

BLAKE NEWS

Spring 2025 ≈ Double issue



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

by
Stewart Richards
Spring 2025

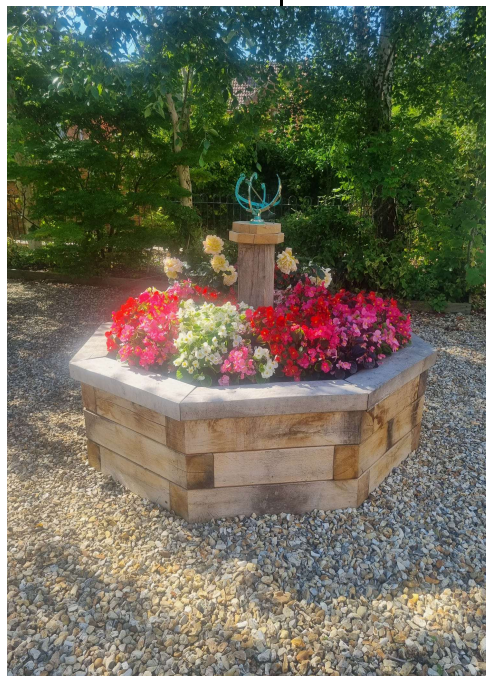
As I look forward to 2025, I see an exciting year ahead of us to build on a strong year in 2024 where the Friends made several donations to enhance the visitor experience at the museum. The Friends made a significant charitable contribution in lieu of the restored Industrial Co-Op weathervane which is now on display in the Bridgwater room and a significant donation to the Mens' Shed for construction of the raised memorial planter. (see right)

The Friends have also committed to make a donation for the renovation of the courtyard paving and funding a new plaque above the entrance door. A battery leaf blower and hedge trimmer were also purchased to assist with the duties that the Friends conduct to ensure that the garden is always looking at its best. The Friends once again made a significant donation to provide the excellent floral displays in the garden.

Disappointing as it was, although expected, our visitor numbers were down by just over 11% on 2023. Analysis shows that we get more visitors from the greater Somerset area and the rest of England than those that we get from Bridgwater itself.

There is no doubt that events such as the D-day celebration swell the numbers of local visitors and to that end, we will be holding an 80th anniversary celebration of VE day to compliment the static displays in the museum; more information will be made available in due course. The Town Council will be organising several events in Blake Gardens during the year on Saturdays, Sundays, and Bank holidays. The Friends will be involved in those and for the events being held on a Saturday, the museum will be open, and we are hoping to enhance the visitor numbers. The goal is also to work out how we can encourage family visits.

Our annual Spring Fair will be held on the 15th of March, and we will also have stalls at the May celebration event organised by the Town Council being held Monday 26th May.



The mill project is currently not moving forward due to the demands on the Town Council with respect to the Town Deal requirements. I will be endeavouring to get a bit more impetus for this project in the next few months.

One new project that the Friends will be funding is the publication of a book on the Blake family written by David Sebborn, once the Museum's education officer, and later a highly active volunteer at the museum. The manuscript was mislaid as a computer file for a period, but has now come to light. This will be funded by part of the legacy we received from a member of the Blake family.

The talks program is currently being finalised, and this will be published when complete.

Membership remains good and we continue to raise significant funds for projects in the museum, as an example our last Coffee Morning in February raised exactly £100 a particularly good result for the efforts of the volunteers involved. As always, we are happy for new people to join the Friends and if those new members wish to become active volunteers, we would be more than happy.

CURATOR'S CORNER

by
Mike Searle

**The Museum opens for the season on
Wednesday 2nd April.**

During the museums winter break, I have made a number of changes and additions to the displays in the Bridgwater Room, Bygones Room, Transport Room and Archaeology Room.

The Fossil Ichthyosaur and the two display cases containing fossils etc. have been moved to the Archaeology Room where they really belong. To facilitate this, the Spaxton Mosaic has been moved and the old tables and chairs have gone to the BTC canteen at Colley Lane. A new small table and two chairs have been purchased to replace them. These were funded by the Friends.



Top: The Archaeology Room
Bottom: The Bridgwater Room



Acquisitions:

Two sample books from BFF (Bonded Fibre Fabrics)

A cache of 420 lead musket balls discovered locally by a metal detectorist. These are believed to have fallen off the back of a cart during Monmouth's march to Westonzoyland in 1685. Another cache of 480 musket balls were discovered in the same field a week later. The second find has gone to the SWHT at Taunton.

Two Crypton battery chargers. A collection of photographs and other paraphernalia from the estate of the late Ernie Elkins.

Somerset Life Magazine Article:

An article has appeared in the *Somerset Life* magazine's February issue featuring an annular brooch dated between 1200 -1400, from the museum's archaeological collection. The articles are a series running throughout 2025 entitled 'Somerset Treasures'. February is very apt, as the brooch carries a French inscription translated to 'I am here in place of your lover'. It is thought that it was one of a pair. The brooch was found during construction works of a new housing estate off Westonzoyland Road in the late 1950s.



New Blake Book

A new book is being produced which was written by David Sebborn, will soon be on the shelves. The script for the book was completed just before David became immobilized and it never got into final print. The Friends are financing the project from a legacy given by a member of the Blake family, which is to be used for such things. I have engaged the services of a professional freelancer to put the book together for us. He will also arrange for the printing. The book is called *'The Blakes of Bridgwater and the English Revolution'*. The book is not just about Robert but also that of his brothers and the parts they played in the civil war. We will update you when the book is launched. I would say that it is definitely one for your bookshelf.

SPRING FAIR

Friends of Blake Museum Spring Fair

In aid of museum funds at The
Museum 5 Blake Street, Bridgwater
Sat 15 March. 10.00 – 1.00

Tombola & Raffle* *

Charity Stalls* *

Books* *

Bric-a-brac* *

Museum Shop* *

Home-made Produce* *

Refreshments* *

FREE ENTRY* *

Any donations of items would be most welcome. Items can be brought to the museum on Thursday 14 or Friday 15 March between 10.00 am and 1.00 pm.

Bridgwater Heritage Group

by

Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson & Tony Woolrich

We have a handful of updates to the Bridgwater Heritage website. Contributions are always welcome.

In terms of historical texts, we've added C.R.B. Barrett's visit to Bridgwater in 1893, published in his *Somersetshire Highways, Byways and Waterways*, which has some interesting details about the town's built heritage, not least the carved oak ceiling in St Mary Street, which was later removed and ended up in Glasgow's Burrell Collection. We've also added Jack Lawrence's 1972 guidebook *St Mary's Bridgwater: The Story of an Historic Church*.

Tony continues to work on the museum's Chubb collections and his transcriptions of series 3C and a number of Commonplace books are now added. Ref A/CSC/1/3 is a 206 page volume of poems written by John Chubb. A number are dedicated to young ladies he knew. Another is a long narrative poem of 1768 about Glastonbury.

Ref A/CSC/1/4 is a muddled collection of some 140 un-numbered sheets in the hands of various members of the Chubb family extending to the 1830s. There are passages from books by writers, such as the Whig political writer, William Belsham (1752-1856); the novelists Robert Bage (1720 – 1801)

and Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and the journalist, political philosopher and novelist. William Godwin, (1756-1836) — and items noted in the newspapers. There is much about the Whig politician Edmund Burke, (1729-1797).

In terms of resources, we've compiled a list of known Town Clerks of Bridgwater, also known as "Common Clerk, Prothonotary and Clerk of the Peace of the Borough." Although a fourteenth or fifteenth century innovation, the earliest we've pinned down is John Webber, who was clerk in 1730 and removed for his 'age, abuses and mistakes'. We then have a more or less complete run up to John L. Turner in 1973, when the office was abolished, at least before its revival in 2003.

An 1865 survey of the north side of Eastover, with Castle Fields: this was part of a submission to Parliament in support of a scheme for a new railway, which would connect Bridgwater to the Somerset and Dorset Railway. Maps and photographs are included.

Matt Cawkwell kindly donated to the Heritage Group – now passed to the museum – a photograph of No. 6 Platoon, 5th Company of the Bridgwater Home Guard, standing in front of Sydenham Manor during the Second World War. A sketch outline history of Bridgwater's Home Guard has been added.

Finally, the most comprehensive addition has been Jill Tretheway and Clare Spicer's history of Dr Morgan's School in the 19th century, which includes asides on the defunct King James Grammar School. Dr Morgan's almost ceased to exist, before being revived under Charles Lucette.

For Bridgwater History Day we contributed four videos: Who was John Chubb? ; John Chubb's Bridgwater ; How big was Bridgwater Castle? and What's the Oldest Pub in Bridgwater? These are all now on YouTube, with links from the main page of the website.

Friends of the Wembdon Road Cemetery

This collection of biographies and historical accounts, compiled by Jill Tretheway and Clare Spicer, sheds light on notable figures from Bridgwater's past, many of whom were educators, business people, and individuals who shaped the town's history.

One such figure is **Rev. Francis Cotton Marshall (1831–1910)**, a clergyman and schoolmaster. Born in Wisbech, he studied at Norwich and Huntingdon Grammar Schools before earning his degree from Cambridge. He taught at King William's College and later at King James Grammar School in Bridgwater. After his wife Harriet died of scarlet fever, he moved away and continued his clerical career, retiring in Teignmouth, where he died in 1910.

Ann Gill (1775–1855) was married to Thomas Gill, a schoolmaster and bank actuary. Thomas ran private schools teaching mathematics and penmanship while serving as an actuary for the Bridgwater Savings Bank. After his death, Ann lived with her daughter and supported her children's careers in education and finance.

Charles Lucette (1829–1893) overcame a difficult start in a workhouse to become a respected teacher at Dr Morgan's School, where he worked for 38 years. His wife Eliza ran a girls' school from their home. Charles was also involved in music, leading the Bridgwater Madrigal Society.

The harsh realities of Victorian society are exemplified in the story of **Alice Osmond (1873–1899)**, who struggled with poverty and legal troubles after her father's death. She was in and out of workhouses and prisons, eventually accused of manslaughter following the death of a child under her care. Though acquitted, she continued to suffer under the rigid social structures of the time, ultimately dying of Bright's Disease at age 25. Her son, William, was later adopted but died in 1903.

Likewise, **Maud Redstone (1896–1897)** was a workhouse child who died under suspicious circumstances at just one year old. Her death revealed the grim conditions of Victorian workhouses, where untrained inmates were tasked with childcare. The tragedy spurred public outcry and some reforms, but systemic issues remained.

Several members of the Davis family were prominent in Bridgwater's business and civic life. **Joseph Murlis Davis (1851–1932)** was a cabinet-maker, upholsterer, and publican, managing the family business and the Bristol Arms Hotel. He served on the town council and was involved in Freemasonry. His wife, **Florence Davis**, ran the hotel, and their son Percy died young from tuberculosis. Another family member, **Louisa Tice Davis (1843–1921)**, co-founded a girls' boarding school and provided for her disabled niece, balancing familial and professional responsibilities.

John Giles Davis (c.1809–1890), another member of the Davis family, was a cabinet-maker and upholsterer known for his craftsmanship and civic duty. He famously commandeered a train to recover stolen church silver, gaining national recognition.

The **Spiller sisters—Kate, Janet, and Margaret**—were notable for their contributions to education, music, and philanthropy. Kate was among the first women to take the University of London's exams in 1869. Janet pursued music and lived independently in London, while Margaret worked as a 'Lady Visitor' to the workhouse, advocating for better conditions.

Nellie Beatrice King (1875–1925) managed the Royal Clarence Hotel with her husband, turning it into a central hub for civic events. Their hotel played a significant role during WWI when officers were quartered there. After Nellie's death, her husband relocated to Wales.

Jane Manchip (1812–1886) was possibly Bridgwater's first female librarian, managing the town's Free Library, which was established to promote education and deter vices like gambling and drinking. Her dedication to the library made her a respected member of the community.

These biographies collectively highlight the educational, social, and economic fabric of Bridgwater, reflecting the struggles, achievements, and legacies of those who shaped the town's history.

IMPORTANT

Please note that the Friends' site no longer exists. Instead there is now a page on the museum's site

www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/friends

**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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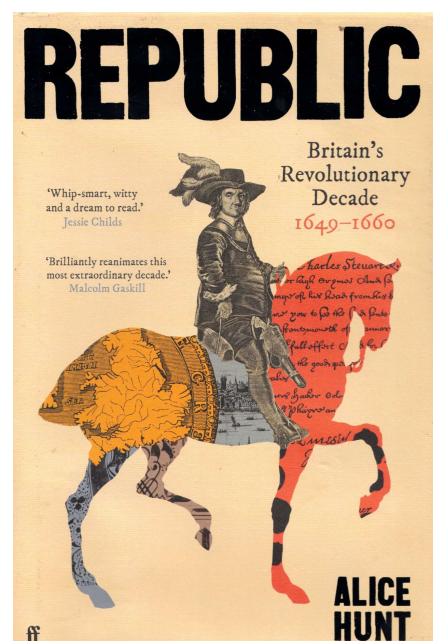
Tel: 01278 456127

TW – 23/02/2025

BOOK REVIEW

by

Tony Woolrich



**Republic, Britain's Revolutionary Decade
1649-1660**

by

Alice Hunt, 493 pp, Faber, £25

This is a fascinating study of an important time in Britain's history. In Bridgwater we think in terms of the Siege of Bridgwater in 1645 and of life of Admiral at Sea, Robert Blake, (1599 – 1657). John Norman, (1622–1669), was in 1647, upon the expulsion of the vicar, George Wotton, appointed Presbyterian vicar of Bridgwater by the Mayor and Corporation, and remained there until ejected by the Act of Uniformity in 1662.

The decade after the execution of Charles I in 1649 saw the country governed as a Republic, and each chapter describes the events of each year of the interregnum.

Websites:

Friends: www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/friends

Museum: www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk

Bridgwater Heritage Group:

www.https://bridgwaterheritage.com