

THE WOOLLEN TRADE IN BRIDGWATER — THE CLOTH FAIR — THE TOWN MADE A COUNTY — LOYAL 'ZOYLANDERS — THE SUPPRESSION OF MONASTERIES — JOHN LELAND'S VISIT TO BRIDGWATER — HIS QUIANT DESCRIPTION OF THE TOWN — A GHASTLY PRESENT—GENERAL HISTORY.

IN the Sixteenth Century the woollen trade in the neighbourhood of Bridgwater was in full swing. It is not known with any degree of certainty when it was introduced into the town, but the manufacture must have existed from an early period. In 1302 King Edward I. granted a charter in favour of foreign merchants and manufacturers, to draw the trade of Flanders, Brabant, &c., into England. This system was further pursued by Edward III., who, in the year 1331, invited John Kemp, a woollen cloth weaver, of Flanders, to come over and exercise his trade in England, and to instruct the English; bringing with him his goods, servants and apprentices, under his protection. He also invited dyers, fullers, &c., and 70 Walloon families, and passed, in the year 1350, an excellent statute for the absolute freedom of commerce. This he did at a time when a great part of his revenue arose from the exportation of raw wool to other countries, being convinced that the more his people were employed in manufacturing wool the more the kingdom benefited and his own revenue in time augmented. Some of the foreigners (who were dispersed throughout the country) settled in Somersetshire in 1336,* and doubtless this town engaged in the woollen trade within a few years of that date. "*Bridgewaters*," "*Tauntons*," and "*Dunsters*," became as well known fabrics as Manchester cottons and Nottingham laces are now. In 1389 Parliament enacted that "*the broadcloth much made in Somerset shall not be sold tied up and rolled, but shall be displayed to the purchasers.*" This was doubtless owing to imitations of the superior Somerset cloth having been palmed off on customers to the detriment of local weavers. Bridgwater was afterwards bracketed with Taunton and Dunster in the table of "*Rates outwards*," 12th year of King Charles II., with regard to "*woollen cloths, accompted for short cloths.*" Whilst the town of Bridgwater was the mart for the disposal of the woollen goods, many of the country villages in the neighbourhood also engaged in the manufacture. In connection with this it may be stated that in Spaxton Church there is a panel known as the "*fuller's panel*," in which a man is shown at work with his tools.

For a great number of years Bridgwater was famous for its cloth fair at Midsummer,

which was attended by all the weavers and dealers of the West of England. The "*standings*" used to line the Cornhill, and frequently also stretched from George-street to St. Mary's Church. This has occurred within the last half century.

Early in the Sixteenth Century King Henry VIII. conferred on Bridgwater the peculiar honour of making it a distinct county, one of the results of which was that the Sheriff could send no writ or process into it. It is difficult to trace any advantages that were derived by the town. The fact is thus satirised by the poet:—

"Then Harry the Eighth (there may be odd views of it),
Made the boro' a county, tho' we never made use of it;
This shows how Kings play fast and loose with their
bounties,
Now beheading of wives, now retailing of counties!"

1513 — In the reign of Henry VIII. (probably on the occasion of his invading France), a "*certificate*" was issued from Westonzoyland, as follows:— "*There are able men, inhabitants within the precincts of the said Lordship (Weston) beying in a redyness to serve the King, when so ever they shall be called upon to the numbre of 5.. Also there are within the said lordship certayne persons, called bondemen, whose bodyes and goodes are allwayes at the King's pleasure, to the nombre of 7.*"**

1514 — In this year Isabella, wife of John Persons, of Woolavington, "*abjured all witchcraft and heresies*," with which she was charged before the Vicar-General sitting in the Parish Church, and bound herself to undergo any judicial penalty if she did not mend her ways. The inquiry was sought by the parishioners, who are stated to have been in great fear of her power over man and beast.

1526. — A casual entry in one of the Diocesan registers, under this date, records that the brethren of St. John's Hospital asked the Bishop for some relief, for their regular attendance at the night services had caused many of them to fall sick from the cold. Accordingly they were allowed to hold their first service at 5 a.m. in summer, and 6 a.m. in winter,, provided that they first rang a bell to waken travellers, workmen, and their neighbours, that they might come to mass, and so might ask God's blessing before going about the work of . the day.***

1534. — Bridgwater (with Taunton, Bristol, &c.) this year appears in a list of towns admitted to the title of "*suffraganes*." It was intended to appoint Suffragan Bishops — "*to found new Bishoprics out of the monastic spoils*" — but nothing appears to have come of it as

far as Bridgwater is concerned.

1536. — The Suppression of Monasteries affected Bridgwater considerably. St. John's Hospital received its death blow, as did the Priory of Minorites, the Priory at Cannington, and similar institutions in the neighbourhood. The dissolution of St. John's Hospital is thus referred to in an old publication: — "*It was on a dark September evening, A.D. 1534, that the inhabitants of Bridgwater were disturbed in their usual avocations by the entrance of a troop of the King's soldiers; this sight, however attractive and amusing in these days of peace and liberty, at the time of which we are speaking spread terror and alarm. The troops having paraded through the town, proceeded to the hospital, which opened its gates to receive them, and an officer stepping forward handed a letter, sealed with the royal arms of England, to Robert Walshe, its master. The supremacy question had been just mooted, and this was an order for the dissolution of the house if the King's authority were denied. A meeting in the chapter was soon convened, and twelve of their number was soon present. They wore the apparel of their order, which was the same as that worn by the hospitalers, except that they wore a black cross, stamped on their outer garments. Their consultation lasted but a short time, their course was clear, they knew resistance would be vain, in fact they were aware that the object of this visit was their annihilation. They therefore soon decided that rather than their house, which had been dedicated to God, should be desecrated by the mercenary band now in its courtyard, it would-be better to admit the King's supremacy. Accordingly they all signed the document presented, and the officer thus satisfied soon retraced his steps towards London. But how little did they calculate the subtle character of Henry — for this measure only saved them for a time. Two short years only did they enjoy the liberty thus purchased; their doom was sealed. That their respite lasted so long may be accounted for from the fact that their revenues were not very large, and short as it was they had been frequently alarmed, more especially when the neighbouring Abbey of Glastonbury was taken by force and its Abbot hanged on a neighbouring hill called the Tor, so that they were not wholly surprised when another band entered the town, and in the King's name took possession of their hospital. Its sun had now set, its existence was almost at an end, the poor were about to be robbed of their inheritance, the prayers and praises which for years had daily ascended as a pleasing incense to the throne of grace were about to cease, for the last step towards its spoliation soon followed, its site was granted or sold, and from this time it began to fall into decay. The endowment, which was to last for ever, has become extinct."*

Previous to the Suppression, the possessions of St. Mary's, Bridgwater, had been seized by the King (Edward V.) as belonging to the foreign abbey of St. Martin, Marmonstier, during the war with France. Several chantries in Bridgwater were done away with — St. George's, the last incumbent of which was John Saunders, pensioned 1553, with £5 2s.; the Virgin Mary's, John Toller, the last; incumbent, being pensioned with a like amount (to this chantry belonged ten messuages, eight acres of land, and 40s. rent in Bridgwater); Trinity Chantry, John Ingar the last incumbent, being given a pension of £5; and St. Saviour's chapel (at the south side without the town), built by a Bridgwater merchant named William Pole.

1538. — John Leland, "*the King's antiquarian*," paid a visit to the town, and gives a quaint description of it. Passing through North Petherton, which he describes - as "*a praty uplandisch town, where is a faire churche*," he speaks of a "*grate numbre of dere longging to the Park*." Entering into Bridgwater he "*passid by a Chapelle of S. Salviour, standing on the Right of the Haven. Then I entered into a Suburbe, and was over a bridge, under the which rennith a Brook, that risith a 4 miles of by weste at Bromefelde. The South Gate of the towne joinith hard onto this Bridge. The towne of Bridgwater is not wallid, nor hath not beene by any likelihod that I saw. Yet there be 4 gates yn the Towne namid as they be sette, by est, west, north and south. The waulles of the Stone Houses of the Towne be yn steede of the towne waulles. I rode from the south gate in a praty strete a while, and then I turnid by Est and cam to the Market Place. The fairest strete and principale Showe of the Towne ys from the West gate to the Easte gate.*" The writer speaks of the river Parret as an arm of the sea, to pass over which "*there is a right auncient stronge and high bridge of stone of 3 arches.*" The part of the town on the west side of the bridge and haven was three times as big as that on the east. "*The Castelle sumtyme a right faire and strong peace of worke, but now all goying to mere Ruine, standith harde byne the Bridge of the West side of the Haven. Wylliam Bruer the first buildid this castelle.*" In the west part of the town Leland marked the Parish Church, "*a goodly house which had been the College of Grey Friars*," and the Hospital for Lepers; on the south side of the town was the Chapel of St. Saviour, built "*in hominum memoria*" by William Pole. The antiquary concluded his description of the town by remarking that a great number of the houses had fallen into sore decay within remembrance.

1539 (or 1540). — Thursday, Nov. 14th. — On this day the authorities at Bridgwater re-

ceived a ghastly present in the shape of a quarter of the body of Richard Whyting, the Abbot of Glastonbury, who for refusing to surrender his abbey under the Act for the Dissolution of Monasteries, was hung, drawn, and quartered. The following letter gives other details- Extract from letter written from "Welles, the 16th day of November, 1539," by J. Russell My Lorde, *thies shalbe to assertayne that on Thursdaye the 15th daye of theis present moneth the abbott of Glastonburye was arrayned, and the next day put to execucyon wyth two other of his monkes, for the robbing of Glastonburye churche, on the Torre Hyll, next unto the towne of Glastonburye ; the seyde abbots body being de- veyded into foure partes, and the hedde stryken off; whereof oone quarter stondythe at Welles, another at Bathe and at Ylchester, and Brige water the rest, and his hedde uppon the ? Abbygate of Glas- tonburye.*"****

1557. — According to a document preserved among the town muniments, Bridgwater paid 7d. per head of its population "towards the weapons and gear of soldiers for seven days in February, 1557 — in which yeare Calye by the Frenchmen was takyin." We shall give a longer description this document under the head of "Muniments." [See Chapter XXVI, The Borough Muniments.TW]

1574. — This year Robert Parsons', a very active seminary priest, of Nether Stowey, was forced to fly from the country. He afterwards returned to England, and travelled through the country in various disguises, and did much to advance the Papal cause.

1581. — In this year, at Comwich, there died Thomas Carnock, a "noted rosicrucian chymist," the author of several Books of an abstruse character. He was born in this village and was buried at Otterhampton.

1589. — Henry Gyffiorde, "a tenant and resident of King Somborne," claimed of William Thomas, Mayor of Bridgwater, William Hoskins and Robert Chute, bailiffs, and Adam Frowman, deputy-bailiff, exemption from tolls and markets.**** The same Gyfford "claimed of Adam Frowman the tolls of the fairs and markets of the town." No reason can be discovered for this curious claim, nor how it was disposed of.

1597. — December 8th. Robert Moore, a strolling player, met his death in Bridgwater by violence.

1598. — Towards the close of Queen Elizabeth's reign, that Queen granted the materials of the dissolved chantry at North Newton to the vicars choral at Wells, who applied them to the making of a stable, and providing stocks, a ducking stool, and a pillory.

1607. — This year a great storm swept over the neighbourhood of Bridgwater, the river overflowed its banks, and great damage was done, especially to shipping in the river and in Bridgwater Bay. At Burnham the tide was so strong that an immense breach was made in the sea-wall, and the water flowed to the base of the church tower.

1607. — June 10. Sir John Popham, Knight, Lord Chief Justice of England, and one of the Hon. Privy Council of Queen Elizabeth, and afterwards of King James, died this day, aged 76. He was a native of Huntworth.

1609. — John Gilbert, *alias* Gogulmere, a fanatical minister, was committed to gaol by Sir Nicholas Halswell, for having on a Sabbath day attempted to preach naked in the Parish Church of North Petherton.

1613. — February 16th. A new charter was granted to the town of Bridgwater by James I., allowing the right to Matthew's Fair, and confirming all previous charters.

1614. — October 20. It was certified by William Allen, vicar, and Alexander Popham, churchwarden, that Samuel Tucker, son of Elizabeth Tucker, widow, was not any time before touched for the distemper, commonly called the "King's Evill." This appears to indicate a visit of the King to the town.

1617. — Mr. Thomas Warr, Recorder of the Borough, was drowned in the river Severn, and was buried in Bridgwater churchyard on April 30. We learn this from a curious entry in the "Register of Burials," at St. Mary's Church, which has puzzled many an archaeologist to decipher.

1620. — Sir Francis Kingsmill, a resident, presented to the Church a handsome beaten silver chalice, bearing the following inscription: — *Calix Ecclesie Bridgwateriensis. Ex dono Frcincesci King smell, Generosi* ("Bridgwater Church Chalice, the gift of Sir Francis Kingsmill"), with the Kingsmill coat of arms in the centre. This chalice is in use at the present-time



* Anderson's "Chronological History."

** Peter Langtoft's *Chron.*, ii.

*** Hunt's "History of the Bath and Wells Diocese."

**** Collinson's "History of Somerset", Vol 2, p, 265

***** *Ducatus Lancastrice*, p.241