

GERARD in his particular description of Somerset remarks that the building of the bridge at Bridgwater by William Briwere meant the downfall of the ancient Saxon borough of Langport as it stopped all ships at the Castle. In old days there might have been considerable traffic, perhaps, of pilgrims going to Glastonbury, but the great movement was to come in Norman times. The conquest of Glamorgan and of ancient Caerleon was made from the North Somerset coast and Parret waters, and this would mean traffic at Bridgwater. Further, all the Severn ports looked towards Ireland, and in his wars with Ireland Henry II constantly requisitioned men and supplies from North Somerset. In the archives of the city of Dublin we meet with such names (1172-1320) as John of Taunton, Thomas of Quantock, Hugh Pollard, Walter of Petherton, Roger of Comwych, Adam Malet, Ralph de Falaise (probably of the Stoke-Courcy family), pointing to early communication between Somerset and Ireland. John de Courcy, together with the Poers and Barrys and Percevals, probably enlisted many stout West-Countrymen for their campaigns in Ulster. *

Elsewhere, Bridgwater vessels plied far up the Severn valley and past the forest of Dene. In 1233 (Close Rolls) the constable of Bridgwater Castle had orders to assist the abbot and monks of Tewkesbury in shipping timber and lead from Bridgwater *for the repair of their church*. At Caerleon there must have been a notable landing place, and every creek and pill of the Severn was familiar to Bridgwater sailors.

From a notice in the Patent Rolls dated February 7, 1277, and written from Woodstock, we learn that the sailors of Bridgwater were summoned to assist Edward the First in his Welsh campaign. A safe-conduct was given that year to Eudo la Zouche (who had inherited by marriage part of the Briwere property in Bridgwater), conveying by water corn and other victuals by his own sailors of Brugeswauter, Totnes, and Dartmouth to Pembroke, Pembrokeshire, Kaermardyn (Carmarthen), Kedevelly, and Sweyneseye (Swansea) for the support of those people who were then on the King's expedition against Llewellyn son of Griffin and his accomplices in rebellion.

Here are one or two entries to show how Bridgwater and its sailors were required to take part in the Scotch wars of Edward I

(1302). August 10. Westminster. Appointment of Thomas de Werbelton and Peter de Donewyco to punish at their discretion the commonalties of the town of Briggewauter (with others) who promised to send a ship well armed in aid of the Scotch war and took no measures to do so, to the retardation of that expedition. This was followed by a milder order dated November 10, 1302, by which Peter de Donewyco, King's clerk, was appointed to act in conjunction with the sheriffs of Somerset (and other counties) to induce the bailiffs and good men of Briggewauter to send one ship furnished with men and necessaries in aid of the Scotch expedition so as to be there by the Feast of the Ascension ready to set forth against the Scots at the King's charges. In the following notice of the appointment of Nicholas Fermband in 1307, there is a distinct Protectionist flavour. Together with the sheriff he is ordered to see that a recent proclamation prohibiting any one from taking out of the realm corn, animals or other kind of victuals, horses, armour, money, gold or silver plate, or silver in mass (except corn and victuals destined for Gascony) be strictly observed by the bailiffs of Bridgwater.

In 1311 (May 23) the mayor, bailiffs, good men and commonalties of Briggewauter with Ilfardcumme (Ilfracombe) and Bardestaple are ordered to provide three ships, with Thomas de Kirkeby as clerk, in aid of the King's service in the war against Robert le Brus, fully armed and provisioned for seven weeks. The vessels are to be at Wolrikeford near Carrickfergus in Ulster by the morrow of midsummer-day. The mariners and men are to obey the orders of John de Ergardia as admiral and captain; Thomas de Kirkeby to superintend the fitting out of the vessels. This aid is not to prejudice them nor to be drawn into a precedent. This last clause is instructive as showing how the ports and boroughs were acquiring power and were already in a position to make terms for themselves.

In 1322 there are two orders (Close Rolls) to the mayor, bailiffs and men of Brugge-wauter, the first dated March 1, in accordance with which they were ordered to prepare ships against the Scotch rebels, the second dated April 3, 1322, by which they were ordered to fetch men from Ireland to Carlisle.

In an order dated August 12, 1326, there are signs of the French war, when all owners of ships of burthen of fifty tons and upwards were required to come from Briggewauter to Portsmouth with ships, arms and victuals to

start in the King's service against the French. On June 28, 1328, an order was sent through the mayor and bailiffs of Briggewater to all shipowners to be prepared to repel an attack of the French.

The following orders in the Close Rolls are also instructive : April 25, 1330. At Woodstock. To the Sheriffs of Somerset. Order to cause the wheat lately ordered to be carried to Plymouth to be carried to Bruggewater and delivered to whom the King shall depute. Ships to come to Bruggewater to carry the victuals to Bordeaux. February 18, 1331 At Windsor. Protection until Michaelmas for David le Palmer and Hugh le Mareysy merchants of Bruggewater, and their servants trading in corn and other victuals within the kingdom, on condition that they do not transport the same to foreign parts contrary to the late proclamation. By another entry in the Close Rolls it transpires that the King, *compassionating the estate of the people of Wales where there is a great scarcity of corn*, granted leave to these Bridgwater merchants to take 500 quarters thither. England, in those days, was looked upon as a corn-exporting country.

In 1331 there was a notice of the appointment of Thomas Boy on the nomination of Arnold Nicol, chief butler of the King, to collect during the said Arnold's pleasure a custom of 2s. on every tun of wine imported by merchant strangers into the port of Bridgwater and Lyme, which the King has granted to Arnold Nicol until Michaelmas for a sum to be paid by him into the exchequer. This entry throws light upon the wine trade of the port, the customs, and also the method of nominating the *costumer*. The chief butlership was an ancient, and in old days, no doubt, a very lucrative appointment, and the perquisites of the chief butler were considerable if levied in the same way as indicated above. Originally the office was claimed as hereditary in certain families.

There is an allusion to the departure in 1386 of John of Gaunt with an English expedition to Castille, amongst whom, we know, was the famous Simon de Raleigh, of Nettlecombe, to assert his claim to the Castilian throne. *March 28, 1386. Westminster. Appointment of Wm. Whitbread, John Polyn, and John Hayly of Bristol to provide ships and arrest mariners in ports of Bristol, Briggewater, Chepstow, and Axwater for the passage of Robert de Veer [Vere], Marquess of Dublin, for the Duke of Lancaster's expedition to Spain.*" Robert de

Vere, Earl of Oxford, was one of the King's (Richard II) chief advisers, against whom there was a formidable party of baronial opposition. However, John of Gaunt's designs upon Castile ended in the marriage of his daughter Katharine to Henry of Castile, bringing the thrones of England and Spain together by a matrimonial alliance — as it has recently by the marriage of King Alfonso to the Princess Victoria.

In the Charter of Edward IV the bounds of Bridgwater (apparently enlarged) are thus described both by land and along the river (June 18, 1468): —

That the Liberties and Franchises of that Town or Burrough shall extend themselves out of the same Town or Burrough by the Limits, moots and bounds following : — To wit by Land : on the east part of the said town to a certain Cross called Kelyng Cross: and from thence to a certain field called Matthews Field on the west part of the same town : and from thence to a certain place called Cropill on the north part of that town: and from thence to the said Cross called Kelyng Cross:

And by water from the Bridge called Lymebridge to Heuclyve [Leuclyve?] and from thence to Brendown [Breandown] together with the Rode called Seynt Andrew's pole [pool] : from this pool to Highbregge :the Head of Comwiche, wijn penyes dokke [?] mill pille, prioraspill [Prioress of Canington's pill ?], Harfullpille, Saxpole, Pauletpille, Downendepille, Pegenspille, and Crowpille with all other pools, creeks and places in the same water for ships and other vessels to lie and rest in."

Some of these local definitions appear to be lost, but the coast and river jurisdiction of the town of Bridgwater would seem to have taken in the sixteen miles of the Parret windings and the littoral of Burnham and Berrow. Heuclyve may have been some point of the Polden ridge, where of old the loop of the Parret used to run towards Cranebridge. *Wine penny dock* tells its own tale, and here the duty on imported wine may have been levied. The *Head of Comwich* is so far interesting as it points to the old-world importance of Comwich or Comwith as a terminus or head of navigation. St. Andrews pill preserves the name of the apostle known at St. Davids and also at Banwell and Stoke Courcy, and may have been at Burnham where the church was dedicated to St. Andrew. It was a favourite Somerset dedication along North Somerset. The word *pill* is Welsh, as in Coganspille across the channel : *Creek* appears surely in Creech St.

Michael and elsewhere in the Parret valley.

The port and landing places of the Parret mentioned in the Charter of Edward IV were difficult to reach from the Severn Sea, and the windings of the tidal river itself formed a considerable obstacle to an invading foe. The distance by river between Bridgwater and the mouth of the Parret is sixteen miles. Sir Walter Raleigh in a Report on the sea defences of the western counties (Sherborne, 25 November, 1595), wrote: *Somerset is sealed from danger having Devon towards the south, and on Severn side it hath not ports capable of any ships of burden and the indraught is long and dangerous*. He notices that Dunster, Minnett (Minehead), and Bridgwater are ports into which small barques cannot arrive without precise observation of tyde.

To come up the Parret in ancient times vessels had to wait at a place called *Botestall*, marked on old maps as off Stolford, and so watch their chance. This place belonged to Stoke Courcy Castle. In Speed's map (1610) under Botestall the following sailing instructions are given: *To sail into the River Parret from the westward for the Port of Bridgwater you will first make a high round hill called Brent Knoll, nearly over Burnham Church, which you must keep due east, and then sail along till you open Bridgwater Steeple. And then you are to keep the north side of Burnham Church, just opened, till you open the river to the eastward of the Warren House of Steart Point.*"

To avoid some of the perils of Parret navigation it was proposed (1 January 1723) to make a new cut through a narrow neck of land about three-quarters of a mile from and out of the Parret to empty into Stolford Bay (Gough MSS, Somerset 7. Bodleian).

In connection with the waterways of the Parret the question of inland public roads and tracks was an important one with the trader. Sometimes they were in a bad state, and on March 27, 1326, Bishop Drokensford issues an Indulgence *pro Calceto de Brugg*, i.e. a ten days' indulgence to all those who might charitably aid in repairing the "causey" or causeway between Bridgwater and the Polden Hills. It was not till 3 George II that, in consequence of an Act for repairing several roads going into Bridgwater, short and level communication between Puriton and Bridgwater, almost touching the bank of the Parret at one place, was made. From the west the most important pack-road must have been that which can still be traced along the present high road leading to Durleigh,

Enmore, and so to *Travellers' Rest* and Buncombe Hill. These deep tracks bear witness to centuries of traffic, but not wheel traffic. The usual traveller was either a packman or a drover, and this primitive state of communication lasted longer in the West-Country than elsewhere. In the Brendon districts wheel traffic was hardly known in many places till the nineteenth century.

Here is an extract throwing light upon the state of the roads nearer Bridgwater in 1737: *We, Jos. Taylor and John Mounsher, surveyors of the highways of the Parish of Bridgwater, do hereby present that the highways leading from Bridgwater to North Petherton, to Wembdon, to Bawdrip, also to Durleigh, are very bad, out of repairs and dangerous to all travellers who pass these roads. This is a great detriment to the parish. Sworn before me Thomas Yeates, Mayor, 27 April, 1737. Samuel Smith, Alderman.*

It is clear, however, that a continuation of water carriage from the borough boundary of Bridgwater to North Petherton and so to Taunton was always an important matter. In 1382 (Patent Rolls, 6 Ric. II) it was complained that owing to the erection of Bathpool Mills, one and a half miles from Taunton below Creechbury hill, by the Abbot of Glastonbury, obstruction was caused to river traffic. *The boats, it was said, which used to carry merchandise from Briggewater to Taunton could not go as formerly. Again, The fish which used to swim from Briggewater to Taunton were so hindered by the aforesaid mills that they could not swim as they were wont. The bank of the river which used to be thirty feet wide was then not more than ten or twelve.* We are informed also that there was a place in the lower part of the said mills, called Bathpolecrosse, up to which all boats came from Briggewater towards Taunton, and, time out of mind, were there discharged and unladen. The river craft were called botes and trowys with their various freights, to wit, firewood, timber, charcoal, pitch, salt, iron, lime, grain, ale, wine, etc.

More than a hundred years later (1498-1500) there was another complaint about a mill at North Curry belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Wells. The men of Taunton alleged that *Time out of mind they have had free passage upon the waters of Tone, Bathpole mill and Brigewater. This was now stopped, and in the winter season, as the ways, i.e. roads, were so foundered by the overflowing of the waters they had no carriage.* This was, no doubt, set forth as a great grievance, but the Dean of Wells, interviewing my Lord of Winchester, as the

lord of the manor of Taunton, thought fit to traverse it. *And as for bote passage, your said officers know right well that in all the said season the water was so low and with so many shallows [?] and bays in the river between our mill and Taunton that it was not possible to convey any bote that way. And in the wynter season the meadows be so filled and replenished with water that the botes may go over at any place, so that they shall not be let [hindered] by the mill"* (Wells MSS.).

In the other direction Bridgwater was connected with Glastonbury via the River Brue, which falls into the River Parret, and the River Brue was linked with the Axe by the canal or waterway that passed Rooks Mill. In the church accounts of St. John's, Glastonbury, the seats for the church are described as being made in Bristol (1500). *David and six men accompanied the carved work, which was shipped in two great boats from the Back near the Temple Friars, at Bristol. These boats were brought to Rooks Mill (on the Pillrow Cut) in S. Brent. Thirteen boats hired at Meare brought part of the work by water from Rooks Mill to the bridge at Maydelode (i.e. near Glastonbury station). Other parts were conveyed by land in thirteen wagons. John Pederam with one carriage and horse brought the carved work from Rooks Bridge to the church, and the whole transit took a week.* Rooks Mill figures very early in Glastonbury history as the place whence each tenant of the abbey was bound to carry *vina et victualia Domini apud Rokys myll debatellis*. Rokes mylle was a kind of port of entry, and here, according to John of Glastonbury, a curia was held by the abbot in Henry VII's time to judge a case according to maritime law.

Modern canals supplemented these ancient waterways. In 1827 the present canal linking Bridgwater and Taunton was cut, in spite of much opposition, and in 1828 the Glastonbury Canal was united with the Brue, capable of carrying vessels of fifty to one hundred tons burthen, and able to navigate the Bristol Channel. The River Brue is navigable to Cripps House, a distance of four miles. * Other more ambitious schemes have been broached in the cutting of a canal between Bridgwater and Comwich Reach, and also the cutting of a trans-Somerset canal from Stolford to Seaton. It is clear, however, that in a smaller way Bridgwater has always been in trading communication with the various parts of the great Parret valley by means of primitive waterways and artificial

canals.

William of Worcester (1415-82), chronicler and traveller, son of William of Worcester, a substantial burgher of Bristol, gives some useful information about the Severn ports at this date. Axwater, he says, is the first port down the coast after Bristol. Comwych is described as three miles from Bridgwater, and is a *portus navium Brygewater*. Myned (Minehead) is the next port towards Devonshire beyond Bridgwater, then *Combe Portus, id est Ilfercomb; Barstable portus sequitur*.

Ships (*naves*), small ships (*naviculae*), and boats and *naviculae vocatae Anglice wodbryshys, cacheys, pycardes*, coming from the ports of the towns of Wales and of the towns and havens of Tynby, Myll-ford-havyn, West-Horford, Lawgker-havyn, Lanstefan-havyn, Ked-welly-havyn, Swansleg-havyn, Neth-havyn, Kerdyff-havyn, Newport-havyn, Usque-havyn (Usk), Kerlyon-havyn, Tyntern Monasterium super flumen de Wye, Chepstow-havyn, Betysley water super aquam de Wye, and of other ports *sive homones* (?) of the comitates or counties of Cornwall, etc. These ships were laden *stango et piscibus*, i.e. stones and fish.

Elsewhere William of Worcester says that all the ships lying *apud le hollow bakkys* at Bristol and hailing from Hispania, Portugallia, Bardegallia, Bayona Vasconia (Gascony?), Aquitania, Britannia Islandia (Brittany?), Irlandia, Wallia and other parts drop anchor at Blackstone. From this description it is possible to infer both the countries with which not only Bristol but Bridgwater men traded and also the kind of ships in which they sailed. The coast traffic would require smaller vessels than the continental.

In addition the old chronicler gives us a list of the familiar islands and landmarks of the Severn Sea beginning from the west, viz. *Insula Lastydenale, Insula de Meulx, Scopeholm, Stalmeys* (four miles from Scopeholm), *Grasholm, Shepesland, Rupis de Crowe, Insula Caldy, Insula Wormeshede, Le Holmys, Insula Barry, Lindey, Syllay* (Sully?), *Flatholm, Stepeholm, Insula Donye, Englysh Stonys, Insula St, Tryacle*.

In an old letter written by Sir Edward Stradlynge of St. Donat's Castle in 1581, the whole haven of Aberthawe, and the government and appointing of all passing boats using the same haven, the granting of all *cockettes*, i.e. *counterparts of the King's seal*,"

and all other money for kyllage (keelage), shippe money, and all customs, commodities and royalties whatsoever were claimed by the writer as having belonged to his ancestors since the conquest of Glamorgan as *lords of the manor of East Orchard*. He claimed also to be lord of the manor of Sully, which originally belonged to the kings of England (Stradling Letter). From the same letter it appears that the haven of Barry — that very ancient landing place — belonged absolutely to Lord St. John of Bletsoe. The above extract is interesting as illustrating the claims of feudal lords over sea ports and havens in former days. Bridgwater was fortunate enough in securing borough privileges to itself at an early date, thanks to its early charters. It secured also all the pills and landing places along the Parret from Lymebridge to Breandown as part of its port. It was, therefore, more independent than Barry, for instance, or Dunster, which were simply baronial landing places. The Bridgwater skippers and merchants had to pay king's dues and customs and, before the time of Edward IV, acknowledgments to the Mortimers and Brewers. But they were practically self-governing men. Henry VIII is supposed to have conferred the peculiar honour upon Bridgwater of making it a distinct county so that the king's sheriff could not send a writ there. This gift, which has certainly never been used to the full, gave occasion for the following doggerel (Jarman, *History of Bridgwater* p, 37) : —

Then Harry the Eighth (there may be odd views of it)
Made the Boro a county, tho' we never made use of it.
This shows how kings play fast and loose with
their bounties,
Now beheading of wives, now retailing of counties.

In Tudor days there was a trade depression in Bridgwater, much in contrast with its prosperity in Plantagenet times. Leland, visiting the town in 1538, noticed two hundred houses in a decayed state, and this is borne out by a notice in the Plymouth Municipal Papers of an Act (32 Henry VIII) for the re-edifying of houses in the borough and towns of Bridgwater, Taunton, Somerton, Ilchester and elsewhere. Was it that the town guilds were becoming too greedy and monopolist, driving trade into the villages? The principle of *co-optatio* would work inside these guilds almost by a natural law.

In Queen Mary's reign (1555) there was the following protest made by the representatives of the cloth industry in Somerset: *Whereas*,

before this time the borough towns of Bridgwater, Taunton and Chard in the county of Somerset have been well and substantially inhabited, occupied, maintained and upholden for the most part by reason of the making of woollen clothes, commonly called Bridgwater, Taunton and Chard clothes, which in time past were much desired as well beyond the seas as in the realm of England, and thereby the inhabitants and poor people of the said borough or towns and of the country thereabouts were daily set on work and had sufficient living by the same. ... Forasmuch as certain persons dwelling in villages and hamlets, not being prentices, have of late days exercised, used and occupied the mysteries of cloth-making, weaving, fulling and shearing within their own houses, etc., the petitioners beg for an act for the sealing and viewing of it to stop the village industry. Herein lay the spirit of Monopoly !

In 1592 the ships of Bridgwater were catalogued thus : one ship of 30 tons, two of 25 tons, two of 20 tons, one of 16 tons, one of 10 tons. These diminished quickly, and on December 11th, 1596, Christopher Salmon, mayor of Bridgwater, and four aldermen recommended William Wallis as *searcher* to Lord Burghley in place of William Hoskins, deceased, *the appointment being of small value and trade having decreased so that only one barque of any account belonged to the town*. This was shortly after the Armada and England's successes against Spain. It is possible that although much privateering was done and many ducats taken from Spain, this very success caused legitimate trade with Spain to dry up. Spain, moreover, recovered her naval power, and in 1597 a bark from Brittany was boarded by a Spanish vessel which, with three others, kept the Channel. The captain threw overboard letters of intelligence he had from Thomas Chaplyn, merchant, of Bridgwater.

In the reign of King Charles the Bridgwater merchants objected to the King's taxation (1629) in consequence of the decay of the town, and certain remissions of sums assessed upon the hundred of North Petherton were granted them, as hereafter noted (Chapter XIV). In 1631 wheat was very dear, viz. 8s. 3d. a bushel ; times were bad generally, and letters were addressed by the mayor of Bridgwater to Sir F. Dodington, then sheriff of the county, about measures to be taken for the relief of the poor. Similar letters were addressed to Thomas Luttrell, the sheriff in 1632. No doubt this local distress

and general feeling of *bad times* added fuel to the political animosities of the day. There were not wanting in those days certain selfish merchants who conspired to make capital out of the general scarcity and distress. There were the evils, also, of piracy at sea, which were very great until dealt with by the Commonwealth admirals. These were always most formidable and existed all round the English coasts. Every hand was against the merchant venturer when he started on his travels, and the Algerine pirates were not the only offenders.

In 1630 there is an official letter of Thomas Wyndham to Edward, Earl of Dorset, describing how a certain Derrick Popley of Bristol tried to *corner* all the salt of commerce in the Severn Sea. He sent down one Yeomans of Bristol *along Severn on the English side* to buy up all the salt he could get. At Barnstaple Yeomans pretended that he had a fishing voyage in view and went from merchant to merchant and bought up above 700 bushels. At Watchet he and Jacob Andrews of Bridgwater bought up the lading of two French ships. Salt therefore rose from 4s. 8d. to 15s. the bushel, much to the great grievance of all people and the ruin of many poor fishers for herrings, such as we may suppose to have plied their trade from Minehead.

Under the Hanoverian dynasty the trade of Bridgwater revived again. From a note in Bowen's Map, c. 1720, we learn that Bridgwater was a large and populous borough town well frequented by merchants and traders, *that ships of 100 tons often ride in the Parret, there being upwards of forty sail belonging to the town*. About 1750 the customs amounted to over £3000 p. a. clear of salaries, a good coast trade being carried on with Bristol and the Severn ports. Twenty colliers brought coal from South Wales, Abroad the foreign trade was with Spain and Portugal, as of old, with Newfoundland and sometimes with the Straits, Virginia and the West Indies. Large quantities of wool were brought from Ireland and sold in the markets.

In 1889 Mr. Jarman wrote : *As a seaport Bridgwater has some claim to importance, its home and foreign trade being considerable. Vessels of 300 tons can be navigated as far as Bridgwater, and goods can be conveyed by barges elsewhere as far as Langport and Creech St. Michael. The navigation dues amount to about £1000 yearly, and the number of vessels entering the port yearly is 3000-4000 with a tonnage of*

200,000-250,000. The chief imports are coal, grain, timber, linseed, valonia, gypsum, esparto, hides and potatoes, etc. In these days of steam and motor traffic the advantages of Bridgwater as a centre of river communication, aided by canals, are surely very great. It might be made the collecting centre of all agricultural and farm produce, with a view to further distribution by steamer to South Wales and by rail elsewhere.

NOTE. — In the MSS. of the Plymouth Corporation (*Ninth Report Hist. MSS. Commission*) there is a letter from Sir Ferdinando Gorges, the famous American colonizer and lord-proprietor of *New Somersetshire*, written to Mr. Robert Trelawney, Mayor of Plymouth, inviting the shipowners of the West-Country to co-operate with the shipowners of London to put down piracy on the high seas which, in the last few years, had deprived England and Scotland of 300 ships with lading and merchandise (1617). The merchants of London were willing to subscribe £40,000. At Barnstaple there were the same complaints.



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* See Greswell's *Land of Quantock*.

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* Phelps, *Hist. of Somerset*.

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