

Bridgwater Heritage Newsletter Spring 2026



BRIDGWATER HERITAGE GROUP

by

**Dr Miles Kerr-Peterson & Tony
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There's only two updates to the Bridgwater Heritage website since the last newsletter, and both have been offshoots of research for biographies for the Friends of the Wembdon Road Cemetery, kindly supplied by Clare Spicer and Jill Trethewey.

One looks at the **Northgate Brewery**, which was founded in the 1840s by George Knight. He died in 1885 and his two sons, Henry and George jnr took over, adopting the black horse trademark, which can still be seen on several old pubs in the district. At the end of 1887 they merged with Thomas Starkey, then in 1895 with Fords of Tivertson, creating Starkey Knight and Ford. The brewery continued to 1964, when Whitbread closed it. It was demolished in 1968.

Second is a look at the **Cornhill Post Office**. Prior to 1861 the town's post office was in St Mary Street in the home of Alfred Saunders. It then moved to Bridge House on East Quay, when the postmaster was William T. Mitchell. In 1874 a purpose-built post office was added to the Cornhill Market House complex, which opened around 1875. In 1897 the Post Office wanted to enlarge this office, but the Town Council who owned it wanted to charge a much higher rent for the use of the additional accommodation in the Market House building. The Post Office decided instead to buy a large house on Cornhill, formerly owned by Dr Parsons, and converted it. A Sorting Office was built at the back of the building in 1903 and this was the town's post office for a good

hundred years. The creation of the Friarn Street Sorting Office in 1962 led to the demolition of the old post office and its rebuilding into its current form.

BOOK REVIEW

by

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Walter Bagehot: life and legacy

By Janet Seaton & Barry Winetrobe
Published by Even Handed Licensing.
162 pp, ISBN 078-1-904496-14-4. £20

Walter Bagehot is probably the best MP that Bridgwater never had. He tried to become our representative in 1866, but narrowly lost. He always retained a deep desire to become our MP, even though the town was disenfranchised in 1869. If he had succeeded, he would have been the highest-profile holder of the office since Robert Blake.

Our loss was literature's gain. As well as a successful businessman and banker, Langport-born Bagehot was writer of considerable note, being editor of the *National Review* and the *Economist*. He wrote widely on a number of topics as the fancy took him, but two works stand out for this long-lasting impact. One, *Lombard Street: a Description of the Money Market* in 1873 is a key text on understanding how the financial sector works in Britain, and in how it deals with economic bubbles and banking crashes, is depressing relevant to this day. Second, *The English Constitution* of 1867 proposed the division of Britain's government between the 'efficient' parts and the 'dignified' parts, the latter making this book a key handbook for our monarchs since.

This book is a very welcome overview of Bagehot's life and works, situating him firmly in his Langport home and

family, and his later prosperity in Stuckey's bank and the mercantile Stuckey and Bagehot trading company (which after his time became the Somerset Trading Company). The first half of the book deals with Walter's life, family and career, while the second half deals with his writings and his legacies.

The picture given is of a likeable, hardworking, genial man, not without his quirks and eccentricities. The authors do an excellent job in explaining Bagehot's cultural hinterland and the society he lived in. They do an equally good job in summarising his writings and the difficult ideas contained within. While they rightly explain the impact of his two most important works noted above, they do not let Walter get away with his shortcomings. His regrettable *Physics and Politics* of 1872, attempting to explain the rise of civilisations, is an example of Walter's occasional amateur blundering, and a reminder that this brilliant man was sometimes just a journalist. But the authors do well to explain this book and understand Walter's motivations.

As mentioned, Walter tried to become MP for Bridgwater in 1866. The authors do slightly glance past his involvement with bribery and corruption notorious in the borough (although endemic in every town in Britain to some extent). The case of James Cook 1835-1911, later Town Clerk of Bridgwater, who was involved as one of Bagehot's agents, can remind us that this was just the 'greasy pole' of nineteenth century politics. Cook was a thoroughly good man, he did much for Bridgwater, but was caught up in a thoroughly rotten system. So the authors might have leaned into this a little more, as Bagehot was no worse than anyone else caught up.

Overall this is an excellent book for understanding Langport's most important son.

FRIENDS OF THE WEMBDON ROAD CEMETERY

The friends' volunteers, principally Jillian Trethewey and Clare Spicer, continue to research individuals buried in the cemetery. The book on the Women of Bridgwater is nearing completion, and we

hope to have that out in the next couple of months. Here are the recent additions to the website;

Frank West (1872-1941), combined a long and diligent career in the Post Office with an outstanding contribution to rugby in Somerset, earning him the reputation of a "Somerset Rugby Stalwart." Born in 1872 in Devon, he grew up in a family shaped by unusual working arrangements, but benefited from a solid education that enabled him to join the Post Office as a sorting clerk and telegraphist in 1892. By 1894 he was based in Bridgwater, working in the busy sorting office and as a telegraphist during the peak years of telegram use. His career progressed steadily, and in 1929 he was promoted to overseer, retiring in 1932 after more than 40 years' service and receiving the Imperial Service Medal. Alongside his professional life, rugby was Frank's great passion. He played locally, became secretary of Bridgwater Rugby Football Club, and played a key role in county rugby administration. Elected to the Somerset County Rugby Union Committee in 1901, he later served as treasurer, secretary and president, gaining national respect for his organisational skills and deep knowledge of the game. Frank married Effie Blanche Edwards in 1898, and they raised three children, though they suffered the tragedy of losing their eldest son Arthur in 1917. Frank remained active in rugby until his death in 1941, widely mourned by the sporting and local community.

James Smith (1827-1884) began as a pig dealer in Spaxton, regularly attending Bridgwater's livestock markets before settling there around 1870. His life is illuminated by family records alongside official sources. He was the son of James Smith the elder, a skilled gelder in west Somerset whose work in animal castration was vital to local farming and allowed him to educate his sons. While some brothers continued the trade, **James the younger** became a pig dealer and moved to Bristol, marrying Ann Brewer in 1853. They later returned to Spaxton, raising four children. By 1861 James combined pig dealing with running the King William beerhouse, supplementing family income. The family later moved permanently to Bridgwater, where caring for Ann's elderly parents caused a two-year marital separation, later resolved. Ann died in 1877, followed by their daughter Lucy in 1881. James

reverted to gelding work and died in 1884.

James and Ann's son, Thomas Smith (1853–1911) was a Bridgwater carpenter, gate and hurdle maker. In 1873 he married Elizabeth Sealy and learned carpentry, likely under his uncle, master carpenter Giles Randle. The couple settled in Silver Street and raised four daughters. As compulsory education expanded, all the girls attended school; Thomas prospered and later became a master carpenter employing others. By 1911 ill health forced him to work from home making agricultural hurdles, and he died that year. Elizabeth and daughter Bessie continued in Bridgwater, where Bessie taught for many years. Thomas's daughters married or pursued skilled work, with teaching becoming a lasting family tradition.

Frederick Harold Allen (1869–1941) was a kind, courteous man with diverse interests in music, sport, and horticulture. Born at Hawker's Farm, Chilton Trinity, he suffered early tragedy when his father died of sepsis shortly after his birth. His mother, Emily, managed the farm alone before marrying wine merchant Henry Knight, moving the family to Bridgwater, and enabling Frederick to complete his education. Frederick began working at the family-associated brewery, Starkey, Knight and Ford Ltd in Northgate eventually becoming company secretary and director. In 1899, he married May BurrIDGE, with whom he had three children. Both were active in local music, founding the Bridgwater Amateur Operatic Society. May died of influenza in 1918. Frederick remarried in 1920 to Edith Hill, who supported his civic duties; she died unexpectedly in 1927. Frederick served as a town councillor, alderman, and mayor of Bridgwater in 1922, promoting community projects such as allotments for returning soldiers. He was also involved in rugby, the Masonic Lodge, and hospital governance. Retiring in 1939 due to illness, he died in 1941. His Westfield House was later donated for charitable use and is now the site of the United Reform Church by the Fairfield.

Henry James Major (1828–1919) became one of Bridgwater's most significant brickyard owners. Born in Langport, he was the eldest child of James and Mary Major. After his father died, the family's future was secured by Henry's wealthy uncle, Thomas Paul, a banker with Stuckey's Bank. Paul funded the children's

education and later found Henry and his brother Charles work as bank clerks, where they learned essential business and financial skills. Working at the bank in Bridgwater exposed Henry to the town's brick and tile industry. Observing both the labourers' demanding work and the wealth of the yard owners inspired him to start his own firm. In 1863, Henry and Charles pooled their savings to create H.J. & C. Major Ltd., purchasing the brick and tile division of the established John Sealy company. They used Sealy's patented tile designs and developed their own, gradually expanding into a successful enterprise. Henry also entered local politics, arguing controversially that poor children should leave school early to work in his brickyards. His reputation as an employer was harsh. He cut wages, prompting repeated strikes, including the major 1896 dispute that brought soldiers into Bridgwater. Despite this, family and friends knew a gentler side of Henry: he sang in the church choir, supported community causes, and enjoyed family life. He died in 1919 at age 91.

John Loosemore Trippe (1842–1914) came from a farming family in Devon, but as a younger son he was apprenticed to a Sidmouth grocer and wine merchant, beginning a long career in the trade. After early posts in Bridgwater and Bristol, he married Mary Ann Aplin of Chard in 1876, a milliner who had been living in Bath. The couple had two daughters, Brenda and Minna. By 1881 they were running the Rock and Pier Hotel in Clevedon, a successful but demanding seaside establishment. In 1889 John took over the Royal Clarence Hotel in Bridgwater, focusing on expanding its wine and spirits business. Well organised and socially active, he sold whisky widely, supported county shows, and joined the Freemasons. The family became part of local parish life. Tragedy struck in 1902 when Brenda died, probably from tuberculosis. John continued to manage the thriving hotel until retiring in 1911 with Mary Ann and Minna to Wembdon. A keen gardener and respected townsman, he died in 1914. Mary Ann lived until 1926, and Minna later married Louis Hayter. The family share a grave in Wembdon Road Cemetery. Finally, we've known since we first went into the cemetery that we had a **veteran of the Battle of Trafalgar (Captain George Lewis Browne)**, but it's only this year

Peter Randle stumbled on the story of a Waterloo veteran we had no idea about. That's the story of **George David, 1798-1884**. He's buried in the cemetery in an unmarked plot, although before he died he proudly chose the spot he wanted to be buried and planted a wooden board with his initials 'GD' carved into it. George David was born on 28 June 1798 in Ubley, Somerset — the youngest of nine children of John and Edith David. At sixteen he enlisted in the 40th Regiment of Foot, just in time to fight in the Napoleonic Wars including the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815. Not only was George there, he was in the very thick of the fighting, not far from the hotly contested farmhouse of La Haye Sainte. Through long hours of the afternoon and evening George and his comrades faced a devastating barrage from French artillery, then swarmed by French Cavalry, then finally fought off the famed Imperial Guard. It was an absolutely brutal day for the 17 year old, in which between one-in-five and

one-in-four of his comrades in his regiment were killed.

If that wasn't enough, he served for 31 years in the British Army: after Waterloo he joined the Army of Occupation in France, then guarded convicts in New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land (Australia), and later was stationed in India – even enduring a mutiny on the transport ship to get there. While in Australia, he was commended — and later rewarded — for capturing a dangerous bushranger, who fired a point-blank range at George, but fortunately the gun failed at the crucial moment. Discharged in 1836 after being declared unfit due to chronic rheumatism, David returned to Somerset. He worked as a grocer/postmaster and later moved to Bridgwater, first Wellington Road (appropriately), then to Dampiet Street. In his later years he was publicly honoured on each Waterloo anniversary — local newspapers highlighted him as one of the few surviving veteran soldiers in Somerset. In May 1884, after a fall and head injury, he died aged 88.

Websites:

Friends:

www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/friends

Museum:

www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk

Bridgwater Heritage Group:

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

Friends of Wembdon Road Cemetery

https://wembdonroadcemetery.com/