

Bridgwater

Distance: 1 mile / 1.52km leisurely walking

In Pursuit of Spring: Chapters 8 and 9 Bridgwater to the Sea

Refreshments: Many options along the walk

Map: Explorer

Getting there: Park in West Quay Car Park, Mount St East TA6 3FH

I wandered about the western half of the town. This being built on a slight hill above the river, was older and better worth looking at than the flat eastern half, though it was lacking in trees, as may be guessed from the fact that some rooks had had to nest in horse chestnut trees, which they avoid if possible.

Leaving the Polden ridge, Thomas had turned southwards on his way to an overnight stay in Bridgwater: *Two miles of flat field and white-painted orchard, and I was in a street of flat, dull, brick cottages and foul smoke, but possessing an extraordinarily haughty white hart chained over an inn port of that name. Then the river Parrett; and a dark ship drawn up under the line of tall inns and stores with glimmering windows. I crossed the bridge and walked up Corn Hill between the shops to where the roads fork, one for Taunton, one for Minehead, to the left and right of Robert Blake's statue and the pillared dome of the market. I took the Minehead road, to the right-hand one, past the banks, post office, the Royal Clarence Hotel, and by half-past seven I was eating supper, listening to children outside in the still, dark street, laughing, chattering, disputing. The night in Bridgwater was still. I heard little after ten except the clear deep bells of St Mary's telling the quarters. They woke me with the first light, and I was glad to be out of the hotel early because the three other guests (I think, commercial travellers) not only did not talk, which may have been a blessing, but took no notice of 'Good evening' or 'Good morning'. It was a clean, new and unfriendly place, that caused a sensation of having slept in linoleum. The charges for supper, bed and breakfast was the usual one, a few pence over four shillings.*

At the time of *In Pursuit of Spring*, Bridgwater had a population of around 16,000. The town was a Saxon foundation. Domesday records a *lytil mill* (a corn mill which much later became a sawmill and closed in the 20th century when it was incorporated into the Blake Museum). The town's name is said to derive from the Bridge of Walter, the latter being the first Norman overlord. The mediaeval town became an inland port and its cloth industry was pre-eminent (surviving into the 19th century in clothing manufacture). A castle was built in the 13th century and a ditch and fenced rampart afforded some protection. Into this were let four gates. In Tudor times the cloth trade declined but shipbuilding developed. Despite Royalist occupation till 1645 in the Civil War, the town was strongly Parliamentary, but very badly damaged by fire in the siege of that year. The town figured large in the Monmouth Rebellion (1685). Its fortunes expanded in the 18th century to the 1880s after which it declined until its rebirth in the late 20th century.

1. Walk towards the River Parrett and go right, along the Quay.



Old Bridgwater bridge



River Parrett, Bridgwater



West Quay

The quay itself is good enough to recall Bideford. The river is straight for a distance, and separated from the quayside building only by the roadway. These buildings, ship-brokers' and contractors', port authority's and customs and excise offices, a steam sawmill, and the Fountain, Dolphin and King's Head, are plain enough, mostly with tall flat fronts with scant lettering and no decoration, where cattle grazed in the neighbourhood of chimney-stacks and railway signals. The Arthur was waiting for a cargo. The Emma was unloading coal. But for the rest, the quay was quiet, and a long greyhound lay stretched across the roadway, every inch of him content in the warm sun.

The town was built at the highest navigable point of the River Parrett and could be accessed by ships of 400 – 500 tonnage. The Bridgwater and Taunton canal (1827, the same year in which gas lighting was installed in the town) linked the River Tone to the Parrett and the development of related basins, locks and docks meant that by 1841 ships of up to 600 tonnage could access the town wharfage. Seven shipyards were active. Brickmaking from local clays had developed as a major industry in the 18th century and continued into the 20th century.

The Port Authority supervised the docks, its related ironworks and railway warehouses. The major 19th century exports were cement, bricks, pottery, drainage products, Bath bricks (for scouring), wine and spirits. Imports included anthracite from Wales, timber and hemp from the Baltic. Trade with the Mediterranean, the United States and Canada flourished in Victorian times. Many emigrants sailed to Canada from Bridgwater in the early 20th century. The town was also a regional distribution centre for coal, timber, flax, imported hemp and agricultural products. By the mid-19th century nearly 4000 vessels carried an overall annual average of 200,000 tonnes. Foreign competition and the growing reach of the Bristol and Exeter railway (established in 1836) killed off the canal. The 1886 Severn Tunnel construction contributed to the overall decline of Bridgwater. By 1912 tonnage had halved. The port was declining, shipbuilding ceased and the docks closed in 1971 and the brick- and tile-making industries and brewing

sectors ceased by the 1970s. The wharf (downstream of the town at Dunball) is still active, taking in imports of aggregates, agricultural exports/imports and the occasional passenger excursion vessel.

After the construction of the M5 motorway, trading estates were established and the two miles of flatlands south of the Poldens with orchards that Thomas noted, now house a Morrisons supermarket distribution centre, a training centre for workers in the nuclear industry, a local police headquarters and other services. To the south, a large market has been built along with an extensive commercial dairy, hotels and new accommodation, including that for workers for the Hinkley Point upgrade.



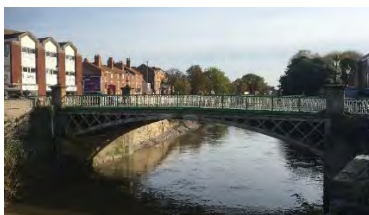
The Lions, BM

Pass impressive mansion The Lions. This was built around 1725 by the carpenter and builder Benjamin Holloway as his family home. He was employed by the Duke of Chandos to build the Castle Street houses. It later became a mayoral residence.

Further along, can be seen the 12ft remnant of the castle walls and the Water Gate (c1200), which connected the Castle with the river. The castle, once covering over 8 acres, was destroyed by Cromwell and Fairfax in the Civil War.

The 1911 census listed 113 pubs at the time of Thomas's visit. The Fountain Inn stands at 1 West Quay on former castle grounds. It has Dutch style gable-ends and was used, along with The Swan, the Castle Tavern, the King's Head for 18th century Excise hearings. Further along the quayside was the Dolphin Inn at 4 Binford Place.

The bridge was originally a medieval stone structure over the River Parrett's lowest dry-foot crossing. With growing prosperity, quays and slipways were constructed alongside. A replacement bridge was prefabricated in Coalbrookdale and transported by water for construction in 1797. A new iron bridge, which stands today and was cycled over by Thomas, was built in 1883. A display on the bridge can be found in the Blake Museum at 5 Blake St.



The 1797 bridge, BM

2. Turn right into Fore Street and walk up to Blake's statue.

With the quay and the church ranks the statue of Robert Blake if only for the inscription:



Statue of Blake, CC



Admiral Robert Blake



Henry Prince

Born in this town, 1598

Died at sea, 1657

I am told there is also a passage quoted from one Edmund Spencer, but I did not see it; nor is it so great an error as the inscription about Jefferies in Salisbury Cathedral, and they have less time in Bridgwater than in Salisbury Cathedral for literary accuracy.

The sculptor and monumentalist F W Pomeroy (1856 – 1924), whose statue of Justice stands above the Old Bailey, created the 1898 statue of Blake. Blake began his career as a soldier, transferred to the navy, became Bridgwater MP in the 1640 Short Parliament. He achieved fame as the Commonwealth's brilliant, innovative and indefatigable 'general at sea' who secured England's naval supremacy in wars against the Dutch and Spanish fleets. He died from old wounds and was given a state funeral and burial in Westminster though Charles II ordered his exhumation and the dumping of his remains in the nearby churchyard. This statue was first sited in front of the Cornhill dome and, despite protest, was moved to its current position at the head of Fore Street.

This area is known as Cornhill. The Cornhill pub stands at 6-7 on the left. The Cornhill had a medieval market hall, and became a congested area of shops, stalls and street vendors. Many of these were cleared away after 1779 to build the Market House which dealt in meat, vegetables, fish and dairy produce. It was enlarged in 1826 and the dome was added. In 1856 an island of butchers' shambles was demolished to widen High St. Later, in 1875, it was expanded through the addition of a Corn Exchange. The railings, to keep the forecourt clear of livestock and food waste, were removed in 1895.

There was a medieval cattle market at Penel Orlieu, near the old West Gate. A sheep market was held in West St.

There is a record that in 1859, the self-aggrandising Brother Prince (1811–99) of the esoteric Agapemone community from nearby Spaxton drove into the Cornhill in great splendour with four bay horses, outriders, postillions, and – to give the touch of the formidable – a number of bloodhounds. Their approach was announced by heralds crying out

3. Go past the left of the Cornhill into St Mary's churchyard.



St Mary's, BM



Kingsmill monument, BM



Christ's descent from the cross, BM

loudly at intervals "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord". There much speaking and exhortation but the entourage was greeted with a mixture of awe and derision.

The next best thing to the quay was the broad sandstone Church of St Mary and its tall spire, standing on a daisied, cropped turf among thorns and a few tombstones, and walled in on three sides by houses, shops and the White Lion and Golden Ball. The walls inside provide recesses for many tombs. The most memorable tomb in the church is that of an Irish soldier named Kingsmill. He is a fine fellow, albeit of stone leaning on his elbow and looking at the world or nothing, as if satisfied with his position. He 'sleeps well' – no man, I should say, better... After Kingsmill's effigy the chief spectacle of St Mary's is the unexpected, big Italianate picture of Christ's descent from the cross, which forms an altar-piece. The story is that it was taken from a Spanish vessel – some add that it was one of the Great Armada; that it reached Bridgwater after long seclusion at Plymouth, and was claimed by Plymouth when Bridgwater was seen to have it, but that Bridgwater kept it in a packing case for two years.

Francis Kingsmill was a soldier who served in the Irish campaigns of Elizabeth I. His 14 year-old granddaughter, Elisabeth Marchant de Saint Michel, married Samuel Pepys in 1655.

Given the discrepancy of dates, it is odd that Thomas entertained that the 17th altar-piece, artist unknown, was seized from an Armada galleon. It was captured in the 18th century from a French or Spanish privateer and donated to the church by Lord Anne Poulett (1711 – 1785), a Bridgwater MP and art collector. Sir Joshua Reynolds is reputed to have broken his coach journey to Plymouth for a long contemplation of this painting.

The 13th century St Mary's replaced an earlier church. It has been extensively altered and extended; it was reroofed and new seating were added by 1857. Prior to that, the problem of an overcrowded graveyard, one common to many Victorian burial grounds, was also addressed: repeated burials had significantly raised the ground level and even contaminated water supplies. St Mary's had a 14th century



James Scott, 1st Duke of Monmouth

crypt and charnel house to which bones were removed. The decision as to when to do this was decided by the sexton who would hammer an iron bar into a grave to determine the level of putrefaction and readiness for transfer of bones below the church. The resulting smell from the vaults was unbearable. In 1851, the cemetery at Wembdon was opened.

The fine sandstone spire was built in 1367. It featured in the 1685 Monmouth rebellion. The Duke, in his forward march, appealed to the strongly Protestant people of Bridgwater; on the Cornhill the corporation proclaimed him king, money flowed into his war chest and his army camped on Castle Field. After his July return from the abortive attempt to capture Bristol and with the Royalist army dogging his heels, the townspeople were less enthusiastic in their support. Monmouth climbed the church tower and noted the Earl of Feversham's Westonzoyleland camp. This led him to trek his army across the Somerset Levels in the hopes of effecting a surprise attack. It was foiled, his army was shattered and dispersed, and the King's justice, as meted out by Judge Jefferies led to nine Bridgwater participants being hanged, drawn and quartered for treason. James II considered Bridgwater as 'a rebel town'.

A vestry and oak screens were added to the church in 1902 and further modernisation took place in 2016 – 2017.

4. On leaving the church, continue walking around it along the pathway which is known as Church Passage. On reaching the alleyway on the left, turn down it onto High Street.

Note the rear entrance of Vino's Wine Bar. This was Thomas's 17th century White Lion at no. 29 High St.

The Golden Ball is off to the right at no. 19. In 1911 there were 113 pubs in the town.

5. Cross over High St.



Royal Clarence Hotel, BM

Bridgwater Town Hall will be on the left but follow the road back down to the right and pass the Clarence Hotel (now converted into shops). This was built in 1824 as Longhurst's Hotel; it was renamed Royal Clarence as an act of deference after a visit of the Duke of Clarence, later William IV. Note on the front of the portico the iron plaque bearing the town's coat of arms and the words 'R C Esq Mayor'. This refers to Robert Codrington. It was placed here



The Spirit of Carnival, CC

6. Walk left down York Buildings to King's Square.

7. From the monument turn right, walking forward and down Castle Street.



Peace Garden, CC



Castle St, Edward Thomas

after the town's first iron bridge (1797) was dismantled and replaced in 1883.

Note the David Faulks 2005 statue of The Spirit of Carnival holding up a 'Bridgwater squib' – fireworks attached to the end of a pole and held aloft during the celebrated Grand Firework display in November of each year. The last public bonfire on Cornhill was in 1924. A further plaque boasts of the town's annual carnival procession as the 'largest illuminated carnival procession in the world'.

On the site of the former castle, the Square was laid out between 1770 and 1800. It is dominated by the town's war memorial unveiled in 1924 and set in a peace garden. The John Angel's bronze allegorical figure of Civilisation is flanked by angels, set above the plaques bearing the names of Bridgwater men killed in action or died of wounds. It has 479 names, with 364 casualties from WW1, three times the WW2 number. Also commemorated are single soldiers who died in the Korean and Falklands Wars.

Castle Street is the pleasantest in the town, a wide, straight old street of three-storey brick houses, rising almost imperceptibly away from the quay. The houses, all private, have round-topped windows and are flat-fronted, except for two at the bottom which have bays. Across the upper end a big, sunlit, ivied house, taller than the others and of mellow brick, with a chestnut tree, projects somewhat, and on the pavement below it is a red pillar box.



1st Duke of Chandos

The 1st Duke of Chandos (1673 – 1744) amassed a considerable fortune as Paymaster General during the wars of the Spanish Succession. He was involved in heavy speculation, not least in Bridgwater of which he acquired the manor and lordship in 1721. Chandos tried to boost the town's industrial economy with ventures into glass and soap making as well as a distillery. He bought the castle site and built King's Square, Chandos and Castle Streets, hoping to attract merchants to the port. Those on the north side were built between 1721- 1734, the south side later.

As a patron of the arts, Chandos was a supporter of Handel who was his house composer from 1717 – 1718 at Cannons, the ducal Middlesex home and where he wrote the *Chandos Te Deum* and the *Chandos Anthems*, his opera *Esther*, the masque *Acis and Galatea* and keyboard music.

Walking down the street, note the individualised doorways.

11-13 Castle St holds **Britain's first Arts Centre**, established in 1946.

At 6 is the **Mary Stanley Training Home** which moved here from King Square in 1920. It was the HQ for Bridgwater District Nursing Association for midwifery training and, until the 1948 National Health Act, was supported by voluntary donations

Bond St on the lower left side of the street derives its name from a Georgian distillery and wine stores which were within the site of the medieval castle and its purlieu.

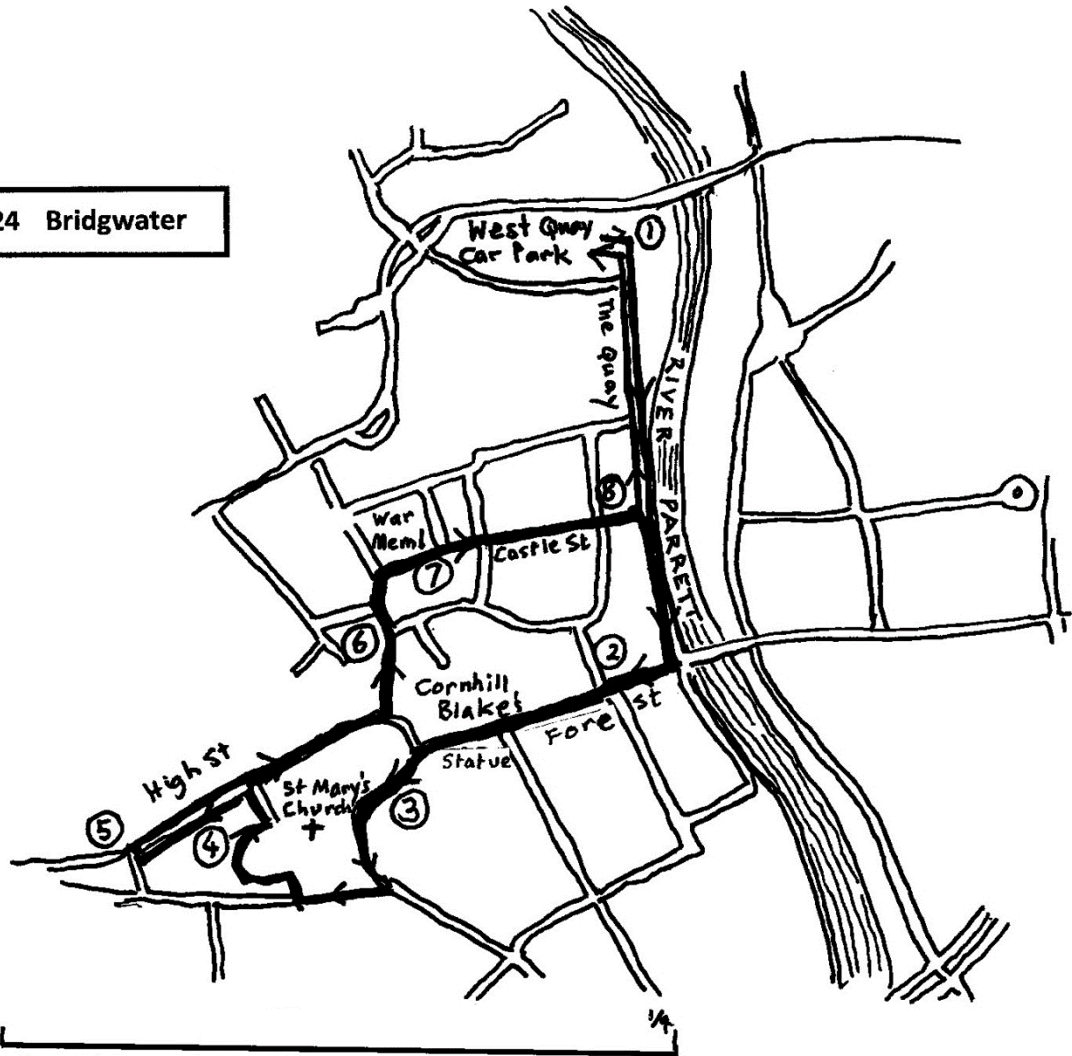
8. Walk down to the Quay and left back to the car park.

It was half-past ten on a beautiful morning when I rode out of the town by a very suburban suburb of villas, elms and a cemetery.

Thanks to Richard Emeny, Edward Thomas Fellowship, Ikuko Shiratori and Chris Sanders Bristol Ramblers and Catherine Carberry for her photos

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Approximate scale: 1/4 mile