

CHAPTER XVII PERSONS AND THINGS

Bridgwater in the later days, by the Rev. A. H. Powell, 1908

1

IF a Bridgwater citizen of the time of Queen Anne were able to-day to revisit his native town, to walk through its streets and take note of its changes, he would find strange alterations indeed. William Briwere's picturesque old stone bridge has gone ; it was taken down in 1795. Its successor, too, has gone, and a third bridge spans the Parret, yet exactly at the same spot as of yore. No more can be seen the High Cross upon the Cornhill, or its companion the old Pig Cross (as it was called) near to the cattle market. They have both been removed, greatly to the sorrow of the antiquary. And the old citizen might look about him for the four Town Gates, which were characteristic features of the Borough, and he would be told that they were pulled down somewhere about a hundred years ago. The group of houses which formerly stood in High Street — they were known as the Island — now no longer block the traffic, and the row of cottages which were at the south side of St. Mary's Churchyard have all disappeared.

The visitor might be astonished, too, at the increased size of the place. There are so many more streets, and houses, than he ever saw. The oldest streets of all. High Street, Fore Street, Friarn Street, Dampiet and Blake Streets, Saint Mary Street, Ball's Lane, Eastover, and a few others, still preserve the same lines, yet they are vastly changed. The rough cobbles and the ill-kept roads are transformed ; dimly lighted horn lanterns are replaced by gas and electric lighting ; the few tiny and straggling shops have passed away, and more sumptuous successors have taken their place. The town has developed and spread on every side. When the Railway came, in the forties, Eastover quickly began to develop, and it has now a large population, extending far beyond the old boundary of the East Gate. Along the Taunton Road, as far as Hamp House, new streets have sprung up, and they are still increasing. It is the same westwards, up beyond West Street and along the Durleigh Road ; so also towards Wembdon, where a veritable suburb is arising. Yet it is not so very long ago since the Malt Shovel Inn was the last house out of the town in that direction. Round about

where the old Castle stood — in the region marked on old maps as Castle Bailey — the houses adjacent, in King Square, Castle Street, Court Street, and even down to the north side of Fore Street, contain many subterranean remains of the Castle cellars and storage places. Of the Castle itself only two relics survive above ground. One is the beautiful old Water Gate by the Quay (hidden away amidst some old houses) and the other is a fragment of the Castle wall, just at the top of Chandos Street. In many other parts of the town, as is inevitable, what was old is giving way to what is new. Old houses are being demolished to make room for others of modern design. Castle Street was a few decades ago the fashionable quarter of Bridgwater. Now it is getting to be the custom to dwell in newer houses just outside the town.

Thus the old gaol has gone from Fore Street, and the almshouses which were located in Old Taunton Road have been transformed to other uses. North Fields are no longer fields, but are covered with houses. Instead of the lumbering stage-waggons, and the gay and splendidly equipped stage coaches and mail coaches, two railways now convey travellers to and from the place, and the ubiquitous motor-car glides swiftly through the streets. The turnpike gates have gone ; and instead of men selling buckets of drinking-water at a halfpenny each, the modern system of water supply exists. King James' School has ceased to be, but Dr. Morgan's School, founded by the good Churchman of that name in 1723, is teaching a large number of boys, and has so far survived the many schemes which have been drawn up for its working by the Education Authorities of the realm.

Two hundred years ago the medical profession had not a very strong representation within the town. All this is altered. In 1813 the Bridgwater Hospital Scheme was started, and was carried through with complete success. Sir Philip Hales was the first President, and Dr. Dunning and Dr. Haviland the first physicians. Mr. John Symes, Mr. Haviland, and Mr. William Anstice were the first consulting surgeons, and Messrs. Henry Axford, Toogood, Haviland, and

CHAPTER XVII PERSONS AND THINGS

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2

Stradling the first surgeons. The first annual sermon at St. Mary's Church on behalf of the Hospital was preached in 1820 by the Rev. Henry Stanbury, and the last in 1907 by the Rev. F. G. Coote, Rector of Thurloxtton. The latter was the eighty-eighth annual sermon preached. There are sad stories of grievous sickness in the Town in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. At one of these visitations, when the cholera came, it was suggested that tar barrels should be burnt in the streets. This was done, and, it is said, with good effect. Many of the victims of that scourge were buried in Chilton Churchyard.

Changes are to be seen in the old Parish Church of Bridgwater. Happily the lines of the great and beautiful building are unchanged, and the fabric is being well cared for. Still Murillo's beautiful picture hangs above the altar, and facing it, at the west end. Queen Anne's Royal Arms are suspended above the old thirteenth-century arch. There were once groups of galleries erected in the Church, but Mr. James, an active Vicar who came in 1848, took them all down. Many restorations, both of the exterior and the interior, have taken place there. Of the later Vicars, the Rev. Michael Ferrabee Sadler became known all over England by his many theological books. He was something of a recluse, but an able and absolutely conscientious man. Mr. Nihill, who was Vicar of the town for four years only, was, as a Nonconformist gentleman describes him, "*a good clergyman indeed.*" And there are still many people living who remember the genial kindness of the Rev. W. G. Fitzgerald, who held the living for thirty-three years.

There have been developments, of course, in the number and method of the Church services. Things were not particularly active in that way in the eighteenth century. At that time people loved politics, elections, and Deist disputations. Little beyond the Sunday services was attempted, and there is no doubt that there was considerable spiritual deadness in the town. Yet some of the eighteenth-century clergy were remarkable and able men. One such was the Rev. John Coles, already alluded to in previous chapters.

He was the son of Mr. John Coles (circ. 1682), a merchant of the town, partner with Walter Ferguson and David Anderson in a large distillery business. He built his house and distillery in Chandos Street. In addition he was a shipowner, whose ship, *The Snow Queen*, traded with Cadiz and other ports. His son, the Rev. John Coles, was a man of great strength of will ; and he wielded considerable influence in the town. In 1742 he was made Vicar of Bridgwater, , and held that position until 1785. Mr. Coles held strong political views, and there is evidence that he showed no scruples about declaring them. A very characteristic water-colour drawing of him exists, painted by Mr. Chubb, who was no mean artist. The Vicar is dressed in a tightly buttoned-up coat, with gaiters, and wearing a shovel-hat and a full wig. Under his arm is a knobby stick, and on his face is an expression of strong determination. His eldest son, John, became a Fellow of Balliol, and a rector in Cornwall. The second son, James, a J. P. for the County of Somerset and Receiver-General for the Western District, died at the Lodge, Taunton, in 1804. The family is an old one. In the time of Henry VIII and earlier they spelt their name Colles, being lineally descended by a younger branch from the Colles of Somerset family.

In 1785 Dr. Wollen came as Vicar. He stayed on until his death in 1844, and was a considerable leader of society in the town. But perhaps he is better remembered as being the last Vicar of Bridgwater who wore a wig. Up to his time all parsons wore wigs. Dr. Wollen lived in Castle Street, and he is said to have been somewhat of a stern man. It was before his time that an Afternoon Preacher was appointed for St. Mary's Church, but during his Vicariate the Evening Service, with a special Preacher, came into vogue in 1833. Mr. Middleton was selected for the position, an able and most earnest man, and an excellent preacher. Since Mr. James' day the Vicar of Bridgwater has always filled the position. This, indeed, became necessary by reason of evening services being adopted in the towns all over England. At one time, however, the people of St.

CHAPTER XVII PERSONS AND THINGS

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3

Mary's had the Vicar to preach in the morning (in the afternoon he went out to Chilton Trinity), Mr. Parsons of Goathurst in the afternoon, and Mr. Middleton in the evening.

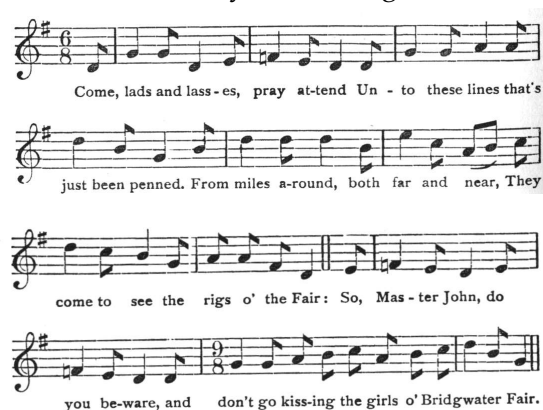
A friend has written down a reminiscence of the year 1840. It is quoted, as seems best, unaltered. He says of that period: "*When every family had to make their own matches with flint and steel and tinder rag and a small stick six inches long, dipped in hot brimstone. When wheat was a guinea a bushel. When people lived on horse beans, and barley cakes, flavoured with a herring. When little boys had to crawl up the chimneys to clean them. When little boys, only six years old, drove bullocks ploughing.*"

In June, 1853, there passed away a man of singular integrity, goodness, and learning; Mr. William Baker, F.R.G.S., Secretary to the Somerset Archaeological and Natural Society, a man of great industry and aptitude, and whose reputation in the town justly stood very high. He was born in Eastover in 1787, the son of a thriving butcher. He entered upon the career of a currier, and very early began to devour books on Natural History and kindred subjects, and became an ardent student of natural objects. In 1806 he wrote to a friend: "*get up before five o'clock, and read ancient history till six, my time to go to work; at breakfast time I read the 'Spectator' for a quarter of an hour; after dinner I have three-quarters of an hour, which I employ in reading Blair's lectures; after work I read ancient history from eight till nine o'clock; from nine till half-past ten or eleven I study Euclid; and on Sundays before and after dinner I practise drawing.*" At the age of twenty-two he started business as a currier in Bridgwater. Mr. Baker, during his long and honourable life, became acquainted with Dr. Buckland and many other of the ablest men of his day, and his influence for good in the town and neighbourhood was very great. His diligence was simply stupendous, yet he never neglected business. He is still remembered, and deservedly so, as one of the shining lights of the old Town. He lived before the days of local Public Libraries, yet he succeeded in becoming a learned man in days when books were scarce, and costly, and very hard to

obtain.

Of late years the even tenor of Bridgwater has been but little disturbed, save during the serious strike of workers engaged in the brickmaking trade, which occurred in 1896. Mr. Richard Else was at length nominated as arbitrator in the dispute, yet so serious was the situation that rioting began, and soldiers from Plymouth had to be drafted into the town, and lodged in extemporised quarters within the Town Hall. On the 3rd of July, at 3 a.m., the Mayor for that year, Mr. Alderman Pollard, had to read the Riot Act, directing all people to disperse peaceably, and return to their homes. Thus quiet was restored, but not until the strike had lasted fourteen weeks, and much distress had been occasioned.

The St. Matthew's Fair still flourishes, but its business transactions have greatly diminished from the olden days. Other methods now prevail, and the doings of the Fair are mostly confined to agricultural dealings, and to the pursuit of pleasure. Mr. Cecil Sharp, the well-known authority on folk-songs, kindly sends the following, being the first of a set of six verses — the old Bridgwater Fair Song. The music was noted from the singing of Mr. William Bailey of Cannington.



In addition to the Fair, the Fifth of November is still celebrated in the town with intense enthusiasm and vigour, and forms, in fact, quite an annual pageant. It has come to be, one may surmise, a present amusement rather than a historical commemoration.

Such is Bridgwater, and such it was. It has passed from William the Conqueror's

CHAPTER XVII PERSONS AND THINGS

Bridgwater in the later days, by the Rev. A. H. Powell, 1908

4

days, through many evolutions, to the time of King Edward the Seventh. It has produced some worthy sons, and it has seen hard times. The days of its fightings, we will hope, are over. Not so, however, its activities. These must continue, and even increase, if the Ancient Borough is to go on and prosper. *Floreat Brugie!* May the days before it be as sturdy and as vigorous as its past has been : may its men be strong, and brave, and true, as in old Briwere's days. And may it go on to weave yet further history still, of which some other pen, perchance a century hence, shall write.

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