

BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL
BLAKE MUSEUM



Bridgwater docks, about 1900

THE PORT OF BRIDGWATER

Historically, the main port on the river was at Bridgwater; where the river was bridged; the first bridge was built in 1200. Bridgwater was part of the Port of Bristol until the Port of Bridgwater was created in 1348, covering 80 miles (130 km) of the Somerset coast line, from the Devon border to the mouth of the River Axe. Quays were built from 1424. A Customs House was sited at Bridgwater, on West Quay. The river was navigable, with care, by 400 to 500 tonne vessels. By trans-shipping into barges at the Town Bridge the Parrett was navigable as far as Langport and (via the River Yeo) to Ilchester. After 1827, it was also possible to transfer goods to Taunton via the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal at Huntworth. A floating harbour was constructed between 1837–1841 and the canal was extended to the harbour.

Shipping reached a peak between 1880 and 1885; with an average of 3,600 ships per year entering the port. Bridgwater also built some 167 ships; the last one was the *Irene*, launched in 1907.

Dunball Wharf.

Dunball wharf was built in 1844 by Bridgwater coal merchants, and was formerly linked to the Bristol and Exeter Railway by a rail track which crossed the A38.

Although ships no longer dock in the town of Bridgwater, 90,213 tonnes of cargo were handled within the port authority's area in 2006, most of which was stone products via the wharf at Dunball. It is no longer linked to the railway system. The wharf is now used for landing stone products, mainly marine sand and gravels dredged in the Bristol Channel. Marine sand and gravel accounted for 55,754 tonnes of

the total tonnage of 90,213 tonnes using the Port facilities in 2006, with salt products accounting for 21,170 tonnes in the same year.

Origins of maritime trade

Exports of agricultural products: mainly wheat, corn, beans, and peas to southern France, northern Spain, Wales, and Ireland.

Imports included herring, but were mainly made up by wine from Bordeaux, through which by 1330 the town had become a centre for victualling.

Bailiffs were appointed to collect appropriate taxes, tolls and berthing fees, and were also able to rent ropes and boarding planks to visiting vessels. However, due to the high tidal flow, merchants were able to avoid taxes by landing goods in the river, whereby a vessel would be purposefully beached downstream close to Combrich and manually offloaded at low tide.

The development of the port allowed the local cloth trade to expand, with over 100 cloth pieces exported each year from 1402 onwards, until the trade reached its peak in 1506. The average number of cloths exported per year during this period was in excess of 200. This expanded further in the 16th century, with most going to Bilbao, San Sebastián, Fuenterrabia and Andalusia in Spain; Bayonne and Bordeaux in France; and half to the Irish ports of Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kinsale, Limerick, Rosses Point and Sligo, Wexford, Waterford and Youghal. By the latter half of the Middle Ages, Ireland also was the destination of over half of the beans and grain exported from Bridgwater.

By the 1590s imports had become erratic and depressed, with most of the port's trade going to wool; cloth; agricultural products; food (Cheddar cheese); Cider, and from sister regional ports of: Bristol (glass); Cardiff (coal); Carmarthen (wood, metheglin); Dartmouth; Dorchester;

Exmouth; Lydney (coal, salt); Melcombe Regis (Weymouth) and Tenby. However, after this period export licences were issued again in 1600s for trade to Ireland, France (salt and lime from La Rochelle), Spain, and Portugal, which doubled the traffic tonnage. By the 1670s Bridgwater registered vessels were running triangular routes, allowing them to operate directly in both French-Irish and English-Dutch trade routes.

By the 1700s, the local fleet consisted of 33 vessels totalling 1,000-tonne, and employing 171 men. At the start of the century, import/export accounted for a third of total shipped tonnage, but stood at two thirds by the end. Exports remained focused around wheat, which was shipped locally to Bristol and around the West Country by coasters, and exported mainly to Madeira and Newfoundland, but with trade also to the Mediterranean, Virginia, and the West Indies. Return cargoes varied greatly, but were mostly made up of coal, culm, local food and wine, and a large trade in illegally imported spirit-based alcohol.

Bridgwater's trade increased by more than 50% in the seven years preceding 1830: in 1822 the tonnage was slightly more than 75,000 tons, while in 1832 it had reached to above 113,000 registered tons. The *Alfred* newspaper noted on 9 and 16 Dec 1832:

The trade of Bridgwater was principally confined to London and the ports of the West of England, some few voyages are made to Liverpool, Dublin and Belfast, and probably three or four voyages in the year to the Baltic for timber and tallow. The staple articles of export of the port itself are scouring bricks, bricks for building and pantiles; to which may be added the surplus agricultural produce of the western part of Somersetshire, as wheat, malt, flour, barley, beans, wool, cheese and cider. In addition to these may be mentioned a few cargoes of elm and oak timber, but principally the former.

*Among the articles of **export** scouring bricks take the lead; of these, which are made in no other part of England, immense quantities are sent to London, Bristol, Liverpool, Dublin and other large places. Bricks for building and pantiles, and shipped in large quantities to Dublin, Belfast, Penzance, Falmouth and Newport — wool is shipped for Gloucester chiefly; malt and flour, with wheat, beans, and barley to Bristol, and the several ports of Wales.*

*Amongst the articles of **import** into the port of Bridgwater, coals form the principal; the greater part of these are brought from Newport, and some from Cardiff and Lydney in Gloucestershire; culm is likewise imported in large quantities from Swansea, for the use of the limeburners; roofing slates are brought from Beaumaris and Port Madoc in Wales; salt, the produce of the Worcestershire brine pits, from Gloucester; groceries and spirits, the latter being chiefly British gin distilled at Bristol, and rum from Bristol; oats from Cardigan and Carmarthen; and some oak bark from Minehead. There are various other articles imported, but the abovementioned are the principal. Besides the above there are four schooners of about 120 tons burthen each, employed in the trade between London and Bridgwater; and four others in the trade with British America.*

Canal and docks

The Bridgwater and Taunton Canal had been built from Taunton to a basin at Huntworth, to the east of Bridgwater, where it entered the River Parrett, and opened in 1826. After the Bristol and Exeter Railway obtained an Act of Parliament to construct a railway which would pass through Bridgwater in 1836, to protect its trade the canal company sought their own Act to construct a floating harbour to the west of Bridgwater, and to extend their canal to join it. This was obtained on 21 April 1837, and the works were started.

Construction work involved a deep cutting from Albert Street to West Street, a short tunnel at West Street, and an inner basin that covered 4 acres. A smaller outer basin covering 0.5 acres was connected to the inner basin by a lock and to the river by a ship lock consisting of a single 40-foot gate, and a barge lock, consisting of a pair of 14-foot gates. The whole outer basin could be used as a lock by larger ships up to 600 tons. The estimated cost of £25,000 for the scheme escalated to nearly £100,000, most of which was raised by mortgage.

The new facilities were opened on 25 March 1841, after which the basin and locks at Huntworth were filled in. Trade increased from 90,000 long tons (91,000 t) in 1840, before the harbour opened, to 120,000 long tons (120,000 t) shortly afterwards. Around 2,400 vessels per year were using the port by 1853.

Canal takeover by railway company

The problem for the canal company was that the extension and docks had been paid for via a mortgage, and despite commercial success, the interest payments on the mortgage were crippling. In 1846 the company obtained an Act to convert the canal into a railway, although its powers were never used. Trade halved as railway competition increased, and the canal company was in the hands of receivers by the early 1850s.

In 1866 the Bristol and Exeter Railway bought the entire stock of the canal company. The main attraction was the dock, with its large volume of coal traffic, but they purchased both the canal and the dock for £64,000, under the terms of an Act of Parliament obtained that year.

Decline

The importance of shipping and the docks started to decline after 1886, the year in which the opening of the Severn Tunnel caused a severe drop in coal imports by sea.

The situation worsened as the railways were extended into Somerset and beyond, and new steam-powered ships became too big for the port.

The last commercial boats used the canal in 1907, from Bridgwater dock to a wharf in North Town, Taunton, and the canal was effectively closed. The canal, which had by this time passed from the B&ER into the control of the Great Western Railway, had fallen into disrepair due to lack of trade by the beginning of World War I.

Control of the docks and canal passed into public ownership with the Transport Act 1947, both consolidated initially under British Railways. The Inland Waterways Association started to take an active interest in the restoration of the canal from 1952. A team of seven men was employed to maintain the infrastructure through this period. The maintenance of the channel enabled the canal to be used for the commercial transport of potable water, which was pumped from the River Tone at Taunton and then transported via the canal to Durleigh reservoir for consumption in Bridgwater, from 1962 onwards.

Closure of docks

By the mid-1950s, the total Port of Bridgwater was importing some 80,050 to 106,800 tonnes of cargo; mainly sand and coal by tonnage, followed by timber and flour. It was also exporting some 7,300 tonnes of bricks and tiles. But the brick and tile industry was in terminal decline, and in the mid-1960s it was clear that they were commercially non-viable. Offered for sale to any buyer; however, with no takers, the last coal was imported on 31 July 1971.

Marina redevelopment

The Countryside Act 1968 provided a framework for Somerset County Council to start the restoration of the canal as a leisure facility. The port was transferred in ownership from British Railways to

Sedgemoor District Council in 1972, who also became the recognised pilotage authority when the Pilotage Act 1987 came into effect.

In the 1980s began the redevelopment of the now abandoned docks area. The dock water area became a leisure marina, only accessible to the then being-rebuilt canal. The docks warehouse was converted for flats, and blocks of flats were built surrounding the water.

Today the docks facility consists entirely of listed buildings. The only commercially active industry located at the docks is Bowering's Animal Feed Mill. Bridgwater Sea Cadets are also located there.

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