

CHAPTER XXVI

THE MUNIMENTS OF THE BOROUGH.— The Charters — Churchwardens' Accounts — Commonalty Documents — Curious Affidavits — Interesting Extracts from the Archives.

IN a secure chamber above the police-station in High-street built expressly for the purpose, are kept the charters and archives of the borough—a most valuable and jealously-guarded collection of documents, many of which contain much that is interesting, and give us an insight into the life and times of our forefathers. To attempt to give a list of the contents of this muniments room is quite beyond our task—there are about a dozen boxes, in which ancient charters, granted and signed by Kings, jostle humble leases and indentures; and long monkish Latin documents mix with the crude English and prim scholarly calligraphy of the last two centuries. Some years since the late Mr. Henry Thomas Riley, a well-known antiquarian expert, was engaged to overhaul and classify the documents, but from the present confusion which exists among them it is apparent that his work was not lasting. Taking into consideration the many fires which have occurred in the town (especially at the time of the siege) it is a marvel that so many valuable relics of by-gone ages have escaped destruction. Few towns can boast of a more complete set of charters and town records than: Bridgwater.

Although perhaps not within the scope of a popular history we are tempted to devote a special chapter to the muniment room and its contents especially as they throw a very valuable light on the proceedings of our ancestors. Commencing then with the charters; the earliest granted to the town was that of King John in 1202, a translation of which we gave in a previous chapter. This charter is unfortunately missing, and there is no record as to when or how it disappeared. The second was granted by King Edward II., March 5th, 1317, in which all previous rights were confirmed to the town. The upper portion of this ancient document is still extant, but it is in tatters, and almost undecipherable. A third charter of confirmation was granted by Edward III., in 1371,* and a fourth by Henry IV., in 1400.

* There must have been one issued by Henry III., an *inspeximus* or confirmation charter, for in the month of February, in the eleventh year of his reign, he declared himself to be of legitimate age, and it was announced it was to all who wished to enjoy their liberties that they must renew their charters under the King's new seal, "because the King regarded ancient charters of no moment"; and accordingly a taxation for such renewals was made and levied not in proportion to the ability of each person, but according to the amount estimated by the Justiciary. In pursuance of the foregoing resolution of the King in Council letters were subsequently sent to the sheriffs of the different counties, ordering the same to be immediately and publicly proclaimed. By this measure King Henry realized not less than a hundred thousand pounds —(*Rotuli Chartum*, v. vi.)

In a charter granted by Edward IV., under date June 18, 1468, it is stated that complaint had been made to the King that *from ancient time the town has been accustomed both by foreigners and captains of this country, and used for all manner of merchandise; and whereas the town had fallen into great ruin and decay by want of reparation, so that the merchants had withdrawn themselves, and failed to come with their ships to the port.* With a view to assisting his loyal subjects of Bridgwater, and restoring the town to its former degree of prosperity the King incorporated the town and borough by the name of the Mayor, bailiffs and burgesses, and confirmed to them and their successors all former liberties, granted they should have in the town and borough for ever a Guild Market, with a "hause" and other customs and liberties to such guild belonging, at the same time extending the boundaries of the town in a remarkable manner. The charter granted a toll of one penny for every plough or cart passing over the bridge; the money arising thereby to be applied to the mending and fortifying of the bridge. A weekly market was allowed on Saturday, and a four-days' fair in Lent. We also gather from this charter that one-third part of the town or borough belonged to the Crown "by reason of the marsh of our country," and which was held by "Cicily, Duchess of York," for her life. The town was to hold this third part in fee for ever, paying to the

King and his heirs £3 per annum, while the Duchess lived, and £10 per annum afterwards.

A charter granted by Henry VII. in 1487 confirms the above, and his successor was pleased to make the borough a county — a mark of particular favour, though of little use.

In a charter dated May 21st, 1554, Queen Mary released the town from paying the royal annuity mentioned above, and the property was held by the Mayor and bailiffs "in free burgage by fealty only" Her sister, Queen Elizabeth, graciously confirmed this charter July 4th, 1586, and at the same time newly incorporated the town, granting markets on Thursday and Saturday, and three fairs yearly — Lent fair, four days; Midsummer fair, six days; and St. Matthew's fair, "which latter it shall be lawful to keep and hold in Matthew's Field." The two charters of these sister queens are beautifully executed on parchment, and are very lengthy documents.

The charter of James I., dated February 16th, 1618, confirmed all preceding ones, and regulated the holding of St. Matthew's fair to three days.

In 1683 or 1684 Charles II. granted a charter in which, among other things, a fair in High-street was allowed to be held every 28th and 29th December.

Twelve charters are known to have been granted to Bridgwater between 1200 and 1684, and the greater portion of them are preserved, some with the seals intact. By Act of Parliament passed by the Commonwealth, the Crown annuity of £10 referred to in the charters was sold to William Sealy, merchant, of Bridgwater, in 1650, and in 1659 was purchased of him by the Corporation, for £110. The property (consisting of messuages, lands, tenements, and gardens) thus came into possession of the Corporation. Old leases and documents relating to lands belonging to the Corporation abound by hundreds. For the benefit of enquirers, it may be stated that the property now held by the Corporation other than the above was acquired by the enclosure of waste-lands, old roads, &c., by purchase and by ancient title. The rectory and parsonage of Bridgwater and Wembdon were formally impropriate of the Priory of Bridgwater, and on the suppression of monasteries

King Henry VII. leased the parsonage of Bridgwater, and the tithes of Blackland and "Haylefield" to the Earl of Bath for 21 years. Queen Elizabeth granted the reversion of the same to the Mayor, Bailiffs and Burgesses of Bridgwater. King James afterwards granted the fee thereof to Francis Morrice, Esq., and Francis Phelps, who conveyed it to the Mayor, &c. In 1836 a complete list of all Corporation property was prepared, showing the same to be of very considerable extent. During recent years, however, a number of properties have been sold and others demolished for the purpose of making "town improvements, &c. In 1870, a spot known as "the bowling green," on the Eastern Quay, was sold to the Bristol and Exeter Railway Company for railway extensions and improvements, for the sum of £7,500, which enabled the Corporation to pay off* a mortgage of £5,000 on corporate property, and convert a portion of the Market-house into a Post-office. '

An early collection of accounts is singularly interesting. They are seventeen in number, ranging from the 47th year of Edward III. (1372) to the 27th of Edward IV., and gives us specimens of annual expenditure and receipts, for the period of nearly a century, by the "Receiver of the Commonalty." The rolls are of various sizes and lengths, and consist of the most part of a single sheet of paper or parchment, generally the latter. They are principally in Latin, only one being in English throughout. They begin with (1) the receipts from houses and gardens belonging to the commonalty; (2) the monies received for special municipal purposes; (3) dues paid for the freedom of the borough, or of a guild; and (4) the income from the port or harbour. Next come the items of expenditure, without any definite arrangement; repairs, fees and hospitalities, are noted apparently just in the order of disbursement. It is evident that our ancestors used to pay their Parliamentary representatives, and such sentences are found as these: — "20s. paid to John Cole for Parliament this year," "paid to John Mancell and W. Warde, being burgesses to Parliament for the Town aforesaid, 40s"; "payed to William Gascoigne 6s 8d"; and "item delyvered to John Pitte, to Parliament ward, 20s." When the Members came home it was apparently the custom to ask them to drink — at the

town's expense. Thus we find "6d. paid for wine bought and given to John Palmere coming to the town after Parliament." Bridgwater people of five or six centuries ago appear to have been very hospitable, and a present of wine (it should be remembered that it was essentially a wine port) was the natural form of municipal courtesy. One item of expenditure was apparently for a new public work—"for the making of the bole-ryng and the stapylle, 3d." Several entries refer to the bridge and the public cranes. "Thornes" are charged for "backing" the river's sides, or in other words, for keeping the mud together at the banks, a practice which is still kept up, especially near the float. The Town Clerk's fee (apparently for half-a-year) was 3s 4d ! whilst in the reign of Henry VI. the Mayor seems to have been paid £5 yearly for performing the duties of his office.

From a document of the reign of Henry VIII., 1526, we can form a pretty correct notion of the importance of the town in those days. Among the expenses :—For one gallon of wine to my Lord Jeff. Just. 8d.; to Lord Audley's minstrels, 20d.; to the King's minstrels, 3s. 4d.; Lord Northumberland's minstrels, 12d. ; a bottle of wine to my Lord Just. 4d.

Another collection of Corporation accounts, of the time of the Commonwealth, contains some curious items. 18s. was charged by an official for a dinner at Taunton, and 10s. for attending the Assizes in the same town; May, 1650, for tobacco and a pipe, 2s. 7d; " money paid to Humphrey Blake about the corn trade, £2."

A document dated December 6th, 1687, addressed to the Mayor, authorises the dismissal of certain members of the Town Council, and the Town Clerk, for being obnoxious to the Government. It bears the autograph of James II.

Some of the churchwardens' accounts are also interesting ; one of them cites a charge of 8d. " for making a selde (shed) in the churchyard upon the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Mary for the Abbot of Glastonbury, and other expenses— bread and ale and other vituals." Probably this was on one of the frequent occasions when the town was blessed. " Wex for torches and the lyght before the Hye Cross agen Xmas " cost

11s.; and at Easter the cost was 2d. more ; 7d. was paid for " sticking candles on a Christy nyght." The following are specimens of a very frequent entry:— " Paid for a gallon of wine for the Master of the Hospital in the Convent on the feast of Corpus Christi, 8d.; for two gallons of wine delivered to the Friars Minors at the said feast, 16d.; paid for two gallons of wine delivered to the aforesaid Master of the Hospital, and Alexander Holly, in the vestry of the Church, 20d.; item for bread, 1d." (!) Occasionally we find reference to "a pottle wine for Sir Vicar, 4d." The Corpus Christi celebrations evidently substantial affairs, judging from the folio account:— " For 2 capons bought of William Seymour, for one goose, 5d.; for 2 schilders of mutton, 5d.; for pepire and safure, 2d.; for powder sinomon (mustard), 3d. : reward to the coke, 3d." In the reign of Edward III. 8s charged for carting clay to make the "soller" of the belfry for straw to mix with the clay, and 2d. for a bell-rope. 1629 the sum of 4d. was charged for bearing to Church a man who died on the Castle wall.

The Church received various articles towards her support which seems strange nowadays. Two entries set out the of an anvil and a "toker's shears;" these were doubtless out on hire, and the profits devoted to the Church.

A curious example of Royal orthography in the Fifth Century is to be found in a deed of Cecily, Duchess of York, widow of Richard, Duke of York, and mother of Edward who just previously had had granted to her the lordship of the burgh of Bridgwater. It sets forth— *Cecile, the Kynges moder, Duchesse of York, to alle those that these oure letres shall see or here, greting. Forasmuch as we be enfourmed that withyn our propertie of the Bourghe of Bruggewater lyvelode is gretely fallen in delaye, for lack of oversight due reparacyon in time, wherbye oure reume the diminerished, and yf it shuld so continue without conuer remedy, it shuld redounde into our great hurte. She then gives instructions to make " due and just inquerre " as to whose fault it is, in order that the same might be remedied. There is also a letter (apparently written after the above addressed to the Portreeve of Bridgwater, asking for 8s. 0 ½" your fee ferme," and threatening proceedings if the money is*

not "delyv-ered to my servante, the berer of this bille." writer also plaintively remarks that "hit semeth by your delying that ye sett butt litille by her."

An early document in French sets forth the liability of Bridgwater men with regard to the new bridge (the Trivet stone structure). If not completed by a certain time, Thomas Lyons and John Fytletone (the latter of whom was Member of Parliament for the borough) were apparently to pay £200.

A document belonging to the Water Bailiff of the port is one of the first instances of paper introduced or made in England. It is of the fourteenth century, about 1398, in Richard II.'s time, of coarse texture, and likely to last as long as parchment.

The Water Bailiffs' accounts of the latter half of the Sixteenth Century were formerly bound, or rather enclosed, in parchment covers, made from the leaves of Missals and Service Books of the Fourteenth Century, and perhaps even of an earlier date. In some instances the musical notation of the hymns and anthems forming part of the various services is given in full upon the fragments. It is supposed that these interesting relics may have come into the town at the dispersion of the library of Glastonbury Abbey at the Dissolution of Monasteries. Many of these fragments are beautifully illuminated, and the whole might appropriately find a place in a glass case in the Free Reading-room.

In the 27th year of Edward I. the burgesses made a grant to Richard Maidus that he may build over the West Gate, with all the vacant place belonging to it, towards the east, unto the corner of the house which formerly belonged to Roger le Mortymere, in such way as shall be most for his advantage, and for the effectual defence of the town. The said Richard, and his heirs or assigns, so often as shall be needed for war or for the army, shall cause the said building to be vacated, and permit the forces of the ville to enter for its defence, without molestation." This very interesting deed is dated at Bruggeswalter," and among the witnesses' names is that of "Sir Walter de Stockelynche, vicar of the Church of the said ville."

Another most interesting document throwing light on ancient town history, is an indenture, in Latin, without date

(probably early Edward I.). It gives what may be termed "Bye-laws of the Commonalty." Thus *no one in the burgh is to buy flesh or dried fish before the 3rd hour (9 a.m.), for the purposes of regrating (retailing), under pain of becoming bound to the Commonalty for the price of the flesh or fish, so bought or sold.* Again, *Any person refusing the offices of Seneschal (Steward) of St. Mary's, or of the Holy Cross in the Church of the said burgh, or of the Wardenship of the Bridge, is to be bound to the Comonalty in the sum of 6s 8d.*

A document of the reign of Edward II. is remarkable, inasmuch as it furnishes the first known instance of a double Christian name, or a double surname, and at the same time gives an interesting local item with regard to the Church. "Philip Crese Erl" is mentioned as a subscriber towards the cost of making a new bell "for the Church of Bridgwater and again as a witness with regard to the grant of a house in "Frerenstrete."

A deed of the 37th year of Edward III. (1365), is with regard to a piece of ground in Cook's Row, and a tenement opposite the Castle "as you go from the Great Bridge to the Market Place" This mention of the "great" bridge evidently indicates a smaller one, probably leading from the Castle to the field on the opposite side of the river.

On a parchment indenture dated August 8th, 1471, is curious "poem," in the Welch-English of the period, commencing:—

*Hay, Hay, take goode hede wat you say,
A doums day we schull ye see,
Fadere and Sone in Trinite,
With Grete powere and magisti
And angelys in grete aray."*

An assessment for the whole county about four centuries ago is deeply, interesting. Bath was assessed at £13, but Bridgwater had to pay double that amount, apparently showing it to have been of more importance than the present "Queen of the West."

Another parish assessment, is contained in a book of three sheets of rough double foolscap, written on both sides, with the heading:— "In this Boke ys conteyned as well the weapons as the somes of money taxed upon the ynhabitants Bridgewatr for the settyng forth of souldyers the vij. day

February, A.D. 1557, yn which yere Calyes by the French v takyin." (An imperfect transcript of this title is given page 40). The book is arranged in the order of streets, and the greatest number of names occur in the street called "between Church and Bridge." The total amount of money produced by this assessment appears to have been £3 19s. 4d and among the many instruments of war which were given the inhabitants may be mentioned bills, bows, spears, swords daggers, jacks, and pole-axes.

It is interesting to note the curious orthography with regard to the streets, and some of the names met with in the old deeds have quite disappeared. The "Dam-eye-te-strete" 1399 (evidently a corruption of Dam-gate-street—from proximity to the mill-dam) has given place to Dampiet-stree "Pynele-street" and "Orloff-street" or "Orlewe-stree" were the lanes leading to the Cattle Market, until recently known as Penel Orlieu. Eastover was simply "Estover"; Cooken's or "Cook's Bow" has disappeared; "Seint-marystret" occurs as early as 1393, and "Frerenstrete" (Friarn-street) earlier still, in 1307; whilst of "Cra-nyleslane in Dam yet" there is now no trace. In Thirteenth Century documents the town is frequently called "Villa de Bruges." The earliest public-house of which we have found trace is "Le Three Crownes," then in Eastover.

Amongst the miscellaneous documents is the probate copy of the will of Johanna, wife of Thomas Fote, dated 1414. Amongst the bequests contained in it are the following:— *12d. to the master of the Hospital of St. John, and 12d. to the brethren, to celebrate for her soul; to the wardens of the goods of the Light of the Blessed Trinity her best brass pot, that her soul might be had in everlasting remembrance by the brethren and sisters of the said Guild; to the Friars Minors of Bridgwater 2s. worth of wheat, and the same amount of beans.*

A singular attestation was made in the reign of Henry VI., by William Tredewyn, priest of North Newton, that in his youth he was *continually abidinge yn the Vicarage of Briggewater, with one Sir John Wheler, Parishe Prest of the said towne, to lerne rede and syng with the said Sir John Wheler, at the commandment of Mr. Sir John Colswayne, then their Vyker of the seid towne, and that he is nowe of age L (fifty) Wynter.* This is a good

specimen of the Early English of the locality.

A letter from Thomas Maundy, of Fetter Lane, London, is addressed to Humfry Blake, asking him to use his influence with the Mayor of Bridgwater for the payment of £25. 11s. 6d. for the making of one of the maces of the borough, which weighed 56½oz., at 9s. per ounce, and 5s. for the case.

A solitary instance of a notice by the Town Crier is dated 1718, and runs as follows:— *I am ordered and commanded to give notice to all persons that bring Corn and Grain into this town for sale on market days that they bring the same in bags on the Cornhill. And that no person shall open the bags for sale until the ringing of the bell, or they will be prosecuted for the same by the Mayor and Aldermen.*

Records are kept of some very curious affidavits. In 1718 Ambrose Hozee and three other capital burgesses made oath that Joel Gardner was in the habit of making his responses in Divine Service loud enough to be heard by anyone near him, "if not asleep," and especially on his knees when the King and Royal Family were being prayed for. They further swore that James Bowles usually slept or lay in a sleeping posture upon his seat in time of service! Roger Hoare also swore that he constantly knelt at the prayers of the Church according to the directions of the Prayer Book, *except when he was troubled with the gout.* Our forefathers were evidently most particular as to demeanour and behaviour at Church; at the same time is more than probable that the politics of the time was the principal factor in the matter; as for instance in 1717, when some musicians *make oath that although they played upon music outside the 'Swann' inn on the 28th May, being the anniversary of his Majesty's birthday upon the request of Ferdinando Anderton, Mayor, they did not play the tune, "The King shall enjoy his own again."* Another instance may be cited, in 1719 (July 18), when "Wm. Erie maketh oath that he was standing near the High Cross, in the Borough of Bridgwater, looking at a person who was put in the pillory, for speaking seditious words, heard Edward Parry, a trooper, say, 'He knew him in the pillory, being one of his countrymen, and that the Pretender was his King,' and the deponent answered, '

King George is my King.'"

The bad condition of the roads in 1737 is responsible for the following: — *We, Jos. Taylor and John Mounsher, surveyors of the Highways of the Parish of Bridgwater, do hereby present the Highway leading from Bridgwater to North Petherton, also Wembdon, also Bawdrip, also to Durleigh, are very bad, out of repair, and dangerous to all Travellers who pass these roads, and it is a great detriment to the Parish. — Sworn before me, THOMAS YEATES, Mayor, 27 April, 1737 — SAMUEL SMYTH, Alderman.*

Town and country did not always agree, and thus we find that Richard Coles, parish clerk, and others, *make known as to how, by order of the Mayor, Robert Steare, they prevented an attack by the country folk on the midnight house at Bridgwater. They were keeping a night watch, and were armed with bills and other weapons.*

The seals affixed to the various documents are a very interesting study. In former times the borough possessed two seals — a large one, held under three keys, one each by the Mayor, Senior Alderman, and Receiver; and a smaller one, kept under the custody of the Town Clerk, and used on common occasions. The arms of the town in 1623, according to the draft of a seal given in the Herald's visitation) were as follows: — A castle with three towers, standing on a bridge with five arches, over a river. The town piece which was struck in 1666 give precisely the same. The modern seal is somewhat different: a castle surmounted by two others, placed pyramidically and embattled, standing on a Gothic bridge, with water underneath ; on each side the first castle a domed tower, over the dexter tower a star, and over the sinister tower a fleur-de-lis, a gate in the centre, portcullised, with head. None of the earlier seals give the star, fleur-de-lis, or head, but it must be admitted that the seal of to-day presents a much better appearance than its predecessors. Many of the documents (ranging from about 1400 to 1500) show the seal of the Provosts — a one-masted galley, with two men standing on it, back to back.

The foregoing extracts and running comments are given with but little attempt at chronology. In addition to the details in this chapter, the muniments have afforded much information which has appeared in previous chapters.