

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL
BLAKE MUSEUM



BRIDGWATER PAGEANT, 1927



*Sydenham Manor, site of the pageant
Blake Museum collection*

Pageants were a part of medieval life, usually with a religious theme, but died out in this country at the Reformation. Pageants were held in Bridgwater at Corpus Christi between 1449 and 1543. This was normally the Thursday after Trinity Sunday.

They were revived in the Edwardian era by Louis N. Parker, (1852-1944) who devised a pageant which was performed in the

grounds of Sherborne Abbey, Dorset in 1905. Between then and 1914 some 40 pageants were staged in the United Kingdom. From 1918 and WW2 pageants were written and performed in villages, towns and cities. Some were very big. For example, the Pageant of Empire at Wembley in 1924 had 15,000 performers and ran for six months. The modern pageant consisted of scenes representing historical events directly

connected with the locality where the pageant took place, with appropriate dialogue, costume and music. They were educational, and designed to inspire pride in their native place to the performers and audience.

The driving force behind the Bridgwater project was the Mayor, Walter Deacon, (1881-1955) a pharmacist by profession, who had created the 'Brighter Bridgwater' project of floral displays to boost the town's trade and commerce. He was largely responsible for the creation of the Blake Museum, opened in April 1926.

The Pageant Master chosen was Major M. F. Cely Trevilian (1881-1932) of Mildnay, near Langport. He was severely wounded in WW1, was High Sheriff of the county in 1925, and a JP. He was a driving force in the Somerset Rural Community Council, active in the British Legion and trained village choirs. He was involved in pageants at Muchelney Abbey (1924), Bridgwater (1927), Taunton (1928), Selworthy (1930) and Combe St Nicholas (1932).

How it was done

A committee was set up comprising the mayor and deputy mayor, 3 local historians, 11 head teachers, 4 clergy, 3 who undertook business management and 8 whose occupations were not stated, plus Mr F. Parr [retired Borough Surveyor], Mr Boltz [District Secretary, Transport and General Workers' Union], Mr H. N. Gedye (Hon. Treas.) [Manager, Lloyd's Bank (Fox's Branch) Fore Street], and Mr Walter Raymond [Writer]

Sub committees dealt with the Libretto, finance, music, costume, the management of the pageant ground, publicity, and the project officers had general oversight.

The Pageant comprised:

A Masque

1) King John visits Bridgwater Castle, 1204

2) The Bridgwater Riots, 1381

3) The funeral procession of Sir John Luttrell, 1428

4) St Matthew's Fair, 1588

5) Robert Blake

6) The Battle of Sedgemoor, 1685

7) 18th century election hustings

8) An array of crafts on carts: *this was a feature of the epilogue, each cart having performers doing the crafts as the carts were drawn round the arena.*

Ancient crafts

Spinning wool

Basket making

Iron work

Pottery

Sheep shearing

Medieval industries

Hand weaving

Dyeing and fulling

Ship building - a carrack

Modern industries

Bath brick

Rope-making

Red bricks and roofing tiles

Pottery

Shirts and collars

Baskets and wicker chairs

Wire rope

Brewing

Builders' joinery

Epilogue

The printed libretto, which contains the various actors' speeches, songs and stage directions, runs to 74 pages. It has a foreword by the long forgotten Somerset novelist, Walter Raymond (1852-1931)

The Masque at the beginning had a prologue spoken by the Brighton actress, Norah Soole. A public address system does not seem to have been used, so all the actors must have used vocal projection techniques in order to be heard in the open air – praised by *The Times* (22nd June).

Photographs were commissioned from Sidney Palfrey of Wembdon Road. At the

conclusion a small number were made of a leather-bound volume containing the libretto of the Pageant, lists of donors and the Pageant Council, Gangers, a reprint of *The Times* criticism of the performance, and of the Pageant Service in Saint Mary's Church and some thirty photographs of the episodes. One of these volumes is in the Somerset Studies Library at the Heritage Centre, Taunton. Another is now on the Museum's library.

Unfortunately, no photographs of the array of crafts at the conclusion seem to ever have been published, but the *Bridgwater Mercury* account of 22nd June gives quite a detailed account of what was involved. See the Museum's online Pageant page for a transcript.

Music for the songs and dances was commissioned from the young composer Percy Whitlock (1903-1946) and other incidental music was performed throughout by the B. A. Christy Military Band (Dir. E. J. Tout).

Bridgwater then, as now, possessed a remarkable range of amateur artistic talent, as can be seen from the ever enduring Carnival. The 1000 performers, adults and children, came from all walks of life in the town, and numerous horses were involved. More townsfolk made costumes and props and helped in staging the event. Everyone involved was a volunteer.

The pageant location

The land to the front of the Tudor Sydenham Manor, owned by Philip Sturdy, about half a mile out of town on the Bath road was used. An elaborate temporary stage-set, designed by the retired borough surveyor, Francis Parr, was erected to the front of the manor house comprising a cottage, St John's Hospital, the Castle Gate, and the Town Bridge, plus a covered stand for the Christy Military band. Facing this, looking over the pageant ground was

covered seating for the audience of 1000. British Pathé filmed the event and this silent film can be seen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aF1IZ-4y1NY>.

This brief film gives a very vivid impression of what went on.

A link to it is also on the Blake Museum's entertainment page together with the pageant documentation.

<https://www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/museum-collections/1927pageant.htm>

The pageant ran for a week beginning with a service at St Mary's Church on Sunday 19th and performances from Monday 20th June to Saturday 25 June.

On the last Saturday a procession of the performers went to the Pageant ground from the Penel Orliou cattle market, to the west of the town, by way of High Street, Fore Street and the Town Bridge, then a brief diversion up Salmon Parade to the Hospital where patients could watch it pass, then back to Eastover, Monmouth Street and finally Bath Road.



View of the stage set with the temporary buildings in the rear



The procession down the High Street

Afterwards

The event made a profit but no figures were recorded about the audience.

Total receipts	£1865 10 4
Total expenditure	£1365 5 10
Credit balance	£500 4 6

The profit was devoted to local good causes, such as the Bridgwater Hospital and the Museum.



*A page's costume worn by Miss M Durston
(schoolmistress)
(Blake Museum Collection)*



Unknown performers at the pageant



The entire cast assembled

The museum's comprehensive page about the Pageant is here:

<http://bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/1927pageant.htm>

Blake Museum is owned by Bridgwater
Town Council
and managed by volunteers from
The Friends of Blake Museum (Registered
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www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/
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