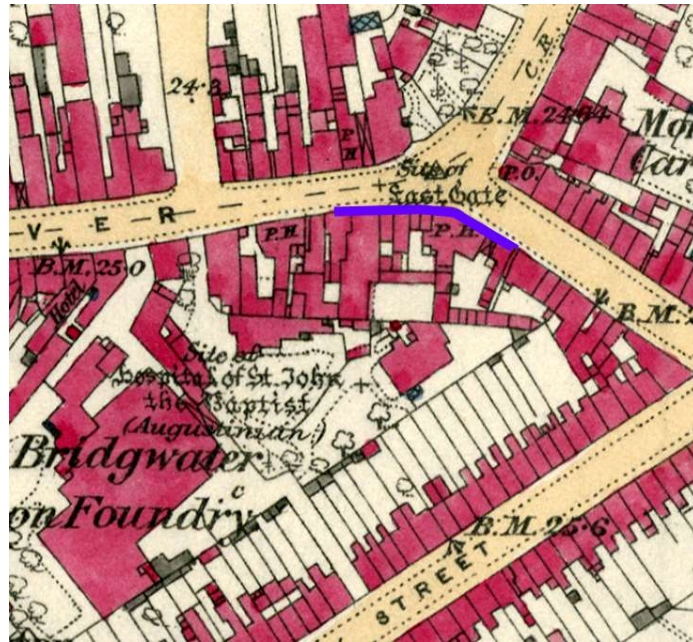


BRIDGWATER TOWN COUNCIL
Blake Museum



The Hospital abutted Eastover and the East Gate along where the blue line can be seen on this map. The full extent of the buildings and the grounds are not known.

THE HOSPITAL OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST, BRIDGWATER
BY DR PETER CATTERMOLE

From www.bridgewaterheriage.com

During the reign of King John and for some years to follow, William Briwer or Bruer occupied the position of lord of the town, castle and manor. This brought Briwer considerable material wealth. As an act of charity, but mindful of his soul, he founded an institution for the care of "Christ's poor" in Bridgwater. Such institutions were called hospitals. Their function in mediaeval times was to provide hospitality to poor travellers and, often,

to care for the sick and needy.

Briwer dedicated his Hospital to St John the Baptist. He endowed it with 100 acres (40 hectare) of land in Bridgwater, together with the parish church of St Mary the Virgin, and parishes of Northover (near Ilchester), and Isle Brewers. So, from its founding, the hospital had adequate means for its purpose, yet duties of administering its lands and churches were placed upon it.

Later, the hospital received the income from further churches and chapels: Wembdon, Chilton Trinity, Idstock, Hunstile, Bovey Tracey; in Cornwall: Davidstow, Morwenstow, Lanteglos (Fowey); and other lands.

The site of the hospital is known only approximately. It lay partly within the town and partly outside the East Gate, which spanned Eastover near The Cobblestones. A stone coffin was found in digging for the foundation of a house opposite some years prior to 1877. A mediaeval decorated tile of the late 13th century was discovered during the construction of the Broadway in 1956 and can be seen in the Archaeology Room of the Blake Museum. The remains of some of the hospital buildings are supposed to lie beneath the Broadway. Some of the stone walls in the area of Eastover, Monmouth Street and Barclay Street show traces of the mediaeval buildings.

We know that the chapel of the hospital was probably 112 feet (34 m) long. It had two doors (the "utterdorys", or outer doors) to a street adjoining it. In addition to the chapel, there was the infirmary, the refectory, the dormitory, the chapter-house, the cloister, a parlour which looked out on the cloister, a stew or fish-pond and a graveyard. A path adjoining the churchyard gave free access to the outer court and east gate of the hospital. A stone wall, containing a door, adjoining the hall and parlour enclosed the fish-pond on its south side, and, later, a cob wall was required to be

built to enclose the east side of the fish-pond.

In 1286, better sanitation became necessary. A channel was to be cut between the river "Pereith" and the hospital on the south side of "the great bridge" over the lands of others as well as those of the hospital. It was to be 3 feet (1 m) in breadth. It passed along the causeway on the north side, back to the river. The culvert was to be covered with stone and earth.

In 1219, William Briwer and Bishop Jocelyn of Wells set out the ordinance or rule of the hospital. The hospital was to be largely self-governing: the rule was not severe. The brethren were to be obedient to the master. They were to wear a clerical dress with a cross of black or blackish colour on their cloaks or outer garments.

The brethren served in the chapel of the castle and the parish church of St Mary. One of their number had special charge and care of the poor, infirm and needy persons in the infirmary. An unusual practice at the time was to allow: "Two or three women, not noble but suitable and of good conversation and report, who are willing and able to serve the infirm poor, to be admitted by the master and brethren; and they are to stay by themselves in a cell or chamber in the infirmary near the needy and poor, and sleep there, and be maintained as the master and brethren think fit. They are to be watchful and ready, night and day, to help the infirm and to minister to them in all things,

and they are not to turn aside to other acts or services, except the prayers which are due. Provided that not more than two or three women, whether sisters or others, be admitted to the house or maintained there in any case."

Rich people were denied the free use of the hospital and infirmary. So were lepers, lunatics, pregnant women and suckling infants, those with a contagious disease, and "intolerable persons". Persons who had recovered from their sickness were to be discharged "without delay".

In 1298, the number of brethren was increased to thirteen (the number at the Holy Supper), plus the master. Soon after, the hospital extended its services to thirteen poor scholars living within.—this makes it the town's earliest school.

Later, seven poor children from the town were fed daily: a portion of a loaf of bread, a dish of porridge and a pittance: each boy was to be given a gallon of second ale (presumably to be consumed off the premises!).

The master and brethren of the hospital may have led a reasonably comfortable existence for much of the time. Income from the land and property of the hospital brought in a considerable sum. Even the horrors of the Black Death, which ended in Bridgwater by 1349, brought benefits through the gift of further properties in the town. The Master of the Hospital of St John became an important personage.

However, the townspeople began expressing their discontent with the

conduct of the master and brethren. In 1380, an armed mob attacked the hospital, broke the doors and windows of the chapel, destroyed documents, stole food and £20 in money, and occupied some of the hospital buildings. A year later, in June 1381, there was more widespread dissent throughout the country, which expressed itself in the Peasants' Revolt. In Bridgwater, on Wednesday June 16th, Thomas Ingleby, assisted by Adam Brigge and abetted by the supposed vicar, Nicholas Frompton, with an attendant angry crowd, broke into the hospital and detained the master, William Cammell. The master obtained his release by paying over £133 (in excess of £50,000 in today's money). The trouble spread. Two houses were burnt, and two murders committed, with the heads of the victims being displayed on the town bridge for all to see. The chief participants were later pardoned.

During the middle of the fifteenth century, some corruption and laxity entered the brethren. In July 1463, the Bishop of Bath and Wells sent his Chancellor, Hugh Sugar, to the hospital with a set of twenty injunctions to be applied, upon penalty, to ensure proper obedience to the rule. The master is to stop seeing Alice Gye in the hospital, on penalty of dismissal; the brethren are not to invite women into their chambers or "other private or suspicious place". The brethren are "not in future to be idle", or "to play publicly at ball" or to have "a special laundress"; they are not

to swear or “to use insulting, opprobrious, scandalous, or dishonourable language” under penalty of silence for a fortnight. A dungeon was to be built, “with suitable stocks and fetters for the correction of the brethren”. Injunctions were placed upon

the master to improve the security of the hospital and its buildings. A “chest with three locks and three keys” is to be obtained for the storage of documents – perhaps this was later passed over to the townspeople, and is today present in the Blake Museum?



The Corporation Chest, possibly Reclaimed from the Hospital

It is unclear how effectively Hugh Sugar’s stern disciplinary injunctions were applied. By 1525, some relaxation in the routine of three hundred years took place, with the first mass of the day being moved from 5 am to 6 am. This small change would be insignificant twelve years later.

In 1536, the hospital received a Visitation from emissaries of Thomas Cromwell, the vicar-general, a man credited with “a great superiority in the art of management”. The suppression of the monasteries was well under way, and the lesser houses were generally surrendering without protest. Such it

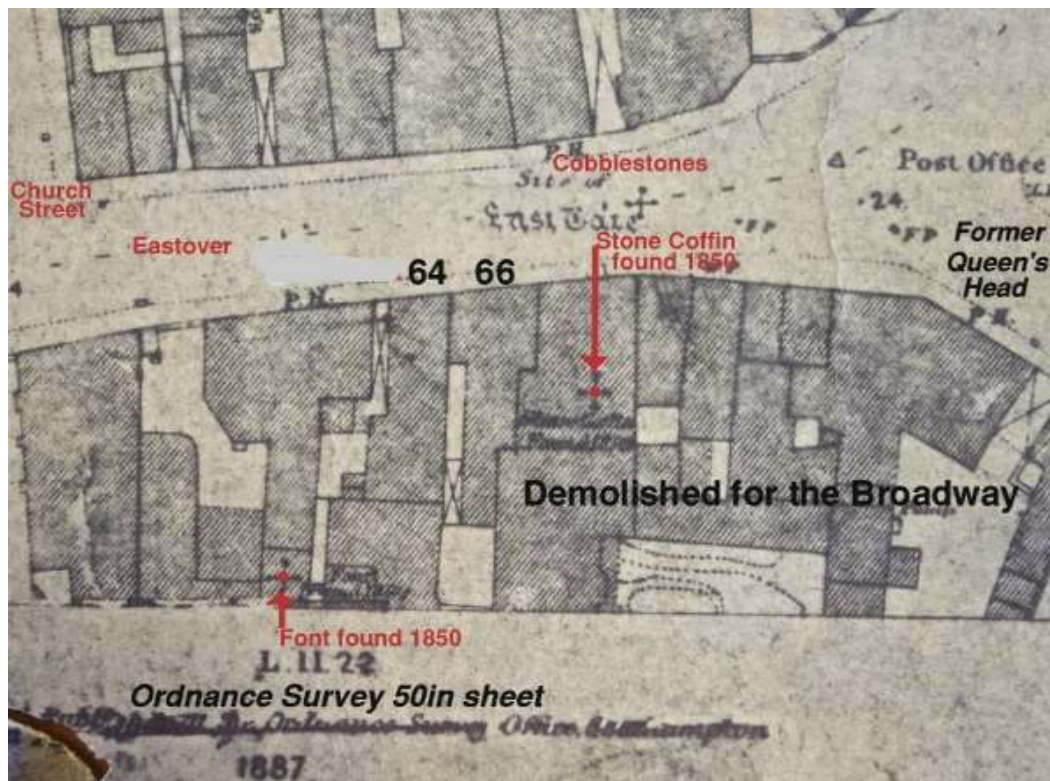
was at the Hospital of St John.

At its dissolution in 1536, the hospital yielded an income of over £120 per year (approximately £36,000 at today’s purchasing equivalent), of which over £32 was given out for charitable purposes.. The hospital owned 69 tenements and gardens in Bridgwater, and property in London, off Fleet Street, all of which were sold off to the benefit of the Crown. The master, Robert Walshe, received an annual pension of over £33 (equivalent to £12,000 today); the seven remaining brethren received lesser pensions. A bell from the hospital was sold together with glass from the

infirmary. Buildings were stripped of their fittings and stones, so that no trace

above the surface remains.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS



There is a reference to the finding of a stone coffin within the precinct of St John's Hospital at Eastover. *Parker, G The Ancient History of Bridgwater 1877 Bridgwater: E T Page p 10 Footnote (h)* "The site of St John's Hospital was at the end of Eastover, and in digging for the foundations of a house near the present Queen's Head Inn some years ago was found a stone coffin." [Repeated on p 48]

A supporting account is in *Jarman, SG A history of Bridgwater 1889 London: Stock p21*

"At the time of the formation of the Bristol & Exeter (now merged into the

Great Western) Railway, a few high mounds marked the site of the hospital, and in the course of building operations in that neighbourhood many interesting "finds" were brought to light, including numbers of human bones, military weapons, a stone coffin, and a variety of other relics."

We can trace these accounts in the local newspapers. *Taunton Courier and Western Advertiser 1 August 1838: Some men, in digging a cellar on the premises of Mr J,W, Sully, grocer, of Eastover, in Bridgwater, discovered a stone coffin, which was afterwards got out in a perfect state. No inscription was visible, but on the lid being*

removed, a skeleton of a grown person, supposed to be a male, was discovered. The remains were doubtless those of a person of distinction interred some ages back in a vault belonging to the ancient Church of St John, which formerly stood on, or embraced within its precincts, the site now occupies by Mr Sully's premises.



A broken stone font in the north porch of St Mary's church. Brakespear reordered that church in 1850-54, and it is possible that the font was transferred from its site of discovery in Eastover to its position in the parish church.

A broken piece has been inverted and set above the font. The octagonal base is typical for an early medieval font.



A Purbeck marble coffin with finely ashlared sides covered with a slab with a delicate foliate cross in relief lying in the middle tomb recess, south aisle, St Mary's church. The small incised Lias slab on top is from a separate tomb.



Medieval tile found on the site of St John's Hospital
Blake Museum BWRAB : 1959/32



Believed to be from St John's Hospital. It was destroyed in 1960 when they tried to remove it for the Monmouth Street road widening. Parts of it are in the museum..

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