

## St Mary's in the Middle Ages – 2

The Bridgwater historian T. Bruce Dilks published in 1920 a little book *Pilgrims in Bridgwater* which described the town through the eyes of a fifteenth century pilgrim returning from Glastonbury. The pilgrim's account of St Mary's enhances the inventory of the vestments, etc published in the leaflet *St Mary's in the Middle Ages – 1*

T Bruce Dilks (1865-1949) was a Quaker schoolmaster who developed agoraphobia in early middle age and from then earned his living as a postmaster and printer in Eastover. He was a fine poet and historian, and devoted his spare time to transcribing the Bridgwater Borough Archives, now in the Record Office, Taunton. At the time of his death he had completed them to 1603. Those covering 1200-1485 were published in 5 volumes by the Somerset Record Society, 1933-1971. He also published about half a dozen articles about the medieval town. These may be read on <http://www.bridgwaterheritage.org.uk/bridgwaterarchives.org.uk/Archives/Archives.html>

Tony Woolrich 01/9/2019



... We would willingly talk longer with these men, for of the sections into which the medieval clergy are divided, the friars are regarded as the most devout and holy, and they have added learning to their devotion. But we must leave them, and, crossing the street, take this way, as yet nameless, which brings us out into St. Mary Street, near to the south stile of the Parish Church.

Opposite the stile stands the house of the vicar. From the open window come the sounds of a good tenor voice practising Church music, and when we present ourselves at the door, the singing ceases, and a jolly round-faced youth comes out to ask our business. He begs us to come in, explains that the vicar has gone across the bridge to see the Master, but that he is a clerk who with the sub-deacon lives at the vicarage and will be pleased to show us the Church. We compliment him on his singing.

"That brings to my mind," says he, "a story which I heard but yesterday. There was a priest that trowed he was a passing good singer, notwithstanding he was not so. So on a day there was a gentlewoman that sat behind him and heard him sing, and she began to weep; and he, trowing that she wept for sweetness of his voice, began to sing louder than he did before; and always the higher she heard him sing, the faster wept she. Then this priest asked her why she wept so as she did, and she answered him again and said: 'Sir, I am a poor gentle-woman, and the last day I had no calf but one; and the wolf came and had it away from me; and ever when I hear you sing, anon I remember me how that my calf and ye cried alike.' From that time forth that priest sang never so loud. But what think ye of these lines which the vicar hath written and hath asked me to fit with notes if I can find them?" He hands us a parchment on which we read these stanzas in praise of the Blessed Mary:—

Now well may we myrthys make  
For Jesu mankynde hathe take,  
Of a maydne with outyn make.<sup>1</sup>

A kyng of kynges now forthe ys browght  
Of a maydyen that synnyd nowght,  
Nether in dede, nether in thowght.

An angell of counseil now ys bore  
Off a mayd, as y sayd be fore,  
To saw<sup>2</sup> all that was for lore.

That sonne hath never downe goyng,  
And thys lyghte no tyme lesyng .  
Thys stere<sup>3</sup> ys evermore schenyng.

Ryght as the stere browght forght a beme,  
Oute of the wyche commyth a marvelose streme,  
So dude that mayde withowtyn weme.<sup>4</sup>

[1] mete]. [2] save], [(3)star], [4]stain]

We thank Master Clerk for showing us this hymn of the vicar's making. It is seasonable in this month of May in which the Blessed Mary to whom the Parish Church is dedicated, is more especially remembered.

It is a noble building, standing strong and broad and well-proportioned. The tower of red stone quarried in the neighbouring parish of Wembdon carries aloft a wonderfully graceful spire built more than a hundred years ago.

Most of the windows are recent. The tracery is of the style which has been adopted by the builders of the present century. The mullions are plain, and straight upright lines replace the curves our forefathers used.

Within, the air is laden with the odour of incense. Lighted lamps shed soft beams across the gloom of the side chapels. One our clerk specially points out to us, which is kept continually burning in memory of the late vicar, good old Sir John Colswayn, who also "made and left" this beautiful mass-book which lies on the vicar's desk "to the end that his soul might be kept in especial memory for the future."

There is not the solemn hush which you might expect to add to the reverence and awe which steal over one in a great building dedicated to the worship of God and the memory of the Saints. The voices of the two chantry priests, who before their respective altars are repeating the daily office, certainly do not break seriously on it, but in one of the aisles a meeting of St. Katherine's Guild is being held, and an occasional dispute in rising and rather angry tones seems out of harmony with the surroundings.

Above the entrance to the choir a life-size and most impressive crucifix hangs from the roof. In days gone by the burgesses were wont to divide their gifts and legacies between the maintenance of the mass in St. Mary's chantry and of the lights before this Holy Cross.

To-day the three chief chantries are those of St. Mary, whose chapel is at the east end of the chancel, the Holy Trinity, whose altar stands in the north transept above the charnel-house, and St. George, by whose altar we are now standing. There are also altars to St. Katherine, St. Sunday, the Holy Cross, St. Erasmus, St. James, St. Gregory, and to All Saints, as well as the high altar.

All these call for a considerable staff of clergy and not only are there the vicar, the deacon, sub-deacon and a third clerk, but also at least four or five chantry priests, chief of whom is the chaplain of St. Mary's chantry. His place in the choir, our guide tells us, is directly opposite the vicar's at the north side of the entrance to the choir. That youth, whom we see collecting the remains of the wax tapers which have been burning on the spikes of the iron hearse, a cage like screen which is placed over a corpse when it lies in the church waiting interment, will carry them away and, after weighing them, divide them equally between the vicar and this chaplain.

Do not think that this is all profit to him, though I allow that he is probably the richest of the clergy attached to the Parish Church, and is well endowed with house property and land. For he has duties to perform as well as privileges to enjoy. He is expected to keep the great clock, now quite a hundred years old, not only going, but in repair, at least as regards the small parts. He has to maintain a lamp continually burning in the choir, beside various candles and tapers. So the perquisites of wax may well be swallowed up in what he has to provide.

As good pilgrims, we are next taken to pay our devotions before the silver reliquary containing a relic of St. Stephen, and the clerk then shows us some of the wealth of vestments and utensils belonging to the Church. He spreads out before us in all their glory the suit of vestments called the gilt suit, one of blue velvet with leopards' heads of gold, one of cloth of gold, one of green silk, and one of crimson velvet "pounded with flores of gold."

He shows us crosses and images and monstrances and chalices and cruets and candlesticks and chrismatories and censers, all of silver and gilt, until our eyes ache. Finally, he displays the beautifully embroidered altar-cloths. Bridgwater burgesses, generation after generation, have added their gifts to enrich this, the temple of their devotion.

Before we leave the Church, there is an addition to the noise in the arrival of the ringers at the base of the tower, and no sooner have we passed out of the south door than a peal rings forth. Bridgwater at one time had its own bell foundry, and the truly tuneful notes of the bells show that the founders knew how to bring forth good work out of the mould into which they poured their metal.

"That goodly house on the west side of the vicarage," says our clerk, "belongs to the chaplain of St. Mary's, and I would fain live with him rather than with Sir Vicar, for," he adds with a twinkle in his eye, "he keepeth a good board!"

