

Bridgwater heritage organisations

By Tony Woolrich

26/04/2025

Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society was founded in 1849 following discussions among 'several gentlemen of Taunton and its neighbourhood'. It was one of several such organisations established in the English shires during the 1840's and reflected the early Victorian growth of interest in county history and the natural environment. Numerous papers about Bridgwater have subsequently appeared in the volumes of *Transactions*.

William Baker, (1787-1853) was a Bridgwater Currier, and Natural Historian. In November 1842 Baker was elected a Fellow of the Geological Society, on the nomination of Dr Buckland. On the formation of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society in 1849 Baker was appointed Secretary of the Natural History section, and presented 7 papers to it. Other papers by different authors followed.

The **Somerset Record Society** was founded in 1886, has been preserving, promoting and making accessible the written heritage of Somerset. It developed from the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society.

It has published a number of volumes with transcriptions by T. B Dilks of the Bridgwater Borough Archives, beginning in 1200.

Through the nineteenth century there was increasing interest in Bridgwater's history, as expressed by the following writers.

Sydney Gardnor Jarman, Newspaper man and historian, (1856-1949).

History of Bridgwater, (1889).

Revd. Arthur Herbert. Powell, (1856-1928). Vicar of St Marys and historian.

The ancient borough of Bridgwater, (1907).

Bridgwater in the later days, (1908).

Emanuel Green, FSA (1832-1919), Antiquarian, collected books and wrote a great deal about Somerset. He compiled an extensive 3 volume of bibliography of Somerset – *Bibliotheca Somersetensis*. (1901-3) with a great number of Bridgwater references, so is an important resource for the Town's history. He wrote an account of the Siege of Bridgwater, published in the Trans SANHS in 1877, and later published as a pamphlet

The most important of these for the development of Bridgwater's heritage organisations was Thomas Bruce Dilks. FRHistSoc, (1865-1949, Printer, and Local historian. For more information see the Historians' page on the Heritage Group's website.

He published various works on the town's history, including several volumes of transcriptions of the Bridgwater Borough Archives for the Somerset Record Society, but also encouraged others to publish on their specialities, by the East Gate Press. These writers included:

Clement Trenchard, (1866-1954). Headmaster of Dr Morgan's School and local historian

Maurice Page, (1871-1940). Printer and local historian, of Fore Street, Bridgwater, who was also an active member of several local civic societies which had historical interests. His best known work was his history of the Battle of Sedgemoor, but he also published articles via Somerset Archaeological and

Natural History Society (SAHNS), and was a well regarded authority on 17th-century local history. He became a leading light in the development of the Blake Museum, Bridgwater in the pre World War II period. (Somerset Heritage Archives web page)

Revd John Rowland Powell, (1889-1980). Powell was born in the Wandsworth area of London in 1889, the son of the Reverend Arthur Herbert Powell. In 1931 he became vicar of Holy Innocents' Church at Kingsbury. He edited several volumes for the Navy Records Society between 1937 and 1969. He was also on the council of the Navy Records Society for many years before serving as vice-president. He was also the author of *Robert Blake: General at Sea*, published by Collins, London, in 1972. He died at Bedford in 1980. (Navy Records Society web page)

They were involved in writing:

THE BRIDGWATER BOOKLETS SERIES:-

1. *Pilgrims in old Bridgwater*, by T. B. Dilks. 2nd ed. 1927.
2. *Bridgwater in brief*, by T. B. Dilks. 1927.
- 3., *The siege of Bridgwater*, by C. Trenchard. 1929.
4. *The battle of Sedgemoor*, by M. Page. 2nd ed. 1932.
5. *Robert Blake, General-at-sea*, by J. R. Powell. 1932.
6. *Charles James Fox and the Borough of Bridgwater*, by T. B. Dilks. 1937.

The Blake Museum has its origins in the Brighter Bridgwater project of Mayor Walter Deacon, the goal of which was to increase pride in the Town by celebrating the Town's past. As well as the Museum opening in April 1926, other events included a vast celebration on Cornhill in 1926 of the granting of the town's first Charter by King John, and the Bridgwater Pageant, held in June 1927.

A private house, Blake House, No 5 Blake Street was acquired. This also had extensive gardens. The next door cottage and adjacent Town Mill were later bought for expansion

The first 2 curators, Gerald Cuzner, followed by Angus Dunn, were also the Borough Librarians, so it is inevitable that as well as books the Library holds ephemeral reference material.

Reference Resources in the Blake Museum Library

Collections of information in binders and box files. There are classified and colour-coded ring binders with reference notes

Villages – Green binders

Reference material relating to the villages of the Bridgwater Rural District. A handful of villages in adjacent rural districts are included. Material will also be found about them in Wikipedia and for some the Urban Archaeology Survey series.

Each binder will typically contain an extract and translation of the Domesday Book (1086) entry, copies from the relevant pages from C19 Directories, and pages from guidebooks.

Black Binders – Brick and Tile Manufacture

Blue Binders – Bridgwater History

Red Binders – Manufacturing And Commerce

Yellow Binders – Biography

Box Files, Numbered and Un-numbered Miscellaneous Lever Arch Files

A *Reference Index to Bridgwater History* was published in 1969 and has been updated.

A *Bridgwater Ships Index* was begun in the late 1990s and is correct to 2002

Between 2012 and 2018 a series of some 30 leaflets about the town's history were written and printed copies placed in holders around the galleries. They may now be accessed with a Smart Phone via a QR code.

Philip James Squibbs (1902-1975), was member of a long established Bridgwater family which had assembled a fine collection of historic Bridgwater photographs. Initially working with Tamlyns, the Bridgwater auctioneers, he joined the family business, initially in their Eastover furniture shop, then their estate agent and auctioneer business and latterly the wicker furniture business in Clare Street. He often gave talks, and self-published, by means of an office duplicator:

Bridgwater in Victorian Days, (1957).

A Bridgwater Diary, (1969).

More pictures of Old Bridgwater, (1971).

They were republished as a collected edition, edited by John F. Lawrence:

Squibbs History of Bridgwater, (1982).

Although Squibbs was just a local historian and not a heritage organisation, the books he produced shows the great popularity and appetite for Bridgwater History in the 1960s and 1970s.

At a public meeting in January 1963, the ***Bridgwater Field Club*** was launched. Its aims were to study the history and archaeology of Bridgwater and district, and to observe and record all excavations in the area .In 1964 the present name ***The Bridgwater and District Archaeological Society*** was adopted.

The Society organises a range of activities:

- Lectures.
 - Courses.
 - Summer Events Visits.
 - Occasional long-weekend trips are organised.
 - Annual Dinner.
-

Bridgwater and District Civic Society was founded in 1972 at the instigation of the then Borough Mayor, Councillor Irene Tester, who requested the local architect Derek Gibson, (1927-2022), Dip.Arch, ARIBA., to form a Civic Society in the town. Not only was the group successfully formed, but Derek secured Lady Gass as honorary president. The society was able to make representations on planning matters, especially on listed building consent. Although there have been notable set-backs over the years, and many a fine building lost, much has been saved, preserved and its future secured through the society's efforts. In 2010 Derek was awarded an MBE in recognition of his tireless

work for and around the Civic Society, Rotary and Bridgwater College.

The Civic Society has the objects of:

- Stimulating public interest in town and neighbouring parishes of Bridgwater.
 - Promoting high standards of planning and architecture in the area.
 - Securing the preservation, protection, development of features of historic interest.
 - It instigated a series of blue plaques to commemorate significant Bridgwater people or buildings, has published several editions of *Town Trails*, edited by Jack Lawrence, and organises regular talks, and has produced videos.
-

Another important local historian of this time was John F. (Jack) Lawrence (1907-96) who taught history at Dr Morgan's School and researched for *A History of Bridgwater*, (2005), which was prepared for posthumous publication by his son, Dr. Chris Lawrence.

The Friends of Wembdon Road Cemetery was founded in 2010 with a handful of people who were passionate about restoring dignity to this much neglected cemetery.

The cemetery is now maintained by the Town Council as a closed burial ground.

The Friends aim to build upon the basic council maintenance to improve the overall condition of the cemetery and its wildlife, and to create a peaceful quiet park for the townsfolk - the ideal Garden Cemetery as first envisioned in 1851,

The **Maintenance Volunteers** who maintain the cemetery During the Spring, Summer and Autumn, working parties go into the cemetery, usually on Sundays mornings. Work includes clearing of sections of the cemetery of overgrowth, tending to individual memorials, checking memorial inscriptions for the database and general gardening.

The Friends fund the repair and reconstruction of monuments by a local stone mason.

The **Research Volunteers** provide an equally important service. This covers a myriad of fascinating areas of research, in the past some of these have included.

- Memorial transcriptions
 - Creation of profiles of all manner of personalities who are buried here which are held in an online database. This is extremely comprehensive and entries often include maps and copies of documents and photographs from the Blake Museum collection.
 - Re-creation of Grave Plans.
 - Discovering archives relating directly to the Cemetery.
 - Research for talks, walking tours and exhibition.
 - Burial Register Transcriptions'
 - Some of their research has been subsequently published by the Bridgwater Heritage Group.
-

The Bridgwater Heritage Group website was founded by the late Dr. Peter Cattermole in October 2012. It was re-formed in March 2016 and is intended to

complement the work and collections of the Blake Museum, and the work of the Bridgwater and District Archaeological Society, the Bridgwater and District Civic Society and the Friends of the Wembdon Road Cemetery. Contributions are welcome from local historians, as well as memoirs about the town.

When this Group began, much emphasis was given to publishing illustrated accounts of the historic sites and buildings of Bridgwater, but since then the scope has broadened to cover historic texts about the town. These have been digitised from original sources and edited in A4 format, and are PDF documents so that readers can download and print them for further study. The goal has been to create an educational resource for the town, of value not only for local historians, but also for school pupils and college students.

The topics the website covers are

- Borough and the neighbouring villages of the old RDC.
- Trade and Industry – Brick making ,shops, utilities etc
- Institutions, – Churches and chapels, schools, etc
- People – Worthies like John Chubb, Robert Blake John Bowen, etc
- Townscape – Maps, Lost structures, database of street names etc
- Events – Battle of Sedgemoor, Siege of Bridgwater etc
- Sources – A *Reference Index to Bridgwater History*, etc
- Things – As well as featuring found objects there is much about items for which there is record, but subsequently disappeared.
- For the past few years the Group has produced videos for the Town Council's annual History Day

One wonders how many towns of a similar size are able to boast the historical resources available in the Museum Library, and on the websites of the Friends of Wembdon Road Cemetery and Bridgwater Heritage Group.