

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL

BLAKE MUSEUM



A BRIEF ECONOMIC HISTORY OF BRIDGWATER

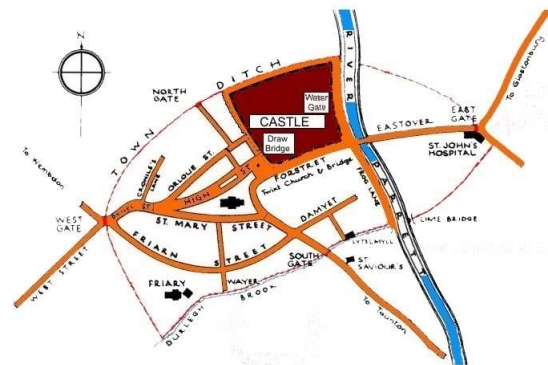
The town of Bridgwater

Bridgwater was founded in the Middle Ages and did not exist before Saxon times. The original wooden bridge gave the town its Saxon name of Brycg, which was pronounced as "Bruge" in the West Saxon dialect. This accounts for its name in Domesday Book, Brugie. To this was added the name of Walter (of Douai), its first Norman lord, hence Brugie-Walter, eventually corrupted to Bridgwater.

The population of the town was always small. In 1086 it could not have numbered more than 100 to 150 inhabitants. Their occupation was predominantly agricultural. The Rating Lists of 1444 record a total of 316 occupied houses. This suggests a population of some 1400 or 1500. The town had acquired the status of a free borough in 1200 and was granted the right to have a Mayor in 1469.

Medieval Bridgwater

St. Mary's Church had reached its present impressive size and the spire had been built (1367). There was a castle (c.1202) of which little trace remains today.



Medieval Bridgwater

There was also a small house of canons regular, known as the Hospital of St. John (founded about 1214) which stood near the East Gate. The Franciscan Friary, the only one in Somerset, stood within the south west corner of the borough boundary (from about 1243).

By the middle of the 15th century the importance of the port had been established and the manufacture of cloth had begun.

The Port

Although relatively small, Bridgwater was important enough to be one of the fifteen English headports for customs purposes. Much of its sea-borne trade was coastal traffic along the Bristol Channel from Gloucester and Bristol down to Minehead, Barnstaple, Bideford and

Padstow. There were important trade links with South Wales e.g. with Cardiff, Haverfordwest, Swansea, Pembroke, Tenby, Newport, and with Ireland e.g. Youghal, Wexford, Cork. Overseas trade was mainly with France and Spain, e.g. with La Rochelle, Bordeaux, St. Jean de Luz, San Sebastian, although occasionally ships came from as far as Venice and Newfoundland. It must be remembered also that Bridgwater was the vital link for all river trade up the Parrett as far as Taunton.

The commodities of trade were many and varied, especially in coastal traffic. The chief imports were wine and salt from France, fish from Ireland and iron from Wales. The exports were cloth and local agricultural produce e.g. wheat, beans, barley.

In the 16th century Bristol had ships of many hundred tons but most of the Bridgwater trade was carried on in small boats seldom above 50 tons even for overseas trade. Its smallness, however, did not deter the Bridgwater boat *Advantage* of only 30 tons from fishing regularly off Newfoundland. Many of the boats trading with Bridgwater were from other ports and Bridgwater never built up a large fleet. In 1572, for example, Bridgwater and Minehead together had only seven ships out of a total of 1,383 for England as a whole.

Bridgwater harbour must have been quite small, with one wooden crane, although in 1603 it handled (among other things) 8,500 gallons of wine. The town also had its own warehouse near the quay.

The Cloth Industry

The West Country was one of the great cloth producing regions of medieval England. The importance of Bridgwater (and district) in this industry was sufficient for the town to give its name to a type of cloth. Occupational surnames such as Cardmaker, Tapener (weaver), Tucker (fuller), and Woder (woadman) are found

alongside the Webbs, Weavers and Dyers in the Borough Archives. In a Will of 1310 a local merchant left about 26 yards of cloth. In 1317 another merchant, Gilbert Bussell, left a large quantity of cloth worth £60, In 1438 a Bridgwater cargo was seized in a dispute with Bilbao. It contained 16 "pieces" of cloth worth 4 marks each (total value £52-13-4).

Yet the town did not possess the essential basis for cloth-making: good fulling mills. Consequently the industry moved out into the Quantock Hills. The well-to-do clothiers who controlled the industry may still have lived in the town, using spinners and weavers within a radius of 5 or 10 miles.

In the 15th century, between 1415 and 1480, only on five occasions did Bridgwater export more than 200 broadcloths, whereas Bristol by comparison was exporting up to 7,000 in a good year. In 1460 the town petitioned the Duchess of York for a reduction of the annual fee which was paid to her because the inhabitants had failed into "grete povete and decaye". Later in the century trade began to improve. In 1480, 401 broadcloths were exported and in 1401, 889. The peak of this prosperity was reached in the 1520's. Yet when John Leland came here in 1538 he found many houses in decay. The town went through a long period of stagnation, to judge by surviving records of overseas trade.

Eventually in 1698 additional customs officials were appointed "by reason of the increase of trade and business in the port".

This revival may also reflect a late 17th century resurgence of the cloth industry. By this time the West Country was producing serges and fine Spanish medley cloth. Medieval cloth was very heavy (38 oz. to the yard, whereas present day suiting rarely exceeds 24 oz. to the yard).

Spanish wool, which was introduced into England in the 17th century was light but it

was short and difficult to use. Once the proper techniques of using it had been mastered the industry boomed and during the first quarter of the 17th Century the West Country cloth towns enjoyed the period of their greatest prosperity. This accounts for the feeling of confidence in the industry's progress which runs through the pages of Defoe's *Tour through the whole island of Great Britain* (1724-6)

Before long there were labour troubles (weavers versus clothiers) which brought strikes and disorders.

The broadcloth weavers employed assistants to stand at the far side of their wide looms to catch and return the shuttle. The invention of the Fly-shuttle in 1733 made it possible for one man to operate a broadloom. In Somerset, however, the new device was never adopted and Bridgwater, in common with other West Country towns, began to lose its market for broadcloths. As further inventions were rejected in the West, the triumph of machines meant the triumph of the North. In 1820 one solitary clothier remained in business in the town. It is doubtful whether he could find work for any weavers.

Population Growth and New Industries

It has been estimated that the population had risen to 2,000 in 1547 but in 1695 when a local Census was taken there were still only 2,200 inhabitants. It is not until the 18th Century that a slow but marked advance begins. When the first official census was taken in 1801 the population recorded was 3,600. This figure had risen to 10,900 in 1851. In 1901 it was 14,900. The commercial manufacture of bricks, which was to become the main industry in the town in the late 19th century does not appear to have begun much before 1840.

In the early C18 the Duke of Chandos tried to develop new industries – a glass works, cloth making and ship-building, etc,



Castle Street, built by the Duke of Chandos

In the early 19th Century, however, the total tonnage of vessels using the port increased annually until it reached a maximum of 17,519 tons in 1854. It is significant that the population of the town had trebled between 1801 and 1851. But it was still very much a small market town which was dependent on agriculture to a marked degree.

One distinctive factor in the economy of 19th century Bridgwater was the trade of ship-building. The last vessel to be built was the *Irene* in 1907. She is still afloat.

The main line of the Bristol and Exeter Railway reached Bridgwater in 1841. The docks were opened in the same year at a time when the increasing use of the Parrett by cargo vessels seemed to justify such heavy capital expenditure. Unfortunately a steady decline in the tonnage of vessels using the port set in after 1854. and the docks closed in 1971. Since then the Port of Bridgwater, which includes both banks of the River Parrett down to its mouth, has a wharf at Dunball which has been doing increased business, with the import of bulk goods like aggregate.

From the beginning of the 20th century the town saw the development of a range of small manufacturing industries – clothing (shirts and collars), boots and shoes, furniture, engineering, and jam and preserves manufacture. Bristol Road became the site of a trading estate where various firms located.

Since 1950 the manufacture of bricks has

ceased although hand-made roofing tiles and drain-pipes were still being made until the early 1970s.

Fortunately many new industries have been started in Bridgwater. This new phase in the economic history of the town began at the start of World War II, when the government built a factory to manufacture high explosives at Puriton near Bridgwater. Called *ROF Bridgwater*, the plant was owned by BAE Systems and closed after decommissioning was completed in July 2008.

British Cellophane Ltd, a joint venture between La Cello-phane SA and Courtaulds opened a major factory producing cellophane in Bridgwater 1937. Bought by UCB Films in 1996, the town suffered a blow in 2005 when Innovia Films closed the cellophane factory.

The opening of the M5 motorway past the town in the 1970s, with trading estates established near the interchanges encouraged Bridgwater's new growth with the siting of new businesses there. On the *Express Park* business park are included the relocated of *Gerber Juice* and new enterprises *Toolstation* and *Interpet* as well as the *Exel Centre* for the *NHS Logistics Authority*. Also there are the headquarters of the *Avon and Somerset Police Authority*. On the other side of the railway is *Morrison's* supermarket regional distribution centre. Retailer *Argos* has a regional distribution centre based at Huntworth. A new £100 m *Regional Agricultural Business Centre* opened at Huntworth in 2007, following construction which began in 2006.

Bridgwater is now a major centre of industry in Somerset, with industries including the production of plastics, engine parts, industrial chemicals, and foods. In consequence the town has expanded way beyond the medieval boundary with more housing, and the population at 2011 is

35,886, or 41,276 including the suburbs of Wembdon and Hamp.

Further reading

Edmund Porter, *Bridgwater Industries, past and present*, c 1970

Chris Sidaway, *A short Commercial History of Bridgwater*, c 2008

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