

The
COUNTY BOROUGH OF
WIGAN

HISTORICAL SKETCH

by H. H. G. ARTHUR, F.L.A., F.R.S.A.

Borough Librarian

WIGAN has a long and interesting history which can be followed in detail from the 12th century. While the continuous occupation of the area can be traced back many centuries before this, it is to be regretted that in the absence of adequate archaeological evidence or other records only the briefest outline of the earliest history of the site can be attempted.

An examination of a physical map of Lancashire shows that the site must have always been one of importance. Northern England is divided by the Pennine Chain and the site occupied by Wigan is located on one of the two principal routes between north and south. Ever since man started communications this route must have been vital. Further examination shows that the site is at a point where the River Douglas alters its direction. This river after leaving Rivington, flows south until it reaches Wigan, which it once encircled on three sides. Now it bends through the town, finally flowing north to join ultimately the Ribble. Old and, of course, modern routes from the east to the west coast intersect with the north-south route at Wigan. Everything indicates that men must have lived here as long as there has been habitation in Lancashire.

Pre-Roman settlement is entirely a matter of speculation. The area is somewhat elevated, rising in places to 250 feet above sea-level. There are some good reasons for assuming that it may have been sparsely inhabited, but the archaeological evidence is very slender. The nearest tumulus marked on the Ordnance Survey map is near the Robin Hood Inn close to Wigan, and there is no

other for miles around. A very small number of Stone Age implements have been found but there seems to be a complete absence of Bronze Age weapons and prehistoric pottery, although some of this material may have been destroyed in the past without being recorded. Only bones of a later date have been excavated. A great deal of the land has been turned over in mining operations and there is considerable doubt as to whether further excavation would add much to our knowledge of the early history of the area. Careful watch has been kept during opencast mining operations in recent years but they have yielded nothing of interest or value.

Passing on to the period of the Roman occupation, the site of the town has generally been identified with the Roman station of *Coccium* mentioned in the Antonine Itinerary. There are valid reasons for this assumption, although Roman remains are disappointingly few. Roman urns containing incinerated bones were found when some foundations of the gas works were being laid in 1837. Small hoards of Roman coins have been located from time to time, the best discovery being a gold coin of Vitellius found on the Mesnes in 1850. Pieces of samian ware have been unearthed occasionally, while in 1847 a large carved stone was revealed during the rebuilding of the parish church, and this was later identified as the cornice of a Roman altar. It bears, however, a 17th-century inscription. The most important evidence is the portion of Roman road still visible on the south side of the town near the Ben Jonson Inn at Marus Bridge. The Roman road from

The County Borough of Wigan

Manchester should join this but unfortunately all traces of it seem to have disappeared. There is no suggestion that the station was such an important military one as Chester, Manchester or Ribchester, but it could have been a small fortified post conceivably and a halting-place when a Legion was on the march.

Following the withdrawal of the Romans, several centuries elapse before there is any record of the area. The belief that the Wigan Douglas was the scene of some of the legendary King Arthur's exploits was current even in the 14th century. Doubtless it originated through Nennius, the 9th-century historian, who mentions the banks of a River Douglas as being the site of four of Arthur's victories. Unfortunately, Nennius' work is not accepted as authentic, and in any case it must first be proved that Arthur was an historical personage.

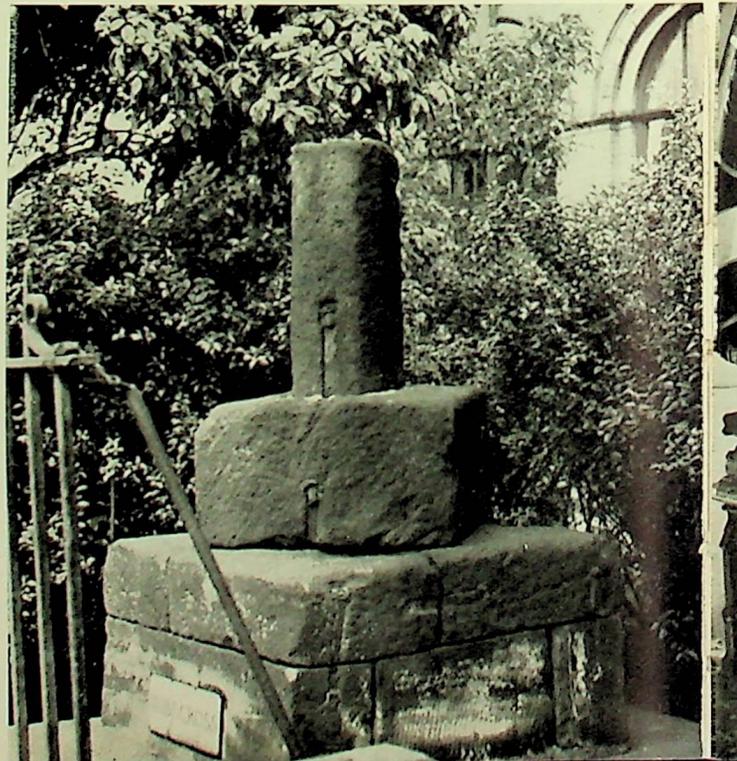
Up to the 12th century geographical evidence shows that the Hundred of West Derby in which Wigan was situated was thinly populated and that it consisted very largely of dense forest and extensive tracts of desolate bog and swamp. It was practically uninhabited save for a few island sites of which Wigan was one. Before the Norman Conquest the land between the Ribble and the Mersey had long been disputed by the kingdoms of Northumbria and Mercia, but during the last quarter of the 10th century, though separately administered, it was annexed to Mercian Cheshire. Place-name evidence showing Norse, Celtic and Saxon elements indicates that the occupied sites on the higher ground were inhabited by people of mixed origins. It has been suggested that many place-names in the Wigan area are traceable to Scandinavian sources but obviously it must first be proved that they had a medieval existence. Many are found in late medieval deeds but it is apparent that some are new creations based on customary usage, e.g., the word *gate* meaning *street*. Seven of the eight ancient streets of Wigan were called gates. Three of them were undoubtedly very ancient and possibly co-eval with the Danish settlement. Others like Hallgate, while still medieval, were later creations and must post-date the beginning of the manor. Finally, Bishopgate could not possibly be earlier than the 17th century.

Wigan is not mentioned by name in the Domesday Survey, but a reference to the "church of the manor" in the former hundred of Newton is generally taken to mean the town. The derivation

of the name is unknown. It occurs in a charter of 1199 precisely as now spelt and was obviously in general use well before this date. The name is generally considered to be of Saxon origin and numerous suggestions have been made as to its exact derivation.

The history of Wigan in medieval times and the description of its character in those days are typical of a north country town of importance. A distinctive feature is a dispute as to the manorial rights which resulted in the acquisition by the inhabitants of a considerable degree of freedom and many rights and privileges at an earlier date than by those of the majority of other northern towns. At the Conquest Wigan was included in the barony of Newton. The barony was large and Wigan was in a remote corner of it. The rector consequently became of more importance in the town than the baron and began to dispute his right to be lord of the manor. To gain the support of the inhabitants in this dispute the rectors seem to have treated them well. Moreover, certain men of great power and influence filled the office of rector with very good results. The rector John Mansel, who was Keeper of the Seal and Counsellor to Henry III, obtained a charter (1246) constituting the town a free borough with guild merchant and treasury as well as

Mab's Cross (left) and the tomb of Sir Will



Historical Sketch

liberal judicial powers. This document is lost but a word for word repetition is contained in the charter granted by Edward II in 1314 now kept in the borough archives at the Central Library. In 1258 a further charter had granted a weekly market on Mondays and two annual fairs of three days' duration at the feasts of Ascension and All Saints. Trade prospered and during the early years of the next century an additional market day on Fridays had grown up by custom. The royal charters looked on the town as a trading centre, every facility being given for its development which continued in spite of the plague and the general economic difficulties of the period. It is interesting to notice that twenty-three boroughs were created in Lancashire between 1066 and 1372. At the end of the Middle Ages Wigan, Preston, Lancaster and Liverpool only were regarded as such, the remainder, including Manchester, having lost their urban rights.

Wigan's great link with English literature, the Legend of Mab's Cross, has certain historical foundations. Sir Walter Scott, who visited Haigh Hall about 1824, related the story in the preface to *The Betrothed*, for which it suggested the plot. The Legend which, of course, has parallels tells how Sir William Bradshaigh was away at the Crusades for seven years. His wife, Dame Mabel,

believing him dead, married a Welsh knight. Sir William, learning of this, came back in the disguise of a palmer. Finally, Sir William slew the Welsh knight at Newton-le-Willows and Dame Mabel was compelled as a penance to walk barefoot once a week for a year from Haigh to a cross in Standishgate, a distance of about two miles. This cross is still preserved in front of the Girls' High School in Standishgate. The tomb of Sir William and Dame Mabel is still to be seen in Wigan Parish Church and was restored very recently.

Undoubtedly the story is connected with the Earl of Lancaster's plots in the troubled times of Edward II when Sir William de Bradshaigh supported the Earl at first in his intrigues against the detested favourite, Piers Gaveston. Treachery was general in those days and Bradshaigh and the Earl quarrelled after the murder of Gaveston. Bradshaigh's forces were defeated by the Earl at Deepdale, near Preston, in 1315 and Bradshaigh, being involved in other capital crimes, had to leave the country for a time.

In 1323 Edward II visited Wigan, staying a fortnight at Upholland Priory in the parish of Wigan. The visit was really to deal with some of the disturbances of the time. The King, sitting with a Wigan jury, personally tried several of the local magnates, including Sir William Bradshaigh. Sir William was eventually restored to his estates and was several times Member of Parliament for the county. At the same time the rector, Robert de Clytheroe, was imprisoned and fined heavily for his part in the insurrections. It was in 1350 that another rector, John de Winwick, in high favour with the King, obtained a further amplification of the charter giving great commercial privileges. This rector finally became Keeper of the Great Seal.

Some description of the appearance and town life of Wigan at this time can be ascertained. The town was built round the church which stood in a defensible position on a mound above the Douglas valley. Two lines of low hills across the Douglas were covered for the most part with thick woods. These woods were full of deer and game, and were consequently a great temptation to the poorer classes of the community. The woods to the west of the town belonged to the lord of the manor, and there he allowed the people to feed their pigs as well as on the common land nearer the town.

The parish of Wigan was about ten miles long and six miles broad, but outside the town it was

Wigan and Dame Mabel Bradshaigh



only sparsely populated. Here and there were the dwellings of landowners who with their dependants were customers for the goods of the Wigan tradespeople. For defensive purposes the town's position was admirable on account of the river which almost surrounded it. On the east side the road from Manchester crossed the river and entered the town by a gate close to the rector's corn mills at the foot of the street still called Millgate. In the reign of Edward III a bridge was built here to replace the ford. To the south and south-west the river flowed at some distance from the walls, the land between belonging to the rector. The people, however, had common rights here as well as on the far bank of the river. Some of this land has provided names today such as Water Heys, Swan Meadow and Swinley or the Swine Lea. Wallgate and Standishgate were the principal thoroughfares then as now. Apart from the church, Wigan Hall, the rector's home, must have been the most prominent building, and it was probably something of a castle. The manorial courts were held there and it contained a prison underneath.

No traces of the wall remain and we can only conjecture what it was like by assuming it was similar to those of other walled towns. The wall would have a fairly broad footway on the top, from which in case of siege the townspeople could drop missiles on the besiegers. This footway would be defended from the missiles of the attacking party by battlements and at intervals, especially at the gates, these fortifications would be strengthened by towers. As these defences have all perished, it seemed probable they were not so strong and massive as those of some other medieval towns. Wigan was never besieged before Cromwell's time and the inhabitants possibly relied more on the natural defences provided by the wooded hills, rivers and marshes in Ince to the east. It is noticeable that all the gates stood at the foot of steep inclines which, in the event of their being forced, would make it more difficult for the party entering to fight their way up to the market place.

The market place was the centre of the town ; it contained the church, the graveyard, the town well, the stocks and the principal houses and shops. The church was a 12th-century building with an older square tower. This is now the oldest portion, the remainder having been rebuilt during the 19th century. From the market place opened the four principal streets and some narrow "wiends" or "wynds." The houses we may imagine, were

low timbered, quaintly carved, picturesque buildings packed closely together within the walls. In the houses in Hallgate lived many of the immediate servants of the Hall and labourers on the rector's land, while the houses in the other streets were inhabited by shopkeepers and craftsmen, each shop probably having some quaint sign hung out.

In those days everything necessary for the maintenance of civilised life was made locally. Rough woollen garments and rugs were made from cloth woven on hand looms. Leather, brass, iron and pewter goods were also made. Some out-cropping seams of cannel coal were being worked early in the 14th century. Pottery, too, was probably made from an early date. Goods were sold mainly at the weekly markets and the half-yearly fairs. These fairs and markets were held in the market place and shopkeepers were obliged to sell there on these days instead of in their shops and pay a toll to the rector. Strangers were allowed to sell at the fairs on payment of a very much heavier toll to the rector.

Wigan has a number of interesting links with English history during the period. Two younger sons of a prominent local landowner, Sir Robert de Holand, became famous for their military exploits in the French wars and fought at Crecy under the Black Prince. They both became founder Knights of the Garter, Sir Thomas de Holand being No. 13 and Sir Otho de Holand No. 23. Later in the century Ralph de Standish, a member of a local family, distinguished himself during the Wat Tyler insurrection as the member of the King's bodyguard who slew the rebel leader. In 1415 the Lancashire archers were mustered in Wigan before the departure for Agincourt. Wigan, as with most walled towns, was not unduly disturbed by the Wars of the Roses.

Wigan emerged from the Middle Ages as an important market town. Lancashire was henceforth to play an increasingly prominent part in national affairs. The trend of the times was seen in Wigan where the craft guilds decayed and the problems of the new age began to occupy men's minds. During the Reformation Wigan as a whole supported the Reformed Church, but the great landowners remained steadfast to the Old Faith. One outcome of the Renaissance was a wider demand for education which was beginning to arouse interest everywhere. The famous scholar-physician, Thomas Linacre, was Rector of Wigan from 1519 until his death in 1524. He may have had some part in promoting a Wigan public

Historical Sketch

school of which there is some record. This was a fee-paying institution and it did not have a long existence. In 1597 the free grammar school was founded.

One legacy of the Middle Ages was the struggle between the rector and the corporation over the administration of local affairs and particularly over market rights. The Wigan Court of Quarter Sessions and the Wigan Court of King's Pleas were operating in the 16th century. Challenged in the exercise of these rights by Rector Fleetwood, the Corporation obtained confirmation of the borough charter from Queen Elizabeth in 1585, a copy of this confirmation dated 1618 being in the borough archives. In 1616 the rector, Bishop Bridgeman, renewed the contest and a Royal Commission was appointed consisting of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Ely and two lord Justices to inquire into the rights of each party. The Commission's decision was a compromise, for they awarded the Friday market and the St. Luke's Fair to the Corporation and the Monday market and the Ascension Fair to the Rector.

The growing political unrest of the 17th century was marked in Wigan at first by disturbances

during parliamentary elections when there was agitation for an extension of the franchise. There were only about 140 citizens qualified to elect the two members to Parliament. Nothing was to come of this for two centuries. Wigan was predominantly Royalist in the struggle between King and Parliament, although it had been one of the principal boroughs in the county of Lancashire required to contribute to the obnoxious demand for ship money. The importance and wealth of Wigan is shown by the levy being for £50, whereas Preston gave £40, Lancaster £30 and Liverpool £25. As early as 1636 Wigan was prominent as a kind of central garrison for the Royalists and throughout the period of the Civil War it upheld its old reputation as the "ancient and loyal" town. Its proximity to Lathom House, the strength of its position as a walled town and the undeviating attachment of the people to the Earl of Derby explain the distinguished part played by Wigan in the northern campaigns.

The Earl had his staff headquarters in the town and repelled the attacks of the parliamentarians until 1643 when he sustained a crushing defeat. The Royalists had been collecting silver and gold plate to be turned into war funds, and this collection as well as the borough treasury and the civic regalia was looted to the total value, it is recorded, of £20,000. Cromwell visited the town in 1648 in pursuit of the Scottish army. The Earl of Derby was finally defeated at the battle of Wigan Lane in August, 1651. Local place-names such as Longshoot and the Bloody Mountains commemorate the battle. The Earl, after joining Charles II at Worcester, was taken prisoner and conveyed to Bolton, where he was executed. A monument erected in 1679 still stands on the spot in Wigan Lane where the famous local knight, Sir Thomas Tyldesley, the Earl's second in command, was slain. Wigan's fortifications were destroyed and the town suffered severely for its adherence to the Royal cause, being plundered seven times. The distress was increased by the plague which visited the town in 1648, and next year things were so bad that an appeal for help was addressed to the City of London.

At the Restoration Wigan's service was acknowledged by Charles II, who granted a new borough charter with greatly extended privileges in 1662. The King presented a sword of honour to be borne before the mayor on all public occasions, a ceremonial still continued with the original sword. The mayor named in the charter is Sir

This monument in Wigan Lane marks the spot where Sir Thomas Tyldesley was killed during the Civil War



Roger Bradshaigh, a descendant of Sir William de Bradshaigh. Peaceful pursuits and trade were soon in full swing again. Wigan is the first town in Great Britain where potatoes, grown as field crops, were marketed. The earliest known references to such marketing of potatoes is found in the Wigan Corporation records for 5th October, 1678.

Wigan played a part in the Jacobite risings and in particular in the Lancashire plot of 1690-94 to restore James II to the throne. William Standish, of Standish Hall, near Wigan, was implicated in this plot but escaped when other conspirators were arrested. They were eventually released, but secret papers mainly in cipher discovered in 1757 and now in the borough archives, prove their guilt. Wigan was also concerned in the risings of 1715 and 1745. The Young Pretender is believed to have lodged in Hallgate during both his advance and retreat, and the Duke of Cumberland, pursuing him afterwards, occupied the same quarters.

At the beginning of the canal era a project was formed to make the River Douglas navigable, the Douglas Navigation Act being passed in 1719. Alderman Alexander Leigh, of Wigan, conceived the idea of Wigan becoming a great inland port and himself almost entirely financed a scheme in support of this. The enterprise regrettably became involved in the gigantic series of financial speculations known in history as the South Sea Bubble. A canal parallel to the Douglas was made in 1727 and was the earliest. In 1772 this was continued to Liverpool and flats of coal were transported into the heart of that town. Subsequently the section became by purchase part of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. All the principal towns of Lancashire were then connected by canal which was extensively used for both passenger and freight transport, the wharf at Wigan being known as Wigan Pier.

Even at the beginning of the 19th century Wigan must have been a town of contrasts. Agriculture as well as industry and mining were carried on in its midst. It continued to have many beauty spots unspoiled by industry. It had even enjoyed a brief spell as a spa in the 18th century until the springs of chalybeate water became contaminated by coal workings and eventually drained away, an episode in its history commemorated in such names as New Springs and Harrogate Street. It was also an important coaching town on the main highways and was very well supplied

with inns and hostelries. A turnpike existed in King Street opposite the Methodist Chapel in 1830, this being on the way to Manchester.

The coming of the railways in 1825 was the start of the modern industrial era. In that year the connections to Manchester and Liverpool were made, the third passenger railway to be opened in England and followed shortly afterwards by the line to Preston. Close to Wigan is the line where William Huskisson was killed by the *Rocket* in 1825 in the world's first railway accident. The railway to Southport was opened in 1855 and further development went on throughout the century. In 1892 the course of the Douglas was changed to allow the building of Central Station. Centrally situated on the great south Lancashire coalfield with cheap coal and excellent transport facilities by canal and by rail, Wigan soon had many large ironworks. It was, of course, these industries which contributed so much to the wealth and prosperity of Great Britain in the 19th century.

In 1780 Alexander Lindsay, Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, married Elizabeth Bradshaigh Dalrymple, who had inherited the Haigh estates on the death of her great uncle, Sir Roger Bradshaigh, the fourth baronet, and so they passed to the Lindsay family. In 1802 Earl Alexander took up residence at the former Haigh Hall, the grounds of which were, according to Kip's engraving, laid out in ornamental gardens reminiscent of Versailles. His son, Earl James, built a new hall in the 1830's and replaced the ornamental gardens with the modern plantations. Both Earl Alexander and his son did much to promote industry in Wigan. Stern measures had to be taken to deal with the local Luddite rioters. A number of small cotton mills existed in the early 19th century and these were replaced with larger mills so that in the heyday of the industry there were scores of mills including some of the largest in Lancashire. The mills chiefly employed women while the principal employment for men was in the mines and in heavy engineering. The wealthy cotton manufacturers dwelt in the mansions of the Swinley district. Wigan had its Chartist riots in 1842 when a mob marched from Bolton to Wigan. Fortunately, there was no actual violence, but all business was suspended. The cotton famine caused great distress in the 1860's and the Earl of Crawford did much to relieve it by providing employment.

Despite setbacks, the second half of the 19th century was a prosperous mining period and also

Historical Sketch

a time of great cultural, social and civic development. Wigan had been governed under the charters until the passing of the Municipal Corporations Act in 1835 when a local board was set up. In 1861 the Corporation bought the manorial rights. Between 1860 and 1890 the centre of the town surrounding the old Market Place was largely rebuilt. The present town hall was erected as the "Borough Courts" in 1866-67. The Moot-hall or "Old Town Hall," which obstructed the principal thoroughfare, was demolished in 1869. The "New Town Hall" built in 1720, occupying the northern half of the Market Place, which had become very dilapidated, was pulled down in 1882 and many of the shops behind it were rebuilt. The fish stones had been taken away in 1866 and other obstructions were now removed. In 1872 a School Board was created and in 1882 there came the grant of a Court of Quarter Sessions.

The Royal Albert Edward Infirmary which had commenced as the Wigan Dispensary in King Street in 1796 was opened by the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) in 1873. This royal visit was one of the most magnificent ever seen in Wigan and the Prince was sumptuously entertained by the Earl of Crawford at Haigh Hall. The extensive market hall and market square were opened in 1877 and Market Street was built to connect them with the town centre. The Central Library and Mesnes Park were both opened in 1878 and the Swimming Baths in 1882. The Wigan and District Mining and Technical College was originally founded in 1857 and moved to its present magnificent building in 1900. Other important civic buildings such as the County Court belong to this period.

The first Wigan Water Act was passed in 1764. In the first decade of the 19th century water was piped through hollowed tree trunks, a few of which are preserved in the museum. In 1855 the waterworks were purchased by the Corporation; the gasworks established in 1822 were acquired in 1875 and the tramways, opened in 1880, in 1902. An electric power station was erected in 1900 and the following year electricity replaced steam as the motive power on the tramways.

Under the Local Government Act of 1888 Wigan became a County Borough. The amalgamation with Pemberton which had been discussed as far back as 1781 followed in 1904. The area surrounding Wigan, bounded by hills to the east, north and west, with the town itself, contains a population of approximately 200,000. The area

is almost entirely dependent on Wigan for transport, shops, employment, entertainment and many other facilities. In 1922 the splendid new coat-of-arms described elsewhere in this handbook was granted to the borough.

The 20th century has brought many changes. Between the wars the coal seams in the vicinity of the town were worked out and there was a lull in industrial development. Today Wigan is very prosperous with many new industries ranging from the manufacture of processed foods to plastics and furniture; large cotton mills and engineering works are still a feature of the industrial landscape. Continual improvements are taking place in the fine modern shopping centre, the handsome black-and-white buildings being retained to denote the town's antiquity. A splendid new retail and wholesale fruit and vegetable market was opened in 1954. Progress in the establishment of new schools and better educational facilities is particularly marked, the new Grammar School opened in 1937, the Thomas Linacre Technical School in 1953 and the John McCurdy Hall opened by H.M. the Queen in 1954 completing an educational plan on American campus lines.

Progress in housing and the replacement of slums with fine new housing estates have continued steadily from the early 1920's despite the depression. Numerous central government offices to serve the area have been established in Wigan and new buildings have been erected to house them. A very efficient municipal transport system now operates over a wide area, buses having completely replaced tramcars in 1931. Other municipal services such as health, welfare, libraries and cleansing have made great strides. A crematorium was established in 1955.

Wigan contains more than 2,500 shops, sixteen cinemas, two theatres and many amateur dramatic societies. Numerous cultural and professional societies, recreational and sporting clubs and many trade associations are found. The purchase of Haigh Hall in 1947 by the Corporation has provided a magnificent opportunity for the development of many additional amenities. Outdoor features such as the miniature golf course, the old English garden and amusements for children have been introduced. Inside the Hall are large scale catering facilities, provision for functions of all kinds and a museum and art gallery. There is no doubt that Wigan today is maintaining its tradition with greatly-enhanced facilities.