

# BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL BLAKE MUSEUM



## THE WORKHOUSE by Summer Hues



Background: During the thirteenth century poor people in Bridgewater could ask for help from the Hospital or Priory of St John (1215) which was situated at the junction of Eastover and Broadway, where the *Mercure* hotel is.

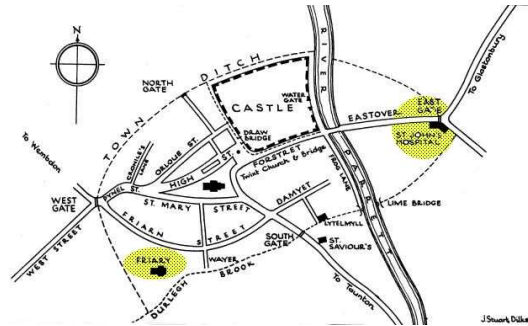
*'Let all know that the nobleman William Bruere has founded a hospital at Briggewater and has placed there clerical brethren who will serve God there and has given possessions for their support and that of Christ's poor.'*

*However:- No leper or lunatic or any having the falling sickness or any other contagious disease or a woman in child, or a sucking infant or any other unbearable patient shall be admitted into the aforesaid house, however poor or infirm.*

Also in 1230 a friary was built where the religious brotherhood known as Franciscan Friars lived, in the Friarn Street / Albert Street neighbourhood Their task was to:

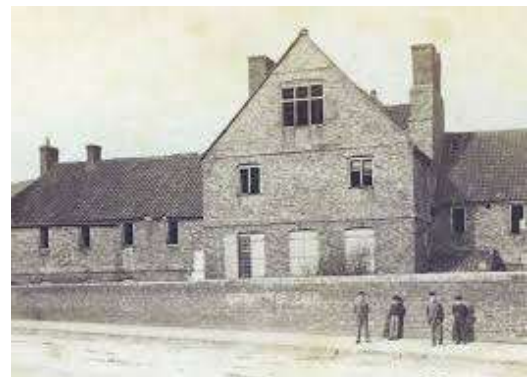
*'Tend to the sick, the outcast and the distressed to alleviate some of the miseries of medieval life' for there was 'terrible poverty, sickness and grinding misery abroad'.*

During the sixteenth century both these institutions were surrendered to Henry VIII during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, their assets sold and the monks dispersed.



*Medieval Bridgewater, with the locations of St John's Hospital and the Friary*

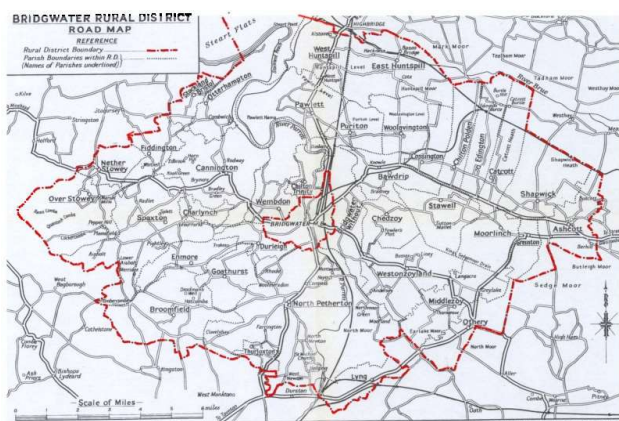
In 1601 the Poor Law made parishes responsible for it's poor and to offer outdoor relief as it was known. The parish relied on a private charity known as a special stock, in the of land, houses, money etc. Then a poor rate was introduced and collected weekly by 'collectors of special stock' and the overseers of the poor. In Bridgewater's case there were 4 – 2 for the town and 2 for Bridgewater Without.



*Bridgewater Poorhouse, Old Taunton Road, 1865*

The new poor law of 1834 stated that 'indoor relief' was to replace outdoor relief, in other words the poor had to live in workhouses. In reality, the almshouses in Bridgwater were already poorhouses or workhouses, for example the almshouse (1693) at the junction of St Saviour's Avenue and Old Taunton Road was gradually taken over as a workhouse and is now referred to as Bridgwater's first parish workhouse. A parliamentary report of 1777 recorded the parish workhouse in Bridgwater (up to 80 inmates) and also workhouses in Lyng (10), Middlezoy (10), Overstowey (20) North Petherton (90), Nether Stowey (14) and Stockland Bristol (8).

Under the 1834 act, the poor houses were grouped as Unions, and the geographical area of the Unions later formed the basis for the Rural District Councils from 1894.



Map showing the boundary of the Bridgwater Poor Law Union

Inmates wore the 'uniform of shame' which was clothing made from the coarsest grey wool cloth and grey stockings. Beds were sacks filled with 'oatendust' on the floor (there were some beds). Conditions were harsh, crowded and unhygienic. Many inmates died from dysentery, typhoid and cholera.

William Holland who was a parson at Overstowey kept diaries and gives a wonderful insight into the workhouse in his locality.

*'Porter has been very ill in the workhouse. I went to see him, he was in a fit. I gave them*

*some gin to put in his mouth, could not swallow'*

*'The madman in the poorhouse outrageous --- the man is chained and lies straw'*

Holland's description of the workhouse in Overstowey is quite different in character and organisation than the 1837 workhouse at Northgate. There never seemed to be any person in situ there all the time and visits were made now and again by himself, parish officers, a farmer called 'Morle' and Tom Poole, a tanner. Holland states that he will refer the state of things to the Justices of the Peace, but no-one appears to take responsibility for the day to day running of the workhouse. This is completely different for the strict military style regime of the Bridgwater Workhouse.



Map showing the Northgate workhouse, c1880

This was designed on the Panopticon Principle so the structure in the middle of the hexagon housed the workhouse staff, who could observe what was going on in the radiating wings.

In 1786 and 1787, economic philosopher Jeremy Bentham travelled to Krichev in White Russia (modern Belarus) to visit his brother, the engineer, Samuel, who was engaged in managing various manufacturing projects for Prince Potemkin. It was Samuel who conceived the basic idea of a circular building at the hub of a larger

compound as a means of allowing a small number of managers to oversee the activities of a large and unskilled workforce.

Jeremy refined his ideas and they were adopted by penal reformers in prison and workhouse design



*Bridgwater Workhouse, Northgate, 1890*

The 1841 Census shows that there were 197 inmates and 6 staff: Master, Matron, school master, school mistress and porter.

The workhouse was governed by a Board of Guardians and the ethos was the principle of 'less eligibility' i.e. conditions were to be worse than the lowest paid labourer. Jobs were intended to be punitive. There were different accommodation for different categories of pauper, e.g. male, female, able-bodied, infirm and children.

The diet contained no milk, and the staple diet was oatmeal gruel made with water. The workhouse diet sheet stated that on some days gruel was only served for breakfast and some days meat or cheese was given. However, Mr Poole, a medical officer, said they were given one pint of coarse oatmeal, three times a day, which was 'poor and disagreeable'.

Outbreaks of dysentery and typhus were regular. John Bowen, who was an overseer for four years and later a Guardian, produced pamphlets given to the House of Lords Select Committee (1839), that reported 30 deaths in three months from an

average of 94 inmates. He wrote that the deaths of convicts in hulks were 23%, whereas workhouse deaths were 41%. He also wrote "Is killing in a union workhouse criminal if sanctioned by the poor law commissioners?"

An extract from the Board of Guardians minute book, 1849:- "*--- foul straw on which children voided their excrements --- accumulated for some time*"

Bowen also pointed out that convicts received 292 oz of food per week, whereas an inmate received 145 oz per week.

The Guardians turned a blind eye to what was happening and even congratulated the staff for saving money by providing subsistence diets and lack of medical care.

In 1849 highly critical reports of the workhouse appeared in the *Bridgwater Times*, one report by J Haviland, a doctor in the town and Mayor highlighted overcrowding, bad ventilation and a chronic shortage of water. The Board of Guardians denied these reports, but a report of a Parliamentary Select Committee found them to be true.

In 1929 the Board of Guardians was abolished and Local Government administered the Poor Law.

The workhouse continued to operate until 1948, with the advent of National Health. The workhouse hospital block was retained as a geriatric hospital, while the workhouse was demolished in the 1980s

#### Sources

Revd A. H. Powell, *The Ancient Borough of Bridgwater in the County of Somerset*, 1907

Jack Ayres, ed., *Paupers & Pig Killers*, (The diary of a Somerset Parson) 1984

J. F. Lawrence, *A History of Bridgwater*, 2005

C. A. Buchanan, 'John Bowen and the Bridgwater Scandal', *Proc. Somerset*

*Archaeology and Natural History Society*, vol  
131 (1987) pp 181-201

[www.workhouses.org.uk/Bridgwater](http://www.workhouses.org.uk/Bridgwater)

[www.bridgwatertowncouncil.gov.uk](http://www.bridgwatertowncouncil.gov.uk)

<https://bridgwaterworkhouse.com>

<https://westoverward.co.uk>

<http://www.bridgwaterheritage.org.uk/bridgwaterscientists.org.uk/bowen/>

Blake Museum is owned by Bridgwater

Town Council

and managed by volunteers from

The Friends of Blake Museum

(Registered Charity 1099815)

[www.bridgwatmuseum.org.uk](http://www.bridgwatmuseum.org.uk)

Version 1: 01 November 2018