

FOR nearly fifty years Bridgwater had enjoyed but little rest. Soon after 1640 the troubles incidental to a civil war and to the rule of the Commonwealth set in with relentless severity. Speedily the siege followed, the terrible losses to the inhabitants, the burning of many houses, the wrecking of property, and the ruin of individual citizens. When Charles II ascended the throne of the Stuarts in 1660 there was some improvement, and the glamour and joy of the Restoration brought a gleam of sunshine to the harassed town. But this was not a permanent settlement of things so much as a sharp reaction from the Cromwellian rule, and it took Charles some time to feel secure as the sovereign of England. His reign was rather the thankful acquiescence of his people in that they once more possessed a monarchy, than the skilful and strong rule of a wise king. Charles possessed the most fascinating manners, which were hard indeed to resist. But neither his private life nor his public rule was exemplary, and the plots which arose in his reign bred a wide feeling of insecurity. In 1685, of course, this ripened, in the west, into a strong and dangerous rebellion which convulsed all Somerset, and which placed Bridgwater and Taunton under a ban. James II had little reason to think highly either of the loyalty or of the good sense of the western towns which followed Monmouth. They had placed a notorious libertine at the head of their Protestant manifesto ; they had committed their leadership of religion to a man to whom all religions were equally indifferent, and they had striven to put Lucy Walter's illegitimate son upon the throne of England. Never was a more utterly foolish, utterly hopeless effort made. But these reasons rarely appeal to the crowd or to the thoughtless. Monmouth was the people's darling ; for King James no one cared. Not until the grey light of that day dawned which followed the execution of Monmouth, did his followers perceive the grievous error which they had made. They had now to sit down and count the cost.

In 1686 James came on a visit to the West-Country. On August 27th he arrived at Bridgwater from Bristol about five o'clock in the afternoon. On his way he made a point of going to look at the field of Sedgemoor, the scene of last year's fateful battle. Then he made his entrance into the town. The mayor and aldermen, who since June in the previous year had managed to develop a passion for loyalty, met the King at the East Gate, and in their formalities bade him welcome to the

ancient and loyal borough. The people, it is said, followed His Majesty with continued acclamations.

It is difficult to resist the wish to linger upon this strange, this almost incomprehensible scene. All these men had once sworn fealty, when admitted to office, to their Sovereign. Presumably it was only upon the supposition that they were loyal servants of the King, and not perjured men, that they were allowed to retain the offices which gave them the government of the borough and its people. In June of the previous year the mayor and aldermen had broken faith, forsworn their vows, and proclaimed a rebel to be king. The same maces* which were now carried in pomp to do honour to King James had been borne in the procession which wended its way to the High Cross, where Monmouth was proclaimed king just over a year before. William Knight was the new mayor ; at any rate it must have been a relief to Alexander Popham, the ex-mayor, that he did not still hold office, though he may have made one of the procession. What did these municipal officers do ? Did they ignore the past episode ? Did they crave pardon from the dour and cynical King ? Or did they, now that Monmouth was dead and his cause for ever perished, renounce him and swear eternal fealty to this last and worst of the Stuart kings ? Happily there is no answer to these questions ; the shame of the position is forgotten and passed out of mind. James could sum up men well ; he could value as well as most men the welcome and the loyalty, the *Punica Fides*, of these councillors. Of the glad cries of the populace there is nothing inimical to be said. They had only followed the lead of their rulers ; they were not to be blamed ; they had taken no oaths of loyal service. Alas ! Deluded Monmouth ! *Sic transit gloria mundi*. Their love for him had not lasted as long as the official gowns which the town officers wore upon their backs. The critical moment passed. James left the town. Intense, indeed, must have been the relief of the mayor and aldermen of Bridgwater when they saw him depart. Henceforth they would dally with rebellion no more. They had not, however, yet quite done with King James.

A letter arrived in the following year bearing the Royal Seal of England ; signed by *William Blathwayt*, and dated from the Court at Whitehall, the 4th December, 1687 ; the King's most Excellent Majesty being present in Council : reciting that, *by the Charter granted to the Town of Bridgwater, a power was*

reserved to His Majesty, by his order in Council, to remove from their employments any officers in the said town ; His Majesty was pleased to order thereby that William Masey, John Rogers, William Symons, Town Clerk, Robert Baker, William Criddle, John Curry, and Robert Reeves, capital burgesses, be removed and displaced from their aforesaid offices in the said town of Bridgwater."

Here was a bolt from the blue ! For although it is a pleasant thing to be appointed to municipal office, it is distasteful to most men to be ejected therefrom. They had not long to wait for the names of their successors. By a similar letter headed James R., dated *Whitehall, 6th December 1687, in the 3rd of our reign,*" and signed, by His Majesty's command, by *Sunderland L^d*, and directed to *our trusty and well beloved the Mayor and Corporation of our Borough of Bridgwater, etc.*, they are required forthwith to elect and admit *our trusty and well beloved John Gilbert, Sen^r Robert Balch, Roger Hoar, Thomas Turnor, Samuell Pitman, and John William Briknell, to be capital burgesses and Town Clerke in the room of the persons removed by former order, without administering any oath, except the usuall oath for the execution of their respective places.* Roger Hoar had been sentenced to death in 1685 for active aid given to Monmouth's cause, and his reprieve was gained with no little difficulty. However, he paid a fine of £1000 and Sunderland's letter proves that he was amply pardoned. James loved money, and would forgive almost anything in order to get it. Hoar lived to be mayor of the town in 1692, as also did John Gilbert and Robert Balch, later on. Of the ejected townsmen, Masey had been mayor in 1683, and Criddle afterwards held that office in 1716, when all the storm had blown over.

It was not long to wait until 1688, but in the mean-time both Churchmen and Nonconformists suffered severely. Under a plea of affected tolerance James harassed all who were not Roman Catholics. Encouraged at first, the Nonconformists were treated with great injustice and severity, and their meetings were frequently broken up by fanatical opponents. But long before this there was trouble, even when Cromwell was at the height of his power. In Bridgwater the mayor and aldermen had applied for the confirmation of Mr. John Norman's appointment to be minister of St. Mary's in 1646, and he was accordingly installed. There seems to have been discord even from the first. A rather remarkable letter from the

Council of State * at Whitehall, dated July 1st, 1651, addressed to the mayor and recorder of Bridgwater, states that *We have received the petition signed by yourselves and other inhabitants concerning the malignity and disobedience of John Norman, preacher there, tending to the danger of that place, and the articles annexed. You are to call him before you and tender the Engagement, and if he refuses to subscribe you are then to give him notice to leave the town within 10 days and not to come within 10 miles of it without special licence of Parliament or Council of State, and if he will not conform thereto you are to commit him to prison until he has entered into a recognizance in £500, with two sureties of £250 each, to obey the aforesaid order. If he takes the Engagement, you are then to prosecute the said articles before the Committee for Plundered Ministers, to whose cognizance offences of that nature most properly belong; and the articles being there proved, you need not doubt but that the Committee will do the Commonwealth speedy justice against him.** This is an excellent instance of the warring of the religious sects in Cromwell's days. For by this time the Presbyterians were losing their power, and the Independents were rising to dominance. The latter, much to the disgust of the Presbyterians, demanded that these should take the *Engagement (ut supra)* declaring that they would be faithful to the Commonwealth as it was then established. Norman, presumably, signed the Engagement, against which he seems at first to have protested, for on June 24th, 1656, a minute of the day's proceedings records the passing of *an Order, on the petition of the inhabitants of the town and corporation of Bridgwater, that the trustees for Maintenance of Ministers be advised to settle a fitting augmentation on the minister there, the former restraint notwithstanding**.*

This was approved on June 27th. In 1649 the King, despite the protestations of the Presbyterians, had been put to death. Their power was now gone. Cromwell tolerated the various sects as far as he could, although he would not tolerate the Church of England. But the Committee sitting in London was relentless. First Norman is put in power, and all promises well. Then he is threatened with imprisonment (under the Commonwealth, be it noted) unless he will sign the Engagement. He has to sign ; his protests are all in vain. Thus he retains his place. In 1660 the chaos ceases, the restoration is effected, and Norman gives place to the real vicar, Wotton. The unfortunate servant of the Commonwealth appears to have suffered all round. He has been described as "a minister

of more than usual talent and firmness."* At first the Commonwealth put him into St. Mary's. Next, when the Independents grew all-powerful, it threatened him with all sorts of terrors, imprisonment, and with expulsion. Next, when he had yielded to their demands, it passed over his offence. Norman's treatment under the Commonwealth is typical of the religious chaos, persecution, and strife which prevailed then. In Taunton it was even worse. There were too many who, like certain of the ministers there, *strongly condemned the error of toleration, which allowed every man to worship God as he pleased*.* Unhappily these Commonwealth tyrannies led on to the harshness — which was just as lamentable — which was meted out to Dissenters under Charles the Second.

George Wotton's career in Bridgwater was certainly an eventful one. In Devenish's time he signed his name in the church registers as curate of the parish ; in 1644 or 1645** his name appears as vicar. After his expulsion and exile he returned to power in 1660, and worked on as vicar for nine years. He was buried on December 22nd, 1669, and he seems to have done his duty well, and to have left behind him a reputation for sterling work and worth. At any rate, some kindly hand, in making the entry of his burial, has written the words: *Georgius Wotton parochiæ hujus Pastor vigilantissimtis*. No man need crave a better record than this.

The reigns of William and Mary, Queen Anne, and George I brought quieter times to Bridgwater, but it took many years for people to settle down after the stirring days they had seen. It seemed to be really a relief to some when the claims of the unfortunate son — or alleged son — of James II to the English crown gave the Jacobites an excuse for embracing the cause of young James, otherwise known as the Old Pretender. Thus in 1718 a warrant was issued under the hand of Edward Raymond the mayor, addressed to the borough constables, to warn John Gilbert, John Allen, and John Oldmixon, to appear before him at his house by eight of the clock in the forenoon of that day, to give an account of the names of the persons (which it was stated they knew) who went up and down the streets of the town on the Friday night or Saturday morning previous, in a riotous and seditious manner, disturbing the inhabitants, crying out, *Ormonde for ever!* — *He is come!* This suggests a revival of the old Monmouth days. In 1717, too, Richard Miller, John

Mounshire, and William Morse declared on oath that on the 28th and 29th of May, being the anniversaries of His Majesty's birthday, and the return of King Charles II, upon the request of Ferdinando Anderdon, mayor, they played upon musick at the Swan Inn in Bridgwater, where Mr. Anderdon and others were assembled, to make public rejoycings suitable to so great occasions, and that to the best of their remembrance they did not play the tune *The King shall enjoy his own again* ; and that Mr. Coles, then lately elected a capital burgess, did not desire them to play it, or offer them 5s. to do so. It is clear that the Swan, which was one of the most famous hostelries of the West-Country, had many such jovial and exciting gatherings. On January 8th, 1718 (George Vs reign), William Prior, anxious to prove his loyalty, declared on affidavit that

He did blot the name of Queen Anne out of his Prayer Book, which he usually made use of in the church, and wrote the name of his then Majesty King George in the Litany and other prayers therein ; and that he always made his responses on his knees ; that he did not (as falsely accused) drink the health of the "king on the other side of the water," or endeavour to make a bonfire on the Pretender's birthday.

The Pretender evidently had some friends in Bridgwater. In the same year Katherine Welles solemnly asserted that her late husband, John Welles, "went into Wales to escape being taken up for drinking the Pretender's health by the name of King James III, and for speaking seditious words: and that he kept himself quiet there until the passing of the Act of Pardon and Indemnity." Four burgesses of the borough in the same year signed an affidavit attesting their loyal feelings. Two of them, they averred,

sit in a pew [in St. Mary's Church] between Joel Gardner and James Bowles ; and that Joel Gardner usually makes his responses to the services of the Church in time of divine service loud enough to be heard by any one near him (if not asleep), and especially on his knees, when the King and royal family are prayed for; and that the said James Bowles doth usually sleep or lye in a sleeping posture upon his seat in time of service ; and therefore 'tis no wonder if he does not hear the responses made by others to the prayers of the Church, at the reading of which he seldom or never kneels.

James Bowles was apparently not *persona grata* with the authorities. His orthodoxy, they felt, was not unimpeachable. Rigidity for Conformity, and a strong dislike of Dissent,



became very prevalent at this time. The well-known Roger Hoar was accused of disloyalty. In October, 1718, he stated by affidavit that he constantly knelt at the prayers of the Church according to the directions of the Common Prayer Book, *except when he was troubled with the gout; and that, being then lately churchwarden, the sexton brought him a box for collecting brief money, and delivered it to him while kneeling on his knees.* Hoar's defence was called for by an information which had been laid in July of the same year by Henry Player, the sexton, and Richard Coles, parish clerk, of the parish and parish church of Bridgwater, *who say that George Balch, John Trott, and twelve others (therein named) are all Dissenters from the Church of England, and, save occasionally, never come to the divine services of the Church. Also, that Roger Hoare, Joseph Farewell, Joseph Grandway, John Roberts, Robert Methwen, James Bowles, and John Oldmixon [the historian] had applied themselves to, and frequented the Presbyterian and Anabaptist Convent-icles; till of late they are thence withdrawn, and come to the service of the Church of England; and that Robert Methwen was generally looked on and much taken notice of as a troublesome man, and a great disturber of the peace and quiet of the town. That they never saw the said Hoare, Farewell, Grandway, Roberts, Methwen, or Mr. John Gilbert kneel at the reading of the prayers of the Church.*

They also depose as to the manner in which the mayor was wont to celebrate great occasions, etc., such as Coronation Day, royal birthdays, etc., by ringing of bells, bonfires, going to church in state, and meeting in the evening at a public-house to drink the health of the sovereign.

Thirty years had now passed by since William of Orange came to England, and Sedgemoor was getting an old story. But the passions which Sedgemoor had raised were hard to allay. Thus it would appear that the aforesaid Richard Coles, the parish clerk, and others, report with a certain self-complacency how, by the order of Robert Steare, the then mayor, *they prevented an attack by the country folk on the Meeting-house at Bridgwater; keeping a night watch, and being provided with bills and other weapons.* These disturbances, however, slowly passed away. By the time that the eighteenth century had run half its course England had sunk into a quiet somnolence of prosperous passivity, and Bridgwater shared in the general calm.

p. 1

* At least one of the Bridgwater maces had been made some years before the Restoration. There is a letter extant, dated the 16th October, 1653, addressed to Humfry Blake, asking him to use his influence with the mayor of Bridgwater on behalf of Thomas Maundy, of Fetter Lane, London, for the payment of £25 11s. 6d. for the making of one of the maces for the borough, which weighed 56} ounces, at 9s. per ounce, and 5s. for the case. — Bridgwater documents.

P. 2

* By this time Cromwell had expelled the Rump Parliament, and had formed a Council of State, of which he was the head. There was now no Parliament. The country was under military rule.

p. 3

* State Papers, Domestic Series, I. 96, p. 263.

** *Ibid*

p.3

* Jerom Murch's *History*, 1835.

** Hunt's *Dio. Hist, Bath and Wells*, p. 214.

*** The pages of the register book have been mutilated about this date.

Edited by Tony & Jane Woolrich, 06/02/2020