

WITHIN a short time after Innocent the Third's laying England under an Interdict, and thus depriving her people of the privileges of public worship, there was founded in Bridgwater an institution which flourished and did excellent work for more than three hundred years. This was the Hospital or Priory of St. John, in Eastover. The *ordinatio seu fundatio* of this Religious House is noted in Bishop Bekynton's Register at Wells,\* beginning with the usual greeting to all sons of Holy Mother Church.

*Let all know that the nobleman William Bruere has founded a hospital at Bruggewater, and has placed there clerical brethren (clericos fratres) who will serve God there, and has given possessions for their support and for that of Christ's poor (pauperes Christi) and promises to give more.*

The gifts enumerated to begin with were the churches of Bridgwater, Northover, and of Ile Bruers, with all their rights and appurtenances, together with the chapel in the Castle of Bridgwater. The most important condition was "that the aforesaid hospital should be a free house of God (*Domus libera Dei*) founded in pure perpetual alms only for the poor of Christ and by no means for the rich or any others. The brethren were allowed to choose their Magister or Master out of their own body (*de gremio suo*); they were to be free from procurations and all episcopal burdens. The Magister was master in his own house and could manage his own affairs, and appoint his own officers and bailiffs outside as well as inside the house. With regard to Mass and habit the brethren were required to wear such clerical garments as suited *Fratres hospitales* or those of a similar order, but, as a distinguishing mark, with a cross of black or blackish colour worked on their mantles and upper cloaks (*cruce nigri aut nidi coloris in mantellis et indumentis suis superioribus*). The brethren were also required to live according to the regular rules and constitutions of the Order of St. Augustine.

Also, that they should serve the parish church of Bruggewater where they live, and which they have for their own use, by one of the aforesaid Brethren, and by a secular Chaplain fit to hold the cure (*per alium capellanum secularem idaneum pro cura supportanda*).

Also, that one of the Brethren or a secular chaplain should daily celebrate one mass in the chapel of Bridgwater Castle; and further, when the Lord of the Castle was at home and should ask for it,

the brother or chaplain should be bound to minister at the canonical hours in a fit and becoming manner. The Master and Brethren of the Hospital should be entitled fully and without dispute to all the offerings and oblations made in the said Castle. Also, the Lord of the Castle for the time being shall find and in all future time provide books, vestments, vessels, candles and everything else either necessary or suitable for the said Chapel.

Also, that some fit or proper Brother should have the charge and care of the poor, infirm and needy in the infirmary, working under the Master, ministering to the same according to the means of the House and his own ability. Also, that two or three women not of gentle birth, but still fit for the purpose (*non nobiles sed idoneae*), being of good conversation and repute, willing and able to minister to the poor and infirm there, should be duly admitted by the Master and Brethren. And these women should be always careful and ready both by day and by night to help the sick and to minister to them in all things, and further they should not turn their attention to any other acts and services excepting their due prayers and devotions.

It is expressly provided that no other women and sisters beyond the said number of two or three shall be admitted and kept on any pretext whatever.

Also, that no leper or lunatic, or any one having the falling sickness (*marbum caduum*) or any other contagious disease, or a woman in child, or a sucking infant (*infantulus lactens*) or any other unbearable (*intolerabilis*) patient shall be admitted into the aforesaid house, however poor and infirm. There were also many stringent conditions laid down to prevent the diversion of things given by the faithful for the sustentation of Christ's poor people. There were to be no corrodies or free meals or boardings or pensions or chantries either to be sold or granted for money or favour (*prece aut pretio*).

Further, "We expressly forbid that either the rich or the powerful, whether of diocesan rank or ordinary people, or the ministers and stewards of the Patron of the House [Lord Briwere was the first Patron] should lodge, sojourn, or be entertained in the aforesaid Hospital and be a burden to the House and Brethren. Nor should they tax it by their frequent presence nor by feeding their horses nor

by any costs of entertainment. If they do, let them be Anathema and lie under Divine vengeance. We, together with the aforesaid William Bruere, of our full episcopal authority approve, and for ever confirm the gift on behalf of ourselves and our successors and with the consent of the Chapter of Wells."

In testimony thereof are appended the seals of the Bishop and of William Briwere. Witnesses : William the Præcentor, William the Archdeacon, Alardus the Chancellor, Godfrey the Treasurer, Lambert the Subdeacon, Robert Succentor, Gilbert of Taunton, the Canons of Wells, and many others. Given at Woky xii Kal. Aug. in the fourteenth year of our bishopric. 1219.

This deed, it must readily be confessed, was drawn up in an admirable spirit, and with no little ingenuity. The Hospital of Bridgwater was eminently practical. Its object differed from that of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem. It had a plain local object in view, i.e. to help the poor and afflicted, and none other. It more than anticipated the scheme of a modern infirmary, and combined with it the carefully regulated ministrations of religion.

A record,\* dating from May 10th, 1286, throws some light upon hygienic arrangements in ancient days. It is a licence to the Master and Brethren.

Whereas they and the poor Christian sick there were in great need of running water they should be allowed to make a watercourse from the River of Parret on the South of the Great Bridge of Bridgwater, by means of a dyke three feet broad over their own land and the land of others, and of a depth according to the depth of the river, as far as the said Hospital ; and thence along the causeway on the North side back to the said river so as to cleanse the privies of the said Hospital ; the said dyke to be covered when necessary with stones and earth, so as to be level with the adjoining land and kept in repair by the said Hospital.

In due time other benefices and properties were allotted to the hospital, including, amongst others, the advowsons of Chilton Trinity and Wembdon. Some work in educating the poor was also laid upon the canons or brethren. There is no doubt that they did it thoroughly and well. They were never a wealthy body, and frequently endured sore straits. Again and again the documents show how the Master and brethren appealed against this and that

impost or due, upon the ground of their poverty. Their plea was usually allowed, which is tolerably strong evidence that the hospital was never well off. The number of documents and references relating to St. John's Hospital is very numerous indeed — relating to the election of a master or prior, to an appeal for the remission of a tax proposed to be laid upon the little society, to a petition asking that a poor clerk may receive preferment, or an ordination or regulation for the proper maintenance and support of a vicar serving one of the benefices of which the master and brethren were rectors. The regulation made for the vicar of Northover is an instance of this.

In return for the due performance of his duties the vicar was given *a house with a curtilage, 9½ acres of arable land, 2 acres of meadow, all oblations from whatever source, together with tithes of hay, ale, lambs, milk, wool, flax, hemp, pigeons, pigs, geese, apples, honey, wax, heifers, chicken, mills, leeks, garlic, and all other small tithes within the said parish whatever. The Vicar to find processional candles, bread and wine for the celebration of Mass, incense as often as required, and have the church clothes (vestments?) cleaned at his expense. The Master and the Brethren of the Hospital to sustain all other charges."*

Certainly the master and brethren looked well after their duties in Bridgwater. They maintained the very high character which the Canons of St. Augustine gained, and deservedly gained, all over England. One might well have thought that the hospital and its brethren would have been free from envy or unpopularity. Yet, since any body which holds property runs the risk of either actively or passively offending other owners of property, so it was with the brethren of St. John's.

The Calendar of Patent Rolls records the issue, on Feb. 6th 1380, of a Commission of Oyer and Terminer to James (Lord Audley), Peter Courtenay, Henry Percehay, and others, on complaint of Thomas, Master of the Hospital of St. John Baptist, Parson of the Church of Bridgwater, that William Blacche, tanner, John Thomas, carpenter, John Kelly, hosier, and many others, armed, approached the said town, close, and houses, broke the doors and windows of his church, took food and £20 in money, closed and still hold the said door closed to the ministers and parishioners, assaulted his servants and so threatened them that they dare not come near the said Hospital." Another entry records that

these riotous persons took away the master's goods and certain Papal Bulls touching the appropriation of the vicarage (of St. Mary's). Probably this was a quarrel, arising out of contested rights, between the master and William, son of William de Zouche, who was lord of two parts of the town of Bridgwater. The latter averred that the master, aided by his supporters, had prevented William's steward from holding his Court of Frankpledge. William de Zouche was patron of the hospital and lord of the manor, and he was supported in his claim by many of the Bridgwater folk. The quarrel was purely local, and it was incidental, in those days, to most neighbouring magnates holding property or land.

A more serious riot occurred on June 19-20, 1381. The Patent Rolls record a pardon, *notwithstanding that in divers parliaments he was excepted as one of the principal insurgents, to Thos. Engilby, for the following treasons, trespasses and felonies with which he is charged, viz. ... he went with Adam Brugge and others to the Hospital of St. John, Bruggwater, broke the house and seized and detained William Cammel the master until he delivered to him certain bonds between the men of Bruggwater and the said Master, released all his rights and profits to Nicholas Frompton, rector (sic) of Bruggewater, tithes of hay and corn excepted, and made fine in 200 marks for the safety of himself and convent. He also went to the house of John Sydenham and destroyed goods, and to the house where John was staying in the same town and burned writings touching his inheritance and court rolls of James Audley and John Cole, tearing off the seals. On the same day he also burned a tenement of Thomas Duffield in the town, value £20, and a house and goods of Walter Baron of Estchilton, causing the said Walter to be beheaded, and on the Friday following he went to Ivelchestre and made John Bursy, living in his house at Longesutton, to go with him ; broke the gaol and took out Hugh Lavenham, there under a charge of felony, and made the said Bursy behead him, carry his head on a spear to Bruggewater and place it with that of Walter Baron on Bruggwater bridge.*

Frompton was afterwards pardoned, with the conditional saving clause (usually introduced into documents at that date) that he did not kill Simon, Archbishop of Canterbury, or Robert Hales. He was in London at the time when the Archbishop and Hales were killed, in the famous Peasants' Revolt under Wat Tyler. Somerset, however, had nothing whatever to do with this revolt. Frompton, it is said, claimed the vicarage of

St. Mary's from the master. He never got it. He may, of course, have utilized the prevailing excitement during the Peasants' Revolt, to raise a riot on his own account in Bridgwater. But there is no direct link between St. John's Hospital and the great peasant rising. A dissatisfied cleric made a fuss because a certain benefice was not given him. He was clever enough to take advantage of the unrest prevailing in other parts of England. That was all.\*

These, however, are only passing incidents in the long and good career of the brethren. When they came to be suppressed, in common with the other religious houses, under Henry VIII, there was nothing to be said against them. It was in vain to resist the King — they acknowledged his supremacy. This, however, was of no avail ; their time had come. Having been expelled, pensions were assigned to " *the late master and Brethern of the surrendryde house of Seynte Ioones in Brydgewater. And they and every of theym to have their halff yeers pencion at Thanunciacon of oure Lady next comyng whiche shalbe in the yere of our Lorde godd 1539.*" Robert Walshe, the master, received a pension of £33 6s. 8d. ; Thos. Coggyn, Richarde Kymrydge, John Colde, John Wyll, and Roberte Ffysher, £4. each ; John Wood and John Mors, 40s. each.

Of the masters or priors of the old hospital, of which every trace has now ceased to exist, the following names are known : Gilbert, 1281 ; Henry de Stanford, 131 2 ; John Pathull ; William Cammel, 1381 ; Thomas Pulton, 1422 ; John Wemedon, 1423 ; Roger Cory, 1449 ; John Holford, 1457 ; Thomas Spenser, 1498 ; Richard Walsh, 1538. Richard Walsh was one of the two clerics who were afterwards nominated to be Suffragan Bishop of Taunton. As it turned out, however, he was not appointed. Taunton and Bridgwater towns were both placed on Henry VIII's list, containing the names of places which were hereafter to be made the seat of a bishopric. To neither, as yet, has this honour come. Perhaps it may be so in the days before us. Poor Richard Walsh's dream of being a bishop was never fulfilled; he died a dispossessed prior. But he did his duty well, and our old town, for many a day, must much have missed the kindly ministrations of the prior and canons of St. John's Hospital in Eastover, on the other side of William Briwere's great bridge.



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\* See Archer's *Account of Religious Houses*.

p. 2

\* *Cal. Patent Rolls*.

p. 3

\* Professor Oman, in his interesting book *The Great Revolt of 1381* in an incomprehensible manner connects the Knights of St. John, at Clerkenwell with the St. John's Brethren at Bridgwater Hospital There was no kind of connection between them. The Bridgwater Brethren were Augustinian Canons of St Augustine, living in St. John Baptist Hospital. The Clerkenwell Brethren were Knights Hospitallers of St. John, an entirely different foundation and Order. Mr. Oman's suggestion that Frompton wished to avenge himself on the Bridgwater clerics because he had seen how the knights in Clerkenwell had been treated, falls to the ground. Frompton's anger with the Bridgwater men, whatever may have been its cause, had nothing in it to connect them with Clerkenwell. He was far too astute a man to make such a blunder. No one who had been, as he is said to have been, at Clerkenwell and in Bridgwater, could have made the mistake of supposing that the two religious communities were one and the same Order.