

# BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL BLAKE MUSEUM

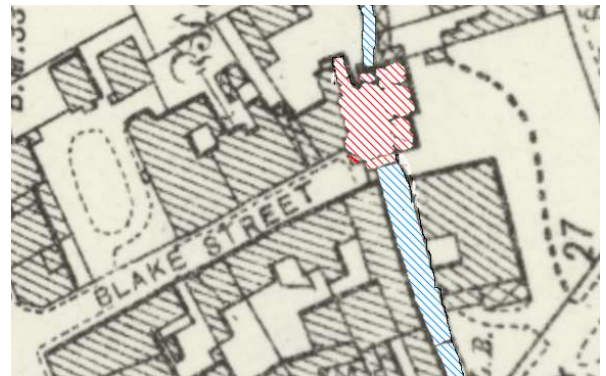


## THE TOWN MILL –A SHORT HISTORY

The site of the Town Mill is at the end of Blake Street (once known as Mill Lane), next door to the Blake Museum.

The early history of the mill (then known as the Little Mill) goes back to the early middle ages, for it was in the Domesday Book (1086) and was originally used for grinding corn. The building is quite small, and the site today indicates that a breast-shot water wheel ran in the bed of a leat from the Durleigh Brook

The main building was built of brick, probably early in the seventeenth century, for they were laid in English Bond, which was common then. Blake Street survived the burning of the town in the Civil War (1645), so the mill must include some of the oldest surviving brick-work in the town.



*The location of the Mill and the Leat*

Until the end of the 17th century Bridgwater obtained its water from local streams - mainly the Durleigh Brook – from wells and from stored rainwater. For the poorer residents who did not have private wells, it was carried round the town by hawkers, who filled their carts at places like Horsepond Lane, which in 1680 had been fitted out to allow the inhabitants to obtain water directly from the Durleigh Brook.

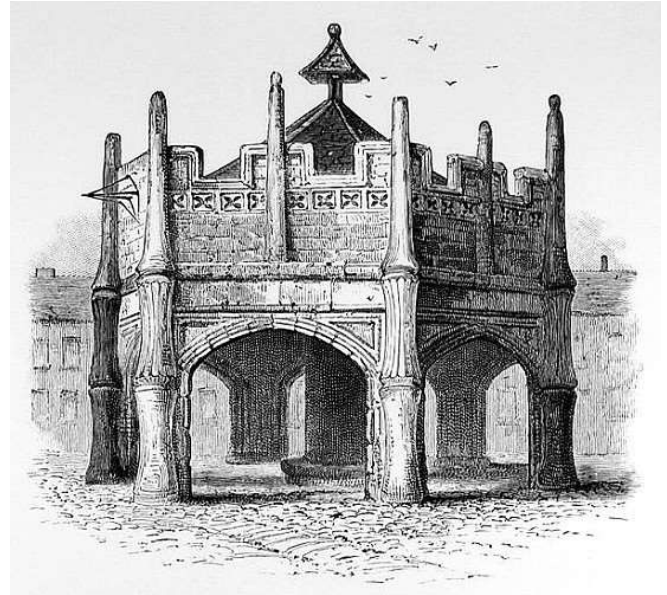


A water carrier  
© Look & Learn

In 1694 an agreement was drawn up by the Corporation allowing Richard Lowbridge, an ironmonger of Stourbridge, Worcs., and David Dunnell to dig up the streets and lay water pipes from the old Town Mill to a cistern constructed in the roof space over the High Cross on Cornhill. Lowbridge had recently purchased the mill from John Smith of Barnstaple

Both Lowbridge and Dunnell were partners in the waterworks at Exeter and Barnstaple. Since Dunnell was a carpenter it is likely he was the engineering specialist, building the wooden waterwheel and machinery.

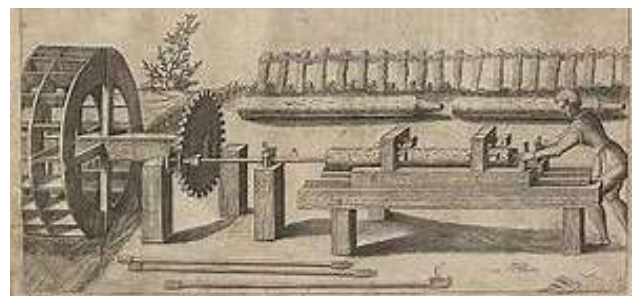
The Durleigh Brook discharges into the River Parrett at what today is known as St Saviour's Clyse, which can be seen on the west bank of the river near Blake Bridge. The cistern at Cornhill had to be big enough to hold a supply during the time the mill was idle, perhaps due to a high tide, especially for use in the case of fire. No information has been found about the machinery at the mill, but it is likely that the waterwheel of about 15 ft diameter rotated at approximately 15 rpm and drove through gearing a number of forcing pumps which drew the water from the stream and pumped it to the cistern on Cornhill through wooden pipes trenched into the roadway. It is possible that a corn mill was attached to the plant, so that water could be pumped during the miller's slack times.



*The High Cross on Cornhill demolished c 1800*

Numbers of wooden waterpipes were dug up from the streets of Bridgwater over the years: in 1795 when the stone town bridge was replaced by the iron one; in the 1830's when the gas mains were laid; and in the 1870's when the Water Company's pipes were laid. In 1917 more than 60 yards of elm water pipes were found in the bed of the Durleigh Brook in the garden of Ivy House, Friarn Street. A complete section of a large-bore wooden water pipe has recently been recovered from the bed of the Durleigh Brook next to the Town Mill. Just why pipes were sunk in the bed of the Durleigh Brook in this way is something of a mystery. But it could be due to the pollution from the tannery, upstream.

The pipes were usually made of elm or alder; oak being far too expensive and much harder to bore. The hole was bored by a succession of hand-operated long augers, increasing in size, but larger water companies used mechanical boring machines, worked by horses or water.



*A machine for boring water pipes*

The ownership, operation and finances of the Bridgwater service during the 18th century is not known. Water carriers would have taken the supply drawn from the cistern, round the streets and it is probable that some large properties would have had an independent piped supply as well. It is unlikely there were public drinking fountains, since the owners of the supply would have charged for every drop they supplied. The water was piped to Eastover over the stone bridge then and it is possible there was a second cistern there somewhere, but no evidence of this has so far been found. The 1694 deed had, however, given the proprietor of the water company the right to build such cisterns as he thought fit. Virtually all buildings would have used water-butts or cistern to collect rainwater for non-drinking use and for fire-fighting. Underground water cisterns for rainwater storage were sometimes constructed in larger house properties, from which the water could be pumped. Little more information has been found about this water service.

None of the tourists' guidebooks published at the end of the 18th century mentioned the waterworks. Joshua Gilpin, the American paper-maker who toured industrial Britain between 1795-1805 recording manufacturing processes, noted in his diary on May 12 1796 that the town obtained its water from the cistern under the High Cross, which was supplied from a nearby stream, so it is clear that the plant was still operational then. The High Cross and the cistern were demolished around 1800, and for the next eighty years, during which the population grew three-fold, and there were frequent severe epidemics, the town depended entirely on rainwater butts and cisterns, wells and what water was drawn from the Durleigh Brook and hawked around the houses. The town did

not have a piped water-supply until the 1870s.

The building reverted to a corn mill early in the 19th century, and by 1858 had a steam engine to drive the stones. By 1886 it was used as a saw mill, then became disused and was used as a food store. By the end of the of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was a builder's store. It came on the market in 1987 and was purchased with a view of incorporating it into the Museum. The upper floor was destroyed by arson in 1995. Various outbuildings were cleared and dangerous walls lowered. In 2009 the site was transferred to the Town Council along with the Museum by Sedgemoor District Council.

From 2009 work was done in the mill, with the part that survived the fire being re-roofed and used as storage, much rubble and debris removed, and a part re-floored to give better access.

In 2017 the Town Council authorised the start of a project to rebuild the main part of the mill as it was before the fire. The space gained will be used to expand the resources of the Museum. Later phases will include the restoration of the water-wheel.

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In 1925 Bridgwater Borough Council purchased Blake House in Blake Street as a Museum for the town and it was formally opened on April 15 1926. It had been in the possession of the Blake family - Bridgwater merchants - and is the reputed birth place of General-at-Sea Robert Blake (1598-1657) Blake House has interesting architectural elements, including timber-framing from the late 15th and early 16th century, but was re-modelled in the 17th and 19th centuries.

As well as material about Bridgwater, it covers the villages in the area of the old Bridgwater Rural District Council, extending from just south of Burnham and Highbridge in the north, to Thurloxton in the south, and from Ashcott in the east to Nether Stowey in the west.

In 1957 the 19th century Mill Cottage, between Blake House and the Town Mill was purchased and incorporated as an extension to the Museum building.

In 1974 Sedgemoor District Council was formed and took over the assets of the Borough Council. It ran the Museum until March 31, 2009 when responsibility for it was returned to the Bridgwater Town Council.

The Museum has collections relating to archaeology, local history, Robert Blake, The Duke of Monmouth and the Battle of Sedgemoor, the local merchant and artist John Chubb (1746-1818). There is an extensive photographic collection. The

museum does educational outreach work in local schools.

Blake Museum is run by Bridgwater  
Town Council

and managed by volunteers from The  
Friends of Blake Museum  
(Registered Charity 1099815)

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The Museum is closed during the winter  
months

Revised edition 8 November 2018

