



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

by Stewart Richards

The New Year has come and gone, and I cannot believe we are approaching the end of February as I write this update for you, – time certainly does fly.

The financial success of the friends has continued with a very successful Coffee morning in February where we welcomed one or two new faces and welcomed back many of our regular attendees. The takings were in the region of £100 and continue at the levels that we saw in the second half of 2022. There is added promotion with the event being publicised on Sedgemoor FM, the Town Council website and notice boards and various other notice boards in other locations around the area. If you would like a Coffee morning poster to display please do not hesitate to contact me. A very successful Christmas Fair was also held towards the end of 2022. The winter book sales have gone well and as a result we have had a number of visitors to the museum that in previous years would not have occurred.

Your committee decided that due to HSBC removing their counter service in Bridgwater and wanting to start charging for services on charity accounts that we should change our banking arrangements. To this end we are now banking with Lloyds who give a full service for charities at minimal cost and provide full counter service in Bridgwater. This has been a frustrating process and my thanks to Lesley Withers our treasurer for seeing this through to a successful conclusion.

Visitor numbers for 2022 have recovered substantially but we are below what was achieved in our last full year of 2019. This is not to be unexpected as I see 2022 as a recovery year after a part recovery in 2021 when Covid restrictions were still in place for a substantial part of the year. During 2019 we managed to receive a total of 3605 visitors, during 2022 we managed 2312 visitors. Although this is a big drop one big contribution to the fall was numbers for the Quayside Festival, that in 2022 were 550 less than 2019, there was certainly less activity in Blake Gardens in 2022 *vs* 2019.

We are addressing the visitor numbers in a number of ways with a focus on school visits, we have a group of students from France who will be visiting in the near future. There are also several other visits in the pipeline from schools and other adult organizations, which will help to increase numbers. We are also looking at other avenues for promoting the museum including local radio and social media.

The current membership of the Friends is 54 which is somewhat down on the membership of 2019 and prior to Covid the level membership was in the mid 70's. Maintaining membership and bringing in new members is essential to the success of the Friends going forward. To this end we have started a new initiative to recruit new members and Steve Austen, a current member, has kindly offered to lead and take this initiative forward. It is felt to be such an important issue for the Friends that your committee has co-opted Steve on to the committee, thank you Steve.

We are looking for members to swell the numbers and whereas in the past we directed our efforts at trying to recruit members who would volunteer at the museum, we are now looking to recruit members who may not wish to volunteer, as well as volunteer members.

One of the benefits of being a member of the Friends besides receiving this fine Newsletter a few times a year is free access to the talks program. I am pleased to announce that we have a full programme of talks in place listed elsewhere in this Newsletter. The talks will commence 11th April with Chris Hocking giving a talk on 'The History of Carnival and the Creation of the Jubilation Cart'. Thanks to Ray White for arranging this series of talks and he is already preparing for the series of talks for 2024.

I am currently involved on an initiative with Bridgwater & Taunton College History and Digital Arts Students to bring technology that will give in depth information about selected museum artefacts. The college are very excited about this project and the museum will be able to forge links with the college which will benefit both sides. As the project unfolds, I will provide more details on how it works.

I am really pleased to announce that the work on the Feasibility and Options Appraisal for the mill restoration has started. Architects Jonathan Rhind of Rumwell were chosen to carry out this work. Jonathan Rhind has a wide experience of restoring historic buildings and have a full understanding of how to make favourable submissions to funding bodies to finance the restorations. They were appointed just prior to Christmas and are carrying out significant research currently. Tony Woolrich has supplied a very detailed historical record of the mill including ownership and uses and this has been a great help to Jonathan Rhind and their research.

I personally thank you all for your continued support and am looking forward to an exciting 2023 museum season.

Curator's Corner By Mike Searle

As spring approaches, we are getting ready to reopen for the season which will be on Wednesday 5th April.

For all custodians and key holders, there is a welcome back day on Monday 3rd April at 10.30. This is to catchup on new procedures and refresh the other parts. Please do come along.

There is an opportunity for anyone to train up in first aid. The training will be taking place at the Bridgwater Town Hall and there are places waiting if you would like to attend. It's just a one-day course and you can choose either Weds 19th April or Thursday 20th April. If you would like to take the course then please contact me as soon as possible so that I can book you in.

The museum has received a donation of the bell from the Chapel of the former Agapemone (Abode of Love) at Spaxton.



The Agapemone Chapel in Spaxton (2010).

MediaWiki Commons

You can read more about the Agapemone here
<http://www.utopiabritannica.org.uk/pages/a>

[bode%20of%20love.htm](http://www.utopiabritannica.org.uk/pages/a)

This was kindly donated by a member of the Friends, Mr Clive Grant. It will eventually be mounted on a frame and put on display.



Also on permanent display will be a reproduction costume of a Musketeer of the Queen Dowager's Regiment. Often referred to as 'Kirke's Lambs' after their commander Colonel Percy Kirke and their Lamb and Flag emblem. Infamous of course for their retribution following the Battle of Sedgemoor. This costume replaces the old one which has been on display for many years. The person who gifted the costume is a former member of the Sealed Knot.



Photograph by Mike Searle



SPRING FAIR

There is no Spring Fair in March. The event is being combined with the Coronation Event which is taking place in Blake Gardens on Monday May 8th and which is being called a Spring Festival. The Friends will be doing their usual teas, coffees etc. The usual stalls etc will be setup in Blake Gardens instead of the museum. The whole event is being organised by Bridgwater Town Council

TALKS

Please bring a small item to the Talks for the Raffle

11 th April	Chris Hocking	The 2022 Jubilee Carnival cart
9 th May	Iain Miles	<i>The Summer People</i> – Westonzoyland Pumping Station
13 th June	Mr & Mrs Back	Bishop's Lydeard Water Mill
11 th July	Ann Marie Gould	Bridgwater in the newspapers
12 th September	Robert Turner	Westonzoyland Aerodrome
14 th November	David Bown	Updated History of the Bridgwater Railway

BRIDGWATER HERITAGE GROUP by Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson & Tony Woolrich

The single most important addition to the website in recent months is J.P. Polak's *Index to the Bridgwater Court of Record 1729 to 1846*. By the eighteenth century a Court of Record was held in Bridgwater at 9 o'clock every Monday morning throughout the year to consider civil cases such as detention of cattle, trespass upon the case and debt. Eight manuscript books listing cases between 1729 and 1847 are among the Bridgwater Borough Archives stored at the Somerset Heritage Centre. The index includes the names associated with each case and will be an important tool for the local historian. This forms part of a major new section on 'Courts, Police and Lawyers'.

The website already has a page about the reports on the Bridgwater Borough Archives by William Henry Black (1808– 1874), published in the *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* in 1856 and by Henry Riley, (1816-1878), and published by the Royal Commission on Historic Manuscripts in 1870 and 1873.

A new page has also been added about William James Sharkey, *Bridgwater Poet, 1871-1950*. During WWI he raised funds for soldiers' comforts by writing and publishing a series of booklets of his verse. The 1911 census has family living at 12 Camden Road. Aged 39, William's profession was given as boot and shoe dealer of his own account. It is most likely William sold these door-to-door.

His obituary in the *Taunton Courier*, and *Western Advertiser* 10 June 1950 stated:

Late Mr W.J. Sharkey

Well known in Bridgwater and district as a poet who published his own verses and sold them from door to door, giving a proportion of the proceeds to charity. Mr William James Sharkey, of 13 Knowle Road Bridgwater, died on Sunday at the age of 79. A widower, he leaves seven sons and three daughters. By the sale of his books Mr Sharkey raised about £1,500 for Bristol Eye Hospital and during the two wars, by similar means, he sent thousands of cigarettes, with socks, scarves and other comforts to men serving in the Forces. In recognition he received letters of appreciation from King George V and Lord Kitchener during the 1914-18 war. He also contributed to the fund which provided X-ray apparatus at Bridgwater Hospital. He had lived in Bridgwater nearly 50 years, and been a lay preacher at the Fore Street Congregational Church, where the funeral service took place on Thursday afternoon.

A new section has been added about the church bells of Saint Mary's following their recent increase by five to thirteen. It joins a page about the historic bells and another about the carillon mechanism that once played a tune as the church clock struck the hour.

Since the last edition of *Blake News*, we've completed our run of the *Bridgwater Alfred* for 1832. This culminated in a dramatic night-time riot in Friarn Street in December that year, when John Bowen, the paper's edi-

tor and owner, was assaulted by a mob and seriously injured, at the time of that year's hotly contested election. Our next major digitisation project will be the *Bridgwater Times* for 1854-1856, which we hope to commence in the coming months.

A summary has been added of the events surrounding the publication of volume five of the *Bridgwater Borough Archives* (1468-1485) in 1971 by Dr. Robert Dunning. Dr. Dunning was working from the transcriptions of the medieval originals made by Thomas Bruce Dilks: somewhere there exists Dilks' transcripts for volume six into the Tudor period, which takes it to 1509, although these still need to be located.

Dilks is known to have taken his transcriptions to 1603, the year of the death of Elizabeth 1; so if these can be found much more might be published.

A history of the Bridgwater Collegiate School has been compiled 1871-1946, with the help of Tony Morgan. This was a boarding school which started in King Square, moved to Lonsdale House (next to the museum) before moving later to Green Dragon Lane and ultimately to Malmsbury.

The donation of two fine carved chairs to the Kelting Room in the Arts Centre has prompted a biography of Orlando Lewis, 1880-1933, Furniture Maker & Antique Dealer of St Mary Street. This has been kindly supplied by Ann Leigh, granddaughter of Orlando and donator of the chairs.



Photograph by Brian Smedley

Thomas DeQuincy's 1807 visit to Bridgwater has been written up, when he eagerly tracked down the poet Samuel Taylor

Coleridge to the house of John Chubb:

'The hospitable family, for Coleridge they all testified deep affection and esteem—sentiments in which the whole town of Bridgwater seemed to share; for in the evening, when the heat of the day had declined, I walked out with him; and rarely, perhaps never, have I seen a person so much interrupted in one hour's space as Coleridge, on this occasion, by the courteous attentions of young and old...not a party passed without some mark of smiling recognition, and the majority stopping to make personal inquiries about his health, and to express their anxiety that he should make a lengthened stay amongst them. Certain I am, from the lively esteem expressed towards Coleridge at this time by the people of Bridgwater.'

In terms of small notes and additions, a description of a skirmish in Bridgwater is taken from *Mercurius Aulicus* of 4 February 1643. This relates an incident where our Robert Blake in command of Parliamentary-held Taunton attempted to bribe the garrison of Royalist-held Bridgwater into surrender, an incident which led to an ambush at the South Gate.

Also in small additions, an update to the history of Penlea House now describes its final demolition, and the sad fact that this article now moved from a section on historic buildings to 'Lost Bridgwater'.

COFFEE MORNINGS IN AID OF FOBM FUNDS

**FIRST TUESDAY OF EVERY MONTH
10.30-12 NOON**

Please bring a small item to the coffee morning for the Raffle

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Friends: www.blakemuseumfriends.org.uk

Museum: www.bridgwatmuseum.org.uk

Bridgwater Heritage Group:

<http://bridgwaterheritage.com>

Editorial note

Readers may note a change in the typeface used for the text. Normally Arial Narrow is used. This is a compact face designed for narrow newsletter columns, as it allows more copy to be fitted in. This issue had problems copy-fitting, so instead, the broader book typeface Bookman Old-style has been used, to give a more aesthetically pleasing result. TW