

EDITORIAL ; THE FUTURE OF BRISTOL CITY DOCKS

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As we have argued before in these columns, the crucial industrial archaeological problem of Avon County is that of the redevelopment of the City Docks, now virtually obsolete, in the heart of Bristol. This is not just an industrial archaeological problem, as it involves also town planners and environmentalists of all sorts, but it has aspects which make it of special concern to BIAS and to all who care for the industrial heritage of the Bristol region. Elsewhere in this Journal we have prepared a map to show the items of prime industrial archaeological significance around the City Docks. Here, however, we consider the general principles on which we would like to hope the redevelopment of the area around the City Docks will take place.

It is worth recalling, in order to get the subject in perspective, the enormous importance of the docks in the industrial and commercial life of the Bristol region. The city has always been a port, and for centuries its prosperity depended upon the quays at the confluence of the River Frome with the Bristol Avon. When, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was decided to maintain the water level of these quays at high-water mark, the works were put in hand which created the substantial area of deep water to become known as the "Floating Harbour", and thereafter it was possible to develop new wharves around the docks. But almost as soon as they were complete there were signs that the new docks were not adequate to deal with the largest vessels, and particularly when the novel breed of steam ships began to grow in size and in number they found the Floating Harbour too restrictive. The need for larger and more convenient facilities led thus to the construction of new docks at the mouth of the Avon, and to the gradual decline of the City Docks - the traditional wharves around the Floating Harbour. A mixture of conservatism, commercial inertia, and determined engineering improvements, managed to keep the City Docks in business for a hundred years after the opening of the first dock at Avonmouth, but now their obsolescence has been recognised and parliamentary approval secured for their formal closure in 1980.

Thus the problem has arisen: what should be done with the City Docks? The initial reaction of the Bristol planners seemed to be to get rid of as much of the old Floating Harbour as possible, with road schemes throwing numerous bridges over it and several areas being marked out for filling in. Public protest managed to remove all

fill-in proposals (except in the case of the Feeder Canal) from the private act of parliament closing the Docks, but the road schemes remain (though subject to confusing and wearisome revision), and the act retained the misguided scheme to build a barrage across the New Cut in order to convert the latter into a deep-water lake. We will not repeat our arguments against this New Cut scheme here: suffice it to say that the barrage will be a prodigious expence for no tangible benefits and incurring some serious disadvantages.

As far as the Floating Harbour is concerned, however, the authorities wisely chose to take expert advice, and consulted Sir Hugh Casson. His Redevelopment Study, **Bristol City Docks**, was published early in 1973. While generally welcome, in so far as it takes for granted the preservation of the Floating Harbour and the sympathetic redevelopment of the surrounding areas, the Casson Report is too **timid**. This is apparent in its failure to approach the problem of the Docks as part of an overall concept of conservation for the whole of the ancient civic heart of Bristol. Thus it accepts without reservation the plan for a bridge across St. Augustine's Reach, which is both unnecessary from the point of view of more efficient traffic circulation, and is a catastrophe from the amenity point of view, while devoting too much attention to comparative trivialities such as conjectural building heights and notional decorative canals in Canon's Marsh. To BIAS, at least, the Report has been a disappointment, and in any event it has so far had no appreciable effect on planning policy. Meanwhile, another Report dealing with the City Docks was published at the end of August 1973. This was commissioned by Bristol Arts and Leisure Committee, a committee of the new Bristol District Council, to advise it on the feasibility of developing a maritime museum in the Floating Harbour, and was presented by Mr. D.J. Blackman of the University of Bristol. The Blackman Report envisages the creation of "a focus for the preservation of boats and maritime equipment from the Bristol Channel and beyond", to be based somewhere in the Floating Harbour and preferably adjacent to the Great Western Dry Dock with the s.s. **Great Britain** installed as the centre piece to the collection. BIAS members will undoubtedly give warm support to these proposals, although many will remember sadly how many fine opportunities to preserve ships have been lost by Bristol in recent years.

Whatever the past failures to seize preservationist chances, however, it is clear from these Reports and from public reaction to them that the present mood in the city and the region is much more sympathetic towards the industrial heritage represented by the City Docks than it was only a short time ago. But in order to convert a vague sense of tolerant sympathy into a realistic planning policy it is necessary to be clear about the principles underlying that policy. We would like to suggest six such principles:

1. That the existing water surface of the Floating Harbour should be retained in its entirety. This means that all suggestions of filling in or covering up sections (including, we would like to stress, the Feeder Canal) should be dismissed, and that bridge-building over the Harbour should be restricted to the minimum. The bridge over St. Augustine's Reach should certainly be resisted because it would merely divert the Queen Square traffic onto the vulnerable Harbour frontage of The Grove and disrupt the magnificent maritime vista from Neptune's statue which is one of the unique features and outstanding joys of the city of Bristol. The possibility of extending the water surface by re-opening parts of the City Centre closed in the 1930s should also be explored.
2. That accessibility to the water-side of the Floating Harbour should be maintained and maximised, by the provision of boulevards, pedestrian ways, and moorings for small craft. The surviving rail access to the Floating Harbour via Ashton Bridge should be preserved.
3. That redevelopment of the areas adjoining the Floating Harbour should be planned as a whole, thus avoiding the piece-meal mixture of insensitive reconstruction in the interests of individual developers which has too often previously masqueraded as planning policy.
4. That comprehensive redevelopment of the City Docks should be integrated with plans for the city centre area including the definition of conservation areas around St. Augustine's Reach, Queen Square, and Bristol Bridge.
5. That the road schemes for the city centre should be modified in keeping with the above principles. This could, in fact, be achieved with considerable economy and elegance by making a link for the ring road between the proposed roundabouts at Temple Meads and Wapping Wharf along the **southern** side of the Harbour, thus eliminating the need for both the new bridge over St. Augustine's Reach and the Redcliffe Bridge and saving The Grove and Shakespear Inn from destruction in addition to restoring Queen Square as a traffic-free precinct.
6. That specific buildings and areas of industrial heritage significance should be defined for preservation. These should include: Cumberland Basin and the Underfall Yard; the Great Western Dry Dock complete with the s.s. **Great Britain**: St. Augustine's Reach, where very

satisfactory uses are already being found for some of the redundant transit sheds; the Canon's Marsh waterfront, where there is scope for an imaginative recreation of a traditional Bristol wharf as a tourist attraction; The Grove and Bush's Warehouse; the Welsh Back Granary, although most of the transit sheds here could be cleared to make a boulevard from Bristol Bridge to The Grove; and Bathurst Basin, which is already attaining a new vitality as a marina for small boats. In all these cases some measure of tidying up would be necessary, but they are all sites with a strong claim for sympathetic treatment and where unimaginative development could do enormous environmental damage.

We believe that these principles could form the basis for a realistic plan which would both preserve a vital piece of the industrial heritage of the Bristol region and assist the solution of other civic problems such as the completion of the traffic improvements and the definition of conservation areas. Such a plan would make good civic sense and good environmental sense. We commend it to the citizens of Avon County who will have to make the necessary political decisions.