

An Outline of the
HISTORY OF WIGAN

By Arthur J. Hawkes.



A. THOMPSON

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By
ARTHUR JOHN HAWKES, F.S.A.,

Borough Librarian of Wigan.



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WIGAN

OUTLINE OF ITS HISTORY

THE "Ancient and Loyal Borough" of Wigan has earned its well-known title¹ by an historical existence which may be traced from the days when it formed an important Roman military station (the Coccium of Antoninus) down to the present time. Samian bowls and other Roman pottery fragments, two large collections of Roman coins, and many stray coins and relics have been unearthed in the town and district at various times.

Various scholars have tried to solve the etymological puzzle of the name Wigan, and have suggested derivations without much confidence. The earliest suggestion is recorded by the antiquary William Camden, who, writing about 1580, says: "Some say [it] was antiently called Wibiggin, of which name I have nothing to observe but that biggin is a Lancashire word for houses." The 18th century lexicographer, Nathan Bailey,² varied this by giving "Pi-

1. The epithet is derived from the Charter of Charles II. See the paragraph referring to this on page 9.
2. Etymological English Dictionary (1721), 20th edn. 1764.

biggin" as the original form (but gives no authority), and derives it from the Saxon *þi* sacred, or *þibed* an altar, and *biggin* to build = sacred buildings." Prof. Ekwall³ is inclined to regard it as based upon a Celtic personal name, and apparently the late Prof. Skeat⁴ agreed with him. A popular derivation gives it a belligerent significance: *wig* Anglo-Saxon for "fight," and *en* (an) forming the plural of the noun. After the Romans departed, the 7th century chronicler, Nennius, records that the Britons, led by the half-mythical hero, King Arthur, fought for their independence and achieved several great victories on the banks of the river Dylas, usually identified as the Wigan Douglas. Henry Harrison⁵ adopted this suggestion, which is scouted by Prof. Wyld⁶ as etymologically impossible. He prefers the personal name theory, but is not satisfied. A by no means improbable suggestion is that of the Rev. T. C. Porteus, who regards Wigan as a softened form of Wicken. There is more than one Wicken in England and numerous Wicks, whilst as an element in place-names it is common enough. The same softening is to be observed in one of the variant names

3. "Place Names of Lancashire," 1922.

4. "Hertfordshire Place-names," 1904.

5. "Place names of the Liverpool District," 1898.

6. "Place-names of Lancashire," 1911.

for the mountain-ash, which in general English is the "wicken-tree," but in the dialect of our district becomes the "wiggin-tree." On this basis Wigan simply means "the hamlets." An equally feasible and rather probable solution is offered by another eminent lexicographer, Dr. Henry Bradley, who proposed a derivation from the old Welsh *gwig*, a fortress. In the Welsh tongue "gwig" prefixed by the article "y" drops the initial "g" and becomes "wig" ("y wig"); but this does not take into account the second syllable of the name, which down to the 15th century was invariably spelt *ayn* (i.e., Wigayn). Now there is another old Welsh word "hen" which sounds like ayn, so that "y wig hen" meaning "the old fortress," would sound to the Saxons as "Wigayn," and this, no doubt, is how the Saxon invaders heard the native Celts refer to the derelict Roman walled camp of Coccium.

That the town itself is Saxon is evidenced by the word "gate" (meaning way or street) in the nomenclature of the chief roads, for in addition to Wallgate (meaning the street leading to the well), Hallgate, Millgate, and Standishgate, there were anciently two others, namely Staurygate and Turfgate. The other ancient Wigan street, the Wiend, is also old English, meaning

a winding alley turning off a main thoroughfare. Canon Bridgeman says there was a church in Wigan in the days of the Saxon King, Edward the Confessor.

After the Norman Conquest Wigan, which had long been a borough by "prescription," or custom, had its privileges restored by King Henry I. (A.D. 1100), and was made a free borough by King Henry III. Henry's charter, granted in 1246 to the celebrated John Mansel (then Parson of the Church of Wigan), sets forth "That his vill of Wygayn may be a borough for ever, and that the burgesses of the same borough may have a guild merchant with a treasury and other liberties, etc." Among the other liberties the burgesses were "freed from county suit," that is to say, were not compelled to attend courts outside their own town, and received a large measure of judicial autonomy. This charter was confirmed to the town by King Edward II. in 1314, and again confirmed and extended by Edward III. in 1350. In this charter the offices of Mayor and Town Clerk are specifically mentioned, and Wigan was added to the list of twelve towns exercising authority under the Statute of Acton Burnell de Mercatoribus. The Charter of Queen Elizabeth confirmed the borough privileges to the burgesses, and the Charter of

Charles II. (1662) considerably extended them. This charter confirms to the Mayor, Bailiffs, and Burgesses of Wigan all their ancient privileges, and ordained that the Corporation shall consist of a Mayor and eleven other Aldermen, a Recorder, two Bailiffs, and a Common Clerk. Charles describes Wigan as an "Ancient Borough" and particularly refers to its "Loyalty to Us," meaning, of course, the Royal House, thus giving specific authority for the town's epithet "the Ancient and Loyal Borough of Wigan."

In this charter also a sword of state was granted to the Mayor, and the King specially honoured the Mayor of Wigan by making him and his successors, during their year of office, in addition to a borough magistrate, a county magistrate for ever. In this the King confirmed a privilege already exercised, for in the roll of county justices in the Minute Book of the Deputy Lieutenants of Lancashire for 1631 occurs the name of "Richard Worseley, Mayor of Wigan," and it is the only instance of a Mayor in the list. The charter of James II. (1685) extended this privilege, in each capacity, to the year following the year of office as Mayor.

Under its charters the borough authorities claimed the right to dispense justice in its own

courts, and from time immemorial Wigan has had a Court of Quarter Sessions and a Mayor's Court of King's Pleas. The early records of these courts are lost, but reference to the Quarter Sessions occurs as early as 1556, when, in January of that year, the Mayor and Bailiffs of Liverpool were summoned to appear before the Wigan Court at the instance of Sir Richard Molyneux.⁷ The Court of Pleas had jurisdiction in personal actions to any amount. The Mayor was judge of the Court, which sat for two days thirteen times a year. An almost complete series of "year books" of the Court is preserved from 1616 to 1781, when the court fell into abeyance. The Corporation Court Leet and View of Frankpledge was held once a year at Michaelmas with monthly adjournments throughout the year. The ancient town hall, known as the Moot Hall, situate at the western end of the Market Place, was taken down, together with the Market Cross and the Stocks, in 1868. The earliest mention of the Moot Hall so far discovered is in a document dated 1422.⁸

The oldest town seal of Wigan is one which appears to date from the 12th century, of which a replica is exhibited in the Wigan Reference Library. It shows a towered Norman gateway. The seal of the 14th and 15th centuries was a

7. *Liverpool Town Books* (pr. 1918).

8. *Cal. of Close Rolls, Henry VI., vol. I., 1933.*

little larger and had for device a church-like building with a central spire or belfry, between two wiggin trees; the inscription is *Sigillum de Wigan*. The seal of the 16th century was a pointed oval bearing for device a building with many lancetate windows, a cross at each end of the roof and a belfry, with a cross in the foreground. In 1695 a new seal (oval) was designed showing the Moot Hall, and this remained in use down to the late 19th century. From 1350 a Statute Merchant seal was also in use bearing the head of Edward III. with a lion across the shoulders and castles on either side.⁹

No doubt the device on the 14th century seal was suggested by the newly built parish church, the present building of late Norman origin, having been erected in the 13th century. The Tower and Walmesley Chapel (added about 1620) are the only parts of the original building now remaining, it having been wholly re-built (in the original style) except for the portions mentioned, in 1849. The earliest known Rector was in office in 1199.

There was a school in Wigan from very early times, for in a document dated 1280 one of the witnesses was "William the Scolemayster," and the "School Field" is constantly mentioned in records throughout the 14th and 15th centuries.

9. SEE *Wigan Corporation Regalia* (1935) for full description and illustrations.

The present Grammar School, however, was not founded till 1596, when Francis Sherington, a pious and philanthropic Wigan landowner, who was Mayor in 1594, along with other worthy citizens, provided an endowment for the maintaining and keeping of a Free Grammar School in the town. Previously there had also been a school in connection with the monastic Priory of Upholland. This Priory was founded as a college or chantry about 1307, with a dean and twelve priests, and became a Priory of Benedictine monks in 1319. It was dissolved by Henry VIII. in 1536, and is now only a meagre ruin, except for the Church, which is to-day the Parish Church of Upholland.

The Charter of Charles II. was considered the governing charter of the borough down to the passing of the Municipal Corporations Act in 1835, at which time the Corporation included the Mayor, Ex-Mayor, and ten other aldermen, two bailiffs, the Town Clerk, a Treasurer, and a Surveyor, with two Sergeants-at-Mace, a Sword Bearer, and two Halberd Bearers. Wigan was included as a borough in the Schedule of the Act of 1835.

On the first return of Borough Members to the House of Commons, the four ancient boroughs of Lancashire, namely Wigan, Preston, Lancaster and Liverpool, were required to send two Members

each (23 Edward I., 1295), and these were the only towns in the whole county summoned to Parliament. The wages of the members were fixed at two shillings each per diem, paid by the Borough. Wigan, with one break only, from that time continued to send two members to Parliament, until the passing of the Redistribution of Seats Act (1885), when the number was reduced to one. The last member to receive "wages" was Raufe Markland, of the Meadows, Wigan, who was elected in 1529. Payment of members, of course, was resumed in 1911.

The remains of an ancient cross known as Mab's Cross stands at the top of Standishgate where it merges into Wigan Lane—in the highway until 1920, when traffic considerations compelled its removal to its present site a few yards away, across the road, behind the railings of the Girls' High School. It consists of a base and a portion of a four-sided shaft much worn away by time. This relic of the past dates from before 1270, and enshrines the famous legend of Dame Mabel of Haigh, a venerable tradition made the subject of an interesting story by Roby in his "Traditions of Lancashire." Sir Walter Scott was also inspired by it and relates the gist of the legend in the preface to his novel, *The Betrothed*, referring to it also in *Waverley*.

The story as preserved in the family pedigree of the Bradshaighs (1647) is in these terms:—

“ Sir William Bradshaighe 2d son of Sr John, was a great traveller and a souldger, and married to Mabell, daughter and sole heire of Hugh Norris de Haghe and Blackrode, & had issue in 8 E[dward] II. [*i.e.*, 1314]. Of this Mabell is a story by tradition of undoubted verity, that in Sr William Bradshaighe absence (being 10 yeares away in the holy wars) she married a Welsh Kt. Sr William, retorninge from the warrs came in a Palmers habitt amongst the Poore to haghe, who when she saw and congetringe that he favoured [*i.e.*, resembled] her former husband wept, for which the knight chasticed her, at wich Sr William went and made himself Knowne to his Tennants: in wich space the Kt fled, but near to Newton Parke Sr William overtook him and slue him. The said Dame Mabell was enjoined by her Confessor to doe pennances by going onest every week barefoute and bare-legg'd to a crosse ner Wigan from the haghe wilest she lived, and is Called Mabb + to this day; and ther Monument lyes in Wigan Church as you see them ther portray'd.”

It is clear that the story as preserved in this and other ancient sources (1563)¹⁰ is inconsistent

10. See Burke's "Visitation of the Scats, Arms . . . of Great Britain" (1852-3), Vol. II., pp. 8-10.

with history since the last of the Holy Wars was concluded before Sir William and his lady were born. Research, however, has shown that the structure of the story is sound, and there is no reason to doubt the romantic details of the legend, for the association of Dame Mabel's name with the cross occurs as early as 1403,¹¹ barely a half a century after her death. The true facts¹² are that in 1315 Sir William Bradshaigh became involved in the Banastre Rebellion and was outlawed for conniving at the death of Sir Henry Bury. He was pardoned in 1318 when it was shown that he was not guilty of any complicity in the murder. Either he did not hear of the pardon or feared to return till after the fall of Thomas Earl of Lancaster, in 1322, and of Thomas's favourite, Sir Richard Holland (of Upholland). He was thus absent about eight years. The actual cause of his absence is scarcely less romantic than the legendary one, and the injustice of it is much more likely to have caused that soreness of spirit which is evident in the legend. Sir William, incorrigibly belligerent, was killed at Newton-in-Makerfield in 1333, and his wife died about 1350. Their tomb is to be seen in the Bradshaigh Chapel on the south side of the Chancel of the Parish Church. Two stone figures

11. In a Wigan Dced of 1403 the Cross is referred to as "Mab-
crosso."

12. Portous "New Light on Mab's Cross," 1922.

preserve their memory : Sir William in an antique coat of mail, cross-legged, with his sword partially drawn from the scabbard on the left side, and on his shoulder the shield charged with two bends ; Dame Mabel in a long robe, veiled, her hands elevated and conjoined in the attitude of prayer. Around the tomb are scenes from the legend.

The Banastre Rebellion and other local affrays brought the King to Wigan in 1323. He stayed a fortnight at Upholland Priory and held a court in Wigan on several days, when the Rector of Wigan, Sir William Bradshaigh, and other prominent gentry of the neighbourhood, were tried for their part in these troubles.

One of the earliest detailed references to Wigan is given in the itinerary of John Leland, the antiquary, who flourished in the reign of Henry VIII. "Wigan" he describes as "pavid as bigge as Warrington and better builded. There is one Paroch Chirch amidde the towne. Summe merchauntes, sum artificers, sum fermers. Mr. Bradshaw hath a place caullid Hawe, a myle from Wigan, he hath found mouch canel like sea coole in his grounde, very profitable to hym : and Gerarde of Ynce dwelith in that Paroch." Hollinshed, a chronicler of Queen Elizabeth's times, describing south-west Lancashire, says the

inns were well provided with "naperie, bedding, and tapisserie, and each commer is sure to lie in cleane sheets wherein no man hath been lodged since they came from the laundress." This view of Wigan hostelries was amply confirmed a few decades later when three gentlemen from Norwich stayed in Wigan on their way to Chester. According to their own account they were provided with "sumptuous chambers" and greatly enjoyed the fare, their general comment being "that better ale and better company no travellers could desire." It was about this time, too (that is towards the end of the 16th century) that the Parson of Wigan, Edward Fleetwood, ordered the Wigan innkeepers not to charge more than one penny a quart for ale.

The mining of coal was already well established in Wigan in the 15th century. Many documents are extant referring to coal mining at this period ; in the Pemberton and Orrell area as early as 1434, and in Wigan in 1450. The cannel mines at Haigh under the direct management of a succession of Roger Bradshaighs were energetically exploited throughout the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. The cannel was hard, clean, and lustrous, and was much used for making trinkets, bowls, medallions, and carved ornaments. The earliest of such objects recorded is a "piece of

cannel plate" presented by Sir Roger Bradshaigh in 1634 to the three travellers from Norwich, already mentioned. A noted carver of cannel in the middle of the 18th century was Robert Town, father of Charles Town, the noted Wigan and Liverpool animal painter, some portrait medallions by whom are still preserved at Haigh.

Baines, the county historian, informs us that in the late 16th century Lancashire was much agitated by religious differences, and in no place did the zeal of the contending parties glow more fervently than at Wigan. Queen Elizabeth's commission for promoting the ordinances of the Church according to the rites of the reformed faith, held sittings occasionally under the Earl of Derby in Wigan. "The popish recusants" as they were then styled, were rigorously pursued in the borough, and the Rector, the Rev. Edward Fleetwood, exerted himself energetically against his Catholic parishioners.

Coming down to another great era in English history, Wigan is to be found amongst the foremost of the boroughs in the county of Lancaster, and when in the year 1634 King Charles I. determined upon the levy of ship money, Wigan from its then superior wealth, was called upon to contribute £50, whereas from Preston only £40 was

required, from Lancaster £30, and from Liverpool £25. Nevertheless, after paying its levy on the writs of 1634 and 1635, Wigan was roused to protest in 1636, describing the impost of £50 as "altogether unfit and disproportionate."

At this time, according to a petition from the inhabitants themselves, the chief industries of Wigan were "the making of pots and pans," by which is meant pewter-ware and pottery. But there were other industries as well: Dycing, Fustian weaving, "Wigan sheeting," iron and brass founding, and bell founding. Bell founding was first practised at the end of the 16th century, and was successfully carried on to the end of the 18th century. More than 100 Church bells in Lancashire and neighbouring counties cast in Wigan still survive. The trade and craft guilds at the beginning of the 17th century had become very influential. Masters and Wardens were elected annually. The actual guilds in existence at this time were the Websters or Weavers, the Cordwainers or Shoemakers, the Founders (or "Pancasters"), the Braziers (or "Panmakers"), Braziers & Potmakers, the Pewterers, the Butchers, the Smiths, and the Mercers.

As a result of the development of the trade-guild system in Wigan a strong democratic move-

ment was developed, and in the elections for 1627 and 1640 a great popular demand arose for an extension of the franchise to all citizens. In 1627 three craftsmen were among the seven candidates for the two seats, one being Peter Houlford, a journeyman tailor, who was not even on the Burgess Roll, and is probably the first definitely "labour" candidate in any Parliamentary election. Gerrard Winstanley, born in 1609, the son of Edward Winstanley, a Wigan Mercer, was no doubt one of the leaders in this movement, for it was he who later founded in London one of the first communistic organisations, known to history as the "Digger" movement.

However, so far as Wigan was concerned, the excitement occasioned by the approaching Civil War put an end to the agitations for the time being, and when the great Civil War came Wigan took a leading part. As early as 1642, on the Earl of Derby being appointed Commander-in-Chief of the King's forces in the North-west, he selected Wigan as his Headquarters. On December 30th he drew up general "Orders" for the garrisoning and defence of the Lancashire boroughs on behalf of the King. The actual "Orders" signed by the Earl of Derby and dated at Wigan, are preserved in the Wigan

Public Library. Many minor encounters took place in or near Wigan during the ensuing months, but it was not till Easter, 1643, that any serious military engagement took place within the area of the borough. By way of reprisal for defeats elsewhere, the Parliamentarians under the command of Col. Holland, with Cols. Assheton and Rosworm, marched from Manchester to Wigan, where the Earl of Derby had thrown up strong entrenchments and formed a camp in "the parson's meadow," on the banks of the Douglas. A desperate battle was fought here on April 1st, the Royalists being totally defeated. The number of prisoners taken amounted to 800 men, with a thousand stand of arms, whilst £20,000 in treasure is stated to have been carried away.

Wigan was almost immediately re-occupied by the Royalists, the garrison being reinforced on April 20th by a small force, under Col. Thomas Tyldesley, who assumed command; but two days later Assheton again attacked in force, and Tyldesley evacuated the town without offering serious resistance. Finding that the people of Wigan remained firmly attached to the Royalist cause, Colonel Assheton, the Parliamentary commander, ordered the outworks and fortifications of the town to be demolished, and the gates and posts at the entrance to Standishgate, Wallgate,

Hallgate, and Millgate, to be thrown down and destroyed.

Wigan almost immediately became a centre for the Parliamentarians, and in the operations against Liverpool in December, "Wigan was the rendezvous for all that went." Two months later, whilst Wigan was still in the hands of the Parliamentarians, Wigan received a gracious commendation from the King in a letter from Oxford, dated 22nd February, and bearing the King's autograph. It was addressed to "Our trusty and Wellbeloved the Maior and Burgesses of our Towne of Wigan." The letter reads ". . . . Wee have received particular information of the singular affection you have lately expressed in your great expense, approved fidelity, and indefatigable industry Wee doe hereby returne Our Royall Thankes for the same, and Assure you Wee will always remember your loyall and faithful Endeavours in Our service abovesayd upon all occasions for your advantage" When Prince Rupert passed through Wigan on his way to the relief of Lathom House after his capture of Bolton, on May 28th, 1644, he was received by the town with great ceremony, the Mayor entertaining him at a banquet which cost £20.

. . . From this period until 1648 Wigan was left

tranquil, although much royalist treasure was known to be concealed in the place, but when Oliver Cromwell had driven the Scotch army, under the Duke of Hamilton, from Preston, he pursued the flying troops through Wigan, where they found quarters on the night of the 18th August, and overthrew them at the pass of Winwick. Three years afterwards, when the appearance of Charles II. in the field again raised the Royalists' hopes, the Earl of Derby once more assumed command in Lancashire and marched from Preston to Wigan. At the same time Colonel Lilburne started from Manchester with ten troops of Dragoons and some regiments of militia to intercept him. On the 25th August, 1651, the Colonel reached Wigan Lane, and lined the hedges on both sides with his infantry. Upon the Earl's approach shortly afterwards with a body of Cavalry, he was received with a galling musketry fire. Surprised, but undaunted, the Earl rapidly divided his small force into two bodies of 300 men each, and taking the van gave the rear to Sir Thomas Tyldesley. The trumpets then sounded the charge, and the gallant band twice cut their way through the main body of the enemy: but attempting it a third time they were surrounded and overpowered, and Sir Thomas Tyldesley, Lord

Widdrington, and many other brave cavaliers, were killed. Sir Robert Throgmorton, a knight marshall, left for dead on the field, was found alive by a poor woman; he was afterwards concealed by Sir Roger Bradshaigh, and eventually recovered. The Earl of Derby had two horses shot under him, and wounded himself, escaped to a house in the Market Place of Wigan (the Old Dog Inn), where he lay concealed till night time, and then fled to Worcester, accompanied by a few faithful followers. The battle of Worcester proved more disastrous than the battle of Wigan Lane, and the Earl of Derby, flying from thence to Lancashire, was shortly afterwards captured, tried at Chester, sentenced to death, and beheaded at Bolton, on 15th October, 1651. In 1679 a monument pillar was erected in Wigan Lane to mark the spot where the battle took place, and where Sir Thomas Tyldesley fell; it was restored and renovated by the Corporation in 1886.

After the Restoration in 1660, Wigan gradually regained its prosperity. In 1670 John Ogilby could write of the town as "noted for its iron-works"; whilst both the pewter and pottery trade flourished. John Dwight, the famous potter, founder of the Fulham Pottery, resided in Wigan from 1662 to 1687, during which time he

took out important patents for the improvement of pottery manufacture. In 1696 there were in use in Wigan two machine presses for the stamping of pewter so much in advance of any others of their kind that they were purchased by the Royal Mint and transported to London for the improvement of the coinage.¹³ About 1680 the Rev. John Clayton, D.D., of Wigan, experimenting with gas issuing from cracks in the earth, discovered the illuminating value of coal-gas, although it was more than a century later before the discovery was put to practical use.

A new industry also grew up in Wigan at this time, that of clock-making, which flourished throughout the 18th century. The first Wigan clock-maker was John Burges, and a specimen of his work ascribed to 1710, the middle of his career, is preserved in the Wigan Reference Library. Clocks were often made as a sideline, for one clock-maker, William Barker, was in reality a gunsmith, who in the middle of the 18th century, attracted attention by the excellence of his fowling pieces, described by one writer as the best in the country.¹⁴ A cross-bow made by him is also exhibited in the Reference Library. Other industries were the manufacture of blankets, checks, rugs, and coverlets. "There are many forges for the making of iron," wrote Nathaniel

13. Cal. of Treas. Bks., Vol. II. (1933).

14. Adam Walker: "Tour from London to the Lakes," 1792.

Spencer in 1771,¹⁵ who goes on to say "Coals are in great plenty here . . . The coal dug up in the centre of the town is perhaps the best in the universe." It was at this period that the carving of cannel, as already described, became a vogue.

Throughout all this time the people of Wigan continued to be loyal supporters of the Royal House of Stuart, and about 1690 Wigan became the centre of a plot (known to history as the Lancashire Plot) to restore the exiled King, James II., to the English throne. A number of prominent local gentlemen were implicated, and had their headquarters at Standish Hall. In 1694 eight of the gentlemen suspected of taking part in the plot were charged with high treason at Manchester, and after a famous trial were eventually acquitted. The secret papers of the plotters, mostly in cipher and some written in invisible ink, including correspondence with the exiled King himself, are now preserved in the Wigan Public Library.

The invasion of the North of England by the Scotch Army under the Earls of Derwentwater, Wintoun, and other Jacobite leaders in 1715, scarcely reached so far south as Wigan, but when the rebellion was suppressed, five of the rebels, namely James Blundell, James Finch, John

15. Complete English Traveller.

Macillwray, William Whalley, and James Burn, were publicly executed in the Market Place. In the rebellion of 1745, Prince Charles Edward, the young Pretender, passed through the town at the head of his army on their way to Manchester, and returned by the same route when retreating, spending the night on the 10th December at Wigan, the Prince sleeping at the Walmsley House, in Bishopgate.

About the middle of the 18th century (1762) private enterprise contrived a proper water-supply for Wigan, with wooden pipe-lines and a reservoir in Coppull Lane. Some of these wooden pipes, consisting of six-foot tree trunks, bored through the centre, were dug up in 1930 in the course of street widening in Wigan Lane. A number of specimens in a remarkable state of preservation are exhibited at the Library.

In 1720 the Wigan Members of Parliament, the Earl of Barrymore and Sir Roger Bradshaigh, built and presented to the town a new Town Hall. Standing in the Market Place just in front of the present Transport Offices its lower parts were let off in booths to butchers. Its conspicuous railed balcony was the scene of many excited speeches in the tense political battles of the 18th and 19th centuries. It was taken down in 1882.

In 1720 an Act was obtained for making the River Douglas navigable from Wigan to the Ribble, and in 1727, a cut parallel with the Douglas was formed. Subsequently (1783) this navigation became by purchase a section of the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. As a result of these developments river and canal traffic with Blackburn, Bolton, Manchester, Liverpool, Preston, Southport, etc., both for passengers and goods, was considerably exploited. Regular services between Wigan and the places mentioned were maintained by what was called " Passage Boats " : a boat to Wigan and Liverpool left Manchester, for instance, each morning at six o'clock in the summer and seven o'clock in the winter.

About 1780 a medicinal spring was discovered off Darlington Street, in Wigan, which excited much interest, and caused Wigan to be regarded as a Spa. The waters were said to be as beneficial as those of Harrogate, and a proper Spa house was built for the accommodation of visitors, who came to Wigan from a wide area. A full description of the Spa appears in a book published in 1788, entitled " England Described." The development of the coal-mines in the centre of the town in the early nineteenth century caused the well to become contaminated, and it was eventually closed. The remains of

the Spa House, however, are still to be seen in Harrogate Street.

Wigan contributed its quota to the defence of the country when Napoleon threatened an invasion, and relics of the Wigan Loyal Volunteers, a regiment raised in connection with this national menace, are preserved in the Wigan Library. In 1816-1820 the town and district was disturbed by the Luddite disorders, and a Wigan Volunteer Troop of Light Horse was raised to preserve order in the locality. In the Rules and Regulations of this regiment printed in 1820 it is stated that "to the credit of the inhabitants, the town of Wigan and its immediate neighbourhood is happily free from any of those riotous assemblies or overt acts of sedition which have disgraced other parts of the country." As ever, Wigan maintained its reputation for loyalty and good sense.

A great improvement in the amenities of the town was made in 1822 when street lighting by gas was introduced, 143 lamps being installed.

The opening out of the great Wigan coalfield at the beginning of the nineteenth century marks a striking advance in the town's commercial importance, which the coming of the railway greatly accelerated. The Wigan to Newton (to connect with the Manchester and Liverpool line)

and the Wigan to Preston railways were projected in 1829 and were actually the third and fourth lines to be laid down. A rare copy of the first Annual Report of the Wigan to Preston Company is preserved in the Wigan Reference Library, together with the original map showing the projected line through the heart of Wigan, with the terminus near the junction of Millgate and Rodney Street, which did not prove acceptable to the inhabitants. These railways were eventually opened for traffic in 1831, being merged into one company in 1834.

An important political movement came to a head in Wigan with the General Election in 1830, another attempt being made to widen the basis of the franchise. The actual number of voters on the roll was just under 200, but as a result of a town's meeting the householders at large presented a claim to the Mayor to take part in the election. Mr. Richard Potter of Manchester (grandfather of Beatrice Potter, afterwards Mrs. Sidney Webb), and Mr. John Hardcastle, of Bolton, were adopted as "People's Candidates." The Mayor allowed them to go to the poll, but disallowed their votes, so that a petition was presented to Parliament on behalf of the popular candidates. The passing of the Reform Act in 1832, put an end to the dispute, and at the

election which ensued in that year Potter was returned at the head of the poll, with Mr. Ralph Thicknesse as his fellow member.

In 1835 came the Municipal Corporations Act, and Wigan shared in the great local government reform which that Act brought about, being included as a borough in the Schedule of the Act.

The Reference Department of the Wigan Public Library possesses a division of local history containing practically everything that has been printed concerning the ancient and mediæval history of Wigan, together with a large mass of local documents ranging in date from the beginning of the 13th century to the 17th century. These, together with the borough archives, present an excellent field for local historical research.



The Chief Histories of Wigan are :—

- Bridgeman (Canon G. T. O.) History of the Church and Manor of Wigan. 4 vols., 1888-1890.
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