

FOLLOWING in his father's bent of mind as a benefactor to Bridgwater, and as one anxious to promote the religious ideals of his day, William Briwere the second, his son, extended a hearty welcome to the new religious brotherhood, then but lately founded, known as the Franciscan Friars. It was in 1182 that Francis of Assisi was born, and he was one of the religious enthusiasts who have moved the world. The Friars lived and worked in Bridgwater for three hundred years, and there was never, so far as is known, any grievance or evil laid against them. From the time of the erection of their house in 1230 to its dissolution under Henry VIII they lived a quiet and industrious life, fulfilling the duties of their order, and molesting no man. The ideal of Francis their founder was a noble one indeed. His famous rule was drawn up in 1209, and was approved by the General Lateran Council of 1215. As the Friars formed an important part of the religious life of the old borough for these three centuries, it may be permitted to say something about their ways and their methods of work.

At the root of everything there lay the conception of a Brotherhood of Poor Men. They were *Fratres* (*Frères*), Brethren. *Frere* became anglicized into *Friar*, and the street *Friarn Street*, or, in fourteenth-century usage, *Freren Strete*. They were to keep the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience and in chastity, without any possessions they could call their own. On no account were they to receive gifts of money, either by themselves or by a third person. Nothing was to be their own, neither house, nor place, nor any other thing. For the reward or hire of their labour they might accept necessaries for the body for themselves and their brethren, but this was to be received in humble manner, as becomes the servants of God and the followers of holy poverty. It was their duty to pray, and to work devoutly. One was to be chosen among them to whom they must give obedience, yet this chief brother must bear no higher title than that of minister. They were especially to take heed of all pride, vainglory, envy, covetousness, worldly care and solicitude, detraction and muttering; those who had no learning were not to run to get literature. Moreover, they were to keep no suspicious company or familiarity with women; they were not to go into the monasteries of nuns, excepting those who had special licence granted them from the See Apostolic. It was their lot to tend the sick, the outcast, and the distressed; to minister to

those to whom none else ministered; to try to alleviate some of the miseries of mediaeval town life. To this end their founder, Francis of Assisi, laid it down that his followers were to be meek, peaceable, modest, mild and humble. They must walk when they went forth upon their errands; they were not to ride unless some manifest necessity or infirmity obliged them. Into whatever house they entered, they were to say, *Peace be to this house*. Whatever food was set before them, that they must eat.

There were in England four orders of Friars: the Dominicans, or Black Friars; the Carmelites, or White Friars; the Franciscans, or Grey Friars; and the Austin Friars. The Franciscans came to England in 1224, their first house being at Canterbury, their second in London. They spread rapidly, for this new enthusiasm captured the imaginations of men; and the towns, wherein their mission chiefly lay, eagerly welcomed them. William Briwere did quite the popular thing in settling them in Bridgwater, although, poor man, he only lived long enough to see two years of their work. For a habit the Franciscans wore a loose garment of grey reaching down to the ankles, with a cowl of the same, and a cloak over it when they went abroad. They were girded with a cord, and went barefooted. Of course they were staunch servants of Rome, and their ministers, or provincials, were to examine carefully all who wished to enter the brotherhood as to their faith and their understanding of the sacraments. Those who joined must take no wives, or if they had any, the wives must also go into monasteries, save when leave to the contrary had been granted, under vows of continency, by the bishop of the diocese. The world, and the things of the world, must be put away. When satisfied, the provincial would give them their habit of probation or trial, viz. two tunics, without an hood, and a cloak to the waist, *unless upon any occasion it may seem good in God to do otherwise*. Those who had fully promised obedience were to have one tunic with an hood, and another without an hood, if they will have them. Such as were compelled by necessity might be shod, but it was held more fitting to walk barefoot. All the brothers must be clad in mean habits, and might blessedly mend them with sacks and other pieces.

Such of the Friars as were priests (it was mainly a lay brotherhood) performed the divine office according to the usual Church use of that period. The lay brothers must say twenty-four Paternosters for their matins; five

for lauds; for prime, tierce, the sixth hour, and none, seven for each ; they must also pray for the dead. They must fast from the Feast of All Saints till the Nativity of Our Lord. As for the fast of forty days, which begins at the Epiphany and holds for the forty days following, they might fast for it voluntarily, but were not obliged thereto. But the other fast, i.e. till the Resurrection of Our Lord, they must keep. At other times they need not fast save on Fridays.

Yet it was none of these things which moved men when the Friars came. They were essentially preachers. Unlike the monks, who remained within their monastery walls, they went everywhere about the whole district, preaching and teaching with a fervour which had not hitherto been seen. Although they were directed not to preach within the diocese of any bishop who might forbid them, they seem to have acted as if this obligation sat lightly upon them. For they did preach, in season and out of season, and in their journeys they travelled far and wide. Their chief appeal — at least in the case of the Franciscans — was to the masses. So little had the Friars in common with the ecclesiastics of that day, whose work lay along different lines, that to the dregs of the populace St. Francis's Brethren seemed as angels of ministration. The parochial system was rigid, and many fish slipped through the meshes of the parish priest's net. There was but little preaching in the churches of that early date. There was terrible poverty, sickness, and grinding misery abroad ; the houses of the poor were frequently ghastly hovels of filth and of disease; there was far more than a submerged tenth in the thirteenth century in England. In many towns the Friars Minor — as the Franciscans humbly called themselves — at first encamped in squalor and want outside the borough walls, until presently they were admitted within, and were allowed and helped to build a house to dwell in. Probably this was what happened at Bridgwater. It seems more than likely that they settled first of all in the field on the south side of the town, adjacent to the house still known as the Friars, till at last William Briwere came to their rescue, and they were welcomed to a more decent home. From that day they rose rapidly in power and in public favour, and made their influence felt far and wide in the county. Their homely and forcible sermons, which dealt, certainly at first, with moral rather than with theological questions, appealed to the laity, and especially to the ignorant and poor, with irresistible force. The

movement was a moral one ; when first it began it lacked almost all intellectual stimulus. It was an appeal ad hominem; the simple yet direct sermon, the attractive miracle-play, the portable pulpit set up in the market-place, the homely visit, the meal shared with the humblest of folk ; these things told. The alms of even the poorest flowed in to the Franciscans. A new religious power had come into Bridgwater and into English life.

The Friars' house in Friarn Street* grew slowly, but many benefactors, small and great, at different times helped it on. William Briwere's start was a splendid thing for them, seeing that he was lord of the town. Leland relates that *one of the Lords Botreaux and his wife were especial benefactors to it. Thereupon his heart, and his wife's body, were buried there.* ** William de Cantelupe, too, was a beneficent patron. Powerful influences in favour of the brotherhood grew, for on May 28th, 1282, an order was sent to John, the son of Hugh, keeper of the King's forest at Shirlet, *to cause the Friars Minor of Bruges to have in that forest six oaks fit for timber, of the king's gift.* *** In 1278 a similar direction is transmitted to the keeper of the King's forest at North Petherton. The Friars are to have five oaks fit for timber for the making of their dormitory. The town authorities, too, welcomed them. A deed exists, dated January 21st, 1246, addressed to the bailiffs of Bruges Walteri. In it the King, Henry the Third, ratifies the assignments which they have made to the Friars Minor of a place to build a church and necessary buildings in their town. **** As the brotherhood prospered, it became usual for some of the great ones to seek spiritual confraternity with them, and the right of burial in their chapel. Thus in 1479 John Kendall, of Bridgwater, acquired a grant from Brother Robert, Warden of the Friars, admitting himself, and his wife Matilda, and William and Juliana, their children, to such confraternity, duly set forth in a deed now enrolled amongst the Bridgwater documents, and endorsed with a form of absolution. In the same year, though in a separate document, John Kendall is similarly admitted to the benefits of the brotherhood. In an earlier Latin document, written in 1409, Brother William, the Warden, greets William Dyst and his wife Joanna. *Through the merits of this life may they attain everlasting joy.*

In recognition of their devotion to the Order and their benefits to the convent they are admitted to certain spiritual privileges, and after death they are to have the same

benefits in the way of prayers as the brethren and benefactors of the Order. Sir Leonard Hakeluyt, Knight, and his wife, the Lady Margaret, both lie buried in the chapel. Moreover, as the rules of the Order became modified, as they eventually did, and it became permissible for the brotherhood to receive gifts of money, if not for themselves, yet for their house, many bequests were made to them from all over Somerset. Agnes Grene bequeaths *my best gowne*; Sir John Poulet, 20s. ; Edward Greville leaves a bequest so that the brothers may celebrate for his soul ; Bishop Bekynton, of Bath and Wells, gives 20s. ; John Cammell, of Glastonbury, 6s. 8d. ; Sir John Chokke, 3s. 4d. ; Sir Richard Chokke, 6s. 6d. ; Richard Burton, of Taunton, 6s. 8d. ; and so on. At first it was amongst the laity, and notably with the poor, that the Friars' influence mainly lay, but it spread at length to layman and ecclesiastic alike. Probably the very real poverty in which the brotherhood began their mission formed a large factor in the influence which they acquired. Self-denial never fails to tell. A fragment occurring in a late fifteenth-century document might well have been the motto of the Franciscans.

*If thowe be in povertie se patientlye that thou take it, And thincke how into the world thou camest all naked. **

Yet there were weak spots in the Friars' armour. The chief one was that they were, if not entirely, yet nearly independent of episcopal control, and so frequently they became a thorn in the side of the vicar of the parish. They could act independently of him, acknowledging the Apostolic See as their supreme guide. It is true that the bishop gave to them licence to hear confessions (as was granted to the Warden in the case of Lady Margaret Hakeluyt); and similar permission was extended to another of their body in regard to the Nuns of Cannington, as well as in other cases. Yet in the main they were free lances, and as such the parson of the parish was apt to look askance upon them at times. They could perform many religious offices; they could itinerate and divert dues which might otherwise go to the vicar; the priests could officiate at the burial of the dead, which might take place in their own chapel or graveyard, paying one-fourth part of the accustomed dues to the vicar. They were free from the payment of tithe, either for their house, garden, orchard, or herbage of their cattle.

They were adepts at drawing up wills for the sick and dying. Consequently the parish

priests watched them narrowly, and sometimes bewailed their intrusion. When Archbishop Peckham directed the parsons to welcome the brothers, the former felt it at times to be a hardship indeed. Thus in 1462 a quarrel arose in Bridgwater between two parties as to the possession of certain deeds. A Bill of Complaint was laid before Sir Richard Chokke, Justice, who proceeded to take evidence on oath in the church of the Grey Friars. A certified copy of this record is given by William at Welle and John Walshe, Common Stewards of the borough of Bridgwater.**Probably John Coswayn the Vicar of Bridgwater, would have preferred that the inquiry should have taken place in St. Mary's. The feeling, however, in Bridgwater never ran high. In 1502 Brother John Boldeheyter, a Friar Minor, was appointed to be a chantry priest in the parish church. He was *Sacræ Theologiae Baccalaureus*.

In one detail the Friars departed *toto cælo* from the direction of St Francis. This was in regard to learning. Before the end of the thirteenth century they had gained immense influence in the University of Oxford. Their scholars multiplied apace, and could not be restrained. Throughout Europe they gained, deservedly, the reputation of being the most learned of the religious orders. Kilwarby the Franciscan became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1273; Bonaventura, their General, declined the great See of York ; Bonaventura's successor in the Order filled the Papacy as Nicholas IV. Brother Alexander Barclay, a Devonshire priest, who was a Benedictine, and afterwards a Franciscan, became in the sixteenth century Suffragan Bishop in the diocese of Bath and Wells. He was *a good poet and rhetorician, who wholly apply'd himself to read and write pious and historical Legends of Saints ; some whereof he composed, but translated many more out of Latin into English.*'

Three famous Bridgwater Friars must be mentioned next. The Bridgwater House (or Friary) was, it should be said, in the custody or wardenship of Bristol. Thus Bristol, Gloucester, Bridgwater, Hereford, Exeter, Carmarthen, Dorset, Cardiff, and Bodmin all had Friars Minor foundations, and were included in one district, there being seven such districts in all England. Dugdale, quoting Leland, specially eulogizes Brother Henry Cross, a Franciscan, *famous in his age, not only for erudition, but also for piety. ****

Nor did his virtue go without an honourable reward. He was made a sub-master of his order in England, which employment conferred on him he managed with so much dexterity that, what

seldom happens, he gained much applause without envy. Nor did he, at his death, leave behind him any ill name, or small reputation, to learned posterity. For he writ some books which testify his good affection towards sacred literature; one of which was a commentary on Aristotle's Natural Philosophy, the other on the sentences of Longobardus. Witness the catalogue of renowned Franciscans. He was made Doctor of Divinity at Oxford, and the thirteenth reader in that house of the Friars-Minor. He died at Bridgwater, and was there buried among the brethren of that order.

Another eminent Bridgwater Franciscan was Brother John Summer. He too was an Oxford student, and made such great progress in philosophy and mathematics, that *there was scarce his equal at that time in England, but none exceeded him. He particularly apply'd himself to astronomy, and produc'd works in that kind which were highly commended, partly gathered from the most approved authors, and partly of his own wit and discovery; which, by command of Thomas Hiber, his Provincial, and at the request of Joanna, Princess of Wales, the King's mother, he finished, reduced into good order, and published.** About the year 1390 he was quite a noted person, and his books, *Canons of the Stars, Of the Quantity of the Year, Corrections of the Calendar,* with other works after the fashion of those days, made him eminent. A few years later William Auger, also from Oxford, came to settle in Bridgwater as guardian of the Friars' monastery. In that position he, "being quietly settled there, began to chew over again those things which he had often read, learnt, or disputed on in the schools; but he took most delight in reading and meditating on the Holy Gospels.** Brother Auger wrote some commentaries on the Gospel of St. Luke, and then, his work finished, he passed away in the Friarn Street House, and was laid to rest in the little chapel. Brother Robert Cross, a Provincial of the Order, and a doctor of Oxford, lies there too. Although the site of the Friars' buildings is fairly easy to locate to-day, the exact position of their chapel has not yet been definitely ascertained. The length of it was 120 *steppys*, its width 30 *steppys*, and the width of the nave 14 *steppys*.

The Friars' time in Bridgwater witnessed a whole catena of stirring events, and a development of thought in England which culminated in the series of upheavals and changes known as the Reformation. The Franciscans' advent was only shortly preceded by the Papal interdict which Pope Innocent III laid upon the kingdom in 1208, in the course

of his quarrel with King John. This interdict was a monumental instance of Papal folly. It forbade the solemnities of public worship, and although its effects have been exaggerated, it practically closed all the churches. Baptism, confirmation and other sacred functions might be permitted in cases of urgency; marriage was allowed, though without the solemnities. Yet it barred all the usual worship of the people, and this, continuing for five years, might well have driven them into absolute alienation from the Church. King John, few will be found to deny, deserved excommunication or any other censure, for in spite of his *bonhomie* and his general popularity in Somerset — he was an excellent sportsman — it would be hard to exculpate him. He divorced his wife Hawisia, Countess of Gloucester, in 1189, and took to wife Isabella of Angouleme, but how lightly he regarded any such ties the stories of that day freely tell us. His reign was a miserable squabble with Rome and with his subjects, ending in an equally miserable submission. However, he gave Bridgwater her first charter, and so started the town on a successful career. But this, in all probability, was due more to William Briwere than to the Plantagenet King. The Crusades had by this time well-nigh spent their force; England was developing her own resources and her trade. The constant irritation caused by the unwise policy of the Roman Church towards this country increased; it was not — certainly at first — a matter of difference of doctrine, but of policy. The Popes might coerce other countries; they coerced England too, somewhat, but it could not last. The independent spirit of Englishmen was bound to prevail, and it prevailed.

In 1349 the Black Death came; an awful pestilence which ravaged the land, and claimed thousands of victims in Somerset. So diminished was the population that the demand for labour rose by leaps and bounds, and in consequence labourers' wages rose too. The insurrection of 1381 was a consequence of this, and all our neighbourhood was for long in a very troubled state. In these crises the three religious forces in Bridgwater were the Parish Church of St. Mary, with its chantries; the Augustinian Hospital of St. John in Eastover; and the Friars. The time of religious intellectual and spiritual development was not yet. The discovery of the art of printing, the New Learning, the open Bible, the growing hatred of Roman political action, and Henry VIII's keen desire for a divorce from Katherine of Aragon and from the Pope,

were the ultimate causes which led to the huge changes of the sixteenth century. Now the Friars, as has been seen, in spite of the excellence of their ideal — which on the whole was really well maintained in Bridgwater — had two weak points. By the time the sixteenth century had dawned their system of mendicancy was bad and out of date ; their dependence upon the Apostolic See was now fatal. The Act of Supremacy in 1534 placed the King, not the Pope, at the head of all persons and things in England, including the Franciscans in Friarn Street. It was probably more from political reasons than from any delinquencies that Henry disliked them. He was a Catholic through and through. But he must be master. And this army of Friars in England, whom the common people dearly loved and trusted, who were sworn servants of Rome, must be done away with. The Act for the suppression of the smaller religious houses, passed in 1536, sealed their fate. It was practically assured in 1534, when our Church's Convocation formally declared that *Romanus episcopus non habet majorem aliquam jurisdictionem a Deo sibi collatam in hoc Regno Angliae quam quivis alius extremus episcopus*. * The Franciscans had got on fairly well with the English bishops, but they always held themselves as ultimately bound in obedience to the Bishop of Rome. Now, the declaration averred, that Bishop had no more power in England than any other bishop. The difficulty, doubtless, might have been got over. But Henry did not want to get over it He wanted the spoil of all these smaller houses, and his jackals wanted their share of it too. The Friars had no lands, and almost no revenues; there were only their houses, churches, and the beautiful ornaments and vestments which they loved to use for the services in their little chapel. They were helpless. They could only bow their heads before the storm. Upon them first in England the blow fell, and in their utter helplessness they stood, as Cardinal Wolsey said to Cromwell, all naked to their enemies.

The wording of the surrender of the Friary is as follows : —

Memorandum ; we the Wardeyn and convent of ye gray Fryeres of Brygewater w^t one assent and consent w^tout any maner of coaccyon or counsell do gyve our house Into ye handes of ye lorde vysytor to ye kinges use desyrynge hys grace to be goode and gracyous to us. In wyttiness we subscribe our namys w^t our proper handdes the XIII day of September In ye XXX yere of kynge Henry the VIII.th

per me Iohannes Herys gardi^m.
per me I. Thomen Howett.
per me Iohon Wake.
per me Richardum Harris, Sacerdotum.
per me Gerardum Morley, bachalaureum.
per me Iohannem Cogyn.
per me Andream Gocyt.
per me Robertum Olyver.

An inventory had been taken, in two parts. The first part enumerated *the housses of ffreres lately given up whiche have any substance of lead* Thus : —

The grey freres in brigwater one pane of the cloyster ; two grete gutters bitwen the church and the batilment; diverse grete spowtes on both sides of the church w^t an oryall in a chamber all leaded.

Lead was valuable, and must be seized. The second inventory is a long one : —

Thys Indentur makeythe mencyon of all ye stuffe of ye grey freeres of brygewater receyved by ye lord vysytor under ye lord prevy seale for ye kynges grace and delyoeryd to John Newport mayer ther and Rycherd Torell to se and order to ye kynges use wth ye howse and all ye pertenans tyll ye kynges plesure be forder knowyn.

The list is too lengthy to give. Almost all the items refer to ornaments and necessaries for the Friars' worship ; very little for their private use.

In the choir were, a table of alabaster with 9 images ; on the altar 4 altar cloths ; 2 goodly candlesticks ; a pair of organs ; a leaden holy-water stoup and a sacry bell. In the church were 3 cloths before the altar, a frame of iron about a tomb, and an old coffer. No fewer than 22 copes are in the list, some of them evidently of exquisite workmanship. The vestments are very numerous. A suit of white silk for priestly deacon, and sub-deacon; 4 old tunicles, 7 old chasubles; many suits, of silk and damask, of all colours ; altar hangings, cushions, silken palls, and other equipments for mediaeval worship. At the end is a significant note. Memorandum: *Where the debts of the house drew about ;£18 or £19 the visitor hath delivered an old suit of vestments, with the cope and other small things, to the warden, and the warden hath undertaken to discharge all debts, and the visitor hath with him to the king's use in jewels and plate to the sum of 17 ounces and 18 ounces, and hath sold 2 old feather beds and 2 small pots and one pan for 17 shillings.*" Signed: *per me Iohannem Newport; per me, Richard Tyrrell.*

John Newport appears on Mr. Jarman's list as having been Mayor of Bridgwater in 1532 ; Richard Tyrrell in 1540.*** The Friars' little property was sold to all and sundry persons,

but it could not amount to much. The house and buildings had a value ; the site went to one Emanuel Lucar. Very little, it is estimated, went into the King's pocket from the Brothers' property, save from the land and the Friary buildings standing thereon. The suppression was theoretically defensible, but the mode of carrying it out was, and is, abhorrent to every just mind. The Friars were mostly turned out into the world with nothing, and with their occupation gone. As Bishop Creighton once said, the Reformation suppressions had to come, but the King had to get the scum of the earth to carry them out.

When old Leland visited Bridgwater he spoke of having seen *a goodly House wher sumtyme a Colledge was of Gray Freres*. After giving a few memoranda upon it, he goes on to say, *the Accustumer of Bridgwater hath translated this place to a right goodly and pleasant dwelling House*.* His note is strangely appropriate. The old house, still remaining, has nothing but the memory of its former inhabitants. It is useful still, but in another way, and to a new generation. The Friars have utterly disappeared from English life. They vanished with even greater quickness than they at first took Bridgwater by storm with their burning religious zeal. No one has quite taken their place, and this is presumably because their work was over and done. It is not necessarily the unfit, in this throbbing world, who go to the wall ; it is those who are no longer needed. The Brotherhood lived, prayed, and laboured ; then they suffered and passed away like a dead man out of mind, as the Hebrew singer hath it. Yet one can hardly walk down Friarn Street without giving a thought to the noble and sainted dead who lie hidden away somewhere under the floor of the Brothers' chapel, and without half expecting to meet a Friar, clad in long grey cloak and cowl, walking barefoot to minister to some hapless soul.



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* *Longitudo ecclesiae Fratnim Minonim de Bryggewater 120 steppys, et ejus latitudo 30 steppys, et latitudo navis ecclesiae 14 steppys.* (Leland.)

Translation: *The length of the Friars minor Bryggewater [is] 120 steppys and 30 steppys [is] its breadth and width of the nave of the church, 14 [steppys] (Leland.)*

** Dugdale's *Mon. Ang*, Vol. VI, part iii. p. 1531.

*** *Calendar of Close Rolls*.

**** *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Henry III.*

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* *Bridgwater documents*.

** *Bridgwater documents*

*** *Mon. Ang*, Vol VI, Part iii, p.1527

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* *Stevens' Abbeys*, Vol I, p. 101.

** *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 102.

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**The Bishop of Rome hath no greater jurisdiction conferred on him by God in this kingdom of England than any other bishop.*

** *Archbold's Religious Houses*, p. 97

****Jarman's History of Bridgwater*, p. 269

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*Dugdale's *Mon, Ang*, Vol. VI, part iii, p. 1531.

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