

**A PICTURE OF BRIDGWATER AT THE CLOSE OF THE EIGHTEENTH. — "THE ISLAND" AND "THE SHAMBLES" — THE CHEESE MARKET — THE OLD BRIDGE — THE FOUR GATES — THE ASSIZES — THE MOAT — COACHING DAYS — POST OFFICE MATTERS — THE TRADE OF BRIDGWATER.**

LET us draw a picture of the town as it appeared towards the close of the last century. There was no regular Cattle Market, and the Corn Market was held in the street outside the present "*Royal Clarence*" Hotel, whilst swine were exhibited for sale on "*Pig Cross*." A row of narrow houses commenced outside the "*Bristol Arms*," running as far as the "*Mansion House*," and this part was known as "*the Island*," and also, from the many butchers' shops, as "*the shambles*." A row of houses came down to the Cornhill, covering the present Corn Market; the old High Cross had just been removed, and on the open space of the Cornhill the hustings were erected in election times, and it was therefore the scene of many a famous party fight. A smaller Market Cross on the Cattle Market still remained, however, as a relic of the past. The Post Office—a little "*general*" shop—stood on the Cornhill, where Messrs. Whitby and Sons now have an establishment. An important Cheese Market was held in St. Mary-street (one of the inns is now licensed as the "*Cheese-market*") from near the Young Men's Association Rooms, to the corner of Friarn-street; it was of open wood-work, and covered with tiles, with a passage for horses and carts on either side. The Market was largely supplied at fair-times, and often, on the occasion of St. Matthew's Fair; the standings stretched as far as "*The Three Crowns*;" and even through Dampiet-street, there being hundreds of tons of cheese on sale; most of which was made sufficiently near home to please even the Ven. Archdeacon Denison; It may be mentioned that the Town Council ultimately did away with the old Cheese Market, and built another in Friarn-street; "*the trade*," however; did not take kindly to the new quarters; and to-day Highbridge is the mart for nearly all the cheese of the district.

The old stone bridge still spanned the river; with its quaint houses on either side; but its days were numbered; it had begun to crumble from very age, the storms of centuries had; beat against it, and for public safety's sake it was replaced by a handsome iron structure.

"Over that old bridge, night and day  
Pack-horses passed upon their way,  
With Yorkshire wool high-laden;  
And tinkling bells about their heads,  
Charmed to the door-steps servant-maids,  
And many a queenly maiden." — *Burrington*.

There was but one Church (St. Mary's) and just two or three Nonconformist places of worship — smiling cornfields, covered the sites of the yet-to-be-thought-of Holy Trinity and St. John's. The four gates of the town stood—or it might be more correct to say, they leaned, against the houses by them, for they were fast going to ruins, and were becoming dangerous to man and beast. King Square was covered with pits and rubbish, and on one side frowned a heavy wall, the sole remnant of the mighty fortress of William Lord Brewer.

The population of the town numbered only 3,000. There were no houses west beyond the "*Maltshovel*" inn, and none below the "*Queen's Head*" in Eastover; the now busy St John-street was a field, where local cricketers held their matches, on the right being a few mounds which marked the site of the old Hospital of William Brewer the younger. Houses stretched round and close to St. Mary's Church, and even to-day two or three of them are allowed to remain.

Bridgwater was important as being an Assize town, the Courts being held alternately with Taunton and Wells until a stroke of misfortune came and the Commission was no longer opened in the town. Some of our oldest inhabitants still remember those "*good old days*;" The Judges on their entrance to open Commission were met by the Sheriff and a large body of javelin men on horse-back, with a captain and two trumpeters, all dressed in dark blue coats, turned up with red; and cocked hats, adorned with large rosettes of purple and crimson satin ribbons. On the Assize Sunday they accompanied the Judges to Church, and at the close of the Assizes escorted them out of the town. It may be mentioned that when Sir Alexander Hood became Sheriff he chose his body-guard from among his tenantry. These wore white surtouts trimmed with light blue, the skirts of their coats were lined with light blue silk; and they carried ancient halberts, very different from the spikes of the javelin men.

From the site of the old North Gate a ditch ran towards the west, throughout the whole length of the "*Mount*," and joined a ditch in

North-street, along which was a raised causeway ; another ditch extended to Moat-lane, to near the West Gate. From the North Gate a ditch also stretched eastwards, passing by the Bailey (or Baily), to the river via the Castle ruins.

The coaching system was then in full vogue. The first mail-coach was started in 1784, but by 1844 coaching had almost become obsolete. The Bristol and the Devonport ultimately became the fastest out of London (the latter passing through Bridgwater), performing the journey at an average speed of just ten miles an hour, including stoppages. This was, however, in the later coaching days. Earlier, the "*Swiftsure*" ran from Taunton and Bridgwater to London in one day—that is, in twenty-four hours, and immense bills were posted up in Bridgwater when the fact was first announced. A very old inhabitant informed us that he remembered a small hand-bill (which came to light on the demolition of a chemist's shop on the Cornhill) announcing "*Pickwick's Fast Coach*" from Bath to London in two days, was placed side by side with the larger one, outside the booking-office, and caused much amusement. In earlier times, the journey between Bridgwater and London occupied nearly a week, the coaches being lumbering vehicles, the horses sorry animals, and the roads, especially in the low-lying districts, veritable bogs and ditches. Accidents of all kinds were common. One of the oldest coach-proprietors made it a rule never to employ a coachman who had not had an upset, for the reason that without such an experience he would not know how to get a coach up again. In the palmiest days there were about twenty coaches passing through the town daily ; the principal hostelrys at the close of the century being the "*Swan*," the "*George*," and the "*King's Head*."

Reference has been made to the old Post Office, situated in a general shop on the Cornhill. Letters, &c., came from London every evening, between five and six o'clock, together with the only London paper that reached the town—and that a day stale—the *Courier*. The postmaster was in the habit of copying out items of interesting news and displaying them outside, the result being that crowds of people were to be found there every evening, eager for news of the big world beyond. Did anyone want his letters whilst our friend was reading his paper he

got no satisfaction, but had to wait with what patience he possessed until the public was supplied with information. The few letters for the town were afterwards taken round by an old woman.

With regard to the trade of the town, it depended principally on the port, as the woollen manufacture had almost gone out, and the brick, tile and pottery trade had not reached any considerable proportions. The town, however, was in a prosperous state. In the middle of the century the customs amounted to over £3,000 per annum, clear of salaries, &c., a good coast trade being carried on to Bristol for sundries, to Wales for coals, and to Cornwall for slate, &c., and over twenty local "*coal ships*" were constantly employed. The port had also a good foreign trade, vessels plying between it and Spain and Portugal, Newfoundland, and sometimes, though rarer, ships went to the Straits, Virginia, and the West Indies. Large quantities of wool were brought to the port from Ireland, and was dispersed at the market.

The markets were held on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays ; Thursday's being the most considerable of the county. Says an old writer of the time, "*Tuesdays and Saturdays are great flesh markets, and the Shambles the finest in England, for their bigness. The best of provisions are so cheap at this place, that it may justly be called a Paradise for Epicures.*"\*

The shops were, as a rule, small, low, and generally inconvenient; many of them had no glass in front, but a huge flap on hinges, which was put up at night and let down in the morning. Some of these were in use as late as sixty years ago.

The town was "governed" by a Mayor, Recorder, two Aldermen (who were all Justices of the Peace), and by twenty-four Common Council-men; the other officials being: Town Clerk, Clerk of the Market, Water Bailiff, two Sergeants-at-Mace, two Bailiffs (elected from the Council), and a Receiver. There was no School Board, and but one public school, education being altogether a matter of taste: and expediency, compulsion not entering into the question; Boards of Guardians, were not as yet, and there was no Poor House or Union; whilst the various other public bodies and offices which now make up town life had not been called into existence.

Such was Bridgwater from eighty to a

A picture of Bridgwater at the close of the eighteenth centry  
Chapter XVII of Sydney Gardnor Jarman. *History of Bridgwater*, 1889

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hundred years ago ; assuredly we have made  
vast strides since those days.



\* *The Agreeable Historian, or the Compleat  
English Traveller*, vol iii., p. 875

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