

BLAKE NEWS

Summer 2025 ≈ Triple issue



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

Stewart Richards

So here we are halfway through the year already. The 'Friends' continue to make progress and fund raising through our spring fair, our 80th anniversary VE day celebration and coffee mornings have been particularly good.

The VE day celebration was an incredible success with Chrystal Bliss singing songs from the period and being ably supported by Dave Englefield and Sedgemoor FM. A themed exhibition of pictures from the celebrations in Bridgwater were well received and everybody had a really great time and the event was blessed with fine weather. The event also boosted the number of visitors by approximately 300 people a welcome outcome. My unequivocal thanks to all those volunteers who contributed to the event with a very special thanks to Steve Manley who worked tirelessly to make the event such a success.

The 'Friends' are very grateful to Casa di Lusso care home for their generous donation of cakes for Coffee morning. We were also pleased to welcome our local MP Sir Ashley Fox to our May coffee morning, that we were able to hold in the museum garden.



The next event super Saturday will be held on the 5th of July between noon and 5pm and will be in part a commemoration of the

340th anniversary of the Battle of Sedgemoor, the last battle fought on English soil. The Wardour Garrison re-enactment group will be present in the rose garden and there are many artifacts and the excellent diorama of the battle that can be viewed in the museum.



Wardour Garrison re-enactment group

There are also several other events which can be seen listed in this copy of *Blake News*.

The new book on Blake's family written by David Sebborn has now been published by the 'Friends'. The publication of the book carries out the wishes of the donor of the legacy to research and publicise the Blake family. See below

The talks program has been a struggle for a number of reasons this year, one of the issues has been finding suitable speakers, this is actually being encountered by many organisations and as a result we had to cancel the first talk, the second issue is that the attendances have been patchy, the 'Friends' will be reviewing the talks and what we do going forward in 2026.

The 'Friends' made a significant donation to the town council to assist in safety repairs to the courtyard and will be making further donations to complete the pointing in the courtyard and to re-roofing the garden shed with tiles as a replacement for the current asbestos roof.

The garden was planted in May with over 180 bedding begonias and geraniums, and this should look spectacular through the

summer. The plants were once again supplied by Lonsdale Nurseries of Chedzoy at an

extremely competitive price that has been funded by the Friends.



Visitors enjoying the sound of Chrystal Bliss at the VE Day celebrations.

OBITUARY

Brian Withers

(1941-2025)



Brian Withers was born on February 15, 1941, at the Mary Stanley Nursing Home in Bridgwater.

His father was in the army, so the family moved around. He later was involved in the Territorial Army REME where he ascended to the rank of 2nd Lieutenant and gained his Para Wings, destroying his hips in the process! He was also involved in the Bridgwater Sea Cadets and the Army Cadet Force, setting the stage for a lifetime marked by commitment and responsibility.

A chance encounter with Lesley at a Bridgwater dance blossomed into a lifelong romance for Brian. They wed on October 19, 1963, at Bridgwater Methodist Church and

had 61 years of marriage, having known each other for 66 years

Brian initially worked at Cellophane's Research and Development department before moving to Hinkley A Station in the Maintenance department. He then moved to Hinkley B Station, where he channelled his community spirit into the carnival club associated with the station.

In 1974, Brian and his family moved to Damman, Saudi Arabia, for his work in the oil industry. After their Middle Eastern adventures, the family returned to the UK, settling in Aberdeen for Brian's work with Shell and later BP. Brian then found himself in Abu Dhabi, working on a subcontracting project for BP. Here, he discovered a newfound passion for sailing.

Upon returning from Abu Dhabi, Brian started his own company in planning and engineering which took him all over the UK. His career then took another leap, this time to Nigeria—a move that came with its challenges.

After two years in Nigeria, Brian returned to Saudi Arabia just before the Gulf War erupted in 1991. He was based in Yanbu, a bustling port town that served as the main docking point for the American troops.

Eventually, Brian and Lesley returned to the UK, but not for long, as Brian soon embarked on a final major move to Libya. Brian spent seven years there, taking him past the usual retirement age. His love for local history

flourished allowing him to indulge his interest in cultural heritage.

In retirement, Brian focused his energies on his involvement with the Friends of Blake Museum. He became an integral part of a significant revamp of the museum. He was, with Lesley, a valued Friends Committee member, being much involved on the planning of the refurbishment, as well as the practical execution. This included him undertaking major reconstruction work, including replacing floors in the Museum and the Mill.

Four years ago, he was diagnosed with heart failure and his health took a turn for the worst and he made the difficult choice and reluctantly gave up his allotment 6 months ago. Also, during this time, he was no longer able to participate in volunteering at the museum.

In celebrating Brian's generous spirit, donations were gratefully received in his memory, to benefit the Friends of Blake Museum.

CURATOR'S CORNER

Mike Searle

There is not much from me at the moment.

Accreditation.

The museum was invited to re-apply for accreditation back in March. Work to achieve this is well in progress and is due to be submitted to the Arts Council at the beginning of August.

New Blake Book.



Bridgwater Heritage Group Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson & Tony Woolrich

The most recent addition to the website has been a history of **Bridge House, 4 East**

The long-awaited book is now in print and can be purchased from the museum shop. The book entitled 'The Blakes of Bridgwater and the English Revolution' was written by Mr. David Sebborn. Many of you will no doubt know of David from the old SDC days. The book is, as the title says, about the Blake family's involvement in the civil war. David, painstakingly spent many, many hours researching for this book which I think has certainly paid off.

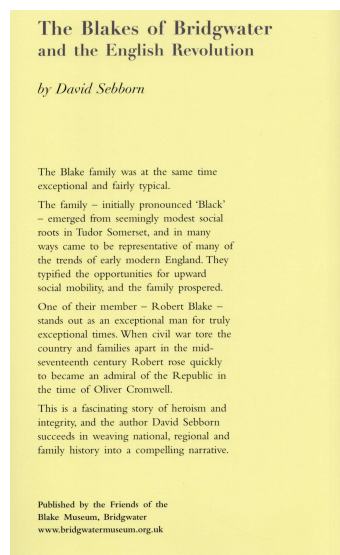
The manuscript came to light quite by chance, and at the same time the Friends were in receipt of a legacy from a member of the Blake family. This allowed the Friends to pursue getting David's book into print. A freelancer was engaged which meant that the book would be professionally typeset and printed.

The book is only available from the museum and is priced at £11.80. The book will be discounted to members of the Friends to £10.00, but you will need to show your membership card to get the discount.

Finds Day.

On Saturday 9th August, Laura Beckwith, Somerset Finds Liaison Officer, will be at the museum from 10am – 2am. Do you have an archaeology item that you would like identified and recorded? If so, you will need to book a time slot by Emailing

somerset.finds@swhereitage.org.uk. For more info. see also the Portable Antiquities Scheme at www.finds.org.uk.



Quay. This is the grand Georgian building that is currently derelict. It dates to the early eighteenth century, and was modernised in the early nineteenth, when the adjoining warehouse was added to its northern side. For many years it was the offices for

Wilkinson and Leng.

Another building explored are the two **Hope Inns of Taunton Road**. The first was a late medieval cottage, while the second was the Tudor Revival building demolished under unfortunate circumstances only a few years ago. A highlight of this piece is an attempt to reconstruct the original Hope Inn, when it had a thatch. This article was written to compliment the biographies of the Barrows recently written for the Friends of the Wembdon Road Cemetery (see below). Likewise, activity in the cemetery prompted additional notes and pictures by various contributors added to our page on St Margaret's School.

Notes on Artemis Aglen Dowty,(1846-1906, known as 'O.P.Q. Philander-Smiff', a Bridgwater-born Victorian Humourist. He was a Civil Servant and a prolific journalist, contributing to a number of Victorian humorous magazines.

Others are

Museum Reminiscences by Tony Woolrich

A sketch history of Bridgwater's Heritage Organisations.

A sketch history of Bridgwater's Fire Brigade has been added, prompted by the contribution of a 1930s photograph, kindly supplied by Debra Maczi. This charts the story from the gift of the town's first fire engine in the 1720s (which may still have been in use into the 1880s), through the steady establishment of a volunteer fire brigade, the town's first fire station in 1906 in Clare Street, behind the town hall. That station was demolished in 1954. At some point prior to 1956 a fire station had been established at the Cattle Market in Bath Road. The lease was due to expire in 1962 and a new site was earmarked in Salmon Lane, where it has been ever since.

Of special interest has been the contribution of **'Clay Recollections: a memoir of growing up by one of Bridgwater's brickyards' by the late Colin Symons Cooper**, reproduced with the kind permission of his sons Ben Cooper and Dan Cooper. These reminiscences take in a lot of detail of Colin's childhood at Crossways Brickyard at Somerset Bridge, his Symons relations as well as the ketch the Irene. Colin Symons Cooper (1927-2012) was a grandson of Clifford James Symons (1857-1943), partner in the brickmaking firm of Colthurst, Symons and Co., which owned yards at Bridgwater. His father Frederick Arthur (Tom) Cooper was Joint Managing Director of the

firm. Frederick was born in Birkenhead and moved to Bridgwater with his family, remaining until 1940, when they moved away.

This focus on the brickyards has also been supplemented by a survey of the town's **Brickyard Strikes** between 1886 and 1896, which has been kindly supplied by Clare Spicer and Jill Trethewey. This article was composed to give greater context to the lives of brickyard workers who lived through it, and especially to compliment biographies of those buried in the Wembdon Road Cemetery, including Stephen Lee Duddridge 1845-1919 (see below). The Bridgwater brickyard owners all knew each other, so they were able to form unofficial coalitions to regulate wages and working conditions. Occasionally the owners would decide that they needed to reduce the already meagre wages even further, and the desperate workers would attempt to strike. The men called this action a 'lock out' as the owners shut their premises while the men would not agree to their conditions, but the owners called this a 'strike'. In 1886, for example, the strike lasted 8 or 9 weeks and the workers achieved little.

In terms of additions to the digitised collections, we have added a catalogue for the **1948 Bridgwater Industries Exhibition**, which details the operations and histories of some the prominent firms in the town at the time, such as Cellophane, Clarks and the Somerset Trading Company.

FRIENDS OF THE WEMBDON ROAD CEMETERY

Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson

The following biographies have been added to the website, all, except the biography of Cook, having been supplied by Clare Spicer and Jill Trethewey:

William Henry Facey 1881-1943 and Blanche Facey nee Parsons 1881-1964, his wife. Their lives reflect working-class resilience, social activism, and adaptation amid the industrial and wartime changes of early 20th-century Britain.

Mary Ann Godden (née Stone, 1841-1923). Mary was a nurse, wife, and mother whose life was largely quiet but marked by compassion and resilience. Mary Ann spent her final days in the Bridgwater workhouse and died in 1923, aged 80. She was buried with Charles.

Emma Day (1788-1855), born Amy Hewlett Routley in Stogumber, Somerset, led a modest but industrious life, typical of many 19th-century working-class women whose stories often go unrecorded. Emma

collapsed and died in the station's booking office from apoplexy (stroke).

The Barrows of the Hope Inn on Taunton Road. James Stacey Barrow (1860–1942) and his wife Sarah Maria Barrow (née Holding, 1864–1928) spent most of their lives running the Hope Inn in Hamp. . The original inn was demolished and replaced by 1930. That in turn demolished quite recently.

Edith Mary Dukes (née Pope, 1862–1898). Edith was an educated and progressive woman of Victorian England, notable for her academic achievements and public advocacy. Her legacy lived on through her children, three of whom achieved national prominence. Edith was remembered as intellectually gifted, compassionate, and committed to both faith and reform, a woman ahead of her time.

Priscilla Heard (née Parker, 1796–1866) lived a turbulent life marked by poverty, heavy drinking, and frequent clashes with the law. Her final years were spent in the workhouse, where she died in 1866. Priscilla's story illustrates the harsh realities faced by poor women in 19th-century England, and her life—recorded in court and newspaper reports—offers rare insight into the experiences of working-class women entangled with poverty, addiction, and the justice system.

Amelia Bennett, the first burial in the Wembdon Road Cemetery, whose story has been looked at again. Her burial location in the cemetery is a mystery, just described in the register as 'Border'. Amelia's mother Ann had married a Thomas Stoneman and later emigrated to Geelong, Australia, seeking a better life. They had ten children, but tragically, only two survived to adulthood. Despite these losses, Ann lived a long life, dying in 1907 at 89, while Thomas became a respected public figure and mayor.

Maria Farrance née Brewer (1835–1887). Maria lived a life marked by poverty, loss, and hardship in Victorian Bridgwater. .

Lucy Stevens (1852–1854) a Bridgwater workhouse child. Lucy Stevens, born in the Bridgwater workhouse in 1852, was the daughter of Charlotte Stevens, a single mother from a struggling working-class family. She contracted whooping cough and died on 1 December 1854. The poor soul probably rarely if ever saw much outside the walls of the workhouse.

Mary Symes Plowman (1840–1854), a sad story, but one all too common for the time. Mary Symes was the daughter of

Thomas Plowman, a saddler, and Mary née Smith, part of a prosperous family in Bridgwater, Somerset. Her maternal grandfather, Richard Smith, was a wealthy grocer and alderman. Mary later attended school in Bridgwater and was eventually sent to the prestigious Northampton House in Islington, London, indicating her parents' ambition and means. Tragically, she died of pneumonia at just 14, shortly before the summer holidays, and was buried back in her hometown. A life cut tragically short, and an all too common story for the time.

Sarah Ann Cotton was born on 14 October 1851 in the Union House workhouse to Mary Ann Cotton, a single mother struggling to survive in Bridgwater. Sarah Ann suffered from marasmus, a severe form of malnutrition, and died on 31 October 1851 at two weeks old. The poor conditions in the workhouse, including inadequate food and medical care, likely contributed to her decline.

Florence Farrance nee Smith 1874–1919. Florence Farrance was a dedicated Red Cross volunteer during WWI, recognized as "one of our best workers." When the war began, Florence devoted herself to the Red Cross, using her skills to sew garments for hospitals. She worked in the Bridgwater Red Cross workroom, where volunteers made essential hospital items such as pyjamas, dressing gowns, and operation gowns. Her expertise ensured that garments were sewn to a high standard. Florence continued volunteering until just days before her death from heart failure and pneumonia in 1919 at the age of 43. She was buried in Wembdon Road Cemetery.

Completely revised and updated biography of James Cook 1835–1911. Cook was a prominent solicitor, civic leader, and philanthropist. Born into a working-class family, he overcame humble beginnings to become Town Clerk of Bridgwater and a key figure in many local causes.

Kate Trevor (1859–1934) was a prominent figure in Bridgwater, contributing to the Church, the Conservative Party, and various charities. . Her life reflected dedication to family, community service, and political involvement, though she never took a public stance on major issues.

The Duddridge family. Stephen Lee Duddridge was a skilled handmade tile maker who worked at the Crossway Brickyard in Bridgwater, owned by Colthurst Symons. Born in 1845, he grew up in a working-class family, where children

often started labouring at an early age due to economic necessity. Stephen passed away in 1919, and Louisa followed in 1923. Their son, **William John Duddridge was born in 1865 in Somerset Bridge**, son of Stephen and Louisa Duddridge. Initially working as a brickyard labourer, he enlisted in the Royal Marines Artillery in 1885, seeking adventure and stability. He trained as a gunner and served aboard various ships, part of Britain's Channel Fleet. His service coincided with peacetime, but he took part in naval exercises and fleet reviews. William returned home in 1897, and He resumed working in the brickyards until WWI, when he re-enlisted in the Somerset Light Infantry at age 49. Attached to the Royal Garrison Artillery, he died of heart failure in 1915 while on active duty in Dover. Honoured with a military funeral, he was buried in St. James's Cemetery, with his name memorialised in Bridgwater's Wembdon Road Cemetery.

Mary Louisa Counsell (née Wheatley) (1860-1942) and William Counsell (1854-1924) were a transatlantic couple whose lives reflected the movement and ambitions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mary Louisa was born in Yorkshire into a family with a strong history of emigration. Her grandparents had journeyed to the U.S. in search of opportunity, and several of her siblings later settled in Iowa.

After her father's death, she worked as a governess before purchasing land in Iowa, likely as an investment. Meanwhile, William, a Somerset farmer, sought greater opportunities in America. Inspired by newspaper advertisements promising fertile farmland, he emigrated in the 1890s, likely settling in Iowa and Minnesota.

The couple met in the U.S. and married in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1893. However, they soon returned to England, possibly due to economic difficulties in America and family obligations. They settled in Nether Stowey, Somerset, bringing with them their orphaned nephew, Bertie Wheatley. William's father passed away soon after, and by 1901, the couple had moved to a comfortable home in Bridgwater, where William continued farming while Mary Louisa managed their household. William remained an active farmer into his later years, but in 1924, while picking apples, he suffered a serious fall, leading to internal injuries. Delayed medical attention resulted in his death at the age of 67. He was buried in Wembdon Road Cemetery. Mary Louisa continued living in Bridgwater before retiring to Torquay. She passed away in 1942 but was

laid to rest beside her husband. Their story is one of ambition, resilience, and the enduring ties between England and America, shaped by the opportunities and hardships of migration.

Florence Ada Waddon (1870-1915). Florence was born in Bridgwater into a prosperous business family. She had a passion for painting and lace-making, excelling in both. Though she never married, her legacy as an artist and volunteer remains significant in Bridgwater's history.

Jane Jefferson Williamson Thurnham (1867-1923) composer and schoolmistress and Alice Maud Mary Thurnham (1872-1960) schoolmistress. Jennie (Jane) and Maud (Alice) Thurnham were accomplished educators and pioneers in women's education. In 1918, they moved to Bridgwater to lead St Margaret's Girls' School. Unfortunately, Jennie was diagnosed with breast cancer soon after their arrival. Despite her illness, she continued teaching until her death in 1923. Maud carried on running the school, overseeing its relocation and modernization, before retiring in the 1930s. Maud lived in various places before settling in Clevedon, Somerset, where she passed away in 1960. The sisters were buried together in Wembdon Road Cemetery. Their legacy lies in their contributions to women's education and their dedication to their students, which continued even through personal hardships.

IMPORTANT

Please note that the Friends' website 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

Published by the Friends of Blake Museum

5 Blake Street, Bridgwater, TA6 3NB

Registered Charity No 1099815

©June 2025

Tel:01278 456127

TW - 22/06/2025

Websites:

Friends:

www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/friends

Museum: www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk

Bridgwater Heritage Group:

[www https://bridgwaterheritage.com](http://www.https://bridgwaterheritage.com)