

**CONCLUSION.—A RETROSPECT—  
BRIDGWATER OF TO-DAY.**

WE HAVE traced in detail the various occurrences which have transpired to make up the history of Bridgwater, as far as they can be gathered, and before summarising the general character and features of the town to-day, we will take a brief retrospect of the past two centuries, when the progress which has been made will be readily seen.

The Bridgwater of the early seventeenth century will bear but little comparison with the Bridgwater which we know to-day. It now stands in the centre of a rich plain, covered with fruitful orchards and smiling cornfields, but which was then but little better than a wide morass, bounded by the blue Quantock Hills on the one side, and on the other by the Poldens. Eastover, joined to the town by the ancient stone bridge previously referred to, was a suburb occupied principally by opulent traders and gentry. The town boasted one of the most famous inns of the county—the *Swan*, situated by the Cornhill, which was the rendezvous for all the gentry and inhabitants for miles around. Near there also stood the old market-cross, where once a week the people from the surrounding country would bring their wares for disposal amongst the townspeople. Before newspapers were invented the people looked forward to their weekly meeting at the market-cross as one of the pleasant excitements of their leisurely life, and one of their chief opportunities of hearing or telling the news of the day.

Lying on the great highway from Gloucester and Bristol to Taunton and the further west, a great amount of traffic of course passed through the town in those days. Pack horses, laden with multifarious wares, *tinkled their merry bells along its streets and over its old bridge night and day*. As a port too, it gradually became to some extent famous. Whilst Liverpool was still a swamp, Manchester but a straggling hamlet, and Leeds a cluster of mud-huts, the streets of Taunton and Dunster resounded with arts and industry, and the merchant ships of Bridgwater and Bristol were daily going out or coming in from the remotest corners of the earth.\*

In former times the place had been defended with walls, but they seem gradually to have disappeared, and no traces were left of them in the middle of the sixteenth century. The four gates of the town were, however, intact, and remained so for over

two centuries later. The North Gate stood at a point outside King's-square; and inserted in the wall of a house immediately opposite the entrance gate to Blacklands and corresponding corner of the Girls' National School is (or was) a square stone, inscribed "*Here stood the North Gate.*" It was the earliest, to be removed. South Gate stood in the lower part of St. Mary-street, near Holy Trinity Vicarage, on the town side of the little brook; a butcher's shop now occupies the exact spot of one of the sides. Loads of hay coming from Taunton-road could scarcely pass underneath, and the gateway was ultimately abolished. The immediate cause of its demolition was that one Sunday morning a quantity of gunpowder was found in some of the fissures of the structure, and it was feared that some miscreants intended blowing it up, to prevent which it was taken down. There were three archways to each of the four gates, similar to old Temple Bar, a large one in the centre for vehicles and a small one on either side for pedestrians. They are stated to have been of very massive construction, as befitted the stirring, troublous times when they were needed. East Gate spanned the roadway where the present *Queen's Head* stands in Eastover. It is related that a wild beast show was once entering the town through this gateway, when a large caravan containing an elephant became stuck and would go no further. After several ineffectual attempts to get it loose the crown of the arch had to be removed in order to allow it to pass. This caused the structure to become unsafe, and after a short time it was removed. This occurred within the recollection of some of the oldest inhabitants now living. West Gate stood by the corner at Penel Orlieu. Mr. Bowering's baker's shop occupies a portion of its site.

Superstition is said to have been very prevalent in this neighbourhood, and witches and fairies were firmly believed in. *Night and morning, in going out and coming in, in bringing the sheep from the fold or the wool to the market, it was common for them to appeal to the tutelary saints of their respective parish churches.* 'Good St. Catherine stay my oxen!' would a farmer cry when chasing his straying cattle. *The drover prayed to St. Anthony. As the pack-horses came sliding and stumbling with obstreperous jingle down the hillside, the men in charge would evoke the aid of St. Loy. Not only did they appeal to dead saints, but to graven images.\**

We have already seen that the population of Bridgwater has shown a steady rise throughout the present century. This constant increase has necessitated the enlargement of the town from time to time. Up to comparatively recent years there was no houses between the Malt Shovel Inn and the old toll-gate at Wembdon whereas that locality is now an aristocratic and well-built suburb. *Provident-place* may be taken as the single exception--this *street* was built by a building society, and was the earliest erection in that neighbourhood. Before the railway was made there were no houses outside the site of the old gate in Eastover—there are now several fine streets in that locality, and the population of Eastover is a large and increasing one.

Bridgwater of to-day is a thriving town, full of enterprise and energy. It is well-served religiously, having numerous handsome and commodious places of divine worship ; it boasts a Free Library and Reading-room equal to that of any town of its size; has an annual exhibition of poultry and cage birds which has obtained a degree of importance in the ornithological world ; a well-conducted dairy factory which will in time doubtless prove of immense advantage to the town ; in addition to which it possesses many other characteristics which mark it as being fully *up to date*. It has of course, being the centre of an important agricultural community, suffered much from the depression of the past few years, though happily not to the extent of some other places. That it may recover itself, and hold its own against competing towns, is the heartfelt wish of the writer of this  
HISTORY OF BRIDGWATER.



\* Hepworth Dixon's *Life of Robert Blake*.

\*\* *Joseph Alleine, his Life and Times*.