

Museum Reminiscences

By Tony Woolrich

16/03/2025

The Blake museum in Blake Street, Bridgwater, was opened on 15 April, 1926, and was owned by the Borough Council. The first Curators, Gerald Cuzner, followed by Angus Dunn, were also the Borough Librarians. The early displays largely concentrated on Admiral Blake and the Battle of Sedgemoor. Over the years the Museum expanded to include a cottage, between the museum and the Town Mill.

The Museum then published a guide to the literature of Bridgwater's history, and also a comprehensive list of Bridgwater registered sailing vessels. These have now been combined to make a *Reference Index to Bridgwater History*. This can now be found to download from the Heritage Group's website.

In 1974, on the abolition of the Borough Council, the Museum became the responsibility of Sedgemoor District Council, and was first managed by John St John Earl and then Nick Nicholson, with assistance from volunteers of the Museum Society. Later, the District Council appointed professional Museum Officers – Sarah Harbige, who was succeeded by Jessica Vale. Carolyn Cudbill looked after the administration.

David Sebborn was the education officer, organising events for schools, which often meant him being costumed. This was very much so when he was discussing the Battle of Sedgemoor, when children might dress up. Indeed dressing up for the children was very much part of things, and the museum had stocks of child's costumes. But under the 2004 child protection legislation it became illegal without numbers of the volunteers needing to be CRB registered and so was discontinued. At this time, a number of the Museum Friends were active in the Sealed Knot military re-enactment group, so it was common to see them in costume around the museum.

David published a book, *Your Faithful Servant*, (2000) about the letters of the Cromwellian navy. The computer files of another book he wrote on the activities of members of the wider Blake family in the Civil War have recently been re-discovered, and the Museum is now (2025) arranging for publication.



David Sebborn as Robert Blake's grandfather



Carolyn Cudbill and friend in costume



The Battle of Sedgemoor!

The Town Mill, at the end of Blake Street, was bought in 1987 through the efforts of the Bridgwater Museum Association Trust, with the aim of expanding the Museum into it, but was damaged by fire in 1995, and the plans came to nothing. The Town Council has recently agreed to explore the feasibility of restoring the mill and using it as an expansion of the Museum' facilities.

The District Council called in specialist designers and architects a couple of times to investigate the redesign and expansion of the museum into Blake Gardens and the Mill; Chris Sidaway was engaged to make comprehensive architectural and archaeological surveys (with photographs and measured drawings) of the Mill to inform the design, but it all came to nothing.

The Friends of Blake Museum began in March 2000, with the aim of supporting the museum practically and financially.

In 2004 the Museum bought the Chubb collection of Bridgwater art and manuscripts, for £123,000 and volunteers John Robins, David Sebborn, Bernice Lashbrook, and Maggie Sampson began transcribing the documents. Their work was stored electronically on the servers at Bridgwater, but later, once the Museum closure was announced all transcription ceased, of course.

In 2004 the District Council, proposed closing the museum and moving the contents elsewhere, and a "Blake Museum Working Party" formed to counter it.



*Blake 350 – on custodian duty
in St Mary's*

In 2007 there was the successful town wide, "Blake 350" Celebration, with a month-long exhibition in St Mary's church but later the same year the District Council announced the museum would close and was looking for someone else to run it. It was subsequently gifted to the Town Council with a valuable dowry to pay for renovations.

The Museum was handed over at the end of March 2009 and a formal ceremony was held at the museum on Easter Saturday, 11 April. There was the Mayor, and blessings from the Catholic, Baptist and Anglican ministers, followed by a buffet lunch for the dignitaries and general festivities afterwards, including Morris Dancers in Blake Gardens.



*Handover Day
L-R Cllr Graham
and Mrs Granter; Mr
David Sebborn*



The distinguished guests

The regular staff left, with the exception of Jessica Vale, who as the Council's Museum's officer had other responsibilities like King John's hunting lodge at Axbridge. During the first year she emailed me numbers of relevant pictures and documents held in Bridgwater House.

It was found that the Chubb transcriptions (and all the other Blake Museum material stored on the server at Bridgwater House) had been wiped by SDC. In addition, it was found that some files of Museum management records were shredded. Also, the staff had been in the habit of removing addresses from letters from the public about queries the volunteers might later deal with. The logic is not hard to see: Until the handover the paid staff had the legal responsibility, and any recent personal details received were covered by the rules on "Confidentiality", which barred disclosure elsewhere.

From then on the Friends have run the museum guided by the honorary curators, helped by the Museum Mentors of the South West Heritage Trust. The Friends have raised considerable amounts of money to fund Museum projects, by way of coffee mornings and events in Blake Gardens during the summer.

An ambitious programme of refurbishment, was co-ordinated by the late Dr. Peter Cattermole, (with funding in part contributed by the District Council and topped up by the Town Council) and has continued during annual winter shut-downs ever since, so the Museum has been completely overhauled. It was re-decorated and re-wired throughout. Most galleries have modern display cases with low-energy LED lighting. The Museum is fully networked with computer access in most rooms. The gardens have been extensively transformed. Several displays are changed annually.

Contractors were employed for some tasks, but Museum volunteers did the rest. Brian Withers replaced rotted floorboards in the gallery to the right of the Hall, and also replaced the wooden floor behind the double doors of the Mill from Blake Street – the original had burnt away in the fire of 1995. Other volunteers help with the redecorating once the more disruptive jobs were done.



Shifting a cheese press



The Archaeology room



Bernice sanding down



New floorboards



The Monmouth room



Ready for visitors



Dr Peter Cattermole



Paul Besley and Alison Cook working on the new garden bed, 2009



The museum garden



New archaeology cases



Victorian costumes



Unveiling the Spaxton mosaic

A limited amount of work was done in the mill, and secure space was created there to house museum material once held at the Town Council's Colley Lane store

Once the refurbishment was complete, in 2010 Peter was appointed Hon Curator, with me and John Robins as deputies. Kay Robins, John's wife was Learning Coordinator,

Peter was a retired Chemistry teacher, very active in Bridgwater affairs, and in fostering Civic pride, especially commenting on proposed buildings conversion. He had firm views on the changes needed, which led to occasional disputes with the rest of the team.

Peter had good links with the College, and the International Baccalaureate, so groups of students worked at the Museum under his direction. In 2009 we were given a collection of swim wear made by Leffmans for Bairdware, and students made a full photographic record of them which may be seen on the Museum's website.

I became involved due to the fact that my late mother in law Winifred Powell, and my wife, Jane, had been custodians for a number of years beforehand. I retired and began taking my pension in 2006, so it was natural I was drawn to helping at the museum.

I had trained as a craftsman mechanical engineer, and had long been interested in industrial history and biography. I was a founder member on the Bristol Industrial Archaeology Society, and was a contributor to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and the *Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers*. I was interested in typography and printing.

As for my skills, between 1992-1994 I researched for Wessex Water, plc., the history of the Town's water supply and dire nineteenth century public health (when hundreds died in epidemics of cholera and measles), to inform the design of an education centre the company was creating in the engine house of the Borough waterworks at Ashford, near Cannington. It involved much work on the microfilms of the Bridgwater newspapers, and I wrote it up with a view to publication some time.

I also had organised the Blake 350 exhibition in 2007.

I also worked for a spell as a publishers' editor and was a consultant to authors and organisations like English Heritage, and I made glass-case models of industrial topics for museums.



*Sectioned model of a Woolf steam boiler of 1819
Science Museum, London*

Jane was a highly skilled needle woman and created the costumes for the women in the Victorian Kitchen, where the shop is.



The kitchen maid

During the refurbishment I spent much time working in the Museum library. The Museum office had a Minolta BizHub colour laser printer, so it was simple to produce quality publications in-house with little fuss.

With my particular expertise Peter tasked me to be responsible for the typographic design of temporary exhibitions, and also to relabel all the cased objects with a consistent typeface, instead of a mixture of typewritten and hand written. Lydian BT was chosen.

Lydian is a calligraphic humanist sans-serif typeface designed by Warren Chappell for American Type Founders in 1938.

Peter was of the view that visitors must be well informed, so asked me to write and design a series of some 30 information leaflets to be placed around the galleries. They have since been re-formatted and digitised, so visitors might read them on their smart phones via a QR code. I have since made them into a book with the title *Studies in Bridgwater History*, and hope it might be published at the time of the Museum's Centenary in 2026.

On learning of my work for the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers* he asked that I investigate Bridgwater Scientists. I had already written about John Allen c.1660 – 1741, Bridgwater physician and inventor. The nineteenth century saw a network of local scientists collaborating in natural history Robert Anstice 1757-1845, William Baker 1757-1853, James Jennings 1772-1833 and

later John Clark 1785-1853 and Thomas Clark 1793-1864. These can be found on the Heritage Group's site.

He also asked me to edit and publish a regular quarterly *Blake News*, for the membership, which I have done ever since.

Peter was of the view that museums were essentially a teaching tool, and displays should be designed to reflect this. He held it was not good enough to let pupils to just wander round looking at cased objects in a random way. Displays should be created for them, specially, and left up for a term, so different schools might visit.



*Geoff Harding
demonstrating knots to
teachers*

For example the first display of 2010, was about the *Irene*, the last Bridgwater-made sailing ship of 1907. It was devised on the lines of the "Take One Picture" scheme run by the National Gallery, where material is added of use to teachers in the classroom. We had a talk by Geoff Harding who demonstrated to teachers the making of knots in rope.

John Robins resigned in 2011 and Peter resigned in 2012, and in that year he established the Bridgwater Heritage Group – where all manner of Bridgwater History may be found online. He died in 2015, and Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson is now web-master.

The Heritage Group is a parallel organisation to the various Bridgwater heritage organisations – the Museum, the Civic Society, Bridgwater and District Archaeology Society and the Friends of Wembdon Road Cemetery, and works with all of them to ensure there is a combined web presence noting what has been achieved.

I succeeded Peter in 2012 with Mike Searle and Esther Checketts as my deputies. She had expertise in historic costume, (having worked at the Horniman Museum, London).

Esther resigned in 2016, and I followed, on reaching my 80th birthday, in 2018 to be succeeded by Mike. But I did not go away, I still edit *Blake News*, and with Miles, now co-edit the Heritage Group website.

In the Covid lockdown I looked again at the Chubb transcriptions. John and Bernice had their work on floppies, so were able to send me copies. The Museum library had a printed copy of David Sebborn's catalogue of the images, *The Friends and Associates of John Chubb*, so I used OCR software to make a new electronic version, so work to complete it might be done.

The museum bought a specialist document scanner, and Mike retrieved the un-transcribed Chubb Commonplace books from the record office and was able to send me copies to work on. The first volume was entirely poetry by John Chubb. I am still working on the second volume, which is more random. All the Chubb material may be seen on the Heritage Group's site as it is finished. Thus we have replacements of what was wiped by SDC in 2009.