

Ashton Gate: Industrial development of a suburb

Roy Webber

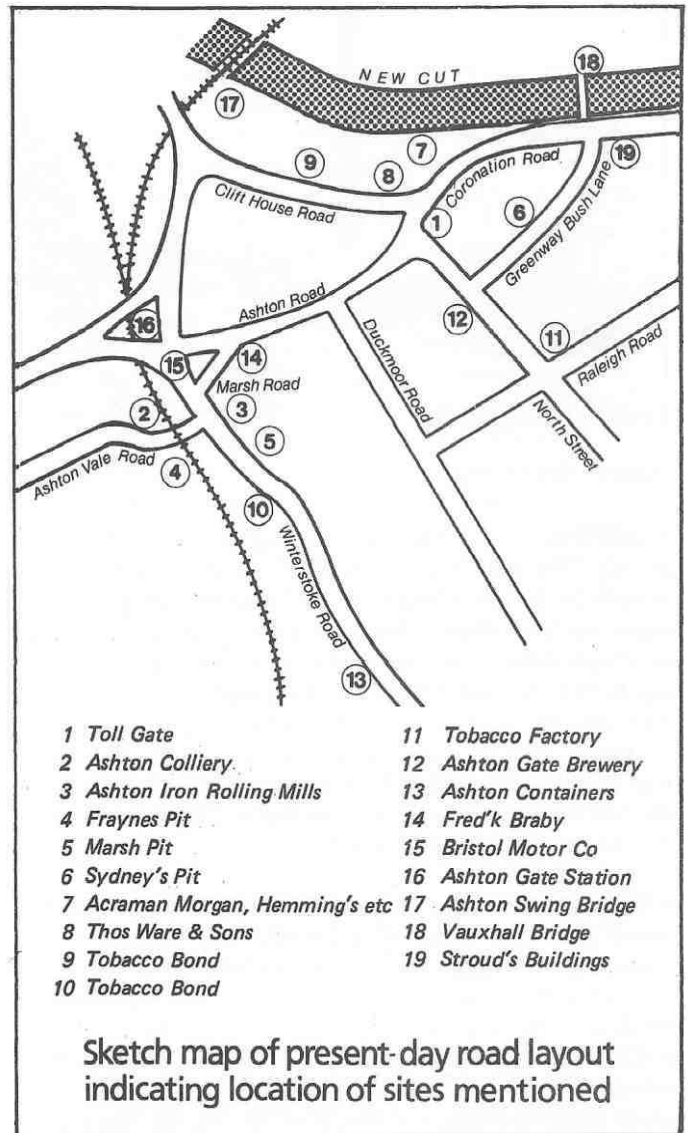
To many people, Ashton Gate is synonymous with Bristol City Football Club. The range and interest of industries that have existed, and indeed still exist, in this Bristol suburb tend to be overlooked, but they are well worth recording. The name 'Ashton Gate' is derived from the toll gate situated in North Street where, in 1749, farm-workers from Somerset protested against the charges levied for moving their beasts and produce through the area. They destroyed this gate (and the one at Bedminster) but the fine tollhouse still remains, a semi-circular fronted two-storey building with cast-iron columns supporting the veranda. It has been recently restored to a very high standard incorporating additional dwelling accommodation.

During the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth centuries there was a move away from the crowded city centre by a variety of industries into the suburbs and Ashton was one of these. An important reason for locating new industry in this area was the availability of good communications. The River Avon and the New Cut both attracted industry along their banks and in the third quarter of the nineteenth century the new railway line to Portishead added to these transport facilities.

Prior to these moves, however, there was one major industry already established here; that of coal mining. Coal had been worked here since the seventeenth century and by 1740 the Bedminster and Ashton coalfield began to rival that of Kingswood. Although there are some records of shallow workings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the first major coal-mining enterprise in this area was established when mining surveyor, Bennett, noticed the similarity of the geological structure of Bedminster and Ashton compared with Kingswood and, between 1745 and 1748 carried out an investigation to prove that the same coal seams as those at Kingswood could be found here. He presented his findings to Jarrit Smyth who was then the Lord of the Manor and together they formed a partnership; The Bedminster Coal Company. The first move was to sink a shaft after 1748 on the site of the South Liberty Colliery in South Liberty Lane. In 1750 they installed a Newcomen atmospheric engine which continued to be used to the present century. An engraving from *Engineering*, October 1895 of the engine appears as our Journal's cover illustration and it is worth noting what author and engineer, Bryan Donkin, a visitor to the colliery, observed at the close of the last century. 'The engine was originally supplied with steam from two haystack boilers but these were condemned as unsafe 30 years ago . . . The engine is still worked for about five hours a day six days a week . . . and is probably one of the oldest, if not the oldest, still running . . . The cylinder of iron, cast in one piece is 5 feet 6 inches in diameter and has a six feet stroke, it weighs about 6 tons.' The beam of the engine was wooden, made up of several oak beams trussed together and is about 24 feet long and 4 feet

deep. At one end of the beam there were three pump-rods raised by chains descending 700 feet down the shaft. The engine operated at a speed of 10 or 11 strokes per minute. This colliery, which was the first major one to open on the coalfield, was later acquired by the Ashton Vale Iron Company in the nineteenth century, and was the last to close in 1925 or 1928.

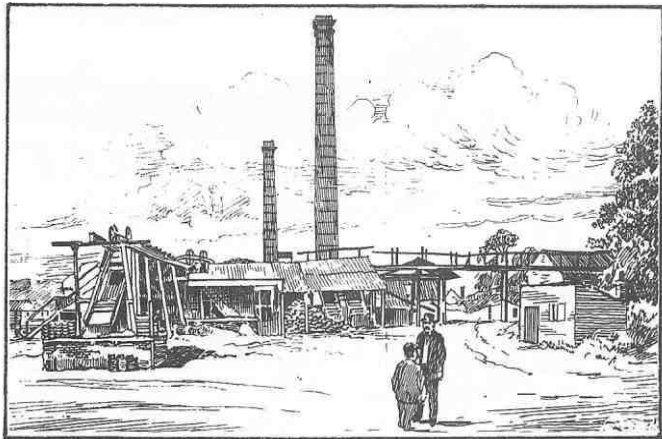
The accounts of Edward Gore of Barrow Court indicate that his collieries were producing 2-3000 cartloads of coal a week in 1788. Fifty years after this date there were at least 21 mines in the area and the period 1840 - 1880 represented the period of maximum activity. By 1887 there were only 5 mines still being worked and in 1895 the Ashton Vale Colliery was producing 300 tons per day. The Ashton Colliery was also owned eventually by the Ashton Vale Iron Company. The later shafts of this concern are in the area now occupied by Strachan and



Henshaw and the abandoned railway lines which can still be seen in the yard once served three closely grouped shafts. The downcast shaft was eleven feet in diameter and brick lined, 783 feet deep and passed through the Bedminster seams (which however were not worked here) in order to get at the Ashton group below. It used a double deck cage and in addition carried a water tank to raise water from the sump. Much of the coal was converted into blast furnace coke and on this site was a battery of 30 coke ovens. The colliery closed just before South Liberty in 1925.

Adjacent to the colliery were the blast furnaces of the Ashton Vale Iron Company who were smelting on this site in 1861, but records indicate only intermittent activity. It is recorded that in 1871 they were using local clay-based ores. Although some iron ore was local, a large quantity also was brought by boat to a wharf, the site of which is now occupied by Ashton Swing Bridge, and thence by a tramway to the ironworks. In 1887 the furnaces were finally blown out but the associated forges and rolling mills continued in use into the present century.

As was common with many colliery sites there was also a brickworks here which closed at the outbreak of World War II and did not open afterwards owing to the



Ashton Vale Colliery

Loxton

deterioration of the machinery and insufficient resources of clay. The spoil heap was levelled and the clay pit filled in in the late 1940s when the present trading estate was established. The last remaining colliery buildings were demolished when the Strachan and Henshaw works was built in the late 1950s. On the other side of the road were the Ashton iron rolling mills which were owned by Joseph Tinn who also owned the Pontnewynydd Sheet Iron & Steel Company of Monmouth. These were one of the few rolling mills in or near Bristol and were linked to the railway line by a private siding.

Within a short distance from the Ashton Gate Colliery were several other pits. Between the Strachan and Henshaw works and the tobacco bonded warehouses was Fraynes, situated on the far side of the railway line. This shaft struck the Bedminster Great Seam at 625 feet and the Ashton Top at 920 feet and the Ashton Little at 1060 feet. Between the railway line and Winterstoke Road was New Land Pit which could have been a second shaft for Fraynes. On the

opposite side of the road in the school playing ground was Marsh Pit. Sydney's pit was situated in Greenway Bush Lane, probably in the present car park at the rear of the 'Try Again' public house, one of several which were connected underground to the Dean Lane pit which closed in 1906. Sydney's pit had been abandoned at an earlier date, however, as it was unproductive.

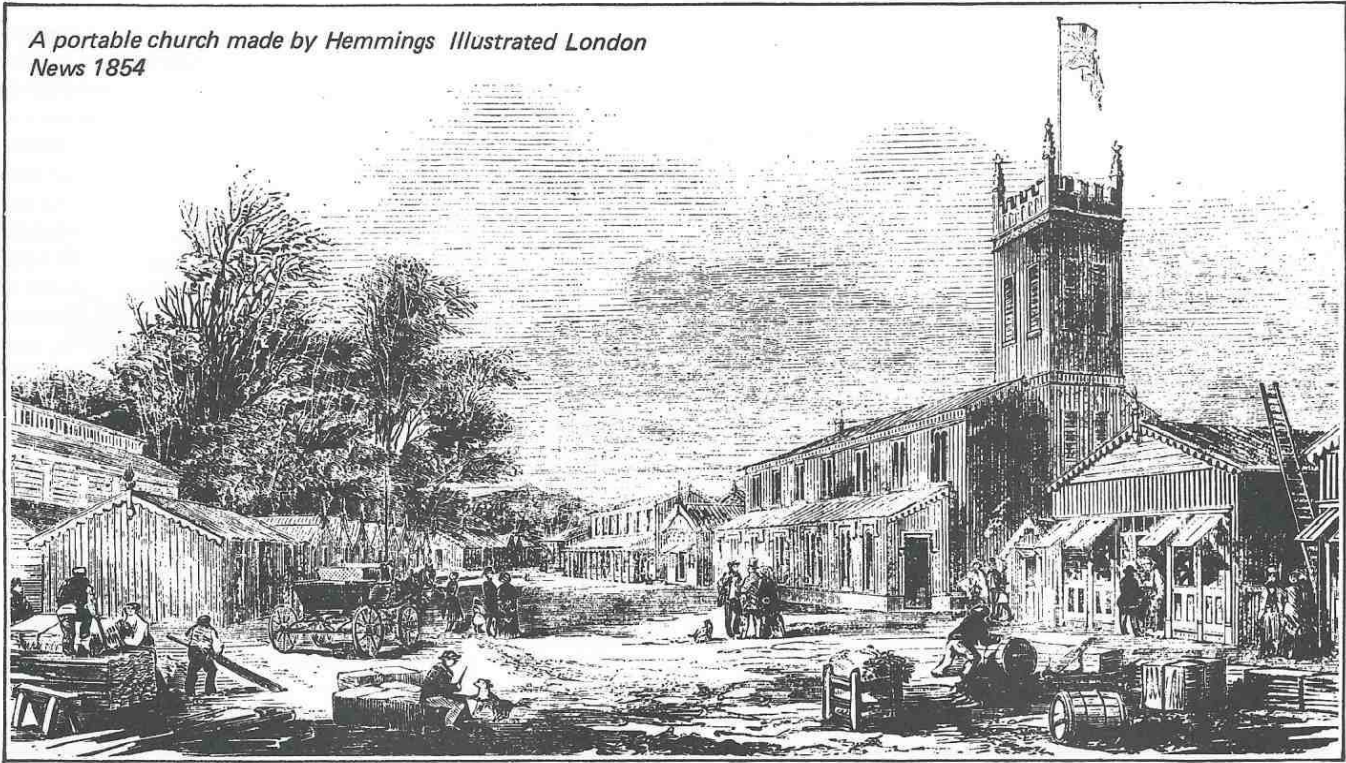
Leaving coal and its associated iron and brickworks, and moving on to other areas, we find at Ashton Gate a particularly interesting site for the variety of industries that have been located here at different times. Situated at the junction of Coronation Road and Clift House Road, it backs on to what was originally a bend in the River Avon and is now the New Cut. On the River Avon here James Martin Hillhouse built warships and other craft at Red Clift Yard between 1780 and 1786. After the construction of the New Cut there was a later shipbuilding enterprise with the operation of Bedminster Yard of Acraman, Morgan & Company which appeared to be in existence only from 1840 to 1844. The incline into the New Cut which can still be seen was once the slipway of the still later Vauxhall Shipyard owned for many years by John Payne and small craft up to 250 tons could be constructed on it. The Vauxhall Shipyard closed in 1925 which ended in intermittent involvement with shipbuilding on the site throughout almost two hundred years.

In 1852, before the advent of the Vauxhall Shipyard, the buildings vacated by Acraman, Morgan were taken over by one of the more unusual of the nineteenth century industrial concerns, that of Samuel Hemmings for the purpose of the manufacture of 'portable houses, simple in construction, perfect in arrangement, efficient in character and easy and inexpensive of carriage'. There is an entry 'Samuel Hemmings: civil engineer and railway contractor of Merrywood Hall, Bedminster' in the Bristol directories from 1841 to 1856. From 1854 the name is listed at Coronation Road and this might be the same person or his son.

The *Illustrated London News* of 1853 variously referred to Hemmings Patent Improved Portable Building Manufactory, the Clift House Factory and also to the Avon Clift Iron Works with a Board of Directors both British and Australian which was active in Bristol until 1854/55, when Hemmings transferred operations to Bow, London and continued working there in the same line of business until at least 1870 Hemmings' principal claim to fame, perhaps, comes with his pioneering development of the portable or temporary church both for home requirements and for export. His original motivation was to provide his son, who was an Australian emigrant, with some form of durable shelter. His inventive mind evolved a house which combined portability with the facility to be erected by inexperienced hands. Other persons, on seeing it wished for similar accommodation together with more rooms and a shop and Mr Hemmings saw the prospects for adaption. A catalogue of 1854 shows single cottages and medium and large houses, including one for the Archbishop of Sydney. Sumptuous villas were constructed which included butlers' pantries and libraries at prices which varied from 50 guineas for a simple cottage to 850 guineas for the more elaborate buildings.

Other examples of buildings were: commercial buildings, small shops, even rows of shops for Melbourne, an hotel for 80 persons consisting of 2 storeys costing 2500 guineas,

A portable church made by Hemmings Illustrated London News 1854



a three-storey iron bazaar shipped to Melbourne in 1855, churches, a 'pub', appropriately named the *Iron Duke*, erected in Narberth and The Royal Aldershot Club house, measuring 82ft x 130ft. The scale of his enterprise can be judged from the number of 'packages' shipped to Australia. In 1853 he shipped 6369 such items valued at £111000 and the following year 30000 packages were valued at £247000. It was said that few other manufacturers could match his design or functional quality.

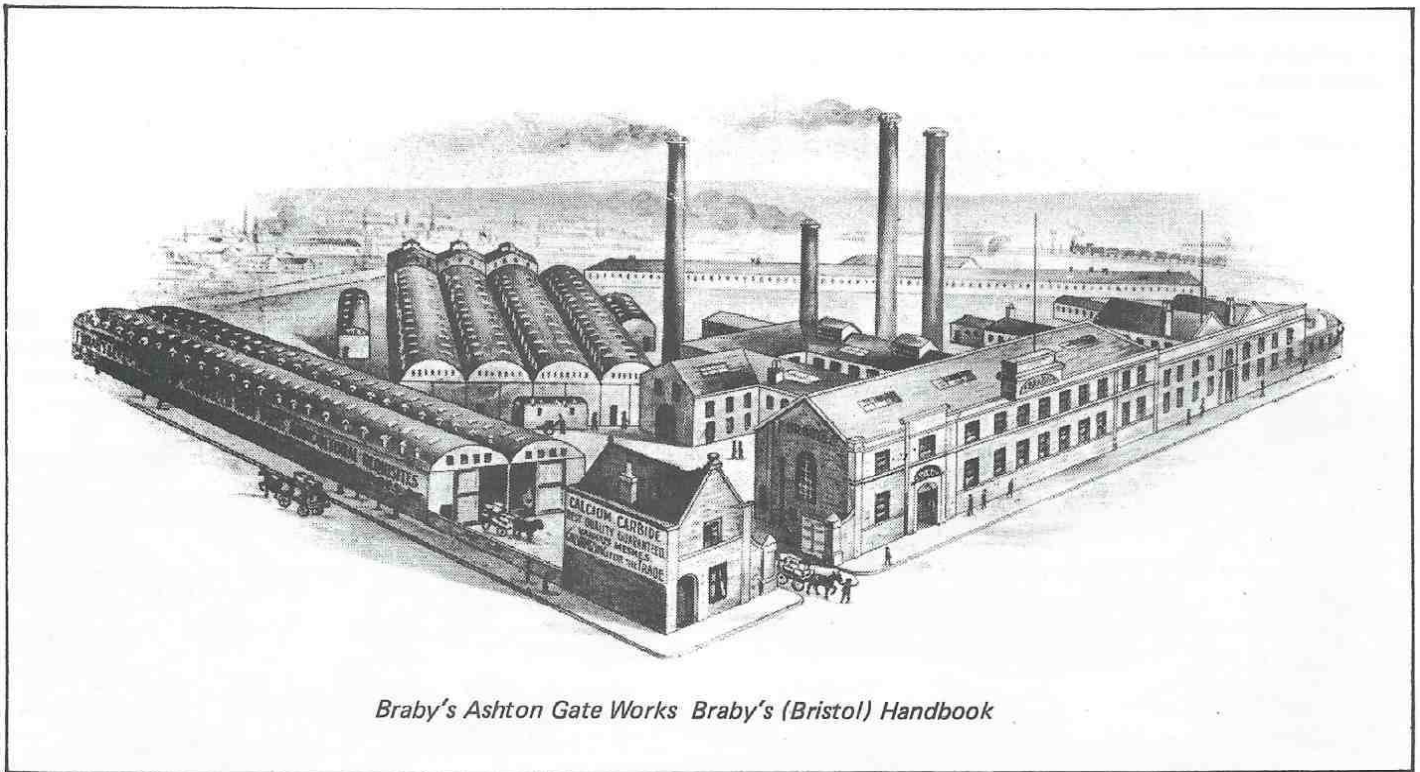
The buildings on Clift House Road vacated by Hemmings in the late 1850s were next occupied by Thomas Ware and Sons who are still very much in existence here. They were established in Devon about 1863 and moved here in 1878, the premises being known as the Clift House Tannery. A contemporary guide mentions that the works comprise a series of spacious tan pits, drying sheds, warehouses and a large yard. The ground originally occupied extended to the River Avon and encompassed seven to eight acres, extensive enough to accommodate machinery driven by several powerful steam engines with three boilers. It is worth noting that with the growth in imported hides for the tanning industry in the nineteenth century, tanneries were set up near the ports to produce heavy vegetable-tanned leather. The speciality at Clift House Tannery was sole leather. At the eastern end of the site was yet another variety of business, that of a brewers' cooper - F V Larway, whose premises were described as the Vauxhall Cooperage. The directory of 1903 indicated that there was a large yard and an extensive range of workshops and stores.

The actual site of Clift House was situated between the tannery and the tobacco bond, the last private occupier being Mr Ware whose tannery was next door. This was in the late 1890s - after which it became an isolation hospital for a period and was eventually demolished in the 1930s. A bonded warehouse was built by William

Cowlin and Son in the grounds in 1919, the last of three red brick tobacco bonds and the only one not to have a rail connection. It was built to meet the demands of the import trade which had quadrupled since 1900 and so to provide a capacity of approximately 10,000 casks of tobacco. Although it had been intended to build two bonds on this site, the war delayed work on this one and the fourth was never built.

The tobacco industry is well represented at Ashton Gate. In addition to the earlier redbrick bonds there are two large concrete bonds in Winterstoke Road which were the last built in Bristol just before World War II. During the war they were also used for aero-engine work and are now still in use as tobacco bonds. The Wills tobacco building situated in Raleigh Road is possibly the least well-known of Bristol's tobacco factories. The Number 2 factory on the corner of Raleigh Road and North Street was built in 1904 and Number 3, in Raleigh Road, in 1906. Considerable extensions were added from 1911 to 1919 and at one time part of the building was used as a tobacco bond. For a time between 1908 and 1914 Franklyn Davey, who was another Bristol tobacco manufacturer recently acquired by Wills, used the ground floor of Number 3 factory when moving out of premises at Welsh Back. Cigar making was carried out here in 1936 but at the present time, apart from the laboratories, the greater part of this large complex is used only for storage purposes.

Almost opposite the Wills factory in North Street are the buildings of the Ashton Gate Brewery. The company was registered in 16 October 1865 to acquire the business carried out by the late Thomas Baynton with a capital of £30000. The name was changed to Hardwick & Company Limited on 23 April 1868 and then back to its original title 1 January 1883. In 1911 they took over the Old Market Brewery which was owned by Michael Clune and in 1931 the Ashton Gate Brewery was in turn taken over by



George's and closed, the company eventually being wound up in 1933. An advertisement of about 1900 refers to the brewery consisting of 'brewery, malshouses, cooperage, smiths shops, stables and offices, constructed on the most advanced principles with latest machinery in use' These typical buildings of a tower brewery were subsequently used by Yeo Bros & Paull for the manufacture of tarpaulins.

Another major Bristol industry represented at Ashton is that of packaging, in the firm of Ashton Containers in Winterstoke Road. There has been a company on this site manufacturing wooden packing cases and containers since 1917, whose original title was Ashton Sawmills; the name being changed when the sawmill operation contracted and fibreboard superseded wood. During the period 1918-35 the company increasingly turned to the making of packing cases and in 1923 the first machinery designed to manufacture fibreboard was installed. By 1934 this had developed to such an extent that it became the sole function of the company. A corrugator was introduced in 1958 and the size of the factory was increased from 92000 sq ft to 126000 sq ft. Production tonnages increased fivefold in the ten years to 1959 and a further extension in 1960 increased the size to 184000 sq ft. Private sidings had been provided for Ashton Containers in 1918 and were extended in 1947 right through the site to reach Winterstoke Road, but rail traffic ceased in 1965. Since then, in common with most British paper and board mills, the company has suffered a decline and is now owned by the St Regis Corporation.

Having reached the twentieth century it is appropriate here to mention two companies connected with products which are essentially modern. Originally Frederick Brabys were sheet metal workers and galvanisers in London with factories in different parts of the country. One of these was in Coronation Road where the company had established.

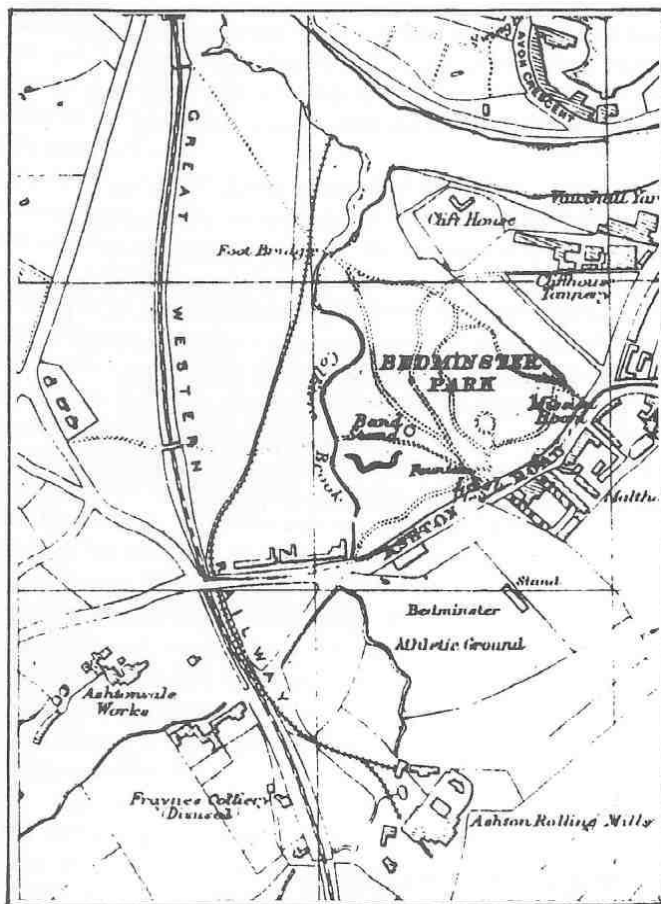
itself in 1897. These premises were soon outgrown and a second and much larger Bristol works was built on the present site at Ashton Gate where manufacturing is still carried out. The firm was the first British manufacturing company to see the possibilities of aluminium for kitchen utensils, very early in this field of activity, confirmed by their catalogue of 1925 which refers to '30 years of wear'. The Ashton Gate works certainly included a section for the spinning of aluminium hollow-ware. It is significant that although they were one of the leading firms in the trade, the production of aluminium kitchenware was not large enough to justify specialisation to the exclusion of other kinds of product. Galvanised sheet metal was prudently still regarded as the bread-and-butter line.

The other twentieth-century site is the remains of the rather splendid car showrooms and motor repair works situated opposite Frederick Brabys in Ashton Road. This concern was formerly owned by the Bristol Motor Company and opened by no less a person than Lord Nuffield in 1931. The works have been recently renovated and partially rebuilt and are now owned by Mercedes Benz.

At the beginning of this account, reference was made to good communications as an important reason for the location of industry at Ashton and it is perhaps appropriate to deal with such features at this stage. The line of the Bristol and Portishead Pier Railway constitutes the western boundary of Ashton. The Act authorising this line to be built was passed in 1863 and opened on 18 April 1867, originally as a broad gauge line, being converted to standard gauge in January 1880. It was acquired by the Great Western Railway in 1884. The line was closed to passengers on 7 September 1964 and cement traffic from Portishead ceased on 3rd April 1981.

The station originally comprised a simple wooden

structure known as Ashton Gate Platform and was opened 1 October 1906 when Bristol City Football Club were first promoted to Division 1. Because of the austerity of World War I it was closed and not re-opened until May 1926. The station was again closed, with the rest of the line in 1964, but then re-opened for football specials in 1970 which lasted until 1977 when Parson Street Station took over this task. A signal box was built several hundred yards north of the present one in 1883 when the line from Clifton Bridge Station to Portishead Junction on the main Bristol Exeter line was doubled. The present box constructed on the down side of the line and called Ashton Junction Signal Box was opened in May 1906 when the lines to Wapping and Canon's Marsh were built. The area just beyond the Ashton Gate station on the North side became the White City Exhibition site in 1914 and later that year, when the war broke out, became a recruiting centre and training ground.



From 1902 OS 6 ins showing tramway from river to rolling mills and Great Western Railway line to Portishead

The northern boundary of Ashton is drawn by the line of the New Cut which was bridged by the double-decked hydraulically-operated Ashton Swing Bridge carrying the railway line to Wapping and Canon's Marsh. The upper deck, now removed, was a roadway, above which was mounted a signal box. This bridge was constructed in 1906 but a few years previously a footbridge had been built from Coronation Road over the New Cut named Vauxhall Bridge. The intention was to relieve busy Bedminster Bridge and offer a point of access to the new suburbs of Southville and Ashton. Pedestrians had been able to use the Vauxhall ferry which had existed previously but proposals for the bridge were probably prompted by the drowning of two ferry

passengers after the boat had drifted into broken water near the underfall sluices. The swinging section of Vauxhall Bridge was 158 ft in length and was built by Lysaghts, the hydraulic gear which operated it being made by Armstrong Whitworth. The necessity for having a bridge which could be opened can be judged from the number of times which this facility was used: in 1907/8 it swung 3401 times, or almost 10 times a day on average. This bridge and the Ashton Gate swing bridge are recorded as being opened for the last time in 1936 although there are memories of war-time usage. In 1951 the Bristol Corporation Act relieved the Port Authority of the obligation to open them.

A final word on housing in the area. in Coronation Road there is a listed terrace of 15 houses, nos 156-170, which are the best in the road. They were first known as Stroud's Buildings and later as Ashton Terrace and were constructed around 1820 in a curiously isolated spot, a terrace of some quality. In contrast, the houses to the west of Vauxhall Bridge are distinctly proletarian, Upper Leigh View (numbers 192-201) is a primitive-looking row in red brick and the earlier Greenbank Terrace (numbers 204-213) was built around 1850. There are several streets of mid-nineteenth century workers' housing in Wells Street and Bath Street, situated just off North Street and Water Street and Lower Sydney Street, situated near Greenway Bush Lane.

A Note on Sources and Further Reading

Information was obtained from the 1881 Ordnance Survey Map 6 ins to 1 mile and also from various Directories of Bristol in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Loxton Collection of drawings provided the illustration of the Ashton Colliery.

The following were also consulted:

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