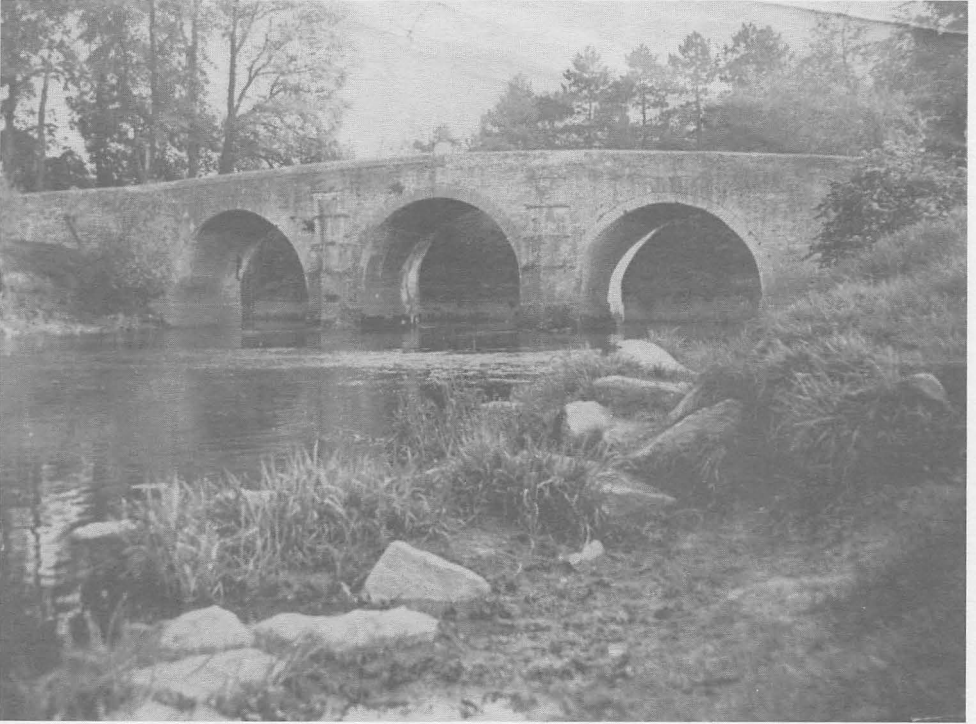


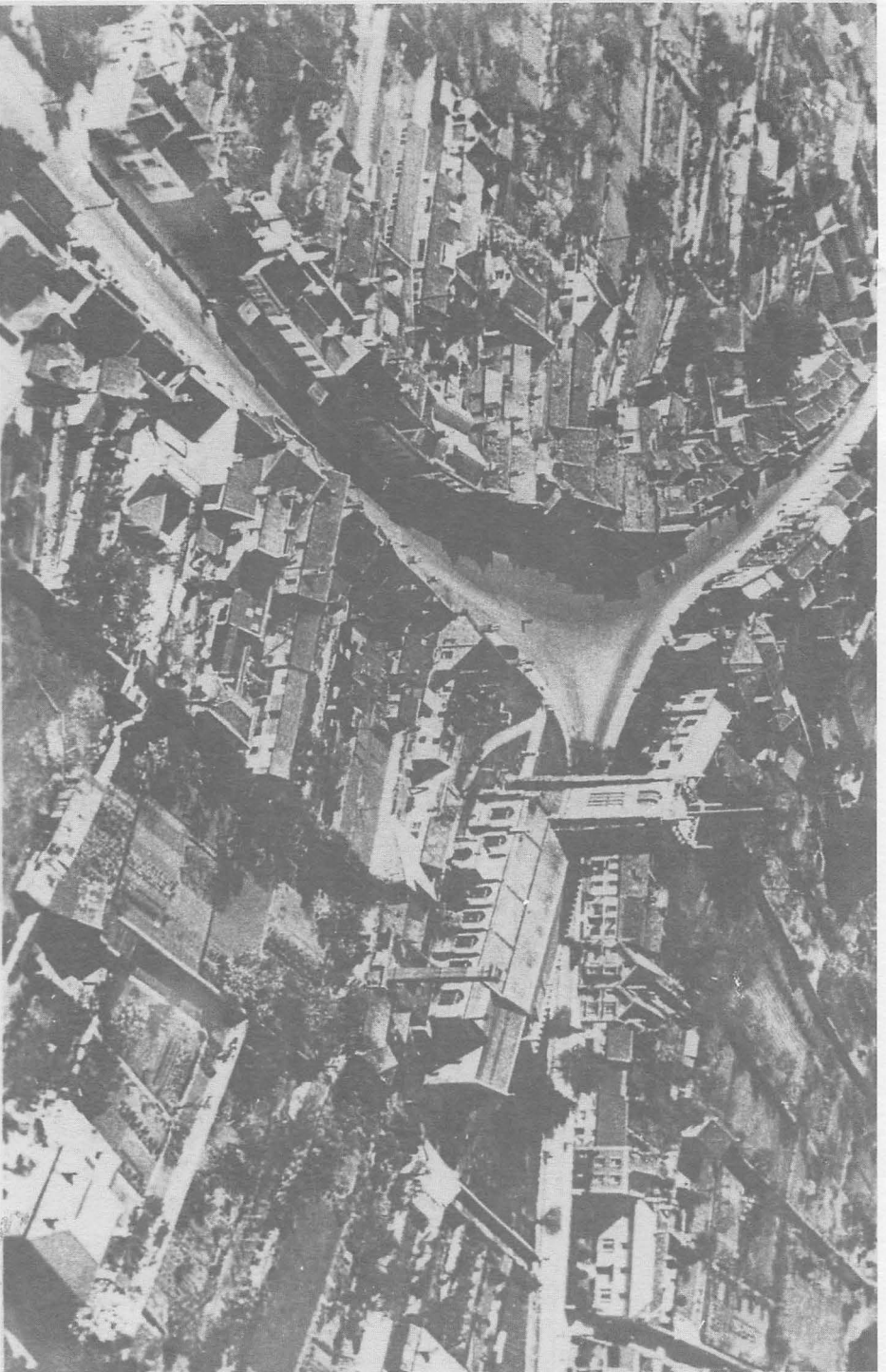
KEYNSHAM CAMEO

A Brief History of Keynsham



County Bridge

Published by
Keynsham & Saltford Local History Society
2000



Keynsham from the air 1920

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Compiled
by Barbara J. Lowe

Published by

Keynsham & Saltford Local History Society

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Cover Illustrations: Front Cover: The County Bridge, Keynsham, prior to being destroyed by the 1968 Flood. Back Cover: Angel Corbel from Keynsham Parish Church.

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A Brief History of Keynsham

The earliest form of animal life here is represented by the 175 million year-old ammonites and other marine creatures (including corals and ichthyosaurus) whose fossilized skeletons are found in the blue lias strata of limestone beneath our feet. This limestone gave rise to one of our oldest industries, lime-burning.¹

The presence of coal in the Stockwood Vale and Chewton Keynsham areas indicates that forests of tree-ferns and hugh mosses once grew and rotted down there. However, the coal mining industry here was on a small scale compared with Kingswood and Newton St. Loe where there were considerable coal stocks. The Bridges family granted coal mining rights to the Langton family in 1708 and George Bridges sank abortive shafts in 1730 near Hick's Gate.² The Charlton Bottom pit was in operation in 1781 (see advertisement in Bonner & Middleton's Journal, 6th October 1781) and mention of steam engines and tram roads at the pits in Chewton Keynsham is made in the Bristol Gazette of July 1833. Evidence of these old workings are discernable as field/crop marks.

The evidence for early human activity in the Avon valley comprises flint and chert bifacial axes found in gravels of the river terraces. They have been found at Kelston and Keynsham and are of Middle-Acheulean type, dated to about 200,000 BC. Nothing of Middle or Lower Palaeolithic date has yet been found in either Keynsham or Saltford but flint blades of Mesolithic type show that people were hunting small game in the neighbourhood during the warmer climatic period after the last Ice Age.

Farmers of the Neolithic Age are represented by flint scrapers, a polished flint axe and a quartz dolerite axe. At Long Reach, a perforated axe-hammer of Beaker type was identified as made of ultrabasic rock or picrite, originally coming from an axe factory site on the Montgomeryshire/Shropshire border.³ Further evidence for the occupation of the area by Beaker colonists from the Low Countries and Rhineland is shown by a Beaker burial at Corston. Direct evidence of the Bronze Age is in the form of a socketed axed found at Saltford and a Barrow at Bitton⁴.

Stantonbury Hill Fort implies a large Iron Age settlement in the vicinity and artefacts of the period have been found in Keynsham.

South of Keynsham a 12 mile linear earthwork, West Wansdyke, extends from Horscombe Vale, South of Bath, to Maes Knoll Hillfort on Dundry Hill. It comprises a rampart with a ditch on the North side and, from Horscombe Vale, passes through Vernham Wood, Englishcombe, adjoins the northern ramparts of Stantonbury Hillfort, through Compton Dando, Publow, Norton Malreward to the North-West corner of Maes Knoll Hillfort. The date and purpose of West Wansdyke remain a subject for discussion. The Iron Age hillforts pre-date the earthwork but appear to have been incorporated into it. Over the years, archaeological sections have been dug across several different parts of the bank and ditch (which is exceptionally deep above Compton Dando), but no clear dating evidence has been obtained.⁵ Current opinion favours it being a physical boundary of the late 6th century, perhaps of the Dumnonii tribe.⁶ Possibly, there was originally a 3 metre deep V-shaped ditch with timber revetments on the North facing scarp of the bank.

Keynsham is rich in traces of extensive Roman occupation over a long period. Coins, pottery, ornaments and evidence of iron working indicate settlement from the 1st century AD. Since 1991, the rescue of Roman artefacts of a military nature from the Keynsham Hams, tends to confirm our belief that Keynsham was the "Trajectus" of the Antonine Itinerary.⁷ "Trajectus" means "a river crossing point" and this would have been guarded by a small military unit. There may have been a bridge across the Avon.

The large courtyard Villa whose remains were found to exist under the 1821 (old A4) road and Keynsham Cemetery, was partially excavated 1922/4.⁸ It has been dated to the end of the 3rd century AD as were the villas at Brislington and King's Weston. A small house, together with a well and 2 stone coffins (containing male and female burials) were found during the construction of Fry's factory in 1922. North of these, whilst levelling the ground for a football pitch in 1991, a single track (5' or 1.53m) Roman Road (iter) and foundations of several buildings were discovered. In drought conditions, outlines of 8 house platforms are clearly visible.⁹ It is possible that they may represent small farmsteads and farm buildings, but remains of higher status buildings probably exist elsewhere on the Hams. Evidence of Roman occupation and industry have been found at several other Keynsham sites, plus known villas at Burnett and Newton St. Loe. Stone coffins were found at Fry's and Burnett with cremations at several sites.

Towards the end of the Roman occupation there seems to have been a complete breakdown of life and government and the villas were abandoned. The Cemetery Villa appears to have been abandoned by 360/365 and then occupied by squatters for a while. Locally, barbarians, in 376AD, swept up the Avon valley, burning the villas at King's Weston and Brislington, but may not have reached Keynsham

Nine pieces of mosaic paving from the Cemetery villa were lifted in 1924/6 and mounted on easels. The tesserae consist of 1/4" to 1" (6mm to 26mm) cubes of blue lias, brown sandstone, white limestone and red terracotta and have been reset in fine cement on a concrete foundation. Designs are of great beauty; dove-like birds, leafy branches, pears, grapes, peacocks, dolphins, knots, ivy leaves, Greek key guilloche patterns. Three surviving rectangular panels (out of six) from an hexagonal room, depict Hellenistic themes --- Europa and the Bull, Minerva playing the tibia and Achilles on Scyros.

For the next 500 hundred years we know little about Keynsham. Certainly indigenous people (albeit with some Roman blood) continued to live here. The geographical situation with lush riverside pasture, fertile soil, abundant water and timber ensured their survival.

Great battles were fought against the West Saxons at Mount Badon in 516 and at Deorham in 577. The Saxons settled in the area from about the 7th century but there is little evidence of invasion, as such. Although pagan burials were discovered near Saltford¹⁰, to date, only Christian burials have been discovered in Keynsham. Certainly, Keynsham was of religious significance by 871 because Aethelward's Chronicle states that Bishop Healmund of Sherborne was killed by the sword at Moreton and brought to Cawine's hamme for burial. We believe that there was a Saxon Minster here, indirect documentary evidence being supported archaeologically by the discovery of part of a cross shaft, tomb slabs, fragments of sculpture with interlace design, and book fittings.

For some time before the Norman Conquest the most general form of land had become the Manor, under a Lord with tenants. The Manor of Keynsham included Burnett, Queen Charlton and Witchurch, and to it were attached 8 houses in Bath, their occupants paying an annual rent of 5 shillings (25 pence). At the time of the Domesday survey in 1084 AD, it was held by the Conqueror himself, who gave it to the Bishop of Countances.¹¹ It passed to the Earldom of Gloucester and when William, the 2nd Earl, founded Keynsham Abbey at the dying request of his only

son, Robert (died 1166), he endowed it with the Manor and Hundred of Keynsham as well as many other properties and land.¹²

The Abbey occupied an extensive site on the hillside overlooking the confluence of the Rivers Chew and Avon. It was large and important, the Church on the summit and other conventual buildings grouped to the West and South. All was built of local limestone and Bath stone with some Purbeck marble. The interior was graced with beautifully sculpted vaulting, tracery, statues, capitals and corbels and floored with decorated paving tiles.

Although quite a lot of record material survives about the Abbey, it is fragmentary with gaps of hundreds of years. No ground plan survived and much of the Chancel and North-East of the Church were destroyed when houses were built on the site between 1865-1885. Unfortunately, insufficient records of the exact location of walls and features were then made.¹³ Consequently, when plans were implemented to construct a by-pass through the Abbey Precinct in 1961, no one had any idea of the extent, layout or position of any part of the whole complex. In spite of pressure from local residents, no-one in authority thought it worthwhile to carry out any excavation on the planned route of the by-pass before letting the bulldozers loose. Had not members of the Bristol Folk House Archaeological Society volunteered to sink trial trenches and literally follow the bulldozers, surveying walls and rescuing masonry and artefacts, none of the Abbey's most beautiful sculptured bosses, capitals and vaulting would have survived and no plan of the abbey would exist.

Robert, 1st Earl of Gloucester, father of the Founder of Keynsham Abbey, was an illegitimate son of Henry 1st. He was exceedingly rich and no expense was spared in the construction of the Abbey. It is thought that a French Master Mason and the finest craftsmen were employed. The dedication was to the Virgin Mary, St. Peter and St. Paul, and the Foundation was given to the Canons Regular of the Order of St. Victor of Paris which was a congregation of Augustine Canons founded by William of Champeau (1070-1121). The Victorines were noted for their piety, learning and mystical interpretation of the scriptures. They were not monks but priests living a corporate life.

Famous Patrons of the Abbey were among the richest people in England, the De Clares, Staffords and Beauchamps. In 1276, Edward 1 stayed several days in the Abbey on his way from Bath to Bristol.¹⁴

The Black Death reached Bristol in the Spring of 1348/9 but it is not recorded how many Keynsham people died. Certainly Abbot Nicholas died between January and March that year, but he was elderly and his successor, John de Bradford, elected March 6th, lived until 1377. The Vicar, Richard atte Wode, died before 4th January 1348/9 when his successor John de Elmlegh was appointed. He, too, survived until c.1375. So Keynsham may have escaped.

Many important people were buried in the Abbey, but perhaps the most elaborate funeral was that of Sir Jasper Tudor in 1495. Keynsham Abbey was classed as one of the greater Abbeys and its Dissolution took place on January 23rd 1539. The Abbot and Canons were pensioned off, some being granted Livings in local Churches. The lead was stripped from the Church and Cloister roofs and sold. Records and excavation have revealed that some land and many of the other buildings remained in use, having been leased out prior to 1539.¹⁵

Sir Thomas Bridges bought the site and remains of the Abbey from Edward VIth in 1552/3. His purchase included a great deal of land but not the Manor and Hundred of Keynsham. Stone from the Abbey Church was used for many purposes including the repair of the County Bridge and to extend the old Hall of the Abbey to form a "large elegant seat". The Bridges Family lived in Keynsham from the late 1500's until the last male heir, Henry (Harry), died in 1728. The entailed estate went to his nephew, George of Avington, and after his death, to his cousin the Duke of Chandos. The mansion house became disused and finally, in 1776, the house and all Abbey remains on the site were sold, all reusable material removed, and the whole site levelled. So ended the great Abbey of Keynsham.

The Keynsham estates were run by an agent until the 2nd Duke of Chandos went bankrupt in 1854 and began to sell the estate piecemeal. In 1857, Newman of Yeovil purchased the last 462 acres.

The Manor and Hundred of Keynsham remained with the Crown until sold to Ann Whitmore of London in 1613. So Keynsham had another absentee landlord with stewards to run the estates. In 1767/8, the Manor and Hundred were sold to Edward Lyne of Bath who tried to restore manorial customs and rights. He appointed a gamekeeper and tried to consolidate fragmented land holdings. Edward Lyne died in Keynsham Manor House (Manor Road) in 1868. By 1923 everything had been sold.

Thus, from the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, most of Keynsham's land had been owned by absentee landlords and administered by stewards. The land had not been improved nor had its industrial potential been realised. The common grazing regulations had not altered for 250 years.¹⁶

Keynsham Parish Church was appropriated to the Abbey in 1292. It was a Perpetual Vicarage, that is the Vicar could be deprived of his office only on the grounds of gross misconduct. The Confirmation Charter issued by Walter, Bishop of Bath and Wells, contained explicit duties and privileges of both Vicar and Covent. All went well until 1395 when the Abbot petitioned Rome for permission for the Church to be served by one of their Canons or any secular priest, appointed and removed solely by the Abbey. Eventually, on the 20th November 1404 a "Composition" was agreed between Abbey and Vicar which set out explicitly, the legal position of both.¹⁷

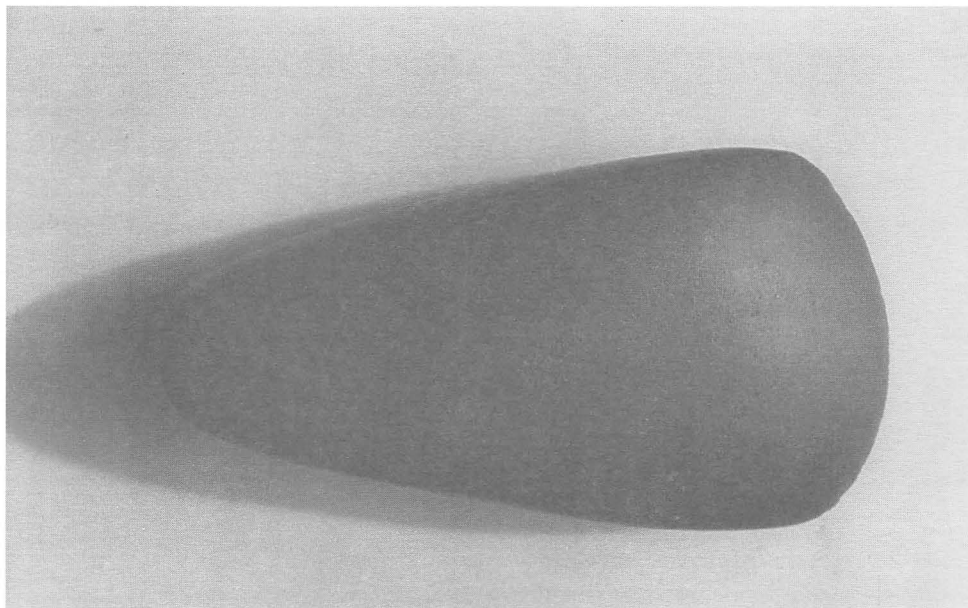
Building the Church probably began about 1270 the whole being completed within 200 years. Although considerably smaller than the Abbey Church, it survived the Dissolution because it was the Parish Church. The North Nave has seven bays, the South, eight, and both have Perpendicular windows with panel tracery. The South Porch has a tierceron vault. Until the Reformation the Church would have had windows of painted glass, brightly coloured wall paintings and many statues. It suffered badly in 1632 when lightning struck the steeple above the squat tower at the NE corner of the Church and it fell on the nearby parts of the Chancel, the Rood screen and North Aisle.¹⁸ The Civil War interrupted the rebuilding work but, by 1655, a new tower had been built at the West end of the Church and a new weather cock set in place to commemorate the event. Repairs inside the Church resulted in the lop-sided Chancel arch, a screen between the Chancel and the organ chamber and a plastered barrel ceiling in the Nave.

The South Chapel is entered through a beautiful Perpendicular screen with panel tracery, leaf frieze and coving bearing "suns in splendour" motifs. There is a Carolean pulpit and a small dainty Font given by Sir Harry Bridges in 1725.

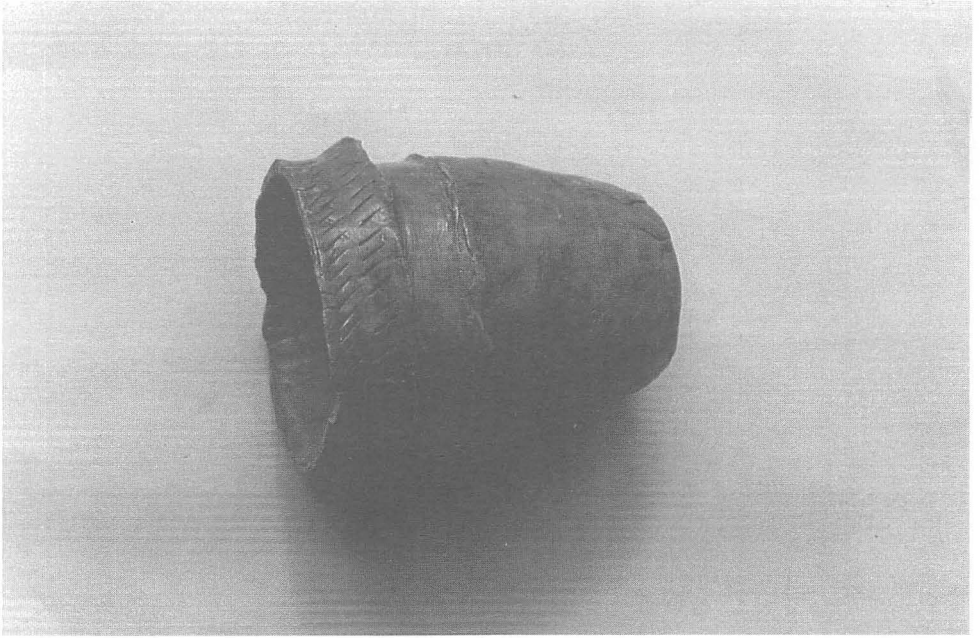
When Sir Thomas Bridges purchased the Abbey remains in 1553, his purchase included much land and the Patronage of Keynsham church. The Bridges family were thus responsible for the upkeep and repair of the Chancel of the Church which is why there are huge, elaborate tombs commemorating members of the family against the walls there.



Ammonite



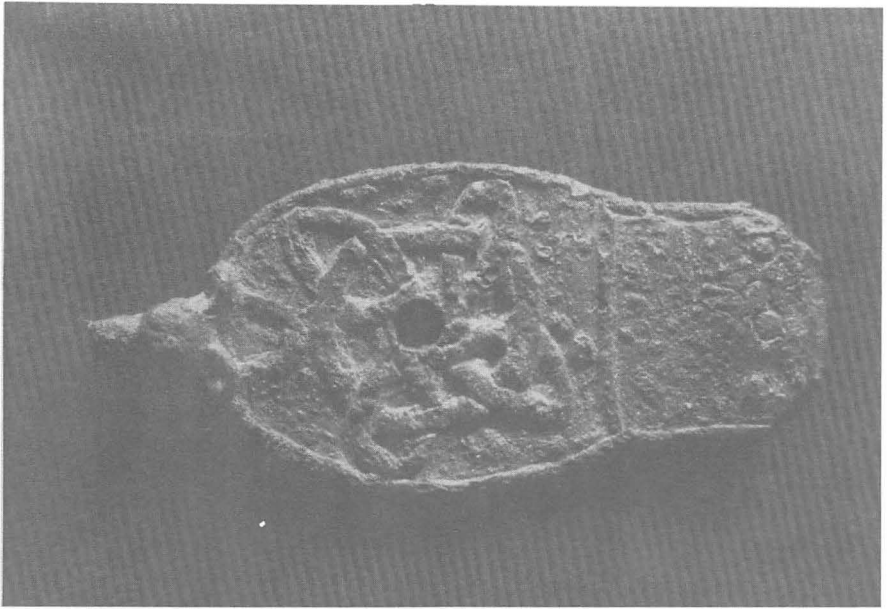
Polished Hand Axe - Durley Hill



Corston Beaker



Wansdyke at Maes Knoll



Saxon Book Claspe



Green Man from Keynsham Abbey



Single Capital from Keynsham Abbey



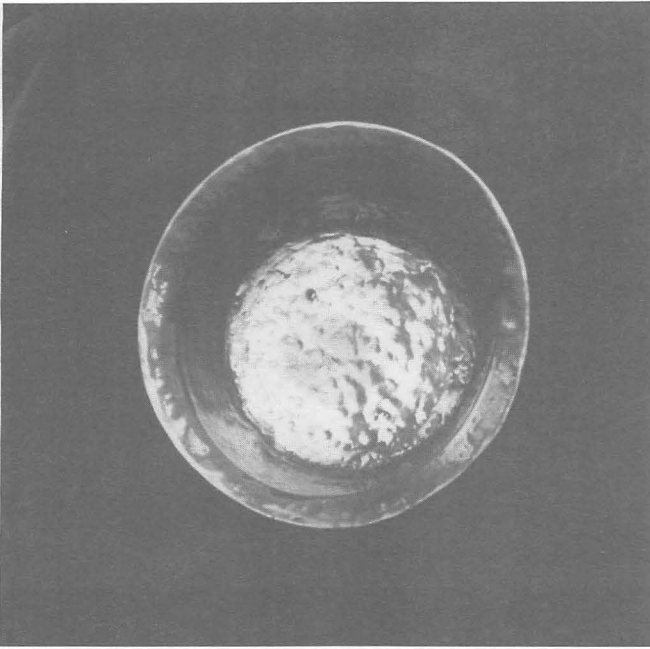
Downe Mill



Albert Mill (South)



Avon Mill



Fray Brass Bowl



Small Brass Pan



Keynsham Railway Station C. 1960



Gas Works with Gasometer on left



Fry's Chocolate Factory 1982

In common with most other churches, St. John's underwent Victorian restoration. In 1861, the Vicar and Churchwardens obtained a Faculty for a complete restoration. The old screen was regilded, the Aisles reroofed, the whitewashed box pews removed, as were the stone benches around the walls, a new stone font was given by the mason, and its cover by the contractors. The old gallery at the West end was taken down, the Nave walls raised, ancient corbels from the Chancel and Choir were moved to the North Aisle and other new ones added elsewhere (e.g. Angels in the Nave). A full account of the reopening appeared in the "Western Daily Press", 27th May 1863, with a complete list of donors.

Of course, care of a Church is ongoing and during the last century much work was done. The bells and belfry needed attention in 1910 and in 1987 the bells were removed and recast. Immediately after the war, death watch beetle infestation necessitated treatment and part replacement of roof timbers. Recently, in 1998, the Church floor was relaid with special sandstone pennant paving slabs. In 1961, the churchyard was levelled and most of the ancient, interesting grave stones destroyed. Others were laid to paths and have eroded away.

The by-pass cutting, 1961-6, enforced the destruction of 10 properties including the 120 year old Church schoolroom, followed by the sale and demolition of the 18th century Vicarage. A new Vicarage and Parish Hall were built immediately South of the Church.

Keynsham became involved in the Civil War, 1642-1659, suffering from both armies, by financial imposition, the quartering of troops and disease which followed in the wake of the armies. The Civil War was fought between Charles 1 and Parliament over supremacy in Church and state. Sir Thomas Bridges was staunchly Royalist but Keynsham was strongly Parliamentarian. Colonel Fiennes ordered the destruction of the County Bridge in 1643 and it again needed repair in 1674.¹⁹

The Duke of Monmouth, rebelling against his uncle, James 11 landed at Lyme Regis in June 1685, marched through Dorset and Somerset raising levies of country folk and was proclaimed "King" at Taunton. Hoping to possess the Port of Bristol, the army had reached Keynsham by 25th June, intending to cross the County Bridge. The previous night had witnessed a skirmish between Captain Tiley and his small group of men and the Gloucestershire Horse Militia who were trying to destroy the bridge. Quick repairs had to be effected before the men could cross and camp overnight on Sydenham Mead. Monmouth occupied Sir Thomas's mansion

and Royalist prisoners were taken to the Bridges' stables. Monmouth then decided to go to Bath to obtain support from Wiltshire but he was refused entry. This was the turning point of his career and he was finally defeated at Sedgemoor, captured, tried and executed.²⁰

Keynsham has a long history of dissent and non-conformity. The Quakers were prominent in the 17th century. A Book of Sufferings (KSLHS Archives) records how several Quakers, including Robert Wastfeld and Christopher Holder, were brought before the Justices for "going to the Steeple House and speaking the truth" and "speaking to the priest in the Steeple House". This refers to St. John's Church. Several were imprisoned in 1660 for refusing the Oath of Supremacy and Abduration, and goods were seized in distraint for non payment of Church Rates.

The Baptists had a meeting house prior to the building of the first chapel in 1803 on the present site, superceded by the present building in 1834.

John Wesley visited Keynsham no less than eleven times in the 18th century. A meeting house was recorded here in 1777 and the first Methodist Chapel was opened in 1807. Subsequent to the breakaway movements in Methodism, two further chapels were built in Temple Street in 1860 and 1866.

One of the reasons for the sorry state of St. John's Parish Church in 1863 was the General Vestry's inability to levy a rate for its repair because a high percentage of ratepayers belonged to the free churches.²¹

In the Domesdy Book Keynsham is recorded as having 6 mills. Avonmyl, Southmyl and Downmyl are mentioned in Abbey records and these are thought to have been what we know respectively as Avon Mill, Albert Mill and the Colour Mill in Keynsham Memorial Park. Early use of Downe Mill was for grinding corn but Avon and Albert Mills were leased for fulling cloth from the 15th century. Waste ground around the Keynsham area still produces teazel and woad plants which were used in the fulling industry. Woad produces a blue dye - the stuff with which the ancient Britons are reputed to have painted their bodies.

By the late 18th century, the woollen industry was declining and between 1788 and 1811, Albert Mill was a cotton and hemp mill. Towards the end of the 19th century it was adapted for dyewood production and continued as such until the 1960's. The site has been redeveloped for housing.

Downe Mill, in 1705 , was leased by Abraham Darby and adapted as a brass "battery" mill, using water-powered hammers to beat out sheets of metal from flat ingots cast in Bristol. It continued to use its water-powered hammers until about 1875. Then, until the Second World War, it was used for ochre grinding. The very picturesque building was demolished in 1948 but its water courses, weir, 15 foot diameter wheel and some walling survive on the site.

Brass rolling and wire-drawing were carried out in Avon Mill from the 1740's until 1927. The mill site was then sold and, in 1933, a modern factory and plant for paper making was installed. This business continued until 1944 but some of the original mill buildings have been converted into an inn/restaurant.

On the opposite banks of the River Chew from Albert Mill was a steel mill, remembered today by "Steel Mills Lane". Christopher Shallard occupied the mill in 1749 but the steel works were for sale in 1814. In 1815 the complex consisted of dwelling house, gardens, stable, orchard, two steel furnaces with a smith's shop, warehouse, charcoal house and barton together with a mill house with newly erected hammer mill and 8 hp engine. Philip Jones occupied it in 1834, and later, Robert Ruddle. The dwelling house still stands (refurbished) and the mill building has been converted into a residence. The sites of the furnaces are no longer visible - in fact, few people know where they stood.²²

Another local trade was the basket industry. Withies grew along the southern banks of the Avon and along the Chew in the present park area down towards Albert Mill. The Cantle family were local basket and hurdle makers and the right of way which leads from Steel Mills Lane to the river (old fording place) in front of "River View" house was named Cantle's lane. At present this has been used as a dumping ground for mortar, grass cuttings and rubbish, is overgrown and of difficult access.

Traditionally the main local building stone was the blue lias limestone. When the quality or thickness was unsuitable for building purposes, it was burnt to produce lime and there are many records of lime kilns in Keynsham. Quarries are known to have existed behind the Police Station (Bath Hill East), off Manor Road, off Wellsway, near the workhouse (St. Clement's Road) and Durley Hill.²³

Whilst the Abbey was active, schooling would have been available there, albeit for a few chosen boys. A descendant of the Sir Thomas Bridges who purchased the Abbey and site, another Thomas Bridges, founded a school in 1705 for 20 boys of

the town and parish "for the advancing and encouragement of virtue, good manners, ingenious education and learning". Boys had to be able to read the New Testament and Psalter and were taught writing, arithmetic, latin and grammar

The Union Workhouse, which opened in 1838, was "avant garde" in providing a school in 1841. An advertisement for a teacher read: "A respectable person between 25 and 45 years, must be well trained in a system of National Education, able to write a good hand, well acquainted with rudiments of arithmetic and without encumbrances. Strict credentials of character as to sobriety, honesty and morality will be required together with a specimen of hand writing."

The Baptists held Sunday Schools from 1804 and opened "The British & Foreign School" (education with sectarian teaching) in 1860. Victoria Methodist Church built a new Sunday School room in 1887.

The Bridges School (attached to the old Vicarage) had only 11 boys in 1854, taught by the Parish Clerk. The Rev. G. Robinson planned a new parochial school on Bath Hill. This opened in 1857 with 113 children.

The 1870 Education Act introduced Board Schools, the first state-provided ones. Schools could be run either by Church or a Board. In 1872, the Education Department served notices on both British and Parochial Schools saying that either the Parochial one be enlarged or the British one improved and re-opened, (this had closed in 1871) because the educational provision in Keynsham was inadequate. The Parochial School was enlarged and the British School remained closed.

Years of discussion in Keynsham decided against a Board School. The British School re-opened in 1880 but finally closed in 1894. A new infant department was built at the Parochial School. Temple Street Infants' School building was opened in 1894. During World War 11 this school became a "Casualty Station" and the infants moved to the Victoria Methodist Chapel schooroom. It was 1946 before the building reverted to school use. Until 1936 all Keynsham's children, not in private schools, were educated in an all age Church of England school.

In 1935 Broadlands Secondary School opened. Kelston Road Junior (now Keynsham County Primary) School and St. John's C. of E. Primary School followed after the war. The 1944 Education Act made secondary education available to all. Keynsham Grammar School, Wellsway Secondary Modern and Chandag Junior and

Infant Schools were built in 1957, the two former later combining to become Wellsway Comprehensive School.²⁴

Keynsham once had a flourishing Thursday market and annual Fair, the former fact commemorated by the present signs on the approaches to Keynsham. The Charter for market and fair was granted in 1303 to the Abbot of Keynsham.

After the Dissolution of the Abbey, Elizabeth 1, in 1575, re-affirmed the Charter and both market and fair thrived for another 200 years. There was considerable manufacture of wool here and, in 1785, the fair was famous for cattle and cheese. In that year a special grant was made to allow roundabouts. Following the decline in agriculture, the fair gradually died out. Until World War 11 the annual August sheep fair was held in the Chandag area. In the 1930's a Heavy Horse Show was held on the rugby field. The weekly market continued to be held on Thursdays until 1889 at least.

After World War 1 Cooper & Tanner (local auctioneers) leased the site next to The Talbot Inn from George's Brewery in 1923. Their weekly cattle and produce market, latterly held on Mondays, continued until 1975 when the site was sold and HomeAvon flats built. Now we have neither a weekly market nor an annual fair.²⁵

In 1817 the first body of volunteer cavalry from Keynsham joined what was known as the North Somerset Yeomanry and served several times in local disturbances, particularly the Bristol Riots of 1831. When they were disbanded in 1842 they were called "The Cossacks" from their promptitude and efficiency in emergencies.²⁶

The Poor Law Ammendment Act of 1834 transferred management of the poor to Poor Law Commissioners. Keynsham Union covered Keynsham, Brislington, Compton Dando, Corston, Kelston, Marksbury, Newton St. Loe, Priston, Queen Charlton, Saltford, Stanton Prior, Bitton, Hanham, Kingswood, Mangotsfield, Oldland and Syston and was governed by a Board of Guardians.

Three acres of land was purchased in St. Clement's Road, the Workhouse built and opened in 1828. The inhabitants were the old, the sick, orphaned children, the handicapped and unmarried and abandoned mothers. Keynsham Workhouse was humanely administered with its own school where the children were educated. Food was ample, if stodgy - porridge, potatoes, peas, bread, cheese and vegetables grown in the Workhouse garden. It appears that people entered and left at will. Tramps walked from one workhouse to the next doing manual tasks in return for a

bath, bed and board. Outdoor relief was given, it being cheaper to help in their own homes than in the Workhouse.

The 1930 Poor Law Act put the Workhouse under the control of the County Councils so Keynsham was separated from South Gloucestershire. To go into the workhouse remained a social stigma despite Keynsham being renamed "Clements House". Finally, in 1948 it became Keynsham Hospital.²⁷

As with the rest of the country the railway made a tremendous impact upon Keynsham. Local business people realised the potential of a Bristol to London line and engaged I.K. Brunel and W.H. Townsend to survey and cost the project. The Bristol & London Railroad Company became the Great Western Railway in 1833. This was strongly opposed by six local landowners, nevertheless Royal assent was granted in August 1835. The Bristol to Bath section was begun and according to a roughly incised stone at the brass mill, work at Saltford began on 11th June 1836. The work was heavy. Seven tunnels were necessary between Bristol and Bath, the one under Saltford proving very difficult. Embankments and bridges were built, water courses and public footpaths diverted. The whole cut a huge swathe through the beautiful Avon valley.

Keynsham station opened on 31st August 1840. The first public train, with eight carriages, left the unfinished Temple Meads station at 8am and took 10 minutes to reach Keynsham. Here it stopped for 3 minutes to change engines and lines taking a total of 33 minutes from Bristol to Bath.

The railway took over the long distance transport of heavy goods such as coal and stone which formerly had travelled by barge. The coaching trade also suffered as did the staging inns and stables. Local carriers gained extra work by transporting passengers, goods and agricultural products to and from the stations. Ordinary mail coaches were put on the trains from station to station, then taken on by horse.

Keynsham folk could now commute to Bath or Bristol for employment. The train fare was 9d (4p) and 1/-d (5p) to Bath. Perhaps, more importantly, businesses could come out to Keynsham. Certainly more people came to live here and many of the Victorian houses close to the station date from the 1860's.²⁸

Keynsham established its own Gas Company in 1857. The works were built by T. Atkins & Son at the bottom of Dapps Hill. There were two small gasholders and a retort house. A new retort house engine, new purifiers and condensers were

installed in 1925. However, the demand by Fry's factory for gas resulted in the Keynsham company being bought out by Bristol Gas Company and the gas works became disused. A retort house survives having been used as offices for some years, but the site is now on the market.²⁹

The communication services of the electric telegraph came to Keynsham in 1865, using the Great Western Railway line as the route.

Keynsham was one of the first towns to have electric street lighting. In 1890 Messrs Parfitt & Webber started the Electric Light and Power Company in sheds just south of Keynsham Parish Church. The business was handed over to Bristol Corporation Electricity Department in about 1923.³⁰

Other industries came and went in the 20th century. Gould Thomas produced Glauber Salts and Ammonium Chloride in addition to dyewood at the Albert Mill. Soap was produced at the Polysulphin Works on the Avon north of Broadmead, the necessary soda ash being brought up-river from Bristol Docks until the late 1950's. The building is now derelict.

Modern industrial development began in Keynsham with the construction of Somerdale model chocolate factory in 1921 on part of the 230 acre Keynsham Hams. J.S. Fry & Sons Ltd moved their expanding business from Union Street, Bristol. In 1924 the name "Somerdale" was given to the new factory site after a nationwide competition.

The name was emblazoned on the railway embankment and the extended station became "Keynsham & Somerdale". At the time of the move from Bristol which took 11 years, the number of employees is believed to have been around 5,000. Many employees had moved from Bristol and more were recruited from Keynsham itself, giving new life to the town. A new housing estate was built on land next to the factory site, 20 had been completed by 1928, another 20 were under construction and a further 20 were planned. Fry's own railway siding was constructed from the factory to Keynsham station. The Fry train crossed Willsbridge Road twice a day causing traffic to wait. Fry's was not just a factory. A range of facilities were available for the relaxation and enjoyment of employees. Drama, music (choir, orchestra and military band), library, cards, billiards, photography, table tennis, and outdoor activities such as cricket, tennis, football and bowls were all provided. The factory was the life-blood of Keynsham and only after World War 11 did reorganisation and automation affect the company, its employees and Keynsham.

Major E. Cadbury joined Fry's in 1919 and eventually became Managing Director. By 1936 Fry's was a subsidiary of Cadbury's although the name Fry's still lingers on. The industry continues, but on a smaller scale with far fewer employees.³¹

In 1894 Keynsham Rural District Council was established to govern the surrounding villages of Saltford, Newton St. Loe, Kelston, Stanton Prior, Marksbury, Burnett, Whitchurch and part of Brislington. Keynsham and Saltford had their own Parish Councils responsible for provision and maintenance of local amenities. This replaced the old Vestry system which had existed for several hundred years.

In 1903, and again in 1931, Keynsham applied to Somerset County Council to become an Urban District but the request was refused. Against their wills, Keynsham and Saltford were amalgamated to form one unit in 1933 within Bathavon Rural District. It was not until 1936 that they were removed from Bathavon R.D.C. to form Keynsham Urban District Council. This happy situation lasted until 1974 when Keynsham became part of a new district, Wansdyke, in the newly formed County of Avon. On the demise of Avon in 1996 Keynsham became part of Bath & North East Somerset District Council.³²

After World War 11 Keynsham began to change. A decision was made to create a town for the overspill population of Bristol, and a building boom followed in Keynsham. Not only were there large building estates, one on the Abbot of Keynsham's Deer Park, another East of the River Chew on the old Common fields, but also a trading estate. Soon, many of the old family grocers, butchers and bakers went out of business as their shops were taken over by multiple concerns. A new Civic Centre with Library, Town Hall and shopping centre was built on the sites of 16th/17th century cottages. New schools were built. A by-pass was constructed between 1961-66 to relieve the High Street of traffic. A new recreational centre, with more shops, replaced 16th/17th century cottages in Temple Street.

The drastic floods of 10th July 1968 swept away ancient bridges and ravished the freshly planted Memorial Park, irreparably damaged the award-winning bandstand, shop and toilets, and wrecked the expensively designed and constructed new Lower Park and Lake.³³

What does the future hold for the town Keynsham, either at the hands of man or nature?

Barbara J. Lowe.

For Keynsham & Saltford Local History Society

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Temple Street late 1960's



Keynsham Market c. 1933 Cooper and Tanner ran the Market, east of the Talbot, along Bath road, from 1923 to December 1975



Angel Corbel from Keynsham Parish Church