice, take wormwood and seethe it long in water, and wash him with that water thrice right well, and give him to drink ivory shaven small in wine, which I will myself prepare."

The woman curtseys, and departs to find out what medieval medicine may haply avail for the sufferer.

Meanwhile Brother Nicholas, whom we met first, has ordered food to be brought to us, and on the bench beside us are placed a loaf of bread, ale, and a dish of sprats. The fish had been brought in early this morning from the mouth of Parrett, the cook tells us, and mighty toothsome we find them to hungry pilgrims.

At noon, after a prayer said in the chapel of the Brethren, we pay our duty to the Master, a courtly and benevolent gentleman, fit to be the chief ecclesiastic in this flourishing town. He would fain hear the latest tidings from Glastonbury and Reading and we give him what news we have of these abbeys, and from the great world beyond; in return he tells us something of the history of his House and finally dismisses us with his fatherly benediction. Brother Nicholas conducts us to the

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

3

door leading direct into the street called Eastover, for the Hospital has entrances both within and without the town gate. Here he gives us his directions and blessing.

“ Pass over the Great Bridge,” says he, pointing up the street, “ and turn to the left into Damyet. Avoid Vrogges- lane which runs up the riverside, neither turn ye into Cronile’s lane, but go forward till ye come to the place where four ways meet near by the South Gate.

There, at the corner of Damyet and St. Mary Street, will ye find a hostel called George’s Inn. The host will give ye good food and lodging. Farewell.”

So to the Great Bridge we go. But what a commotion fills the street from one end to the other! From every house and every garden flutter the women and girls. Joan calls to Margery, and Margery to Alice, and twelve-year old Alice struggles along under the weight of fat baby Christine. But never a Mary among them, mark you ! nor will you find one if you search all through the town. That name is much too sacred in this age to give to small sinners such as these ! 'Prentices down tools, journeymen hurry after them, even the masters follow, though more sedately. All Eastover has clustered together like a swarm of bees. And all for what! To see a dancing bear, and a juggler standing on his head, playing a rebek ! We saw the rascals some days ago, and know all their tricks by heart, and elbowing through the happy throng, we pursue our way, and at length arrive.

This bridge, great as they call it, small as we deem it, is a thing of much importance for this old river-port. It is the centre round which its activities circle. It is the hub of this small universe. Long, long ago, when it was but of wood, it gave a name to the place. Walter or Water, the Flemish lord, to whom Norman William gave the manor, added his name to that of Bridge.

In time, we are told that William Briwer, who in King John’s days founded the borough, began this fine three- arched bridge of stone on which we are standing. Certainly he was a great builder. He built that great castle which looms before us, and he built the Hospital for the Augustinian Canons in which we have this morning found refreshment for soul and body.

Yet if you will stand in this angle of the parapet, where we shall be safe from any passing put or waggon, and if you will lean over, you will see carved in the stone a representation of one of those tripods for holding a pot or a kettle known as a trivet. It is one of those ‘ancient, silent names ’ which speak to the unlettered more clearly than carved words. It tells us that the bridge was built at the expense of some member or members of the Trevet family, who lived in this neighbourhood.

Remember that, in this age, this is an act of piety. To build a bridge or repair a road, and thus help God’s pilgrims is a holy deed. Close to us is a small Chapel built actually on the bridge, which places the structure under the protection of one of the saints, and where offerings for its maintenance are collected. It is served, not by our friends of the Hospital, but by the Grey Friars, whose acquaintance we have yet to make.

There are dwelling-houses on the bridge beside the Chapel, and at one of them the tollman will collect our bridge- pennies as we pass his door.

I said that the bridge is the hub of the town. Truly, we are in the midst of a busy scene, and from our point of vantage can see much of what is going on around us.

On the stone Slip, which has but lately been built, and which is destined long to outlive the bridge itself, lies a barge. A crowd, almost as large as that which we have seen in Eastover, is collected on the quay and is looking down on the work of a group of labourers, who are directed by a master mason in charge of the operation. They have brought from a ship, which has come up the river on the last tide, two stone effigies swathed in straw. The faces and hands, however, are visible, and we see that the Bristol carvers have fashioned here a Knight and his Lady, with faces and hands turned towards heaven. The labourers are now lifting them into the flat-bottomed barge. On the evening tide they will be carried up to Taunton, and thence will make their final journey in a waggon to the church for which they are destined.

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

4

Below the bridge, moored against the quay-side lie ships, not a few. That fine vessel *Le Gabriel de Bridgwater* belongs to Master Dionysius Dwin, the Irish merchant. She is unloading her cargo of woad, a blue dye-stuff for the use of the Bridgwater cloth makers. The town crane is busy hoisting it ashore. *La Marie de Tanton* got rid of her cargo of Bordeaux wine yesterday, and is taking aboard a cargo of Bridgwater cloth to be supplemented with a few passengers, mostly pilgrims.

Lower down the quay the hobblers are rolling out casks of herrings from a coasting crayher, called the *John*. Other vessels are undergoing repairs to deck and rigging and sails, altogether a picture of much animation, and a veritable babel. The shouts of the sailors and hobblers, the creaking of the crane, the calls of the gulls hovering over the water, the blare of a trumpet from the castle, fill the noon-tide air this May morning. But let us proceed. Is your bridge-penny ready ?

The street in front of us is known as "the High Street between Church and Bridge," of more shortly as "between Church and Bridge." The Castle ditch and wall are on our right, the gables of gardened houses, some with the lean-to shops or stalls of the period, on our left. Here live some of the best-to-do burgesses.. But our directions are to turn into Damyet, as this quarter of the town is called, and into Damyet we accordingly turn.

No, Brother Nicholas, we have not forgotten that we are to steer clear of Vroggeslane which would take us along the river side. Reptiles do not appeal to us. But we are tempted to follow the miller's broad shoulders down the Mill-tayle to Lytel-mill whose pleasant click-clack we hear. The wheel is busy this morning, and Durlegh brook, after forming the town boundary on the south, performs here an important piece of work before it ends its journey by falling into the waters of the Parrett. This is the lord's mill, and formerly, if not now, all the corn in the manor had to be ground here. But I expect the miller could tell us a tale of rival mills and private querns, and that things are not what they used to be.

We do not need to ask which is George's Inn.

Mine host is even now watching his ostler hang out a bunch of green, which causes me to guess that he has just broached a cask of that same wine of Bordeaux which *La Marie* put ashore yesterday. We will taste it anon.

But first I would show you the Chapel of St. Saviour's which stands on the road to Taunton a few yards outside the South Gate and close to Lytelmyll. It was built, we are told, by a merchant of the town named Pole.

It is the only chantry chapel in the town that I have heard of outside the parish church. We need not go in, but I thought it worth while to show it you.

Do you mark that poor creature standing on the edge of the road and pointing to a box which is lying on the ground near us ! He is a leper, one of many who suffer from an incurable disease now happily growing rarer in this country. He is asking an alms from us. We answer his petition, but just as we approach the South Gate, a man rushes past us at top speed and approaches the leper as he is emptying his box. Then the hue, and cry sweep past us, for the runner is a thief and had best use his long legs well. The leper is an unlooked-for obstacle in the race, however, and when the thief sees the dread object in his path he swerves, trips, falls and before he can scramble to his feet again, is caught. The hands of justice are on him and he will have to stand before the Borough Court and there answer for his theft.

After this excitement a cup of Bordeaux at our host's is certainly refreshing.

Once more on foot we pass up St. Mary Street in the direction of the Cornhill. Near the east stile of the church stands the Common Bakehouse, a most useful institution where one oven can serve many households.. In front of us in the open space before the drawbridge of the castle is the High Cross, a stone shelter from heat and rain for the women who are selling butter and eggs and other market produce, and which forms a centre for the business of the market. Near us we can smell the presence of the fish stalls.

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

5

And near the fish-stalls stands the pillory, wherein we see standing at this hour a culprit who is suffering the penalty of deceiving his customers by weighing loaves of bread with a piece of iron thrust into them. A loaf, you observe, is hung about his neck.

The narrow lane where the butchers' stalls display raw meat, the uninviting Shambles, is not an enticing thoroughfare and we prefer the street, only slightly broader however, called the High Street. High Street is, I fancy, in these days rather a general term, somewhat like the *via regia*, the King's high way, the public road. You noticed that the Street from the Cornhill to the Bridge was still the High Street.

Similarly here. People live either on the North Side of the High Street or on the South Side of the High Street, or more briefly, in North Street or South Street. It is indeed the main thoroughfare of the town. Important shops and stalls are here. Here too is the seat of the Town Government. Where the street widens, do you note on the north side those buildings, plain and devoid of ornament, but solid and purposeful in structure? One of them is the Hall of the Gild Merchant, which has ruled the Borough for many, many years, under its Seneschals or Stewards, but has lately merged into a Corporation under Mayor and Alderman. Another is the Tolsey or Tolhouse, in which the revenue of the Borough was collected. There too is the Cockemoyle, the prison where our thief is now awaiting trial, safe under lock and key. I wonder by the way, whether the word Cockemoyle is in any way connected with the name of that row of houses next the Gild Hall, known as the Cokenrewe. Possibly Bridgwater men had their cockpits here in earlier times.

We are now within sight of the West Gate, of which I shall have somewhat to say presently, and the street widens yet. more.

The market is brisk here also and gathers thickly around a second cross, known as Pig Cross. This suggests, rather obviously, that pigs are sold in its neighbourhood, and such may be the case. Indeed there are unharmonious sounds in the air that appear to confirm it. But there may be an alternative explanation, though I think it less likely, in the fact that three hundred years ago the family of Pegenel or Pagenel intermarried with Walter de Douai's descendants. I do believe, however, that their name, if it did not give a name to the cross to be corrupted by usage to the more familiar word of Pig, lives in that of the short street in which we are standing. It is now called Pynel or Penel Street.

I ask a farmer if he can tell me where to find the Orfaire or Orf-faire, the cattle market, but he tells me he also is a stranger in these parts and merely passing through with a load of wool to Bristowe.

From here we can see the town wall which runs from the West Gate round to the North Gate. It looks as though the builders had intended to surround the whole town with a wall as well as with a ditch, but that they had abandoned the idea after complet-ing this section. If we may look into the future, when the day comes for an attack to be made on the fortifications of the town, it will become from the east and not from the west, and it will be successful.

Note this stout rather pompous-looking man, coming from the direction of the Gildhall. He is deep in conversation with a priest, and as the two are walking slowly, we can follow them and observe them at our leisure, for the one is Master Mayor, and the other is the chaplain of the chantry of Holy Trinity, grown to be an important religious gild in these days. They have turned into Orloue Street, a street which runs from Penel Street straight down to the ditch on the west side of the Castle, and parallel with High Street.

The Mayor is dressed in the exaggerated fashion of today. His pelisse is full and very long, and the sleeves are very wide, and trail slightly with the hem of his garment. The collar is high, fastening right up to the chin. I feel very much that I should like to lift up that long tail of stuff which hangs down his back, from the crest of his stiff-brimmed hat right down to the ground where it trails in the dirt. But is it not the fashion? and must not the Mayor follow the fashion? No doubt his lady's surcoat also gathers dust, and no doubt she wears one of those extraordinarily high conical head-dresses, for, as I have said, this is an age of exaggeration.

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

6

In the quiet of Orloue Street snatches of their conversation reach us occasionally, and the substance of it appears to be that the chaplain wishes to take his annual leave of absence during the first two weeks in June, and the Mayor will not consent until he has consulted his brethren of the gild of the Holy Trinity.

If we turn to the left before reaching the Castle Ditch we shall see the North Gate. It is the least used of all the gates, for it faces no well-trod thoroughfare but looks out on Blackland towards the moors of Chilton. Near by is a garden called 'Rome'!

A narrow lane, skirting the moat of the Castle, brings us back from Orloue Street to the High Cross.

We have brought with us from Glastonbury a letter which the Abbot has asked us to put into the hands of the Constable. Armed with this we pass over the Drawbridge of the Castle, and find no difficulty in obtaining the porter's leave to enter. He is a comfortable looking man, on whom life's cares evidently sit easily. He tells us that the Constable and almost all the Castle staff are away on the moors hawking. If we will wait an hour, we shall have our opportunity. It will suit us admirably to rest again, though there is here no such pleasant garden as that in which we spent the fore-noon. But a young clerk badly marked with small-pox takes us in hand, not unwilling to leave his quill for an hour, and shows us what is to be seen in the precincts.

To tell truth the place has fallen somewhat into dilapidation, and hardly does credit to its royal owner. But probably it is, on the other hand, of little service to her.

Our guide, who is inclined to be garrulous, takes us to the armoury, the chapel, the kitchen, the buttery, and even the cellars. Well, we have seen better appointed strongholds. But there is a spot which he points out to us as we cross the great courtyard which has its tragic story. Only a few years ago the Constable of that time was there beheaded for treason.

Humphrey Stafford, Master Clerk tells us, during the troubled days of the White and Red Roses, had risen to place and power under the favour of King Edward, until, to crown all, he had been created Earl of Devonshire. When an insurrection broke out in Yorkshire, Stafford came at the King's call with 7,000 archers of the west country. The Earl of Pembroke joined him with 43,000 Welshmen, the best in Wales. Their united forces should have been enough to crush the rising. But the two Earls quarrelled over some personal and trivial matter. Stafford sulked and marched off with his archers. The rebel, Robyne of Riddlesdale, triumphed over the Welshmen, slew 2,000 of them, and took the Earl of Pembroke prisoner. And on this very spot Stafford paid the penalty of his treachery.

What I like best about the Castle is the walk round the walls and the views we get on all sides. There is the river winding to the channel; there are the marshy flats of Sedgmoor; on the south is the picturesque manor of Ham; and away to the west the line of the Quantock Hills, calling to us to follow them on the morrow.

Did the porter say an hour? Alas! it is more than three hours before the hawking party jingle over the Drawbridge with the hooded falcons on their wrists, and the dead game on their saddle-bows! Grooms lead the tired horses to the stables, and we follow the Constable to his sitting-room where he receives us with a certain rough dignity. But he is hungry, the Abbot's letter must yet a while lie on the table, and we obtain an early, though courteous dismissal.

In the courtyard our garrulous clerk hurries to us to tell us that if we will but mount the steps once more, we shall have a good view of the tide coming up the river. Lead on, Master Clerk; we are in your hands.

From the top of the wall, stationed above the Water-gate, we are soon gazing across the moor. A south-west breeze has sprung up, and our guide tells us that, with this blowing up the Channel and so much fresh water in the river as there now is, we shall see a good 'head.' If ever they cut off any of those mighty curves, he says, in order to straighten the course of the stream, the head of the tide will not be so high as it is in these days. We are fortunate in being here at full moon. Indeed everything is favourable to a sight worth seeing. The wave, gleaming white in the distance, rolls

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

7

nearer and nearer. Now we hear the sound of its growing roar. The ships' hawsers are made taut. Boats are turned with bow to meet the oncoming tide. Then the shrill voices of the children cry "Tide's coming !" and at last it sweeps past us, rocking the boats, or carrying them away like corks, washing the timbers of the shipping, rushing through the arches of the bridge.

What astonishes us most is the rapidity with which the channel of the river is filled. When we have descended from our point of vantage, and passed under the triple arch of the old Watergate, and said farewell to Master Clerk, the water has already risen to a considerable height.

We are just in time to see the barge on the Slip with its precious freight of the two stone effigies take the water, and ride off on the tide on its way to Taunton. *Bon voyage* to the Knight and his lady!

And so to our inn, to supper, and to bed ! Do you ask what we had for supper ! I will tell you.

We feasted sumptuously on a hen in a pasty, a gift which kind Brother Nicholas had sent to the inn for us, four mutton bones boiled, a manchet, and a pottle of beer, which we shared with two other pilgrims.

We have not seen day dawn, but we are up betimes and have broken our fast before we leave the inn to be present in the church of the Grey Friars at mass.

Our host sees us off at his door and points the way. It is not difficult to find. Freren Street or Friarn Street does but carry on the main street in Damyet. Not many yards away we pass the Wayhur or Horsepond on our left and then come to the wall behind which the Friary and its Church stand between the street and the brook. We note that the houses here are smaller and meaner than we have yet met with in the town, as indeed we might well settle among the poor of the town in which they have taken up their abode, bringing to them the great gift of human sympathy!

One notices the difference, too, in the uncleanliness of the street itself. The channel, or kennel, which runs up the middle of the roadway is not so clean as we have found it elsewhere in the town. Garbage is lying about and there are smells ! and yet the streets of a medieval town are not so bad as one might suppose. If any one through negligence is a nuisance to his neighbours, he is not left in peace. He is challenged to appear before his fellows and pay the penalty of his faulty ideas on sanitation.

Here then the good Grey Brothers live among their poor, and while the bell is yet ringing we pass through the outer door and make our way to the little church which adjoins their dwelling-house. One of the friars is playing on the "pair of organs," whose simple and rudimentary, if not solemn, strains do not greatly appeal to us. Yet must we remember that even in this age:

"Pryk-song may not be dispysed,
For therewith God is well plesyd,
Honowred, praysyd, and servyd.
In the Church oft tymes among."

Mass is said. The neighbours depart. The Warden comes forward to greet us. He learns our mission, and forthwith shows us such treasures as the fraternity possesses. He asks us to admire the two goodly candlesticks which adorn the altar, the table made of pure alabaster, and the railed-in tomb in which lies the dust of Sir Leonard Hakelute and his Lady.

With some pride he brings from their hiding-place before us the vestments, not a few, which from time to time have been given by their pious embroiderers to the Church of the Grey Friars.

Indeed the riches of these good men are mostly to be found within the precincts of their church. The articles of furniture and household implements which serve them in their daily life are few in number and not exactly luxurious, though it must be admitted that they are not quite so simple as in the early days of the Order.

As we look forth from the oriel window of the upper room across Durlagh brook to the level fields beyond, the Warden points, out the meadow which belongs to the House.

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

8

"But that is all," says he "that we possess beyond the land on which our house and church are built and in which they stand." We have not added house to house and field to field like our brethren, the Canons of St. John the Baptist's, whose tenements you will find in every street of the town, whose fields are many, and who possess in that and this parish advowsons and tithes to boot. We are poor, and dependent on the gifts of God's people. These and what we derive from serving the Bridge Chapel are our all, and even these gifts for our mere sustenance are becoming yearly less. God knows how and when it may end ! "

Our pity is moved. But if it must be so, even then the work of the Little Brothers of St. Francis will never be forgotten. They have done something of what they set out to do, and if the times are changing and other men and other methods are replacing the friars and their ministrations, it will be remember-ed for ever that they held the cup of cold water to the lips of many of the least of these.

But look, here are riches of more value than gold or silver ! On two shelves, ranged with care, stand twenty to thirty volumes, all written in the beautiful script of these times by skilful penmen, probably members of the Order. These constitute the library of the House. I doubt whether in the whole town you would find a dozen books other than these.

The Warden points out for our special notice a Commentary on St. Luke's Gospel, which is the work of a predecessor of his in the office of Warden, one William Anger. Then he shows us the astronomical works of John Somer, who like Roger Bacon, was a scientist born out of due time.

"We are inclined to think," says the Warden, "that Friar Somer, who belonged also to this House, was a native of this town, for there have been folk of the same name living in this very street."

We would willingly talk longer with these men, for of the sections into which the mediæval clergy are divided, the friars are regarded as the most devout and holy, and they have added learning to their devotion. But we must leave them, and, crossing the street, take this way, as yet nameless, which brings us out into St. Mary Street, near to the south stile of the Parish Church.

Opposite the stile stands the house of the vicar. From the open window come the sounds of a good tenor voice practising Church music, and when we present ourselves at the door, the singing ceases, and a jolly round-faced youth comes out to ask our business. He begs us to come in, explains that the vicar has gone across the bridge to see the Master, but that he is a clerk who with the sub-deacon lives at the vicarage and will be pleased to show us the Church. We compliment him on his singing.

"That brings to my mind," says he," a story which I heard but yesterday. There was a priest that trowed he was a passing good singer, notwithstanding he was not so. So on a day there was a gentlewoman that sat behind him and heard him sing, and she began to weep; and he, trowing that she wept for sweetness of his voice, began to sing louder than he did before ; and always the higher she heard him sing, the faster wept she. Then this priest asked her why she wept so as she did, and she answered him again and said : ' Sir, I am a poor gentlewoman, and the last day I had no calf but one ; and the wolf came and had it away from me ; and ever when I hear you sing, anon I remember me how that my calf and ye cried alike,' From that time forth that priest sang never so loud. But what think ye of these lines which the vicar hath written and hath asked me to fit with notes if I can find them ? " He hands us a parchment on which we read these stanzas in praise of the Blessed Mary:—

Now well may we myrthys make
For Jesu mankynde hathe take,
Of a maydne with outyn make.¹

A kyng of kynges now forthe ys browght
Of a maydyen that synnyd nowght,
Nether in dede, nether in thowght.

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

9

An angell of counseil now ys bore
Off a mayd, as y sayd be fore,
To saw² all that was for lore.

That sonne hath never downe goyng,
And thys lyghte no tyme lesyng .
Thys stere³ ys evermore schenyng.

Ryght as the stere browght forght a beme,
Oute of the wyche commyth a marvelose streme,
So dude that mayde withowtyn weme.⁴

[1) mete]. [2) save], [(3)star], [4)stain]

We thank Master Clerk for showing us this hymn of the vicar's making. It is seasonable in this month of May in which the Blessed Mary to whom the Parish Church is dedicated, is more especially remembered.

It is a noble building, standing strong and broad and well-proportioned. The tower of red stone quarried in the neighbouring parish of Wembdon carries aloft a wonderfully graceful spire built more than a hundred years ago.

Most of the windows are recent. The tracery is of the style which has been adopted by the builders of the present century. The mullions are plain, and straight upright lines replace the curves our forefathers used.

Within, the air is laden with the odour of incense. Lighted lamps shed soft beams across the gloom of the side chapels. One our Clerk specially points out to us, which is kept continually burning in memory of the late vicar, good old Sir John Colswayn, who also "made and left" this beautiful mass-book which lies on the vicar's desk "to the end that his soul might be kept in especial memory for the future."

There is not the solemn hush which you might expect to add to the reverence and awe which steal over one in a great building dedicated to the worship of God and the memory of the Saints. The voices of the two chantry priests, who before their respective altars are repeating the daily office, certainly do not break seriously on it, but in one of the aisles a meeting of St. Katherine's Guild is being held, and an occasional dispute in rising and rather angry tones seems out of harmony with the surroundings.

Above the entrance to the choir a life-size and most impressive crucifix hangs from the roof. In days gone by the burgesses were wont to divide their gifts and legacies between the maintenance of the mass in St. Mary's chantry and of the lights before this Holy Cross.

To-day the three chief chantries are those of St. Mary, whose chapel is at the east end of the chancel, the Holy Trinity, whose altar stands in the north transept above the charnel-house, and St. George, by whose altar we are now standing. There are also altars to St. Katherine, St. Sunday, the Holy Cross, St. Erasmus, St. James, St. Gregory, and to All Saints, as well as the high altar

All these call for a considerable staff of clergy and not only are there the vicar, the deacon, sub-deacon and a third clerk, but also at least four or five chantry priests, chief of whom is the chaplain of St. Mary's chantry. His place in the choir, our guide tells us, is directly opposite the vicar's at the north side of the entrance to the choir. That youth, whom we see collecting the remains of the wax tapers which have been burning on the spikes of the iron hearse, a cage like screen which is placed over a corpse when it lies in the church waiting interment, will carry them away and, after weighing them, divide them equally between the vicar and this chaplain.

Do not think that this is all profit to him, though I allow that he is probably the richest of the clergy attached to the the Parish Church, and is well endowed with house property and land. For he has duties to perform as well as privileges to enjoy. He is expected to keep the great clock, now quite a hundred years old, not only going, but in repair, at least as regards the small parts. He has

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

10

to maintain a lamp continually burning in the choir, beside various candles and tapers. So the perquisites of wax may well be swallowed up in what he has to provide.

As good pilgrims, we are next taken to pay our devotions before the silver reliquary containing a relic of St. Stephen, and the clerk then shows us some of the wealth of vestments and utensils belonging to the Church. He spreads out before us in all their glory the suit of vestments called the gilt suit, one of blue velvet with leopards' heads of gold, one of cloth of gold, one of green silk, and one of crimson velvet "pounded with flores of gold."

He shows us crosses and images and monstrances and chalices and cruets and candlesticks and chrismatories and censers, all of silver and gilt, until our eyes ache. Finally, he displays the beautifully embroidered altar-cloths. Bridgwater burgesses, generation after generation, have added their gifts to enrich this, the temple of their devotion.

Before we leave the Church, there is an addition to the noise in the arrival of the ringers at the base of the tower, and no sooner have we passed out of the south door than a peal rings forth. Bridgwater at one time had its own bell foundry, and the truly tuneful notes of the bells show that the founders knew how to bring forth good work out of the mould into which they poured their metal.

"That goodly house on the west side of the vicarage," says our clerk, "belongs to the chaplain of St. Mary's, and I would fain live with him rather than with Sir Vicar, for," he adds with a twinkle in his eye, "he keepeth a good board!"

One thing I must do before leaving the town. A pilgrim's shoes do not last for ever, and one of mine is in need of some stitches and possibly of a patch also. Near the West Gate I noticed yesterday a shoemaker's shop at the corner before one turns into the narrow street that leads from the Gate to the Grey Friars. It is one of the lean-to stalls I have spoken of, built against the gable end of a two-storied house, the upper part of which is of timber, with roof of thatch. The journeyman busily at work within the open front of the stall tells us that the master has gone down to one of the Clerks with a new apprentice in order that they may seal the indentures. He will himself repair my shoe if I will meanwhile walk into the house. So we pass through a garden full of flowers and enter the house at the side. The house-wife bids us sit down, and Richard, her eldest boy, shall carry the shoe to Nic. Puddyng. Maidus will be back from the Clerk's soon. She hopes the new apprentice will turn out all right. Seven years is a long time if they don't. She had one once who was unbearable, and then to be one of your family all those years! Well, there now, she hopes this one will be a manageable boy, and worthy some day to have his freedom of the gild. Comes from Taunton, he does, one of the Atte Stones there, a good burgess family. All living in this one room and all sleeping in the chamber above, one can't be too nice who one's apprentice is!

We agree. Master Maidus does not return before Nicholas comes in with my mended shoe. He walks with us as far as the West Gate and tells us that, the house built over it was put there by one Richard Maidus; an ancestor of his master, about 300 years ago so they say. If ever the borough authorities needed the house for the defence of the town, they were to be allowed to put a guard into it.

"Why, that was the very condition on which Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote the famous tales, was allowed to live in the house over Aldgate. It is strange we should find the same here."

"They are always repairing that Gate," says the shoemaker, and to bear him out, a put load of the red Wembdon stone arrives as we pass through. Nicholas points the direction of the several roads that lead from the gate.

"That in front, where a cross stands in the midst," says he, "we call the West Street. You can see the Park, in the distance on the right, and further on on the left is the manor of Haygrove, and beyond that again the manor of Durlegh. Then this path to the left will take you to the West Wayhur and the field where they hold the fair of St. Matthew."

"And is that the fair which King John gave to Bridgwater when he made the place a borough?"

PILGRIMS IN OLD BRIDGWATER

by

T. Bruce Dilks, B. A., F. R. Hist. S.

Bridgwater

1920

11

“ No, master,” says Nicholas, “ that is Midsummer fair. This one, as you may suppose, is held about the time of the feast of St. Matthew at the end of the summer.”

“ Then this other road, to the right, must be our road,” say I, “as we are bound for Wembdon, where we hear there is a holy well.”

“ Yes,” says he, “likewise to Kerdisbury, which you leave on your right. And I wish you good morrow, masters, for I must back to my last.”

Now the living of Wembdon is one of those in the gift. of our friends the Canons of St. John’s, and Brother Nicholas has told us to expect hospitality .there, “ or the. vicar,” said he, “ formerly one of ourselves, is a good fellow and hath a spacious dwelling.”

APPENDIX

Number of houses calculated from the Tallage or Rate Lists, 1444-5

	Houses	Amount
Estover	58	16s. 0d
Between bridge and church	20	14s. 0d.
Damyate	18	5s. 9d.
Seynt Mary Strete	51	10s. 9d.
Ffreyrn Strete	43	8s. 8d.
West Strete	19	6s 10d.
Orloffe Strete	18	5s. 2d.
North St (High Street)	39	14s. 2d.
South St High Street)	25	7s. 8d.
Castle Ditch	25	10s. 1d.

This gives a total of more than 300 rate-able houses and points to a population of about 1,600.

It should be pointed out that North Street is not the present North Street which was then known as “ Outside the West Gate, as you go to Kerdesbury [Kidsbury]”. North St. means the north side of High St.; South St. means the south side.