

THE END OF BRIDGWATER CASTLE

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INTRODUCTION

The early medieval history of Bridgwater Castle has been excellently researched by Dilks (1940) and Dunning (1992).¹ However its later history, especially the turbulent 17th century, perhaps the most eventful in its long existence, has been surprisingly neglected. This is compounded by some serious misconceptions that have been made and repeated, namely that the medieval castle stood relatively unchanged until the Civil War, was heavily involved in the fighting and was subsequently demolished by Parliament; all of which will be rejected here. This paper will seek to highlight the significance of the redevelopment of the castle by Henry Harvey in the 1630s, and the stages by which the castle was gradually dismantled over the centuries, rather than coming to an abrupt end as a result of the Civil War.

THE CAROLINE REVIVAL

Henry Harvey, an attorney of the common pleas, purchased Bridgwater Castle and the attached manor, which included lands in Haygrove around Bridgwater and roughly a third of the properties in the town, in 1630.² By this time the great 13th-century castle built by William Briwerre had been in decline for several centuries and was most likely in ruins. John Leland, the antiquarian, had noted that the castle was in the process of decay in 1542, despite its once great strength.³ Twenty three years after this a port survey of Bridgwater described the 'olde decayed castell . . . within the walles thereof, there is a greene conteyning half

an acre . . . ' and how it would be a convenient source of stone to build a custom house.⁴ The next year, in 1566, a house was being built within the castle at the expense of the town, which was presumably intended as the custom house.⁵ In 1617 a survey of the old manor of Bridgwater Castle states that William Goble and his son held the castle, which contained one acre.⁶ The sudden doubling of space within the castle site might be attributed to either clearance, or simply the result of differing estimates. The castle had been in royal ownership since 1425, until it was granted to Sir George Whitmore by Charles I in 1626.⁷ Whitmore sold the manor and castle to Harvey soon after.⁸

The 18th-century antiquarian, the Revd John Collinson, reported that Henry Harvey converted an 'old gatehouse' to a mansion in the form of a 'Roman B', in 1638.⁹ The date of this is questionable; at first glance it would seem odd for Harvey to wait a whole eight years before he started building, and 1638 is the year given for Harvey building another house by the town bridge in Eastover.¹⁰ It is likely that Collinson, or his source, had the two projects confused. Works seem to have been happening within the castle before this, as in 1634 Tobias Atkins confessed to making saltpetre out of the walls of the castle, which had lately been pulled down by the owner.¹¹ We know Harvey could not have pulled down all the remaining walls at this point, simply because there was still enough for the Duke of Chandos to demolish in the 1720s.¹² The information Collinson asserts about the old gatehouse seems more credible and other evidence corroborates with this. A building in the shape of a reversed

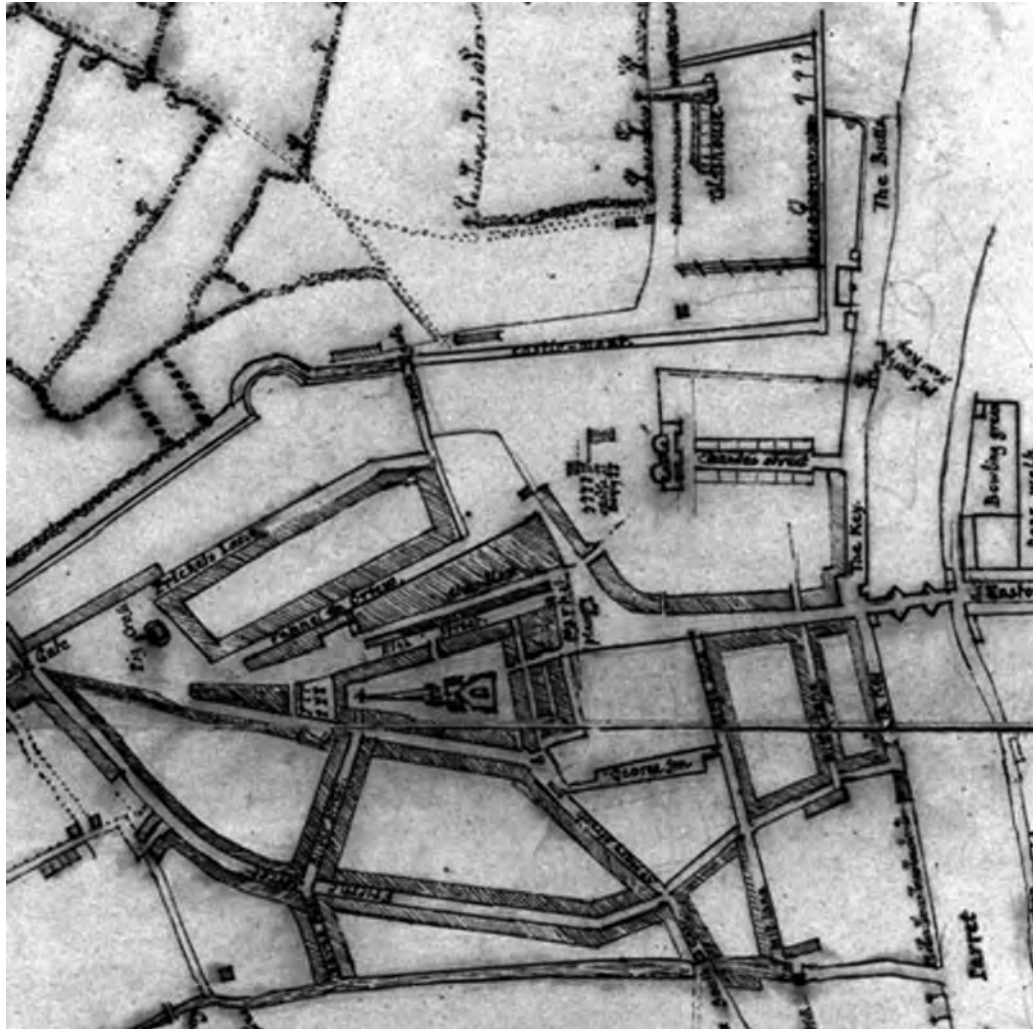


Fig. 1 John Strachey's map of 1735; castle, moat and Chandos Street middle right, curved feature 'The Mount' to the upper left; Harvey's other house is the small plot immediately to the upper right of the bridge. Courtesy Blake Museum, Bridgwater.

Roman B appears on John Strachey's map of the 1730s (Fig. 1) and Locke's survey of 1777 (Fig. 2), labelled in the former as 'Castle'. John Strachey stated that this building, referred to as the castle in his map, was only 100 years old, which would fit with Collinson.¹³ Three illustrations survive of this building, a watercolour from 1761 in the British Library, and two by John Chubb (Figs 3 and 4), sometime around 1800. All three reveal the structure in different stages of ruin. The 1761 watercolour reveals a partly ruined building with

a large round turret. The picture conveys the suggestion that there was once a corresponding turret which at the time of illustration had either collapsed or been removed. Chubb's earlier picture shows this same building from a different angle. Chubb's second picture shows the structure after a wall and the remaining turret has been removed, revealing a gothic door within the building. The evidence from the images suggests that the house had incorporated features of an earlier building, which we can confidently link to the medieval

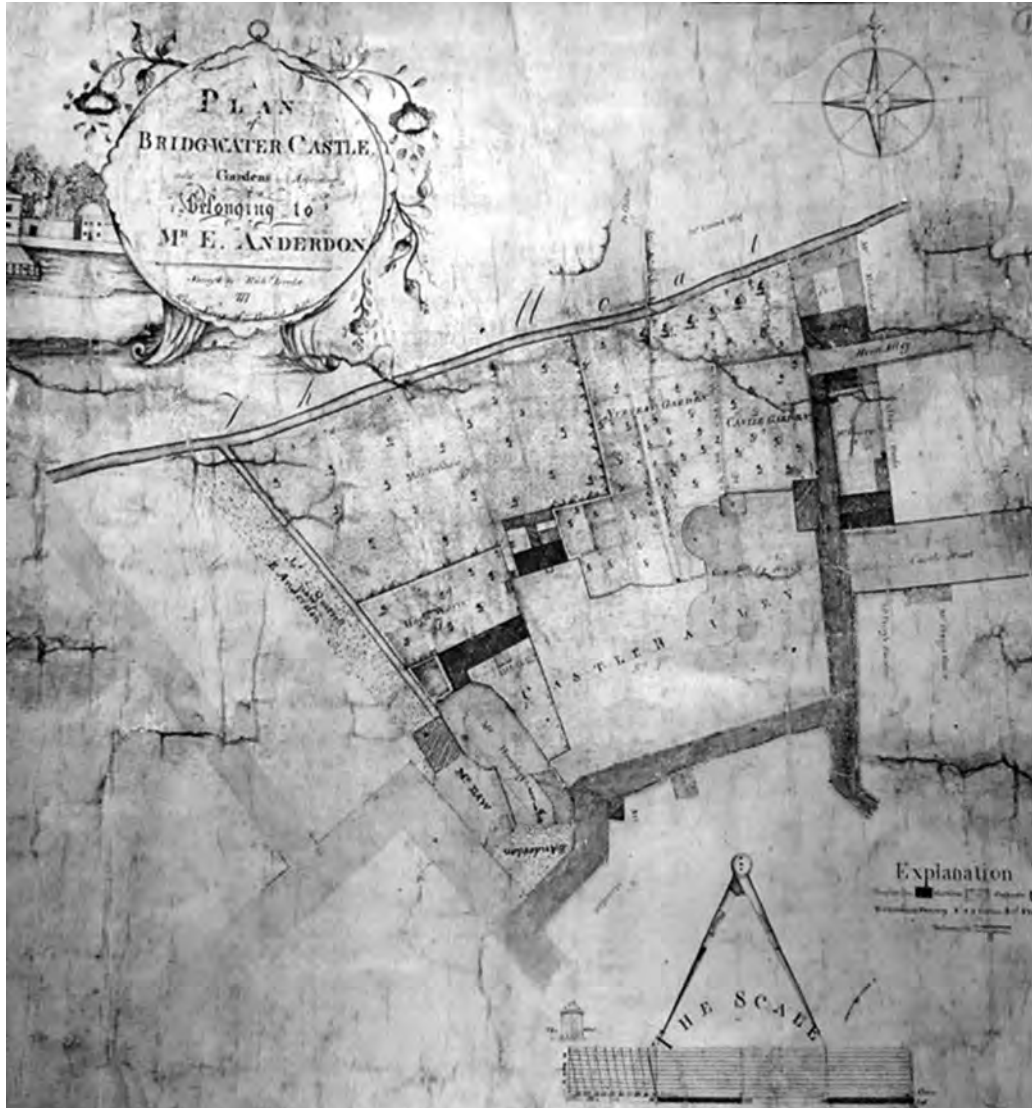


Fig. 2 Locke's survey 1777, showing ruins of Harvey's house, the reverse B in the centre, and the remains of the moat. Note the Queen Anne style house backing onto the old Moat beside the title. Courtesy Blake Museum, Bridgwater.

castle. Malcolm Airs' study of Elizabethan and Jacobean manor houses highlights the piecemeal approach of construction and gradual renewal of older buildings, rather than total replacement. Even if the older structure was demolished the foundations would often be reused. This is likely the case with the two turrets, as this is an unusual shape for a manor house of this time.¹⁴ Whether

this building was once a gatehouse as Collinson asserts is harder to confirm. The main gate to the castle was located near the Cornhill at York Buildings, but there is recorded a second, inner gatehouse and drawbridge, which might confirm Collinson's assertion, although further exploration of the medieval fabric of the castle is necessary.¹⁵

Airs suggests that social aspirations were



*Fig. 3 Bridgwater castle by John Chubb c. 1790. Note Castle Street in the background.
Courtesy Blake Museum, Bridgwater.*

a strong motive for building in the Tudor and Jacobean periods. He notes that successful lawyers were a strong component of this group, who wanted the social esteem created by landed estates and impressive houses.¹⁶ The conversion of Bridgwater Castle would give Harvey that esteem, as well as an impressive status symbol. Evidence for the family aspirations can be seen in the memorial to John Harvey, of 1771, in St Mary's church, Bridgwater, which states that he 'descended in a direct line from Sir John Harvey Knight, who came to England with William the Conqueror. He was born in Bridgwater Castle, many years the residence of his family'. This shows the Harveys asserting social status by lineage and association with the castle. The house Harvey constructed had a totally new facade, which faced toward the river and had gardens laid out immediately in front. Harvey presumably retained the section of castle wall along the quay as a means of shielding his property from the busy commercial riverside. Entrance to the manor house was presumably made through the creation of what is now Court Street, rather than the old

main gate, which would have entailed pulling down at least part of the south wall. In 1638 Harvey was also building another house in Eastover, by the river.¹⁷ This was a smaller townhouse, perhaps intended as a dwelling for Harvey's sons or for tenants. In either case it became Harvey's dwelling when he leased the castle in 1643 to Colonel Wyndham who would be the royalist governor of Bridgwater during the Civil War.¹⁸ Other parts of the castle which might be attributed to Harvey's redevelopment are 'a large grove of elms' reported in 1721 and the castle orchard which was behind houses on the Cornhill in 1739.¹⁹ The interior of Harvey's house can only be guessed at, although a piece of furniture that was in the castle when it was demolished, a bed in the collections of Agecroft Hall, Richmond, Virginia, dating to about 1629, and a carved wooden tiger in the collections of the Blake Museum, Bridgwater, alludes to the grandness of the interiors.



Fig. 4 A later image than Fig. 3 by Chubb of the castle in a further stage of ruin. Note the early gothic doorway. Courtesy Blake Museum, Bridgwater.

THE CIVIL WAR

The Civil War is often taken to mark the end of the castle, although this is likely to be an error. It seems to begin with Collinson, or at least was first recorded by him, who states that the castle 'was at length, in the year 1645, nearly levelled to the ground in parliamentary confusions'.²⁰ It seems much more likely that Harvey was responsible for the greater part of the levelling in the 1630s, although there was still much left for Chandos to demolish in the 1720s. Parker seems to reiterate Collinson in 1856, that the castle was 'nearly levelled to the ground during the civil wars'.²¹ Many subsequent historians have thereafter repeated this and today the error is replicated in several websites and archaeological reports. The error seems to have come from Collinson confusing accounts of the town's substantial defences and subsequent demolition during and after the civil war with the castle itself. Where Joshua Sprigg, an observer from Fairfax's army, describes the town defences, Collinson erroneously took that to mean the castle. Joshua

Sprigg, who was present at Fairfax's side during the campaign, states that the defences of the town were 'regular and strong', that the ditches were filled at each tide. He mentions some 40 cannon placed on the 'batteries'.²² Collinson states the castle 'had then forty guns mounted on the walls, which were in most part fifteen feet thick, and all the fortifications were regular and strong. The moat . . . every tide filled with water'.²³ However after describing the town's strength in some depth, Sprigge goes on to describe the castle's 'indifferent strength' and its role seems to have been simply as a command centre and stores for provisions and valuables.²⁴ Fairfax himself describes the considerable strength of the town defences, yet writing during the assault on Bridgwater, he describes the royalists as still holding 'the castle, but a very weak one'.²⁵ Underdown compares the assault on Bridgwater to the siege of Taunton, noting that when the town of Taunton was burning, the commander Robert Blake was able to retreat to and hold the castle there. Whereas in Bridgwater, when the town burned the commander was not able to do the same. Underdown attributes this

to the ill-will of the townspeople and the lack of stomach for a fight.²⁶ However this might also suggest that the castle of Bridgwater was at this time a military irrelevance, unlike Taunton's, which was refortified at the start of the war.²⁷ That the town defences were strong seems to have been indicated by Wright and Chelu in 2007, when they discovered substantial defences running around the town.²⁸ Fairfax also accounts for sconces built to defend the market place and castle, suggesting that the castle could not defend itself.²⁹ During the battle in Bridgwater, when the Parliamentarians fought through Eastover to the town bridge and seized Harvey's house by the river, Royalist cannon fire came not from the castle, but troops in the Market Place and churchyard.³⁰ We know of at least three of the batteries that Sprigge mentions, beyond those mentioned in the Market Place (Cornhill) and on the west of the bridge. One was probably the local feature known as the Mount which was near the Northgate, and which appears on Strachey's map (Fig. 1). This would have given a clear range of fire along the whole northern boundary of the town, including the castle. The second battery's location has been lost, but was described by Fairfax as the 'Great Fort Royall', on the north side of the eastern town, which was captured along with Eastover.³¹ A smaller battery is suggested at the top of Barclay Street, presumably an outwork to defend the medieval Eastgate, where workmen removing mounds in the mid 19th-century discovered 'human bones, bullets, swords and other military weapons'.³² The bones are a mystery as it would be assumed the dead of battle would have been buried rather than left to rot. These might be explained in terms of the proximity to the old medieval Hospital of St John, dissolved over a century before the Civil War, which once stood in the area: earth for the Mount was presumably dug from the former graveyard.

As the role of the castle has often been exaggerated at the expense of the town defences, likewise the fate of these defences has also been wrongly attributed to the castle. On 14 August 1646 the House of Commons ordered that the Bridgwater garrison be disbanded and the fortifications there dismantled.³³ In November a riot broke out in the town. It appears that a committee with troops on horse arrived to begin dismantling operations. Enthusiastic crowds gathered in order to help, but troubles broke out over a dispute about levelling works around the castle, which the committee argued were

not included in their official order.³⁴ It seems Parliament had to reissue the order for 'slighting and dismantling of the works in Bridgwater', which appeared to have stalled following the riots.³⁵ Finally on 19 July 1647 clarification seems to have had to be issued, that 'Bridgwater be de-garrisoned and the new works slighted'.³⁶ Thompson asserts that in 1647 parliament was only concerned with the dismantling of new works made since the start of the wars, not with ancient fortifications. The medieval fabric of the castle was an irrelevance at the start of the war; hence it was at the end. It was not until after the second Civil War that a hardening of attitudes led to more severe and symbolic demolition of medieval castles, but by this time attention had moved away from Bridgwater.³⁷ In 1650 the castle's military value was assessed in order to determine whether it was 'fit to be continued in the hands it is present in', but there are no mention of slighting or demolishing thereafter.³⁸ Evidence for the destruction of the new works seems half-hearted; as late as 1656 the mayor, Henry Milles, requested stone from a small sconce at the foot of the bridge and from a wall near the castle manor house.³⁹ If the town defences were still not dismantled at this stage, it seems unlikely that the castle would be. Overall the castle seems to have been given a far greater role in the civil war and the aftermath that it deserves. The castle was not destroyed during the storm, and was unlikely to have been demolished immediately afterwards.

POST CIVIL WAR REDEVELOPMENT

Little seems to have happened to the castle after the Civil War, or at least little was documented. Langdon and Richardson's excavations revealed that the moat to the north of the castle had been over half-filled in the late 17th century, sometime after 1680.⁴⁰ The Harveys continued associating themselves with the castle, all the way up to 1717, when Francis Harvey would call himself variably 'gentleman of Bridgwater Castle' or the grander 'Lord of the Manor of Bridgwater Castrum'.⁴¹ In 1721, the Harveys sold the castle and other properties to James Brydges, Duke of Chandos. At this time the Castle House was still occupied; Major Crosbie lodged in eight rooms in one floor in 1721. In 1726 it was occupied by a schoolmistress who held two or three rooms, later a Mr Moss had two.⁴² John Strachey, a contemporary of Chandos,

notes that the Duke 'having purchased the castle of Harvey, demolished the greater part', suggesting that some of the castle fabric had survived to this point.⁴³ It is important to note that this does not refer to Harvey's house, which was still standing long after Chandos had sold the site. In 1721 Chandos had plans for New or Chandos Street, which was to be built upon the former castle garden.⁴⁴ It has long been asserted that the cellars of this street were parts of the old castle, Jarman noting an archway in the cellar of a house 'at the corner of Castle Street'.⁴⁵ These cellars require further investigation to explore this assertion, but also to establish the relationship they have with a series of stone and brick culverts, discovered by Place in 2010, running the length and width of Castle Street.⁴⁶ Strachey's map shows Castle Street, here called 'Chandos Street', leading up to the 'Castle', Harvey's house (Fig. 1). Presumably Castle Street was intended to lead up to this grand residence, creating a terraced avenue. However Chandos had little sentimentality for Harvey's old building; by 1723 five houses were up in the new street and Chandos considered demolishing the castle house and running the street over to York Buildings.⁴⁷ This, however, never came to anything as the project stalled. Chandos turned his attention in 1726 to smaller cheaper houses to the north, to be half-built over the moat, which he considered would be good cellaring.⁴⁸ This would entail the further filling in and narrowing of the moat, which can be seen on Strachey's map. Chandos abandoned his Bridgwater projects in 1728. It was noted when selling, that for a small outlay the castle could be put in good order.⁴⁹ This might be a reference to the house or the project as a whole. Chandos sold the castle property to Thomas Watts in 1734, who thereafter sold it to John Anderdon in 1735. It is interesting to note that 'wastes near and adjoining the castle' are mentioned in the release.⁵⁰

John's son Edward and grandson Edmund can be identified as demolishing most of what remained of the castle and Harvey's old house. The Anderdons were prominent Quakers and in 1776 eight Quakers from Glastonbury worshipped in a temporary booth in the Castle Bailey which had been licensed.⁵¹ John Locke was commissioned to survey the site in 1777, although new plans for the site did not emerge until 1800. In these plans Harvey's house was to be demolished to make way for 'Castle Place' to be built 'on the site of the present castle and gardens'. These plans were

eventually abandoned in favour of the simpler King Square. The south side of King Square was started in 1807 and the east in 1814.⁵² The cellars of the buildings of this Square seem to be of mixed stone and brick construction. Many of these are no doubt walls made reusing castle materials, although a few could possibly be in situ castle walls. Below 6–9 King Square for example is an unusual curved wall.

In 1877 the antiquarian George Parker recalled playing in the castle grounds as a boy in about 1805 remembering the many 'holes and pits which had been made in digging out foundations'.⁵³ Jarman records parts of the castle site to have been used as a timber yard around 1800.⁵⁴ A deed of 1814 mentions 'a ruined messuage' and 'Castle House' which were to be transferred for the building of the east side of King Square.⁵⁵ Presumably the remains of Harvey's once grand house were demolished that year.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, we can question the notions that the castle was militarily involved in the 1645 storm of Bridgwater or was demolished as a result of the Civil War. Instead we have a more prolonged process of redevelopment of the medieval castle, starting with Henry Harvey in the 1630s continuing through to Chandos in the 18th century and Anderdon in the early 19th. There was no one moment at which Bridgwater Castle ceased to exist, but rather a prolonged process of attrition and now all that survives above ground are a few walls and the Watergate. The various stages of redevelopment have obvious implications for future archaeology in the area and exploration of Harvey's large manor house would be highly rewarding.

ENDNOTES

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- ³ Leland, J., 1897. *Itinerary*, ed. E.H. Bates, *SANH* 33, 422.
- ⁴ *Bridgwater Port Survey, 14th May 1565*, <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/Depts/History/Maritime/Sources/1565bridgwater.htm>, accessed July 2010. Transcription (by Evan Jones 2003) PRO E159/350 Hil, no. 336, r, v, seq.
- ⁵ Dunning, 'Bridgwater Castle', 206–7.
- ⁶ Yorkshire Archive Service 100/DZ/39
- ⁷ Lawrence, J.F., and Lawrence, J.C., 2005. *A History of Bridgwater*, Chichester, 22; Bruce, J., 1858, *Calendar of State Papers Domestic 1625-1626*, London, 369.
- ⁸ Lawrence, J.F., and Lawrence, J.C., 2001. 'Bridgwater castle', unpublished notes, 8.
- ⁹ It is possible that Collinson took his assertions from the notes of Thomas Carew, as he did elsewhere in his history, although if they exist the author has not been able to identify them. Collinson 1791, *History of Somerset, Vol III*, London, 77.
- ¹⁰ Anon., 1645. *An Account of Sir Thomas Fairfax's ENTERING Bridgwater by Storming on Monday Last, July 25th 1645* Early English Books Online <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>> (Accessed July 2010)
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- ¹² Lawrence & Lawrence, 'Bridgwater castle', 8.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ¹⁴ Airs, M., 1995. *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, Stroud, 25–6.
- ¹⁵ Dunning, 'Bridgwater Castle', 206–7.
- ¹⁶ Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, 16.
- ¹⁷ Sprigge, J., 1647. *Anglia Rediviva*, London, 68.
- ¹⁸ Airs, *The Tudor and Jacobean Country House*, 26; Collinson, *History of Somerset*, 82.
- ¹⁹ Lawrence & Lawrence, 'Bridgwater Castle', 8.
- ²⁰ Collinson, *A History of Somerset*, 76.
- ²¹ Parker, G., 1856. 'Proceedings of the Congress', *Journ British Archaeological Association* 12, 377.
- ²² Sprigge, J., *Anglia Rediviva*, 68.
- ²³ Collinson, *History of Somerset*, 76.
- ²⁴ Sprigge, *Anglia Rediviva*, 68.
- ²⁵ Fairfax, T., 1645. *Entering Bridgwater By Storming; On Monday Last*, London, 5, Early English Books Online <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>> (accessed July 2010).
- ²⁶ Underdown, D., 1973. *Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum*, Newton Abbot, 110.
- ²⁷ Bush, R., 1988. *Taunton Castle, a Pictorial History*, *SANHS*, 10.
- ²⁸ Wright, J., Chelu, A., 2007. 'The Franciscan friary and civil war defences at Friarn Meadows, Bridgwater', *SANH* 151, 104.
- ²⁹ Fairfax, *Entering Bridgwater By Storming*, 3.
- ³⁰ Underdown, *Somerset in the Civil War*, 109.
- ³¹ Fairfax, *Entering Bridgwater By Storming*, 5.
- ³² Parker, G., 1877. 'Bridgwater castle', *SANH* 23, 46.
- ³³ Anon, 1802, *Journal of Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. 4 1644-1646, London, 643–4.
- ³⁴ Underdown, *Somerset in the Civil War*, 137.
- ³⁵ Anon, 1802. *Journal of Parliamentary Papers*, Vol. 5 1646-1648, London, 102–3.
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- ⁴¹ SRO DD/BW/2/509, 510.
- ⁴² Baker, C., Baker, M., 1949. *The Life and Circumstances of James Brydges, first Duke of Chandos*, London, 229.
- ⁴³ Lawrence & Lawrence, 'Bridgwater castle', 8.
- ⁴⁴ Baker & Baker, *James Brydges, first Duke of Chandos*, 221.
- ⁴⁵ Jarman, S., 1889. *A History of Bridgwater*, London, 29.
- ⁴⁶ Place, C., 2009. 'Castle Street, Bridgwater, Somerset', unpub client report, Somerset HER, 23.
- ⁴⁷ Baker & Baker, *James Brydges, first Duke of Chandos*, 222–3.
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- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.
- ⁵⁰ SRO DD/X/WBB/266/1.
- ⁵¹ SRO Q/PR.
- ⁵² Lawrence & Lawrence, *History of Bridgwater*, 142.
- ⁵³ Parker 'Bridgwater Castle' 46.
- ⁵⁴ Jarman, *A History of Bridgwater*, 30.
- ⁵⁵ SRO DD/X/RIC/2.