

BLAKE NEWS

SUMMER 2009



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Update on what has been happening.

Since our last newsletter of Winter 2008, momentous events have happened in the Museum. The change of management from the District Council to the Town Council was achieved and since April 1 the Museum has been run mostly by volunteers from the Friends. The building and contents are now the property of the Town Council, and funding for the next four years is secured to run it as a going concern. As well as the Museum, the adjoining Town Mill is included, which has provided valuable potential storage space.

During the shut-down between February and May an enormous amount of hard physical work was done by about 40 people, by no means all Friends. A number came by way of the Volunteer Bureau and similar organisations and did magnificent work. There is not space here to include everything but the main work involved major re-wiring, redecorating the ground floor, replacing an entire floor suffering from various kinds of rot and beetle damage, and moving displays to different rooms. A shop was created, and the garden was given a makeover with new seating. Full information can be found on the News Page of the Friends' website. (See below). This is updated weekly, and is very detailed.

Websites

The Friends' website, www.blakemuseum.org.uk, is designed for the production of newsletters. It was originally conceived as the means of keeping local councillors and council officials up to date with progress but now serves a wider audience.

www.bridgwatmuseum.org.uk is the Museum's administrative website and is the principal means of publishing important documentation about the Museum, and also a number of photographs of work in progress

A third website www.blakemuseum.org is likely to be the basis of a new one covering digitised photographs from the collection and pages relating to the main displays. The internet will play a major role in the way the Museum is promoted.

<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/AdmiralBlake> is a web discussion group covering all aspects of the life and times of Robert Blake as well as Museum developments.

Volunteers wanted for tasks

Volunteers are needed for many tasks. These range from being a custodian, helping in the shop, housekeeping, helping in the garden, curatorial work and helping in the office. If you are interested, please contact Bryan Gillard 01278 458382; bryan@bgillard.orangehome.co.uk

Winter shut-down dates

The Museum will be closed to the public between Thursday 12 November 2009 and Tuesday 31 March 2010. During this time we plan to work mostly on the upper floor, and jobs envisaged include installing security cameras there, exhibiting new or stored material, re-placing the electrical circuitry, and installing roof insulation. Downstairs we plan to replace the floor in the office, where the joists are rotted, and bring part of the old Blake room back into use as a display area for large or heavy items.

Plans for Museum development

Much work is being done to re-affirm the Museum's Accreditation. A revised Statement of Purpose has been drawn up, bringing it back closely to what it was when the Museum was founded in 1926

The Blake Museum Bridgwater is established:

- 1) To rescue from loss and destruction the relics of our ancestors.
- 2) To collect, conserve and to show relics of history relating (principally but not exclusively) to Bridgwater and its immediate surroundings.
- 3) To show visitors that Bridgwater is not indifferent to its own history.
- 4) To interest visitors in what has happened in Bridgwater since it was granted its first Royal Charter in the reign of King John.
- 5) To give the townspeople of Bridgwater pride in their past.
- 6) To reveal that great events have taken place within the town and adjacent areas and set them in the context of the history of England.
- 7) To honour the lives of great men who have lived or been associated with the town, and, in particular but not exclusively, Robert Blake.

The Key Aims arising from this so far are:

To improve the accessibility of the collections to visitors and a worldwide audience.

To develop new interpretations, displays and learning experiences.

To improve the care of collections through better storage and environmental control.

To refocus the content of the collections to reflect more accurately the purpose of the Museum.

To become the centre of excellence for the study of the local history of Bridgwater and its people.

To improve the street signposting to the Museum.

To encourage volunteers to develop skills of benefit to the Museum and thereby to enhance their enjoyment of their voluntary efforts; to work with others to increase the volunteer base.

Band Concerts in Blake Gardens

During the summer, the Friends have served teas at the fortnightly Sunday band concerts in Blake gardens. As well as being fun, it is an important means of raising funds for the Museum.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Invitation to tea

The Friends Committee is hosting a tea party at the Museum on Wednesday 16 September from 3.00pm. This is a social event to enable everyone to meet each other. It is extended to all Friends, and the Custodians and Volunteers who have done so much to ensure the Museum has been saved and remains open.

AGM notice

The Annual General Meeting of the Friends of Blake Museum will be held in the Museum on Tuesday 13 October at 7.30 pm.

Formal notification will be issued nearer the time, but this is advance notice that we are looking for at least a new Treasurer and Programme Secretary.

Next year's programme of talks

Tuesday, 10 November *My life as a Policeman* Mr. Philip Smeed

Tuesday, 9 December *Afternoon entertainment 2.15 – 3.45*
Annual Christmas gathering at the Museum.

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Tuesday, 12 January *To there and back again* Mr John Beasant

Tuesday, 9 February *Millworkers' tales* Mr. D. Canham

Tuesday, 9 March *Life as a farm labourer* Mr E. Lovell

Tuesday, 13 April *Memories of a village grocer* Mr J Barkle

Tuesday, 11 May *Victorian House Servants* Mrs P Hase

Tuesday, 11 June *TV Journalist* Mr G. Purches

Tuesday, 13 July *The Stoways* Mr Chris Sidaway

August, – No Meeting

Tuesday, 14 September *Memories of a village school* Mrs P. Tinney

New Blake documents discovered

by David Sebborn

Previously unknown historical documents which shed light on the nature and extent of property owned by Robert Blake at Puriton and Bawdrip turned up in a Ludlow auction in early May last year. Blake Museum received a tip-off, and realising their significance, an urgent telephone call to Taunton alerted Somerset Record Office, which succeeded in purchasing them. (Ref: A\ICGP/3)

In addition to a copy of the Admiral's will, the purchase included two deeds drawn up in 1667, a copy of the will, previously believed lost, of Nicholas Blake (died 1649), a brother of the Admiral, and a 19th Century valuation of the Blake estate at Puriton. In the first of the deeds, May 1667, Nicholas Blake bought 100 acres of arable, meadow and pasture land in the parishes of Puriton and Bawdrip from his brother Humphrey Blake, who had inherited the estate of Crandon cum Puriton on his brother Admiral Robert's death ten years earlier. A document which has been in the Blake Museum for many years shows that this land had been leased by Robert for forty years in 1649 to Nicholas Blake and Robert Bowditch (probably a relative by marriage) shortly before Robert went to sea to command the English fleet for the first time. The second document of November 1667 transfers actual control of the land to Nicholas from Augustine Question, probably a close relative of Nicholas's

wife Joan Question, in repayment of a mortgage. Two 19th Century documents give details of the property of Silas Blake, the last of Nicholas's male line, in Crandon and Puriton and should make it possible to identify some of the land actually owned by the Blakes. The sale of this property by Humphrey Blake in 1667 was followed by the sale by him of the Manor itself to another brother Benjamin in 1669. Benjamin subsequently sold the manorial rights out of the family.

These newly discovered documents shed new light on a whole range of intriguing questions about the Blakes of Bridgwater and the country estate which supported them through three generations from the time when the Admiral's grandfather bought the Manor in 1575 and the time Benjamin Blake sold it in 1675, part of the land of which was to remain in the family until the latter half the 19th Century.

Objects given to the Museum

It has not generally been wise or possible for the Museum to add to its collections for some time, as there is much to do with sorting out the existing material, but in recent weeks it has been possible to give consideration to acquiring possible new material.

This has included a box of papers and records relating to the Bridgwater printer Bigwood and Staple, whose works burnt down a year or two ago, and some material received a few months ago from BWW Printers of Colley Lane, which recently moved premises. Another interesting gift was a collection of photographs of costumed members of the Operatic Society, 90 years ago. We have received a Typhoo Tea card, of about 1930, showing Blake House and Robert Blake, from the *Homes of Famous Men* series.



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More recently the Museum was given a cup, saucer, bowl and jug, all with the Borough crest and made by Fentons They may date from before the 1930s. This will augment the small collection of similar crested china-ware. We hope soon to have a display of them in the case containing the Bridgwater Cup.