



Victoria County History of Somerset Newsletter

Issue 17

Summer 2021

Welcome to the seventeenth edition of our newsletter. We hope you enjoy it.

Please pass this newsletter on to others. If you are not on our mailing list and would like to receive future copies of the newsletter please let us know by contacting us at vch@swheritage.org.uk.

County Editor's Report

Like many of you we are emerging from lockdown and beginning to delve into the archives and libraries. Once again our newsletter was largely produced under Covid-19 conditions. The vaccination rollout is going well and we are all hoping for a more normal life in the months ahead. History, however, warns us against assuming the worst is over. We are still hoping to restart live events later this year including the VCH lecture but are exercising caution. All those on the mailing list will be notified in advance about our events.

This year was of course a census year and we looked back to 1821 and 1921. What will historians in a century make of 2021, assuming we have not lost the digital data by then! There is a note about the census later in this newsletter.

At least we can give you a bumper issue for summer reading!



High Street, Bridgwater, 1900s South West Heritage Trust [SWHT]

We are showcasing Bridgwater in this edition and hope you enjoy reading about the town's streets, its river trade and its workhouses. Bridgwater is fortunate in its collections of historic photographs that show us just how much life has changed in the last 100 years.

You can find out more about Bridgwater in volume six of the Victoria County History, which is available online at British History Online

www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/som/vol6/pp192-206

There is also research content on the Bridgwater Heritage Group website

<https://bridgwaterheritage.com>

The Bridgwater Heritage Group has just acquired microfilm of *The Alfred*, the first surviving Bridgwater-published newspaper, covering 1831 to December 1832. The paper has not yet been included in the British Library's online newspaper programme, but there are copies on their website and printed copies will be available in the Blake Museum library.

<https://bridgwaterheritage.com/wp/historical-sources/source-collections/the-bridgwater-alfred/>



King Street, Bridgwater

Mary Siraut



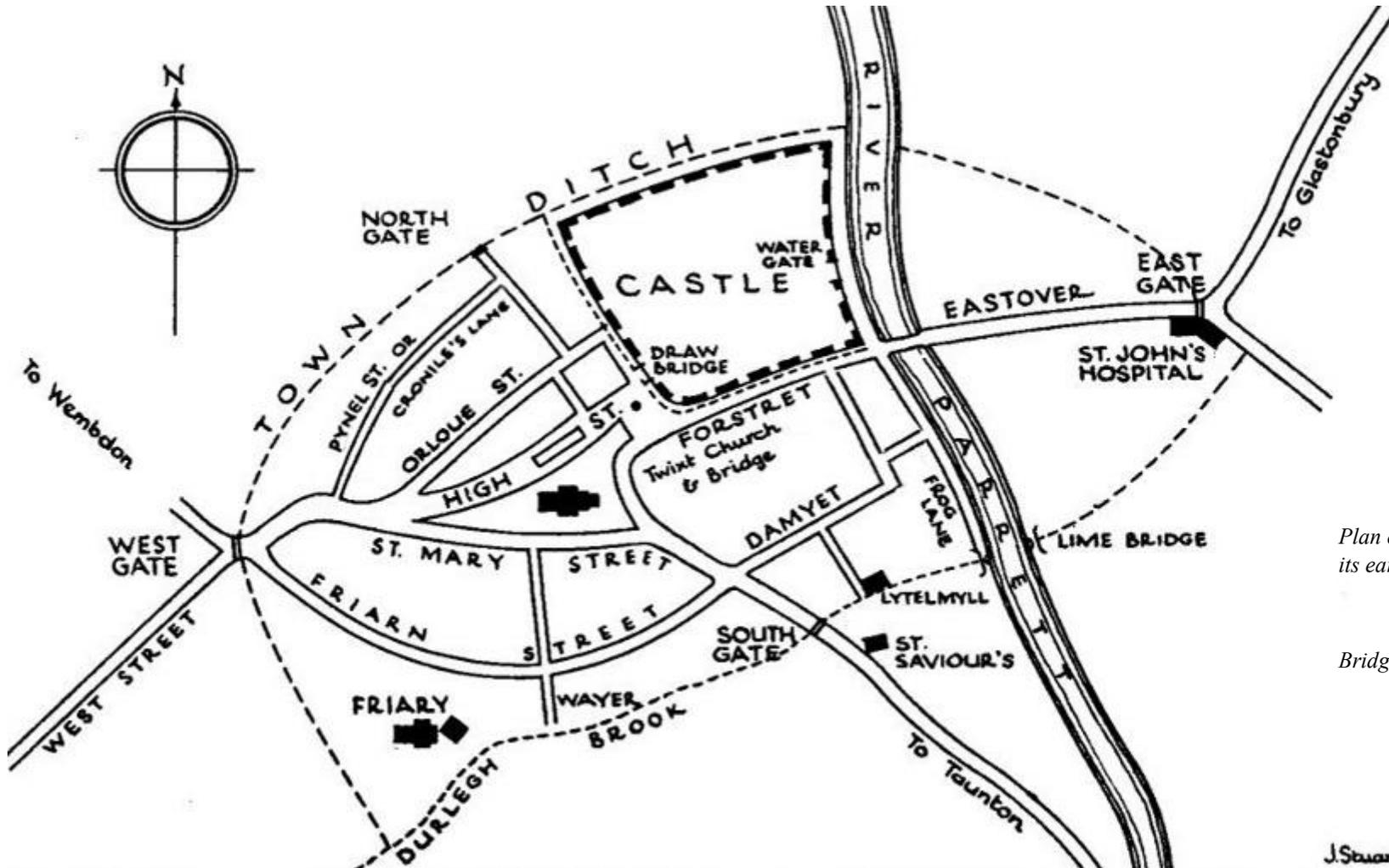
Bridgwater bridge looking towards Fore Street in the 1900s

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The Bridgwater Street Names Project

The Bridgwater Heritage Group is currently undertaking a research project to compile a database for the meaning of the town's street names. The scope of the project includes the area currently administered by Bridgwater Town Council and the adjoining village of Wembdon.

The core of the town's street plan was laid out in around 1200, and it remained largely the same into the nineteenth century, before rapidly expanding out over old agricultural fields or marshland. As would be expected through the middle ages most routeways were usually only vaguely described, rather than being 'named' as such.



Plan of the centre of Bridgwater and its early street pattern by J S Dilks

Bridgwater Heritage Group [BHG]

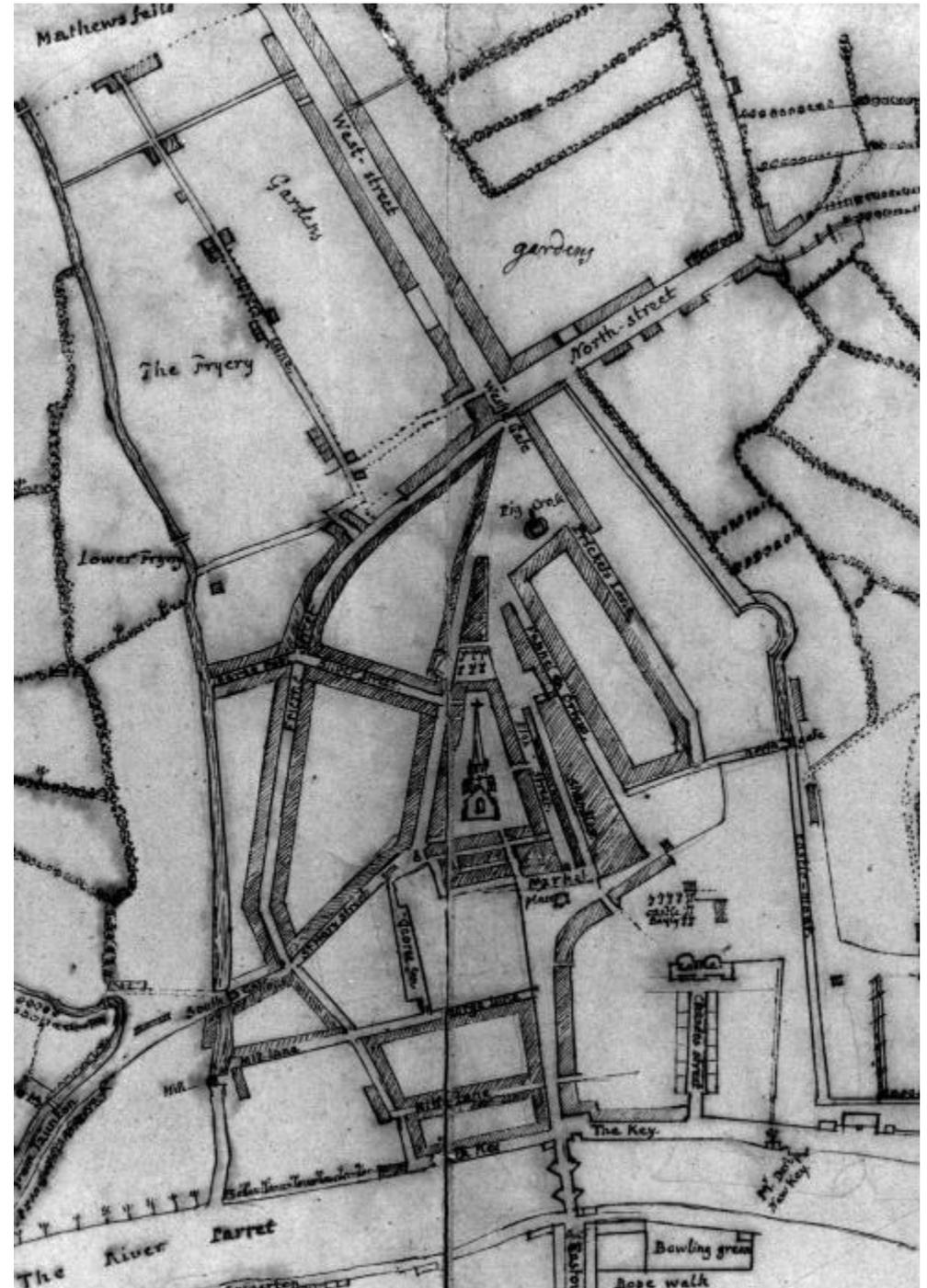
J. Stuart Dilks.

Few street names have been fixed through the town's history, although there are some notably persistent names. Friarn Street has persevered from its first recorded mention in 1298 (as 'Frerenstret') referring to the Franciscan Friary which was sited there. However, how that street was designated from 1200 to 1246 before the Friary was established is not recorded. One suspects it may have been part of 'the Wayhur' or 'Horsepond', now preserved in Horsepond Lane (incidentally the town's oldest recorded named street, first mentioned in 1268) forming a 'Y' shape. Precedent for this can be found in Friarn's continuation east of St Mary Street, Dampiet Street, which was once a designation that also included King Street and Blake Street, forming a 'y'. Dampiet refers to the dam of the town mill in Blake Street, so here we see that a name was applied to a series of three adjacent roadways as a route to an important landmark, and only later rationalised with different names for its straighter sections.

Fore Street is another persistent name, first mentioned in 1367 and still used today. However, not only was Fore Street variably also known as 'twixt church and bridge', 'twixt market and bridge' or 'twixt bridge and churchyard' in contemporary documents, the northern row of properties were known as 'Castle Ditch', that side being built over a portion of the in-filled castle moat. Again, the implication is that labels were vague and often overlapping.

Because of this, other streets seem to have had an ongoing identity crisis. The area now known as Penel Orlieu was initially referred to as West Gate (by 1307 at least), due to the town's defensive and ceremonial gate. It was also known as the Orfaire by 1399, referring to a cattle market, but for most of the early modern period it was known as Pig Cross after its market cross (although still a cattle market). In the early twentieth century the name Penel Orlieu stuck, although this had previously been a broader name for the vague meeting points of medieval Pynel Street (now Market Street) and Horlocke's/Ordlof's Street (now Clare), which included parts of what is now High Street.

As a rough rule of thumb, it seems that most medieval names were blunt topographical descriptions, the way to here or there, the place with this institution, or the street in that direction. Alongside that, and much more a feature of the early-modern period, streets were named for individuals who lived there.



Ordlof's Street refers to a prominent family who lived there in the 1260s, likewise a side lane off it was known as Godwin's Lane, while the same process in what is now Market Street seems to have exchanged the medieval Pynel for someone called Prickett by the 1650s. Other examples included Roper's Lane (now Albert Street), Jacob's Land (Blake Place) or Danger's Ope (Church Passage).

This process continued into the eighteenth century. The 1720s development by the Duke of Chandos led to the creation of Great Chandos Street and Little Chandos Street, the latter still bearing his name. Interestingly, both streets had alternative names from their conception, the former also being known as Castle Street (which it is now) the latter as Horn Alley. In 1741 William Binford purchased a large house near the river and renamed it Binford House. Subsequently the street leading up to it, previous Back Quay, became Binford Place.

Nearby, a prominent Quaker family by the name of Ball lived on the site now occupied by the Wesleyan Chapel of 1816, and so the street, which was more officially known as 'Dampiet Ward' (part of Dampiet mentioned above) became more popularly known as Ball's Lane into the nineteenth century. It was then renamed King Street, as a counterpart to Queen Street, which was on the opposite side of its junction with Fore Street. Queen Street had in turn been named as a counterpart to the 1810s King Square at its other end, but the part that met King Street was also known as Court Street (as it led to the County Courthouse), and that name stuck, leaving King Street nominally isolated. Surprisingly, despite the abundance of early modern personalised street names, only Binford and Chandos survive today, the rest being retitled in the nineteenth century.

It is in the Victorian period that properly naming streets became more of a serious concern. We see the emergence of naming streets in honour of people, usually national figures such as Barclay Street in the 1840s, after the Quaker apologist (the land being owned by a Quaker charity); the slightly later Wellington Road, after the Duke; or the renaming of old medieval roads, such as Roper's Lane being renamed Albert Street, in honour of the Prince Consort.

We also see the emergence of historically-inspired names for the first time: the old routeway east out of the town was renamed in the early nineteenth century as Monmouth Street in memory of the 1685 rebellion, while Blake

Place (1840s) and Blake Street (formally Mill Lane and before that part of Dampiet) after Robert, the General-at-Sea and the town's most famous son. St John Street was laid out in the 1840s and took its name from the medieval hospital.

As the town expanded in the nineteenth century new roads might simply take on the appellations of the fields they were built over (Northfields, Blacklands, Castlefields), or else have grander styles, such as Provident Place. We also see some streets upgraded with more prestigious names, as Salmon Lane (named after an Inn, in turn named after the adjoining Salmon traps) to Salmon Parade, Malt Shovel Lane (named after another Inn) becoming Victoria Road, or Albert Street, mentioned above.

An interesting sub-development of naming in the nineteenth century was the names given to the slum courts or the new red-brick terraces. Most of the courts took the name of their builder/owner (Gold's Buildings, Hutching's Row, Bailey's Court, etc), while the terraces took more ambitious names, such as Alma Terrace, named after the battle of the Crimean War, or Connaught Villas, presumably named in honour of the regiment.

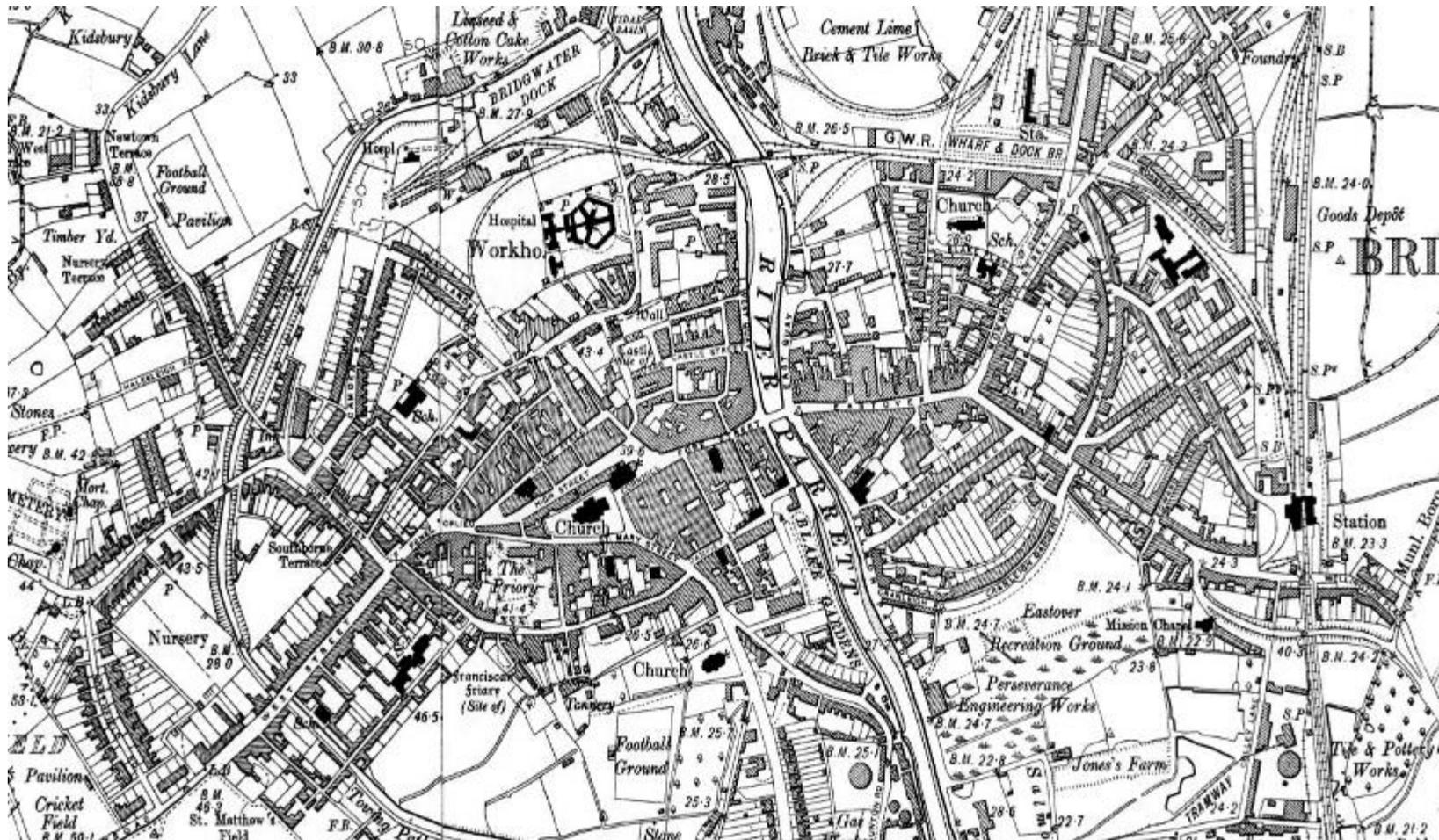
Although the Victorians had started a process of more fixed names, it seems only at the turn of nineteenth to twentieth centuries do the street names become wholly regimented and 'fixed'. A good example of this is 'Clare Street'. Medievally known as Ordlof's Lane, it was otherwise known as 'Back Street' (in opposition to High Street) and is seen as such on the 1889 OS maps, but by 1904 we find it fixed as Clare, although why this change was made is still a mystery, although it is probably a contraction of 'Clarence' from the Clarence Hotel which backed onto it.

As the town started rapidly expanding from the 1930s, whole housing estates needed to be named, and we find a scatter gun approach to naming that continues to today, with trends for royal titles (the Hamp Estate 1930s), Somerset Rivers (Colley Lane, 1960s), local dignitaries (the Wills Road Estate 1980s), saints (Dunwear Lane Estate, 1980s) and the most recent estates taking their names from tree types (Bower) or ships from the port of Bridgwater (also Bower, and also the Homberg Way estate), to name a few.

Although several nod towards the town's history, seldom do these names respect their historical locations, with many interesting fieldnames being lost, which would have made perfectly good and characterful street names. One example is Carlton Drive. part of the 1980s Chilton Street development, which was simply named as all the streets on this development took 'c' names. This was built over a field called Escott's Marshes. At the extreme end of this scale, one that we suspect crosses a line of propriety, the rather safe 'Avalon Road' occupies a site once known as 'Kiss Arse Causeway'.

In time the full survey of street name meanings, with brief historical notes on their historical development, as well of notes of where older names have either been forgotten or obliterated, will be published on the website bridgwaterheritage.com. There will also be a list of notable omissions, of important townspeople who have not been honoured by a street name (such as John Chubb artist, mayor and campaigner against the slave trade), but also a list of notable Bridgwater women, to help the overwhelmingly male honorific names.

Miles Kerr-Peterson



Bridgwater in the 1900s

The Franciscan Friary at Bridgwater – a medieval religious house of note

Although little now remains to be seen above ground, the Franciscan Friary at Bridgwater was of some importance in the Middle Ages. It was the only religious house of the Franciscan order in Somerset, with other such Friaries to be found in Bristol and Exeter. Although not of the grandeur of the older monasteries such as Glastonbury Abbey, and with little now to be seen, Bridgwater Friary is a place that anybody with an interest in the history of late medieval Somerset should not overlook.

The date for the establishment of the Bridgwater Friary is not certain. It may have been founded around the year 1230, some six years after the Franciscans (or Greyfriars) had first arrived in England. Their order had been founded in the year 1209, and they were one of a new wave of religious orders that were approved by the papacy in the early thirteenth century. These included the Dominicans (or Blackfriars), another group of mendicant friars founded in 1216.

The mendicants were originally itinerant preachers with a vow of poverty that encouraged them to beg for food and to forswear wealth and comfort. The Franciscans were inspired by the life of St Francis of Assisi whose story is well-known. However, like the other orders of friars, they quickly attracted patrons who established them in permanent buildings of which the Bridgwater Friary was a characteristic example. It was located immediately outside the boundary of the town in the area between the modern Friars Avenue and the Darley or Durleigh Brook (more on the site and remains later). Like their brothers in Exeter, the Franciscans may initially have settled within the town boundaries, but through the generosity of their patron, acquired a new, permanent site outside the town ditch. That patron may have been William Briwere, although a later date of 1245 through the patronage of William de Cantilupe is also possible. In January 1246, the patent rolls of King Henry III contain the following entry: 'To the bailiffs of Bruges Walteri. The king ratifies the assignment which they have made to the Friars Minors of a place to build a church and necessary buildings in their town'. The Franciscans may already have been in the town for some time before this act of ratification.

The Greyfriars were also known as the Minorites, a designation that came from their Latin title as the *Ordo Fratrum Minorum* (the order of Friars or

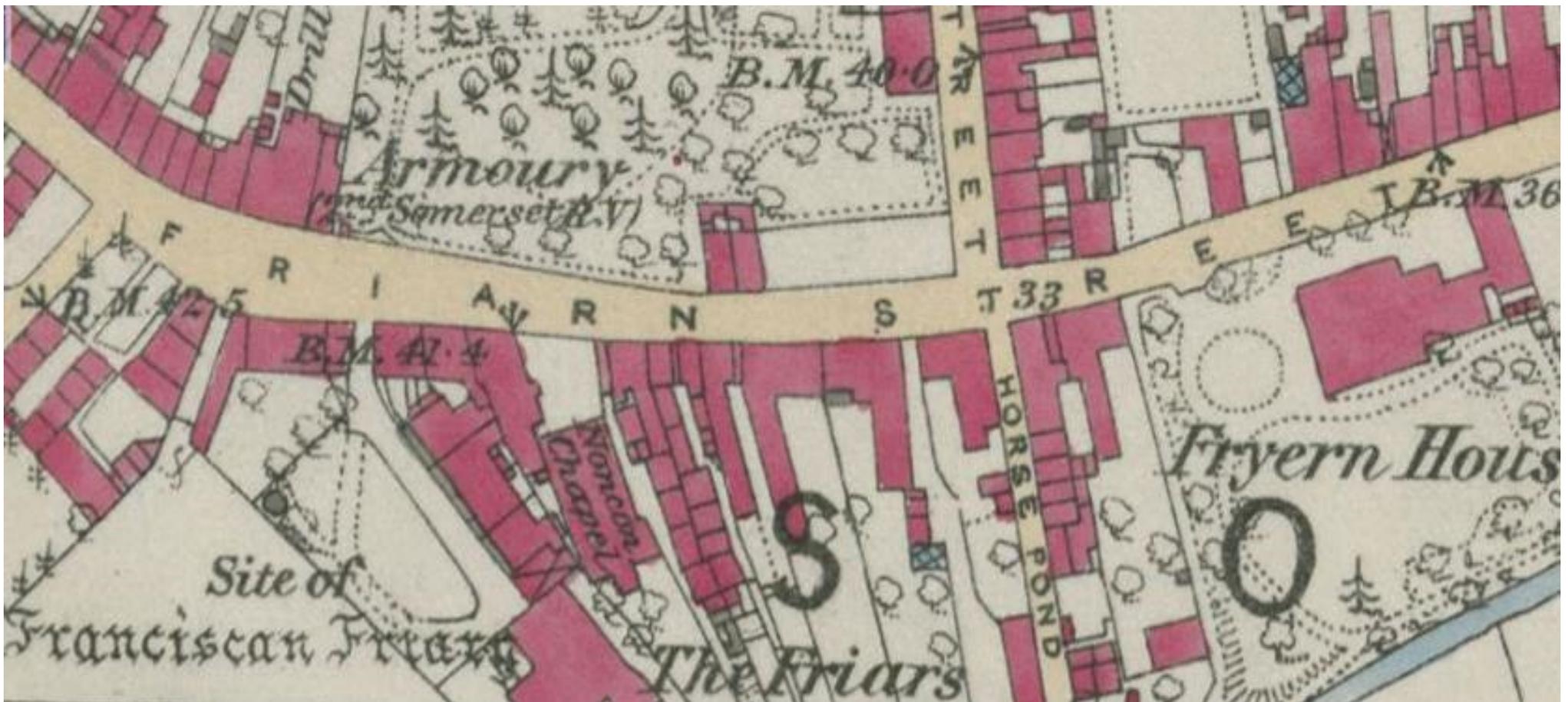
Brothers Minor). The Dominicans were known as the *Ordo Fratrum Praedicatorum* (the order of Friars Preachers). The Blackfriars saw themselves as perhaps the more intellectual of the mendicant orders, and they certainly had some very notable names among their membership. Thomas Aquinas, the very famous Italian theologian, is perhaps the greatest of those. However, the Franciscans also valued the life of the intellect, and they established a friary in Oxford in 1224 and a house at Cambridge in 1226. It was to the Oxford Friary that Bridgwater's most celebrated Franciscan, John Somer, went and established his reputation as an astronomer. Somer was born probably around 1340, making him a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer who greatly valued Somer's work. Somer entered the Franciscan order at the Bridgwater Friary, and it is likely that he was a native of Somerset. There were certainly Somers living in Bridgwater who were property owners in the town, and Somer may have been a member of that same clan. John may have risen within his order to become warden of the Friary at Bodmin some time in the 1380s, but what is certain is that he was resident in Oxford at various times during the 1380s and 1390s.

At the request of the master of the the Franciscan Province in England, Thomas Kingsbury, Somer produced his *Kalendarium*, a calendar with astronomical tables. This was written for Joan of Kent, the mother of King Richard II, indicating just how high Somer's reputation had risen. Geoffrey Chaucer acknowledged that Somer's calendar was one source for the tables in the third part of his *Treatise on the Astrolabe*. The value placed on Somer's *Kalendarium* during and after his lifetime is indicated by the large number of manuscript copies of his work that survive (more than thirty), as well as several partial ones. He received royal grants from both Richard II and Henry IV, and he died some time between 1409 and 1419. In his will Somer left 200 marks (over £133, a sum worth at least £85,000 today) – that bequest was towards the building of a new friary church in Bridgwater which indeed began in the first quarter of the fifteenth century.

Somer was not the only celebrated member of the Bridgwater Friary. John Leland, the sixteenth century antiquary, wrote of 'Brother Henry Cross' who he described as both pious and learned, who became a doctor of divinity at Oxford and wrote several books. William Dugdale's *Monasticon* also talks of Friar William Augur, who is described as the warden of the Bridgwater house and a notable commentator on the Bible. Clearly the intellectual life of Somerset in this period was enriched by the contribution of the Franciscans.

The other religious orders also made their contribution and Nicholas Trevet, the Dominican friar and noted theologian who died around 1334, is perhaps the most noteworthy.

The Franciscans remained at Bridgwater for a period of almost 300 years, their presence only coming to an abrupt end on 13th September 1538 when they surrendered their house to King Henry VIII. The deed of surrender was signed by the warden, John Herys, and six or seven others of his brethren. The Blackfriars of Ilchester had surrendered their house on the previous day, and the Exeter Franciscans followed on 15th September. An inventory of the contents of the Bridgwater friary and its church was taken, and its assets were disposed of, as were the surplus buildings. By 1544, Emanuel Lucar, 'citizen and merchant of London', was granted the site of 'the late priory' of the Franciscans. That grant also included the possessions of the Hospital of St John in Bridgwater, as well as those of Montacute Priory. By 1571 there was a mansion house on the site of the friary. What remains of the physical fabric of Bridgwater Friary today? A pertinent observation comes in a commentary by William Worcester, the fifteenth-century topographer and chronicler. He visited the friary and estimated its church as being 120 steps in length, 30 steps in width, and the nave to be 14 steps in width.



Site of Bridgwater Friary in the 1880s

Somerset HER

Those measurements have been interpreted as describing a structure some 64 metres long and 16 metres wide. That is a relatively grand building. As well as the church, the contemporary documents describe a set of buildings that included some chambers, a kitchen and buttery, a frater (refectory) and possibly a reredorter (lavatory block). Excavation work has taken place on the known site, both during the 1920s and 1930s, and again in 2003 when Wessex Archaeology (WA) undertook a programme of archaeological mitigation works in advance of a proposed development. In describing their 2003 work, WA were somewhat downbeat: 'The layout and development of the friary are poorly documented, and the excavated remains poorly preserved. Interpretations offered here must be seen as conjectural only.' The archaeologists found what they believed to be the corner of the cloister and estimated the cloister walkway to have been approximately 20m long. To the south-west of that was a 'substantial building' which they interpreted from its cruciform plan as being the friary church. Their finds included fragments of floor tiles, some dating to around 1300. Unfortunately the archaeology of the friary was significantly damaged by civil war defences created by royalist forces during their unsuccessful defence of the town in July 1645.

Despite the paucity of the monastic remains, the importance of the Franciscans at Bridgwater should not be underestimated. The significance of men such as John Somer has been clearly demonstrated. The friars in general were greatly valued in their local communities. An examination of late medieval wills shows many bequests to the houses of friars, while the grander houses of the Benedictines and Cistercians were overlooked. Such wills also requested that the friars, both Franciscan and Dominican, should carry the coffin of the deceased to its burial. Friary churches and churchyards were often chosen as a place for burial. The register of Thomas Bekynton, bishop of Bath and Wells, has an entry dated January 1444 which talks of ground set aside at the Bridgwater Greyfriars for a churchyard. Friars could be licensed by their local bishops to act as confessors. In so doing they supplemented the parish clergy in dispensing the sacrament of penance to the local community. The Bridgwater Friary was not endowed with lands and churches in the way that monasteries had been, and so was reliant on benefactions. The continued existence of the Franciscan house at Bridgwater until its enforced suppression indicates that it had real value to the people of the town.

Des Atkinson



The site during the 2003 excavation

Somerset HER image 45767

Bridgwater's river trade

Today it is very unusual to see a boat on the rivers Tone or Parrett above Bridgwater or even on the Bridgwater and Taunton canal. Until the coming of the railway and for half a century after the waterways were busy with working boats. Most of Bridgwater's import trade was for onward transmission, much of it upriver. In 1673 the Tone below Taunton was described as the Bridgwater river. The Parrett was navigable to Langport and the Tone from the Parrett to Taunton.



This image of Bridgwater's riverside quays in the 1900s is a glimpse into the vanished world of the sailing coaster. These vessels were once a common site in Britain's ports often anchored two or three deep as they waited to unload or pick up cargoes. In the latter days of sail heavy goods like coal and limestone or timber for pit props in the mines were brought daily across the Bristol Channel from and to South Wales, even after the coming of the railways. In the distance is the telescopic railway bridge and a brickyard chimney. On West Quay are the premises of Alfred Peace whose business comprised a shipping agency, potato imports, insurance, ship owning, warehousing and furniture removals. Just visible on the left is the shipyard with its dry dock.

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In 1488 a quay was built at Bridgwater especially for inland traffic and was later known as the Langport slip. During the 16th century a new cut improved navigation of the Parrett. Millstones, on whose sale Bridgwater had a monopoly in the mid 16th century, iron, coal, salt, wine and soap were common commodities passing upriver in the early 17th century. Iron, wine, fish, coal, flax, hemp, grindstones, glass, saws and glue regularly went upriver to Langport and Taunton. Less common were the 160 bushels of apples in 1630-1 or the 1½ ton of nails in 1639-40.

The Tone was a major waterway from the Middle Ages to the 19th century. The Revd Thomas Amory, minister of Tancred Street New Meeting, took that for granted in his 1724 poem on Taunton:

“The fatt’ning Tone in slow meanders moves
Loath to forsake the happy land it loves:
Forc’d to the main, by nature’s law, it bears
Back floating vessels fraught with richest wares;
And diff’ring products from earth’s diff’ring shores;
Gather’d by commerce, lavish, on us pours.”

However, there were periods when the trade had not flowed smoothly. In the 13th century the bishop of Winchester’s tenants were required to bring wine from Topsham, Exeter and Bridgwater. Goods for the manor came upriver from Bridgwater and grain may have gone back down and contributed to the large quantities of corn shipped out of Bridgwater in the Middle Ages. More prosaic goods such as coal, lime and iron were imported by river from Bridgwater. From the late 14th century navigation appears to have become more difficult as mill weirs and other obstructions impeded the flow and depth of water. In 1382 the abbot of Glastonbury was accused of obstructing waterborne trade with his Bathpool mill and willow trees but he claimed boats from Bridgwater discharged at Bathpool cross and only went as far as Obridge in time of flood. However, in 1414 it was said that a new narrow watergate at Bathpool mill obstructed the river trade between Taunton and Bridgwater used by barks and trows (cargo boats) carrying, timber, firewood, coal, stone, lime, peas, grain, malt and wine. The loss was said to be £1,000 or more. Goods were carried upriver in sailing trows and barges. Trows were recorded from the 15th to 19th centuries when ‘lock-up’ trows were operated. Above Taunton bridge boats were poled.

Cloth appears to have been exported mainly through the southern ports but some Taunton cloth went through Bridgwater as did incoming Irish linen. In 1464 the Taunton merchant Thomas Blower imported four tuns of iron and 51 dozens of linen cloth using an Irish merchant based in Bridgwater. By the 1480s some Taunton kersey was exported through Bridgwater to Spain, France and Ireland. During the 16th and early 17th century Irish wool and some dyestuffs including woad for Taunton’s clothiers came through Bridgwater. In 1682 one clothier had his stock of Spanish and North Country wool stolen while it was stored in Bridgwater.

However, the Tone remained obstructed and especially in dry summers goods were transferred to packhorses or carts at Ham in North Curry or Bathpool in West Monkton. That was clearly inconvenient especially for bulk and heavy items where there was no crane or labour. Some goods were therefore loaded directly into carts at Bridgwater. In 1505-6 dues were paid for loading goods for Taunton in 19 wains. Even heavy items like iron and grindstones were carted to Taunton in 1528-9. Extra expenses were incurred in storing goods in the port until they could be carted; in 1558 Taunton men paid for the Coal Harbour in Creech St Michael opposite Ham which had become a terminus for river traffic in heavy goods. Taunton merchant Alexander Hill had his own account with the water bailiff for ‘shooting’ Bridgwater Bridge with his lighters having directly unloaded iron and coal from Cardiff and Newport ships, often downriver at Comwich. In 1601-2 he paid for lighters carrying 122 tons of iron and 2 weys of coal. By the early 17th century the Bobbet family were rebuilding Coal Harbour and by the 1670s were sending their own boats to Wales for coal. Sea coals then cost 1s. 6d. a bushel at Coal Harbour or 2s. in Taunton. The Bobbets were able to undercut Hoare and Company of Bridgwater who set up a rival business at Ham Mills but went out of business c. 1700.

The Tone Conservators held the Tone navigation under Act of Parliament with the right to make the river navigable as far as Taunton. Between 1699 and 1708 coal, bottles, deals, lead, iron, oil, salt, stones, sugar, tallow, tiles, tobacco and wool were shipped directly to Taunton. One boatman shipped 4 tons of tobacco and other goods on Christmas eve 1705. On busy days 20 or more boatmen coming upriver paid toll at Knapp Bridge to go through to Taunton. The operators of Coal Harbour fought the Conservators by undercutting tolls charging only 4d. to land a wey of coal when the Conservators charged 4s. to continue upriver making it cheaper to obtain coal from Coal Harbour. When they were forced to levy the same toll as others nearly 400 Taunton labourers, over 40 boatmen, and many other .



Bridgwater Bridge and quay. The old bridge had a high arch and goods were unloaded from ships into lighters and barges that passed under the bridge and upriver to Coal Harbour on the Tone and Langport on the Parrett.

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interested parties petitioned unsuccessfully against raising the tolls at Coal Harbour. The higher tolls removed Coal Harbour's advantage and in 1713 the Bobbets let most of their premises to the Tone Conservators and agreed not to trade between Taunton and Bridgwater except in their own vessels. By the 1730s very few goods for Taunton were being unloaded at Coal Harbour

The main commodity coming upriver was Welsh coal but other bulk cargoes included salt, oil, and iron, and in 1716 shipments of 70,500 tiles weighing 23 ½ tons went upriver. At this period c. 4,000 tons of coal and culm were taken up to Taunton each year. In 1724 Defoe recorded Welsh coal, iron, lead, oil, wine, hemp, flax, pitch, tar, grocery and dye stuffs being taken by barge from Bridgwater towards Taunton. By the early 19th century c. 11,500 tons came upriver from Bridgwater to Taunton. Several firms sought a share in the lucrative river trade including Sealy and Company, based at Ham Mills, and Stuckey, Bagehot and Company of Langport but the brick companies appear to have delivered directly to customers who paid the tolls.

From 1804 all boats using the Tone had to be registered at Ham and have their numbers painted on the side. Problems of water shortage in summer led to a ban on loads of over 7½ tons going upriver to Taunton between 24 June and 29 September, although barges carrying 15 tons went upriver and at least one boatman was prosecuted for exceeding the limit. River tolls increased from an average of £353 a year 1719-28 to over £2,200 in the early 1820s before the canal opened. In 1823 28,500 tons of coal and 1,879 tons of other goods paid toll to go upriver to Taunton from Bridgwater with a further 712 tons shipped to Taunton from Langport. In May 1830 5,000 tiles came upriver but through trade on the river was already suffering from competition with the canal, which had opened in 1827 and had been cut through the river bank at Taunton to access the wharves. The canal was cheaper as it was navigable by vessels carrying up to 180 tons.

It also provided a shorter route to Taunton especially for bricks and tiles made mainly at yards situated on the river near its original junction with the canal.

Huntworth in North Petherton was home to many boatmen who carried London goods upriver to Burrow bridge and beyond but the village benefitted most when it became the original terminus of the canal and housed many bargee families like the Meades. The establishment of brick and tile works in the area also increased waterborne trade being the ideal way of moving those commodities until the end of the century. In 1836 two coal merchants who used to bring coal upriver had moved to the canal and one said he no longer saw barges for Taunton on the Tone and that it was cheaper to ship Welsh coal from Bridgwater by canal. In 1828 William Goodland set up as a coal merchant in Taunton and in 1830 formed a company with his brother Charles at North Town Wharf buying coal, culm and anthracite from Gloucestershire and south Wales and shipping it through Bridgwater.

Early 19th century views of Taunton bridge show large tree trunks being unloaded on the river bank for the sawmills and a North Town wharf was known as Bridgwater wharf. It was taken over in the 1850s by Colthurst, Small and Company which specialised in mahogany, timber, deal and slate but also shipped pipes and bricks from its yards in Bridgwater. Timber brought upriver probably accounted for the number of sawmills on the north bank of the river with their own wharves including Pollards who had a long basin cut from the river for loading and unloading their barges.



The weir on the river Tone at Ham with Coal Harbour in the left distance.

Mary Siraut



Bridgwater docks in the 1900s with a brick and tile kiln behind the warehouse on the right. Sail still dominated the coastal trade although onward carriage was by steam-hauled trains.

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After the canal was extended and Bridgwater docks were completed more goods were transhipped by rail as lines were built on the dockside. However, many bulky goods like coal and timber continued to go upriver or on the canal. Many Bridgwater registered ships were owned by merchants from Langport and Taunton in the mid 19th century including coal merchants like the Goodlands. Two of the largest fleets were owned by Stuckey and Bagehot of Langport and James Haviland of Taunton. Most goods in transit were coming through not from Bridgwater and the railway was an increasingly important rival. However, the growth of the brick and tile industry along the river and canal including at Huntworth prolonged the use of water transport and their goods for Langport and Taunton still went upriver until the end of the century.

In 1840 a wharf south of the river was offered for sale after 30 years use in the coal, culm and salt trade. Coal merchants had their own vessels and two or three were also wharfingers and offered a daily passage for goods to Bridgwater. Large warehouses were built especially on the north side of the river either side of the bridge and those on the north-east survived until the late 20th century, but the railway eventually took over the bulk carrying trade and water carriage to Bridgwater declined and was no longer offered as a general service. In 1893 a woman whose family had been wharf owners sold five boats, presumably no longer needed, to the council to assist with rebuilding the town bridge. By 1901 there were complaints that barges could no longer reach Taunton and the last is said to have made the journey in 1907 but some businesses continued to maintain their river wharves in the 1920s.



The former Stuckey family home at Langport

Mary Siraut

Unlike the Tone the Parrett had to wait until the 1830s for improved navigation, which included a new cut at Langport where locks could hold water for vessels. The traditional landing place was near the Great Bow and in the 16th century one of the most important commodities to be unloaded was fish, especially salted herring, but also oil and wine, some of the latter for onward carriage to Somerton. By the 17th century coal was a major import and large warehouses were built but fish, salt, and grain were also important river commodities.

In the mid-18th century the maltster Thomas Bagehot came to Langport and entered a partnership with the merchant George Stuckey using the Great Bow. As the firm of Stuckey and Bagehot they and their successors traded by road and water as far as London and Liverpool and became one of the dominant companies in Bridgwater's trade with four 'constant coasters' by 1820. In 1828 they opened a shipyard in Bridgwater and built one of their largest vessels there. In the mid 19th century they owned four large ships of between 340 and 516 tons which were too large to come up to Bridgwater and docked at Comwich. Goods were transferred to lighters for transport upriver to Langport and Taunton. In 1855 the company registered Bridgwater's largest ship the 1,347-ton

British Empire for its American trade, but it was lost in 1860. Although by the 1860s the company owned 14 East Indiamen they also had 19 barges, an indication of the importance they still attached to the river trade on which their fortunes were founded. In the late 19th century the trading business became the Somerset Trading Company supplying bulk materials, running local brickyards and also invested in steam towing.

In the 1770s, to assist their business, the Stuckey family had established a bank. It was one of the most important and successful west-country banks and their circulation of bank notes was only surpassed by the Bank of England.

After the railway arrived in 1853 river trade declined abruptly although some barge traffic continued to Langport into the 1900s. At the other end of the river trade Bridgwater was in decline and on one day in 1911 there was only one vessel on the river.

Mary Siraut

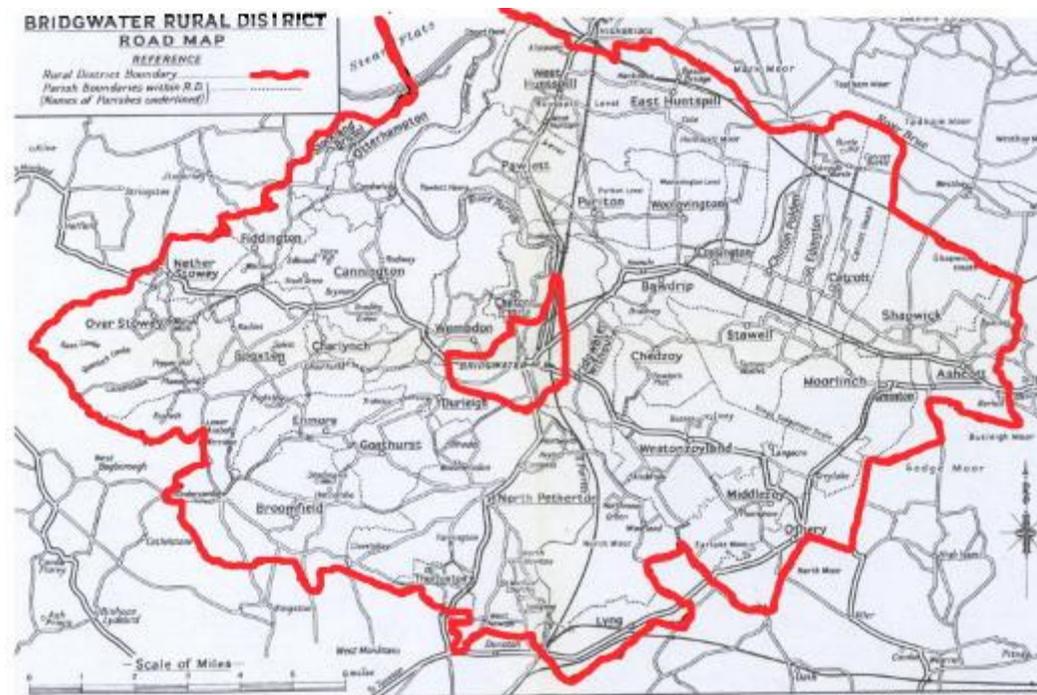


Former Bagehot family home in Langport, birthplace of Walter Bagehot *Mary Siraut*

Bridgwater and the Poor Law

The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 created eighteen Poor Law Unions in Somerset to replace the Elizabethan Poor Law, where it was administered on a parish basis, and overseen by people elected by the churchwardens and parishioners. Each Union had elected Guardians, drawn from the gentry and better-off tradesmen. Each Union had a Workhouse, to replace the smaller town and village poorhouses, which had housed the sick, the disabled, the unemployed, young children, the old and the mad. A number of other paupers were helped in their homes with money and a bread dole. This was called outdoor relief.

The mood of many in the 1830s was that if the poor could not support themselves or were old so could not work, rather than being given payments



Area of the Bridgwater Poor-law Union. It later was the area of Bridgwater RDC, formed 1894, and the collecting area of the Blake Museum, Bridgwater, founded 1926

from the parish to keep going in their homes or the poorhouse, they should be forced into enlarged workhouses, where the conditions were so austere that only the truly desperate would wish to go there, and where they would be badly fed, forced to wear uniforms, and their families broken up, with men, women and children placed into separate over-crowded dormitories. A goal was to suppress the payment of outdoor relief. This should result in a fall in the numbers getting payments and so reduce the amount taken for the Poor Rate from the better-off in the community.

The Bridgwater Union covered 39 Rural Parishes, plus Bridgwater. It ranged roughly from Ashcott in the East to the Stoweys in the West, and the Huntspills in the North to Thurloxtan in the south, Bridgwater's population was 7,807, and the other parishes 20,759, making a total of 28,566. At 25th December 1837, there were 2,624 paupers of whom roughly two in five were children under sixteen years of age. The average wages per day of able-bodied labourers was 7 shillings and three pints of cider.

The village poorhouses were closed, with the exception of Bridgwater and North Petherton, which remained open while the Northgate workhouse at Bridgwater was built, which was where the Union paupers were to be concentrated. In the mean time, 112 paupers were to be placed in Bridgwater – to be achieved by stuffing more into the beds, so this overcrowding plus an inferior diet caused outbreaks of dysentery in the poorhouse, when around a third of the inmates died.

Under the Old Law, 17 Parish Doctors looked after the poor. Under New Law these were grouped into seven areas and the doctor numbers reduced accordingly, but the local doctors protested, as they held it would reduce the service they could give. They also had problems in getting properly paid under the new system. In addition, Charlotte Allen, of Stowey, suffered mis-treatment for child-birth problems from a newly appointed doctor, John Rodney Ward, whose *bona fides* were held to be suspicious. He was also sued by a Taunton man for his botched treatment of his wife's dislocated shoulder.

John Bowen, a Bridgwater wine merchant, who had been a parish overseer under the Old Law, began a campaign against the new system, by publishing a series of pamphlets and also letters to *The Times*:

Letter to His Late Majesty; containing a refutation of some of the charges preferred against the poor: with some account of the working of the new poor law in the Bridgwater Union ... by John Bowen. Publisher: London, 1835. 2nd ed.

The Reform Poor Law, with some account of its working in the Bridgwater Union. by John Bowen, 1837.

Twelve Letters to the Editor of The Times – The New Poor Law ...Bridgwater Union. 1837 (<https://bridgwaterheritage.com/wp/scholars-writers/john-bowen-1785-1854-biographical-notes/twelve-letters-by-john-bowen-on-poor-law-reform-published-in-the-times-1837-8/>)

The New Poor Law, with some account of its fatal operation on the sick and helpless poor in the Bridgwater Union, 1838.

New Poor Law: the Bridgwater case: is killing in an union workhouse criminal, if sanctioned by the Poor Law Commissioners? A question raised on certain facts deposed to on oath before a late committee of the House of Lords, and humbly submitted to the serious and early consideration of both Lords and Commons, 1839

The Union work-house and Board of Guardians system , 1842.

<https://bridgwaterheritage.com/wp/scholars-writers/scientists/john-bowen-1785-1854/john-bowen-the-union-work-house-and-board-of-guardians-system-1842/>

Likewise, some of the local doctors, disturbed by the effect the new system was having on the area's medical provision, published a pamphlet: *Facts connected with the medical relief of the poor in the Bridgwater Union*, 1837. (<https://bridgwaterheritage.com/wp/conservation/workhouses-poor-relief/facts-connected-with-the-medical-relief-of-the-poor-in-the-bridgwater-union-13-november-1837>). This discussed, amongst other things, the reduction in medical care in the new Union.



The location of Bridgwater Poorhouse, on Taunton Road, at the South Gate

After the publication of the pamphlets and *The Times* letters the Government set up a Parliamentary Committee on the Operation of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1838. It was a Lords committee, chaired by Lord Wharnccliffe, and took Bridgwater evidence over 19 days, between 12 June to 17 July, 1838. Forty three local people gave evidence, whose printed testimony runs to more than 800 pages. Their evidence was published verbatim, with that of the medical men, some of the Guardians, some of the Relieving Officers involved, as well as a number of the paupers, and there is first hand evidence from a number of the women who attended the sick, and did the laundry. It was published in *Parliamentary papers: Minutes of evidence before the select committee on the operation of the Poor Law Amendment Act*, Vol 19 1838, parts 1 and 2.

The second volume begins at page 753 and continues with the evidence of Dr Jonathan Toogood, who was then involved with the Bridgwater Infirmary. Later, much evidence is given by John Bowen and William Baker, FGS, (a currier and Natural Historian, who was the first secretary of SANHS), about the dire conditions within the Bridgwater poorhouse itself after the new Act was applied.

Pages 1321 to 1323 is a detailed analytical index to the Bridgwater Union material. Both volumes are a most important source of information on the running of the workhouse and the people involved. There is much incidental information about Somerset rural poverty, and midwifery.

The end of the first volume noted simply recorded the evidence but did not adjudicate on it, it being the end of the Parliamentary session. It is strange there is no mention of either the Bridgwater Union, (other than in statistical tables), or the Parliamentary enquiry in any of the



The Bridgwater Poorhouse, about 1860

Blake Museum

Annual Reports of the Poor Law Commission, 1836-1840, so it can only be inferred the affair was quietly dropped and no action taken. It is also strange that Bowen said nothing in his biography of William Baker, published in 1854. Bowen forensically examined the published testimony, and wrote an 89 page pamphlet: *New Poor Law : the*

Bridgwater case : is killing in an union workhouse criminal, ... (1839). In it he severely criticised a number of named individuals from Robert Weale, Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, downwards, and with frequent quotation of their testimony. He expressed his great disappointment at the unwillingness of the Lords Committee to pursue the matter any further. There might well be unpublished material in the Bowen Mss in the Heritage Centre which can shed more light on it. He concluded by asking: *Is Killing in an Union Workhouse Criminal, if sanctioned by the Poor Law Commissioners?*

Bowen included there much valuable material on the previous working of the Bridgwater poorhouse, including statistics relating to the area, and tables of costs. He drew up a named list of the poorhouse inmates 1830-31. In that year there were 74, – 4 idiots and lunatics, 30 elderly averaging 74 years of age, 24 children and 16 of intermediate age. Most disabled. Under the new Poor Law the amount spent on food decreased by a third, over the end of 1836 and the beginning of 1837. This is before the Northgate workhouse was in operation. There were 98 inmates in July 1836, 8 able-bodied men and women, 24 aged, 11 infirm and 55 children under 16 years of age. Once in use the new workhouse housed an average of 196, from the last quarter of 1836 to mid-summer 1837. The 1881 Census records 242 inhabitants, including the staff.

Compared with this period from the very beginning of the application on the new Poor Law Act, little seems known about the later operation of the new workhouse at Northgate. The records of the Bridgwater Poor Law Union in the archive of the Somerset Heritage Centre, Taunton, (Ref: D/G/bw) are extensive, but an examination of the catalogue shows the greater part relate to the Northgate workhouse later in the 19th and well into the 20th century.

Only the minutes of the Guardians' meetings, (D/G/bw/8a/1 and D/G/bw/8a/2) and a General Ledger (D/G/bw/9a/1) cover the time investigated by the Committee. However, the printed inquiry evidence quotes much documentation and statistics, which would otherwise have been lost. These include committee minutes, and a series of affidavits and letters. These may be traced in the comprehensive index published with the Committee report.

John Weale, the Assistant Poor Law commissioner responsible, published a series of statistical tables:

Day 5, p 700, A list of parishes and their assessments, midsummer 1837

Day 10, p 888, A comprehensive table listing the numbers of paupers in the workhouse from the Quarter to the end of 1837 to the end of June 1838. This would be at Northgate.

Day 19, pp 1293-1297. Lists of paupers in the 7 medical districts, who had been treated for Diarrhoea since the start of the Union and June 1837

John Bowen, Day 8, p 802, published a statistical statement about the 40 parishes making up the Union, p 805 – 6, a list of the Bridgwater Poorhouse inmates, 1830-31, and p 807, a table of workhouse costs 1829-1835.

The names in these tables will doubtless interest family historians.

There is much medical evidence, not only from the various doctors, but also from Charlotte Allen of Stowey about her gynaecological problem, caused by a botched delivery. (The testimony is not explicit about which of the two Stoweys is meant.) As well as testimony from her midwife and the doctors involved, a number of her friends also gave evidence, as did Dr Charles Locock 1799 – 1875, the well-known London Accoucheur, who later to become Obstetrician to Queen Victoria.

The 1838 Report, as well as the Annual reports of the Poor Law Commissioners for the period, have in recent years been digitised and are freely available on-line from the Internet Archive, the Hathi Trust and Google Books, It has been a straight-forward, but time-consuming,



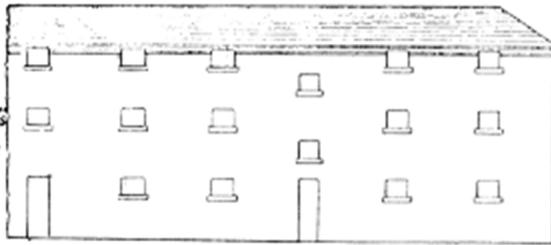
project to download PDFs of the texts for printing at home for further study. It has also been feasible to download OCR versions texts which can be used to create documents which can be edited and have further commentary added.

The website <https://bridgwaterheritage.com/wp> has dedicated pages about Poor Relief: <https://bridgwaterheritage.com/wp/conservation/workhouses-poor-relief/> where the documentation may be read.

This is an on-going project, and more texts will be added as they are finished. There are also pages about John Bowen <https://bridgwaterheritage.com/wp/scholars-writers/john-bowen-1785-1854-biographical-notes/> and William Baker <https://bridgwaterheritage.com/wp/scholars-writers/scientists/william-baker-1757-1853/>. who were much involved.

No animal poison is more potent than the effluvia generated in close and over crowded apartments.
 "An insufficiency of food even when not carried to the extent of Starvation has a decided effect on the production of effluvial poisons"
 3rd Report Registrar General.

ELEVATION OF ONE WING.



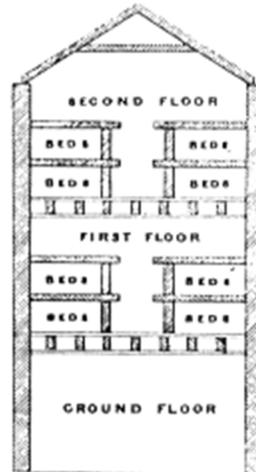
"The Prison like appearance of these new Workhouses and the notion that they are intended to torment the poor, inspires a Salutory dread of them"
 Assistant Poor Law Commissioner, Tufnell, to the Poor Law Commissioners.

HEXAGON PLAN OF A WORKHOUSE

TO CONTAIN 300 PAUPERS.



| | |
|--|-------|
| Space allowed to a Felon in the Plans published by the Inspectors of Prisons. Cubical feet | 1000. |
| Space allowed to a destitute industrious labourer in the accompanying Plan. Cubical feet | 108. |
| Weekly allowance of food to convicted Felons in the Penitentiary. Ounces | 292. |
| Inspector of Prisons 4 th Report. | |
| Weekly allowance of food to an able bodied man in an Union Workhouse. Ounces | 145. |
| Commissioners Report Page 30 | |
| Deaths of Convicts in the Hulks per Cent per Annum | 2.3. |
| Deaths of Convicts in the Penitentiary | 2.5. |
| Deaths in the Bridgewater Union Workhouse. | 41.4 |
| Lords Poor Law Committee Report. | |



SECTION THROUGH A. AND B. SHOWING THE DOUBLE ROW OF BEDS IN TWO TIERS.



Scale of 1" = 20 feet

The new Union workhouse was erected at North Gate, and could house 200 inmates. John Bowen complained the window sills were too high, and this drawing shows the amount of space allocated. Note the numbers sleeping more than one to a bed.

The question arises now about whether a similar situation existed in the other Somerset Poor Law Unions at this time, with instances of deprivation, poverty and neglect? Few other communities appear to have residents like John Bowen and Bridgewater's doctors, assiduous in going public and raising a fuss about it, with the resulting testimony recorded by the Parliamentary Committee, and fully accessible now.

Tony Woolrich

Nuggets from VCH Research

The Census

It has been a census year, they come round too often as one gets older! Although the schedules of family details with names only date from 1841 the census was taken regularly from 1801 and a few of the local census surveys survive, from which the statistics were completed. The 1821 census sought to ascertain how many people were engaged in trade or agriculture as well as numbers of families and houses in each parish and a breakdown of the population of each parish by sex and age. These are useful, but the categories are rather vague and frustrating for historian.

However, even later census summaries have their traps for the unwary especially under the heading of occupations. The compilers of statistics, those men responsible for the thick black lines and annotations that

make some census schedules difficult to read, were none too particular when it came to classification. They frequently struck out women's occupations and presumably did not therefore include them in statistics and in some schedules a wife's trade is assigned to her husband, even such unlikely ones as milliner. On one Taunton census schedule every clerk was classed as working in the law even the young man in Station Road who stated he was a clerk in the booking office! Some people were able to make themselves heard like the Keinton quarryman's wife who gave her occupation as 'slave to the rest of the family'!

The census is one of the most important tools for local historians and hopefully our recent forms will be as informative a century from now. Most people fail to appreciate the preparation work that goes into taking a census, partly because early records have not survived, but in some parishes the vicar or clerk carefully entered the parochial statistics in the registers or the overseers of the poor who often collected the data considered the results of their hard work should be preserved. At Sparkford the churchwarden Thomas Guppy entered the 1821 figures carefully in the parish register.

The above Account was taken by me (or under my Direction)
1st of June 1821 Tho: Guppy Church-warden:
May 28th 1821.

| Inhabited Houses. | By how many Families occ ^d | Houses now building | Other Houses uninhabited | Families employed in agriculture |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 37. | 49. | — | 2. | 49 |
| Families employed in Trade. | all other Families not comprized in the two preceding tables | | Males. | Females |
| 9. | 3. | | 127. | 146 |
| Total. 273. | | | | |

1821 statistics for Sparkford

By 1921 the census was very different and involved a great deal of advance preparation well before Census day. The Registrar General required preparatory lists of civil and ecclesiastical parishes and details of streets and buildings where people might be staying on Census night. That included hotels, boarding schools and colleges, hospitals, military camps and prisons. Frome kept all those preparatory materials but every council must have been geared up to roll out the schedules, keep track of who had received them and ensure everyone was included. The government issued a timetable to be adhered to. Enumerators had a month to complete the task. The calendar makes it sound easy but someone had to locate tramps in barns and under hedges as well as sailors, barges and boatmen on their vessels, travellers in caravans and caretakers sleeping on commercial premises. At least by that period householders and others were responsible for filling in the domestic and institutional schedules.

| 1921 | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| April 9 | Saturday | Enumerators to receive Books, Forms, and Supply of Schedules before this date. |
| April 16 to April 23 | Saturday to Saturday | Enumerators to deliver all their Schedules during this period ; no Schedule to be delivered earlier than April 16 ; delivery to be completed on or before Saturday, April 23. |
| April 25 | Monday | Enumerators to collect all Schedules and to report to Registrar on Form E3. |
| May 2 | Monday | Enumerators to complete the entries in the Enumeration Book and to return it to the Registrar by this date ; the Registrar to be consulted in reference to addresses of Place of Work. |
| May 9 | Monday | Enumerators to complete writing Transfer Post Cards, and to return all Schedules and Cards to Registrar, together with Claim for Payment. |

Mary Siraut

Enumerators' timetable for the 1921 census

SWHT

Historic image of Somerset



*Bridgwater bridge c 1905.
The bridge marked the
boundary between sea and
river trading.*

SWHT

Between 1800 and 1900 Bridgwater's riverside was almost totally rebuilt. The buildings on the left beyond the bridge are on the site of the river wall of the castle.

The old triple arched bridge with its high centre arch was replaced in the 1790s by a cast iron single arched bridge from Coalbrookdale, slightly upriver from the old bridge. That was in turn replaced in 1883 by a the flat bed bridge in the photograph which is still used. Its design hampered navigation but the upriver trade had almost ceased by then. Previously small vessels had been able to 'shoot the bridge' if they lowered their masts.



Bridgwater marina in the former docks Mary Siraut

Forthcoming Events

Unfortunately we have not been able to hold events so far this year due to the pandemic restrictions, but we are still hoping that it may be possible to hold our annual autumn lecture in November and to restart our programme of other events next year.

Subscribers to this newsletter will be notified of further details as they become available.

Please Support Us

Further work is entirely dependent on public generosity. If you would like to support the future work of the Somerset VCH please consider making a donation or legacy to the **Somerset County History Trust** [Registered Charity Number 1161263]. For more information contact:

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