

THE name of the town of Bridgwater was originally Brugge, Bruge Brigge, Brigga, or at Domesday Brugie, and simply meant a bridge. In 1086, therefore, the date of the great Norman Survey, there was already an important place here, settled by Saxons, and called by them Bruge, attracting traffic to itself and probably dependent upon it to some extent. Unlike its neighbour Axbridge, under the Mendips, it did not introduce the name of the River Parret upon which it stood. According to the Domesday Survey, the Saxon owner of Bridgwater was Merlesuain, or Merleswain, and he was supplanted at the Conquest by a follower of King William the Conqueror, called Walter de Douai, a Fleming, who was a constant companion of the King, and held a large number of manors along the valley of the Parret (to which it may be necessary to refer presently), with the head of his barony at Castle Cary, at the very source of the Cary River. Walter de Douai, or perhaps his son Walter (for this point is a little uncertain), built or took charge of the bridge at Bridgwater, and so the place was always called. Brugge Walter or Brigge-walter, or, to show its origin more clearly, Pons Walteri. Just as Stoke at the mouth of the Parret, meaning simply a settlement in Saxon times, became amplified into Stoke Courcy when the Norman family of de Courcy settled there, so Brugge became Brugge-walter, after Walscinus or Walter of Douai. Now and then the town is certainly spelt *Burge*, as if it might have been so called from a burgh or borough; but there were no borough privileges or castle previous to the reign of King John (1199-1216), and the real name of Brugge was stereotyped long before this. The Somerset folk to this day speak of Bridgwater as if it were *Burgwaater*, but this dialectal variation must be explained by the fact that not only in Bridgwater, but in many other words, there is a change or meta-thesis of the letter "r". For instance, great is often pronounced as if it were *gert*, and Richard as *Hurchard*, red as *Iurd*, and even bridge itself as *burge*, and so on.

The first history of Bridgwater, therefore, is the history of a bridge in Saxon and possibly in British times. Far back in the centuries there may have been a *hard* or a ford, across which men could wade or ride or drive stock, and such towns as Wallingford on the Thames and Oxford on the Isis bear testimony to the fact that a settlement may first spring up round a ford. At Bridgwater it may have been possible to cross somewhere along the line of the present bridge.

Curiously enough, we must look eight miles lower down the River Parret for a notable and historic ford viz. at Combwich Passage. If Combwich (anciently spelt Comwith or Cumwych in Bridgwater documents) is really the Kinwith of the Saxon Chronicle and the Cymwich of Roger de Hoveden, and Cannington the *Kinwith Castle* where Saxons and Danes fought in A.D. 878, there would appear to be little doubt that the really important passage across the Parret was here at the terminus of the Rodway, or old roadway, that led from the Quantocks to Combwich and the little Pill there. This roadway is still visible, and can be easily traced back to Fiddington and Over Stowey, and finally to Triscombe Stone, or thereabouts, on the Quantock Hills. Along its course it forms more than one parish boundary, thus proving that it was older than the parishes themselves. Across the Parret, and on the east side, the objective of the roadway was the strong hill or entrenchment of Brent Knoll, and to travellers coming from the west to North Somerset or Bristol it furnishes a more direct route than any road leading to and through Bridgwater. Indeed, within the memory of old men Combwich Passage by the White House used to be always the place where the Parret was forded, or passengers were ferried across on their way to and from Bristol. Warner, in his *Walks Through Some of the Western Counties*, written in 1800, mentions *the passage house on the banks of the Parret, about 2½ miles from the Shoulder of Mutton Inn*, and says, *I ferried over the River Parret at that time quite at ebb, and not more than a quarter of a mile across.*

Although Mr. Warner somewhat exaggerates the distance, it is clear that a bridge at Combwich Passage would always have been a formidable undertaking, more formidable than the bridge at the mouth of the Teign above Teignmouth, and, in very early days, even the stern requirements of the *trinoda necessitas (arx pons, expeditio)* might scarcely have served to bring it into being. A ford, or *drift*, as they call it in South Africa, it always might be and nothing more, across which the lumbering wains might travel at low water. But it was reserved for Bridgwater when the Parret had narrowed its course and the banks were closer to have a permanent bridge. The well-known *bore* was an ever-present problem, but it could be spanned best just here.

We may well wonder what kind of bridge existed in Saxon and pre-Domesday times.

Probably it was of wood, for the Saxons were better workers of wood than of stone, and the bridge of those days might have been of a primitive kind, sufficing for foot passengers only, the vehicular traffic finding its way across *the hard*, as at Comwich. The Flemish Walter de Douai may have given some new feature to the *Pons Walteri*, for he must have seen and known of many bridges in Flanders and at the continental *Bruges* itself, where there were of old fifty-four bridges, so geographers tell us. Or, as the distant lord of Castle Cary, with the oversight of the Parret River Valley, he may have been satisfied with a military pontoon, with defences either side. No one seems, however, to be absolutely positive as to the actual position of the *Pons Walteri*.

If it is a matter of conjecture, we may suppose, naturally enough, that the bridge was not far off the Castle, if not in direct communication with it. In his *History of Bridgwater* Mr. Jarman alludes (p. 22) to a rock in the centre of the river which used to be pointed out as one of the foundations of the old Brewer Bridge. It spanned the river from the Castle to the place known as Castle Field. This bridge must have lasted more than two hundred years, and was probably existing in 1365, for, in a deed of 37 Ed. III, mention is made of 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* (p. 167).

That there were some rocks, probably flat ledges of the blue lias, in the bed of the River Parret at this particular spot appears from the wording of King Edward IV's Charter, recited in the Charter of Henry VII.

In this document it was stipulated that the Mayor, Bayliffs and Burgesses of Bridgwater should for ever have and receive for every *plough* or cart drawn and passing with merchandise or grosswood over the bridge of the town one penny, and the money thereby arising was to be applied for and about the mending and fortifying the bridge there from time to time : And that it should be lawful for them, the said Mayor, Bayliffs and Burgesses and their Successors, to cleanse, secure and amend the banks and walls of the water within the Town and Borough aforesaid and the Liberties and precincts thereof :

And the rocks and stones lying and being in the bottom of the same water it should be lawful for them to draw from thence, as often as it should be necessary, for the safe bringing and lying of ships and other vessels

there : And to have and retain the same stones for the mending and repairing of the bridge aforesaid, and for paving the said Town or Borough without any let, hindrance or impediment of us, our Heirs, or Successors, or of any other our ministers whatsoever.

This grant certainly gives us a little glimpse into the probable physical aspect of the Parret bed hereabouts. The channel must have been more confined than at present, the rocks may have been high enough to facilitate the setting the foundations of a bridge, and, indeed, have naturally indicated the best spot to span the flood. The *bore*, rushing up this confined place, would have been a far more notable phenomenon than it is at present. The ships themselves, to begin with, would have found shallower water and less room to anchor in than, perhaps, at the *Head of Comwith*; but, in process of time, the quarrying of the stones at low water would clear and deepen the waterway. The blocks of blue lias would make, as always, good paving stones for the streets of the borough, and a double purpose be effected by their removal.

There are more historical details about what may be called *Trivet's Bridge*, a triple-arched, strongly-built stone structure with houses on both sides of the roadway. Frequent references are made in the Commonalty Accounts to repairs made in these houses. The position of this bridge is probably that of the present structure, and it may have replaced the old Brewer Bridge. Amongst the town MSS. an early document sets forth the liability of Bridgwater men with regard to the new bridge, and stipulating that if it was not completed by a certain time, Thomas Lyons and John Fytleton (the latter a member for the town of Bridgwater in the year 1379) were to pay £200. This looks like a very heavy fine for those days, but the important point about this extract is that we get a date. This surely is the bridge of seventy *steppys* which William of Worcester mentions, and it is the bridge which Leland, the travelling antiquary of Henry VIII's time, saw, which he says was begun by William Brewer, the first lord of the town, and finished by Trivet. This statement is a little misleading, as the distance of time between the first William Brewer and Trivet was 150 years, Lord Brewer dying in 1227, and Sir John Trivet living in Richard II's reign (1377-99). In an ancient record amongst the Bridgwater accounts there is a very interesting reference

to this bridge. *It appeareth that Sir John Trivett, knight, gave in Richard the Second's tyme (1377-99), 300 marcs towards buildinge of the new bridge, and the Stewardest and Comunaltie bound themselves to performe the rest of the charge in building of the said bridge, as by several readings in French dated at the tyme aforesaid, hit doth appear.*

The Trivet family were well known in West Somerset and owned, at one time, the manors of Comwich, Otterhampton, and left their name to Chilton Trivet. Their badge is still to be seen on the porch of Dodington Church and in Dodington Hall. A John Trivet represented Bridgwater in Parliament in 1348, and he may have been the benefactor of Bridgwater and the contributor to the bridge.

Sir John Trivet's badge of three trivets was affixed to the coping of the bridge, and the old structure was called Trivet's Bridge. It was in existence in Commonwealth days, and right up to 1795, and must not be confused with the gateway and drawbridge at Eastover which figures in the famous siege of Bridgwater. In 1795 Trivet's Bridge, a sketch of which still exists, was replaced by a new structure which, however, had a comparatively short life, giving place, in 1883, to the modern bridge with its span of seventy-five feet.

In the old charters of Bridgwater defining the boundaries of the borough, by river as well as by land, there is constant reference to Lymebridge on the south side, the point where the boundaries began. Some piles found in the river just above the present site of Bridgwater Infirmary (*Jarman's History of Bridgwater*, p. 22), together with a reference made by Oldmixon to a communication across the river between Hamp House and Sydenham House, may lend colour to the supposition that there was an old wooden bridge here. This would always have been distinct from the Great Bridge.

The River Parret, anciently called Pedret (600), or Peret or Pedrida in the A[nglo].-S[axon]. Chronicle (658), deserves more than a passing notice. Taking its rise in the high ground about Crewkerne and Pendomer, it flows northwards towards the Bristol Channel, or *Severn Sea*, its usual name in former days. In its course it is joined by many tributaries, such as the River Ile or Ivel at a point near Thorney, which gives a name to Ivelchester or Ilchester, Ile Abbots, Ile Brewer, Ilminster, and Ilton. It is also joined by the River Yeo (which gives its name to Yeovil), about half a mile above Langport Bridge. This

part of the river from its sources to Langport may be called the *Upper Parret*," and a very good view of the moors and low-lying meadows, especially in time of flooding, may be obtained from the churchyard at Langport, or any high point above Aller and along Ham Hill. On more than one occasion the writer has viewed this country when periodically inundated from 1866-1906, and has skated over miles of the moors.

The nomenclature of the River Parret has occasionally varied. Not far from Montacute its upper waters have been known as the waters of the River Credy. Camden, the Elizabethan antiquary, calls the Parret the Ivel and the Parret mouth the Ivel mouth ; but this is in direct conflict with the old Saxon chroniclers, who speak of the *Pedridamuda*, i.e. the mouth of the Parret (845), and all ancient chroniclers. Even in Henry VIII's reign Leland falls into the error, surely, of calling the Parret the Ivel. But the antiquity of the name and of the river which far back in history gave its name to North and South Petherton, often spelt Pederton or Pedreton, is evident. It also gave a name to Puriton (Domesday Peritone) at the end of the Polden Hills and, at its very source, to North and South Perrot, called anciently *Peret*. The river bisects the county of Somerset from south to north.

The total watershed of the Parret and its three tributaries, the Ile, the Yeo and the Tone, is calculated to be 362,860 acres, of which the Upper Parret with the Ile and Yeo comprises about 186,880 acres, and the Lower Parret with the Tone about 175,980 acres. In certain seasons the flooded area of the Upper district is nearly 25,000 acres, and that of the Lower 15,000 acres. The watershed of the Cary is calculated at 44,930 acres, the area liable to floods at 13,958 acres. The Brue can hardly be termed a tributary of the Parret, as it joins it so low down and near its mouth, but it may be worth noting that this river, with which really the Parret is in communication as a waterway, has a watershed of 136,850 acres and an area of 13,520 acres liable to floods.* The Brue is historically interesting as the river valley of ancient Glastonbury. As it flows from Langport to Bridgwater the Parret is joined by the River Tone, which rises far to the west on the Brendon Hills and in its turn gives a name to Taunton. In old documents the River Tone is written Tàn, and Taunton dean is written Tàn dean. The most conspicuous feature of the moors and levels at the junction of the Parret and Tone is the Borough, or

tumulus, near Athelney, whence an excellent view may be obtained of what may be termed the Lower Valley of the Parret. Not far from Borough Bridge the Parret received the waters, in former times, of the River Cary, the sources of which lie close under the historic site of Castle Cary. In order to facilitate certain drainage schemes the River Cary was diverted from its original course and canalized along the main King Sedgemoor drain, so that it is now made to flow out into the Lower Parret at Dunball Clyce. Further to the east lies the valley of the Axe with a watershed of 62,720 acres and an area of 2266 acres liable to floods. From these official figures it will be possible to realize the nature of the Parret valley as well as that of the adjoining valleys of the Brue and the Axe. Taken together they present the view of a series of low-lying moors stretching across the centre of the county of Somerset.

These moors are in general on a level with the sea water in ordinary tides, but considerably below it during high spring or equinoctial tides. The levels are secured from floods at these critical times by strong banks called sea-walls, extending both along the shores of the Severn Sea and also the sides of the rivers. The mouths of some of the rivers and outfalls are secured against the inrush of the sea by sluice-gates. For centuries it has been the work of Commissioners of Sewers and Dyke Reeves to regulate the flow of the waters by widening the natural outfalls and keeping the *rhines* or drains clean. But occasionally the forces of Nature are too strong for the devices of man. Sometimes the sudden melting of snow or an exceptional downpour of rain, happening in March or September, during the period of the highest tides, results in a flood and in widespread havoc, simply from the reason that the fresh water is pent and backed up in certain areas by the incoming *bore*, and cannot find its natural outlet quickly enough. Langport is still subject to periodical visitations, although it is twenty-five miles from the mouth of the Parret.

Bridgwater itself is in a better position with regard to floods, but exceptional high tides have been known to flood Castle Street with three feet of salt water. Tidal observations taken at Bridgwater, which is fourteen miles by the windings of the river from Burnham at its mouth and eleven miles from Langport, are very interesting. At the bridge the spring tides will rise sometimes to a maximum height of twenty feet, measuring

from a gravelly place in the bed of the river. The *bore* takes about four hours to traverse the fourteen miles from Burnham, going quickly in narrow places but slower up broad reaches. Now and then there is a second *bore* following after the first, but this is exceptional. Curiously enough, the tidal wave having gathered its first impulse from the sea will continue to run up the River Parret beyond Bridgwater towards Langport, but in the lower reaches the back movement will have begun, so that the unusual phenomenon is presented of a river flowing upwards and downwards at the same time. Some neap tides do not reach much further than Borough Bridge, five miles beyond Bridgwater. The tides vary with the winds outside, the east or north-east winds keeping down the level of the spring tides, the south or south-west, the prevalent winds, raising it. The effect of a south-west gale from the Atlantic piling up the water in Bridgwater Bay is very marked. On September 10th, 1903 a great south-west gale, which reached a velocity of sixty miles an hour, raised the water to a level of more than six feet above the calculated height of the tide at Burnham. Given the force of wind outside, a skilled observer could foretell the height of water. In 1703 it is related how during the exceptional storm a vessel in the Parret was driven ashore and left upon the land several hundred yards above the ordinary high-water mark, and also how the country folk set up marks on their houses and trees to show how high the waters flowed.

There is more than one *level* along the banks of the Parret. The Bridgwater Level has been described in Billingsley's *Survey of Somerset* as comprising the flat country lying between the range of the Polden Hills and the River Parret, bounded on the north-west by Bridgwater Bay and on the south-east by Ham Hill. The higher districts include the large tracts of alluvial land known as Pawlet Hams and Horsey Slimes. But this definition is not very satisfactory, and to arrive at the proper conclusions it is safer to consult the latest ordnance surveys as in Bartholomew's reduced maps. *Burnham Level*, *Huntspill Level*, *Puriton Level*, *Petherton Level*, are local definitions, but they do not exactly tally with land conformations. On the ordnance survey there are many places where the land is only 15 feet and even less above the ordnance datum. The zero of the gauge at Bridgwater Bridge is 5.62 feet above ordnance datum, so that a 20-foot tide at the bridge would be 25.62 feet above ordnance datum and consequently 15.62 feet above those portions

of land only 10 feet above ordnance datum. In the case of freshwater floods happening coincidentally with high spring tides the danger is obvious.

The following is a quaint description of the disastrous effects of the breaking of the bank or sea-wall at Burnham in the year 1607. *Suddenly, without notice, the country for 20 miles by 5 was flooded to the depth of 11 or 12 feet, the deepest part being at Kingston Seymour. At Huntspill 28 were drowned... Brean was swallowed up. Of 9 houses there, 7 were destroyed and with them 26 persons lost their lives... Ken was almost out of kenning. In this parish stood a fair large building belonging to the Lady Straunge, into which all were invited to shelter. The horses stood in the hall above their middle in water... In Berrow a maid coming from milking was round about beset and climbing up a bank remained there 24 hours, the rats, mice and wants (moles) being in swarms about her to save their lives. All this blew profit to some, as seafaring men came in boats and went away richly laden. Others, sheep-biters, killed the sheep for their tallow only, leaving the carcasses. Conies sought refuge on the backs of the sheep but were at last drowned with them. As soon as possible, 500 men at 12d. a day were put to work at Burnham, the Justices helping not with their eyes only but also with their hands.*

This terrible catastrophe was of a very unusual kind and is not likely to be repeated, although Mr. Grantham, in his Report of 1873, observes that not only in 1607 but also in 1703 and in 1811 the sea has rushed in and flowed up as far as Glastonbury. The weakness of the Burnham defences lay in the divided responsibilities of many riparian owners working their *doles* at that time according to no fixed plan.

Bridgwater in its very early beginnings bore a considerable resemblance to Axbridge or to Over-Weare on the Axe as the terminus of a tidal river. On the score of time the thirty-two burgesses of Axbridge had the advantage, for they got their charters from the Saxon kings and as favoured king's *vills*. The privileges of Bridgwater were acquired in Norman times and some centuries afterwards.

In modern times it is curious how history has repeated itself. In the colony of Nova Scotia there is a Bridgwater situated on a tidal river at a distance of fourteen miles from its mouth. In five places in our Empire Bridgwater is reproduced : in Newfoundland on the east coast near Freshwater ; in Nova Scotia, already noticed ; in Victoria, where, in

the south-west of the colony, a cape, bay, and town carry the name ; in Tasmania ; and in New South Wales.

There is just another town which challenges a comparison with Bridgwater, and this is its neighbour and rival Taunton. As in the case of Bridgwater so with Taunton, the annals of the town are extremely interesting and provide a study in themselves, as they go far back into Saxon times like Axbridge, Somerton, and Langport. But in a certain sense these become stereotyped when in A. D., 790 Frithogitha gave the manor of Taunton to the bishopric of Winchester, and King Ethelwulf, the father of Alfred, enlarged it of his gracious bounty. In Taunton we breathe a different — perhaps a more ecclesiastical — atmosphere altogether, with laws surviving through the centuries right up to modern times. The *Customs of Taunton Dean*, or Tandean, reflect the spirit of Saxon legislation since the days of Ina and Alfred.

Taunton's agricultural prosperity was won from the *dean* or rich valley around it just as the wealth of Bridgwater arose from the marshes and knee-deep pasture lands of the Lower Parret, but the men of Bridgwater had another string to their bow in their trading, commercial and shipping position. They held the coign of vantage here, seized by a rapacious baron in the first place with his anchorage, pontage and port dues, but presently to be passed on to the burgesses and the modern mayor and corporation. At Taunton the Bishop of Winchester may have been a good overlord enough but he was too far distant, and when the diocese of Bath and Wells was split off from Winchester the growing inconvenience and anomaly must have been felt for centuries. For instance, it was no great advantage for the Taunton men and the dwellers of Taunton Dean to pay rich rent to such a bishop as Henry Beaufort, the famous Cardinal, who certainly did not spend his money in Taunton Dean.

Bridgwater, therefore, reaped much in the past not only from her natural river surroundings but also from other more intangible and fortuitous events. She scored her first victory over Langport under William Briwere ; she had a kind of river and navigation precedence over Taunton ; her burgesses gained the reversion of the baronial privileges falling in like a lease in due time. The only possible rival was Comwich, but the river was too wide there, and the position was dangerous and exposed to piratical raids. The chances of Downend gradually became

obliterated by the working of natural causes; and so, betwixt and between, the town grew from a primitive bridge, first to a mediaeval castle, eclipsing the old *Caput Baroniae* of Walter de Douai at Castle Cary ; then to a favourite hunting centre, finally blossoming into a self-governing borough.

A single modern industry of Bridgwater seems to illustrate the peculiar position of the town as the exact topographical point of converging interests that have helped to localise it and to place it where it is. In making Bath bricks (for these useful household articles are really products of Bridgwater and not Bath) a certain proportion of sand and Parret alluvial deposit is required, tempered and mixed to exact proportions. The chief agency is the ebb and flow of the Parret bore, keeping it in suspense here and accumulating it there, until by the inscrutable working of the great water sieve the detritus is fit for human manipulation. Earth, air and water all combine to churn the mixture, and no human hand can rival Nature's workshop. The gift is adventitious, and the curious fact is that only within a mile or so of the bridge at Bridgwater can the suitable compound be found. So, indeed, the prosperity of the ancient borough is due far back in history to the inscrutable churning of unseen forces. Natural agencies have been at work, and human hands have seemed now to interfere, now to forward, and now to depreciate the task. But by ordinances beyond man's control and by influences converging with a kind of magnetic force the old bridge arose as the Rialto of the foaming Parret, whence sailors adventured far and near to the markets of the world.



* Grantham's *Report on the Floods of Somerset*.
Presented to the House of Commons, 1873

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