

Large but largely forgotten : the Victorian building industry

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Buildings generally are understood, or at least appreciated, by industrial archaeologists. The same scarcely may be said of the means by which buildings were made. Today, Victorian builders are largely overlooked and their former importance is obscure. The aim here is to try to redress neglect by making a short general survey of the Bristol building industry as it was about a century ago. The loosely-defined boundaries of industrial archaeology (surely one of the glories of the subject) seem to justify an extensive, rather than intensive, approach, glimpsing trades and suppliers, as well as the builders themselves.

One reason for the obscurity of builders is their nomadic restlessness, ever moving from site to site. Another reason is their vulnerability, compared with other industries, to bankruptcy and failure. This was due largely to the fierce cycles of boom and slump to which demand for new buildings was prone, in Bristol as elsewhere. Short-lived firms, the great majority very small, have left few records and from this it would be easy to under-estimate their size and significance. Yet investment in buildings was enormous, amounting to about one third of total national fixed investment in every Victorian decade after 1870. Activity on this scale required a very large industry employing very many people. In 1881 as many as about one occupied male in every ten in the country was engaged directly in the field, and others were employed in brick-making, timber, quarrying, materials transport and so on. The great extent of the building industry was matched by its diversity, with firms ranging in size from one man jobbing repair businesses to large and resourceful enterprises tackling the largest projects. Skills ranged from those of stonemasons to steeplejacks, from thatchers to gas fitters. Activities were so wide-ranging and fluid that the extremities of building are indistinct.

Although basic building technology was evolving only slowly in the 1880s, new building products appear to have been multiplying. The keynotes of the time were adaptation and improvement, with some old and laborious methods and less processed goods yielding to newer branded goods. Among them were patent glazing, terra cotta, window gear and gas geysers. There were growing opportunities for builders to use plant in their yards and workshops, and sometimes on site. Joinery workshops were becoming mechanized and there were mortar mills, pumps and other plant. Cheaper transport was making some materials more widely available so that certain suppliers, such as quarries, were becoming more exposed to competition. Other suppliers, such as makers of speaking tubes, faced new rivals which ultimately would destroy them.¹

The volume of building activity in Bristol during the nineteenth century, although quite large compared with what had gone before, was moderate compared with that in London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester, where the pace was far more hectic. In the 1880s national building activity was

in something of a lull, and Bristol builders found their trade 'not at all in a flourishing condition'. It is probable that the great bulk, by value, of Bristol building activity in the 1880s, as before, was speculative, that is to say put up in advance of knowledge of eventual owner. Such work was mostly low and medium-cost housing on the suburban edge in places such as Bedminster. Speculative builders are likely to have ranged from firms of some size and repute, down to very small ones, in some cases of equally diminished reliability. A smaller number of the more prestigious firms engaged in contracting, mixed to some extent with speculative work and, as we shall see, some were substantial enough to obtain work well outside the West Country. Contracts usually arose when more specialised and often costly, buildings were required on specific sites. The record of Bristol in such cases was a good one, with many examples of high-quality architecture appearing both on city centre redevelopment sites and further afield. Again, however, the 1880s emerge as a decade when activity was relatively light. A random example of a contract, dated January 1880, involved the design by architect Charles Hansom for the east wing of Clifton College. Eighteen firms submitted competitive tenders, and Wilkins and Sons of Surrey Street, St. Pauls won the contract for £4472 (a sum equivalent to about thirty two-bedroom terraced houses). In addition to contractors and speculative builders there was a host of firms engaged all over the city and suburbs in specialised parts of buildings such as plumbing and painting, and in supplying raw materials and finished goods. The world of building teemed with firms, making up a flexible, rough and ready industry able to meet large, varied and changeable markets.

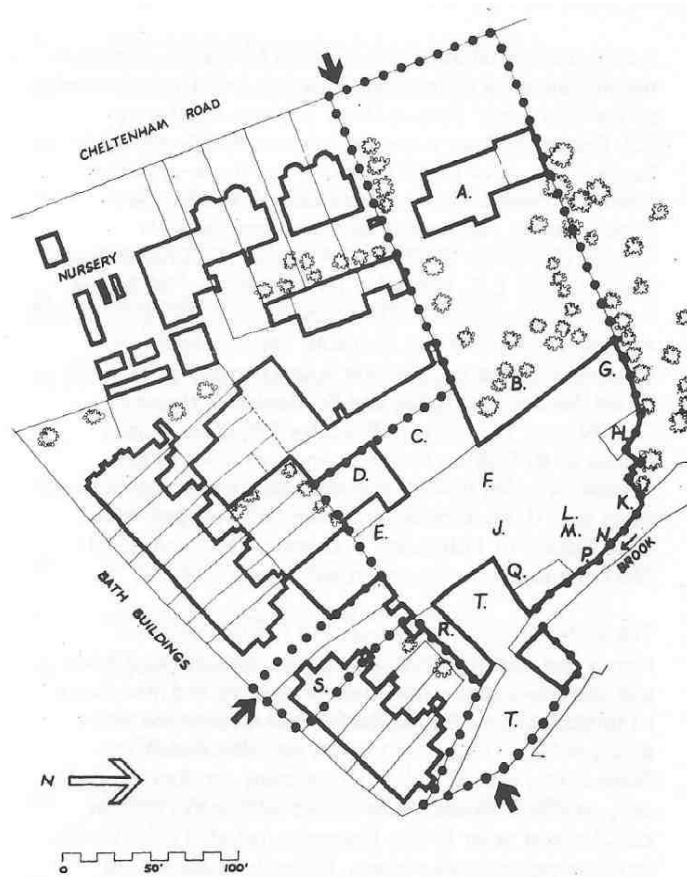
From the Census of 1881² it appears that, in a major part of the city at least, building occupations were relatively numerous, compared with the proportion in the country as a whole. One possible explanation of this, in view of the moderate rate of building in Bristol compared with many other cities, is that building workers generally were concentrated in the towns and were under-represented elsewhere. Nearly 250 people in Bristol described themselves as builders (a rather vague term), and the largest craft group was that of carpenters and joiners with nearly 1900 people. The next position was held by the masons with about 1700, followed by painters and glaziers with about 1300. There were over 300 plasterers and whitewashers, a similar number of plumbers, and nearly 150 each of gasfitters and bricklayers. The last figure is notable since, in the country as a whole, bricklayers ranked second, well ahead of masons. It may be assumed that the relative scarcity of Bristol bricklayers at that time was due to the strong local persistence in use of stone, possibly coupled with the effect of slack trade. Among the minor crafts were paper-hangers, paviours, slaters and tilers. The largest occupation, but connected with building to an unknown extent, was that of general labourers, of whom there were over 5500. There

were also no fewer than 64 females among the occupations listed above, of whom 38 were general labourers. Bristol was the home also of eight of the 216 female carpenters and joiners in England and Wales, four of the 240 plumbers and four of the 108 masons.

According to *Kelly's Directory*³ there were over 180 building firms, some of which were contractors, in and about Bristol in 1883. Very many of them appear to have been, and must remain, obscure. While we can only conjecture about the likes of Messrs. Podger of Bishopstrop and Fudge of Oldland, a few firms have left more substantial evidence behind them. Issues of *The Builder*⁴ suggest that a dozen or more quite prominent firms competed regularly for local contracts and also sought work further afield. For example, six Bristol firms tendered in December 1880 to build a lunatic asylum in Gloucester, valued at over £20,000 (equivalent to more than 130 small houses). They faced competition from firms in London, Manchester, Plymouth and elsewhere, and on that occasion were unsuccessful.

One prominent firm (and still so today) was William Cowlin and Son. In the 1880s it was already well established, having been founded in 1834. In 1865 the founder, who lived until 1878, was joined by his son William Henry Cowlin. He was president of Bristol Master Builders' Association for seven years from 1877 and became the national president of the MBA in 1885. In the early 1880s the firm occupied two premises in St. Pauls; 3 Brunswick Square and 4 Meadow Street. In Cowlin's case the transitory nature of building applied not only to the sites but also to builders' yards and workshops. By 1893 the firm was in Stratton Street and at some time had held an address in York Street. By then, if not well before, the firm was able to boast of national operations, contracts with the government Office of Works and of cathedral restoration work.⁵

One of Cowlin's leading rivals was Stephens and Bastow of Montpelier, founded in 1839. In 1880 the firm tendered for jobs which included an £8,000 Cardiff church and additions to the Anglo-Bavarian Brewery, Shepton Mallet, worth £2,850. In that year they worked on Bridewell Police Courts for £17,000 and a church in Bromley, Kent, for £5300. Here was enterprise on a considerable scale, for the following year they were busy on a £10,000 Exeter factory, as well as seeking larger jobs in London. In 1909 the firm published an outline⁶ of their achievements over England and Wales, some of which were of the greatest size and prestige. Many jobs were valued at over £8,000 and one was as much as £87,000 (council houses cost upwards of £150 each at the time). Such a firm required a sizeable headquarters for administration and storage, fabrication and finishing of goods used on sites. Some goods, like smith's work, plumbing and wood windows were quite light and intricate while others, like bulk timber, were the opposite. Stephens and Bastow were prepared to supply some goods, at least joinery items, to anyone who wanted them, as well as to their own sites. Their headquarters were used also to maintain the essential road transport which linked yard, workshops, suppliers and sites. By the turn of the century the firm occupied densely-packed premises covering about an acre off Cheltenham Road. It was laid out on two levels around an irregular



Plan of Stephens, Bastow & Co Ltd premises, Montpelier, based on 1883 Ordnance Survey. Dotted line shows probable extent of premises, based on text reference 6 Key, based on same source:

		J	Saw mills
A	Arley House. Occupied by proprietor?	K	Smith shop
B	site of timber store built after 1883	L	Engine
C	Timber store	M	Drying room
D	Timber yard	N	Chimney
E	Stables	P	Boiler with tank over
F	Stowage for deals, with machine shop over	Q	Oil store
G	Plant store	R	Wheelwright's shop
H	Smith's store	S	Offices
		T	Yard

yard, having access from Cheltenham Road and at two separate points from Bath Buildings.⁷ There were large roofed timber stores, saw mills, boiler house and chimney, engine room, machine shop, joiner's shop, smith's shop, wheelwright's shop, stables and separate stores for plant, paint, oil and smith's goods. Although the firm has since disappeared, the premises retain to the present day a link with building.

Such a substantial installation cannot have been unusual in the city for there were other firms prepared to take on work on a similar scale. Among those active in 1880 were: A.J. Beaven of Dean Lane, Bedminster, building Knowle Baptist Chapel for £2,000; Brock and Bruce of Albert Road, St. Philip's Marsh; J. Eastbrook and Sons of Eugene Street, Pennywell Road, building Eastville Mission Church for £1,700; H.A. Forse of 3 Charles Street, Stokes Croft; E.T. Hatherley (or Hatherly) of 84 Stokes Croft, extending Ashton Gate School for £500; E.C. Howell and Son of Moon Street, St. Pauls, heavily engaged in building both the London and South Western Bank, Corn Street for about £18,000 and St. Raphael's House of Charity, rear Cumberland Road for £10,000; August Krauss of 40 Colston Street, laying tram lines to Bedminster, winning several small contracts and going on seven years later to work on the city electricity supply; and T.K. Yalland of Fishponds, in October 1880 and March 1881 winning sewer contracts worth over £14,000.

The building firms, as erectors and fabricators, were merely the final link in a chain which included extractors and importers of raw materials, processors and merchants of finished goods. Specialization had reached the point where at least 75 different trades are identifiable⁸. Some firms, such as makers of lightning conductors, had only narrow interests, while others were active both in building and other fields. Examples included brass works, lime burners and nail makers. Some firms appear to have extended their interests vertically from raw materials through to merchant activity in finished goods. Others again extended their interests horizontally to embrace numerous different types of goods. An example of this was (and still is) Alfred Gardiner and Sons of Nelson Street and All Saints Street, who advertised as art metal workers, glue merchants, and makers of weather vanes, iron staircases, lifts, stoves and so on. Firms primarily supplying goods and services to sites included (in descending numbers of firms) painters, decorators and paperhangers, carpenters and joiners, plumbers and glaziers, stone and marble masons, gas fitters, plasterers, shop front builders, and others. As well as general builders' merchants, there were specialist merchants in timber (the docks import trade was important here), stone, slate, ironmongery, plasterers' hair, creosote, and other goods. Firms which processed and fabricated goods, largely for installation on site by others, included an almost endless list of glass workers, zinc workers, and makers of window blinds, electric bells, burglar and fire alarms, gas stoves and the like. Finally, there were the producers of bulk goods including at least twenty-two quarry owners, nineteen brick and tile makers, a similar number of saw mills, six paint manufacturers, four lead manufacturers, four makers of iron sheeting and girders, three manufacturers each of drain pipes and stoneware, and two each of manufacturers of cement and asphalt. These primary producers of materials, perhaps, were the most impressive in operation, and some of the most likely to have left evidence behind them.

The producers of bulk goods were located in a clear pattern. In the north and east were quarries scattered in such places as Hambrook, Stapleton, Fishponds, Hanham and Oldland. Brick and tile makers were tied equally to sources of raw material, being particularly evident east and south of the city as well as further afield, for example in Almondsbury,

Pucklechurch, Littleton-on-Severn and Portishead. One group of brick and tile makers occupied premises around Upper Easton, among which were Cattybrook in Lawrence Hill, Enoch Fussell in Elm Grove Road, William Hickery in the same road, and the inappropriately named Samuel Stone. In Bedminster another group of brick and tile makers were Isaac Bennett of Limetree House, North Street; the Bristol Colliery Co. Ltd, Malago Colliery, West Street; The Fishponds and Bedminster Brick and Tile Co., Luckwell Lane; and Henry Sampson of Malago Vale. A further group in St. Phillip's Marsh were the Avon Bank Brick and Tile Co., Feeder Road; Thomas Bennett, Aberdeen Street; Thomas Hickery and Son, and Henry Howes.

A great part of all materials output came from, or was processed in, St. Philips and St. Philip's Marsh. Three limeburners in St. Philip's Marsh, Messrs. Shellard, Nurse and Watts, no doubt added to the atmosphere created by the brickworks. Asphalt came from C. Bradshaw and Son of Chapel Street and George Melsom of Victoria Road. William Butler and Co's tar and creosote store was in St. Philips and another pungent-smelling activity was the drain pipe making of the Bristol Fire Clay Co. in Passage Street. Nearby was galvanizing and iron working by the Redcliff Crown Galvanized Iron Co., Chapel Street, which offered complete iron churches if required. Galvanizing and iron girders came from John Lysaght Ltd's St. Vincent Works, iron sheeting from George Bailey of Lucky Lane, and iron girders from John Priest and Sons of Tower Hill. The claim of St. Phillips to be the heart of materials processing activity is reinforced by two sawmills and the works of Alfred Ireland, of 8 Cheese Lane, who had varied interests in cement, plaster and paint.

In Redcliff was a contiguous group of firms with similar interests. Here, however, it is less easy to distinguish manufacturing premises from warehouses and offices.

Malago Colliery & Brick Works
 BEDMINSTER, BRISTOL.
Registered Telegraphic Address—MALAGO, BRISTOL. Telephone No. 233.
 CELEBRATED BEDMINSTER GREAT VEIN COAL. MACHINE AND HAND-MADE
 BRICKS, TILES, SQUARES, DRAIN-PIPES, &c.

S. CASHMORE & CO.,
 Victoria Street, Temple Street, Temple Backs, and Bastavon,
 BRISTOL.
 ESTABLISHED 1820.
GLASS, LEAD, OIL, COLOUR,
 AND
PAPERHANGINGS MERCHANTS.

Three lead manufacturers were evident in 1883: S. Cashmore and Co., Victoria Street, who advertised nationally and referred to export trade; S.J. Fear, 17 Redcliff Street, and Sheldon Bush and Co. of 55-56 Redcliff Hill. Paint and tar was offered by Colthurst and Harding and timber by Wickham and Norris, both of Temple Gate. In Temple Back the Crown Clay Co. handled bricks, tiles, plaster, drain pipes and terra cotta. In the same street were the two

stoneware manufacturers J.G. Hawley and William Powell and Sons, and similar work was carried on by Price, Sons and Co., 69 Victoria Street.

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS—"DENTY," BRISTOL. TELEPHONE No. 187.

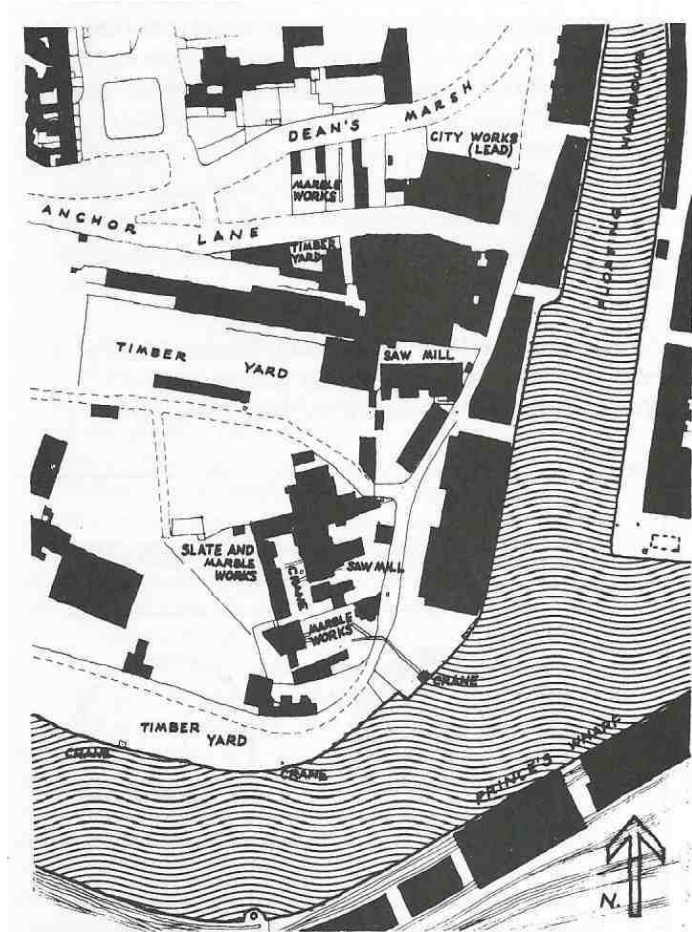
HEBER DENTY,
English and Foreign Timber Merchant,
SAWING, PLANING & MOULDING MILLS.

Mahogany, Walnut, Wainscot, Stettin & American Oak, Ash, Birch, Whitewood
 Teak, Kauri Pine, Ash Oars, Spokes, Felloes, Spars, Rick & Scaffold Poles, &c.

CANONS' MARSH, BRISTOL.

The remaining centre for bulk materials was Canon's Marsh, extending west along the waterfront. Here, among timber firms were Heber Denty., founded in 1853, and Jones and Wainwright, founded in 1844, both of whom by the early 1890s occupied yards covering six or more acres. Canon's Marsh also supported lead and paint manufacturers Rowe Bros. and Co. and national-scale stone and marble importing firm Gooddy Cripps and Son Ltd., which dated from 183

0



Canon's Marsh: Industries related to building. 1903
 (Based on OS 25 inch: mile map)

What does this short survey suggest for the study and enjoyment of industrial archaeology? As a subject, the building industry has been handicapped by a problem of identity, despite its vast sprawling character and great

economic importance. Because it was footloose and impermanent, the industry is ill-defined in nature and extent; to study building activity is to pursue a moving target. Yet, in spite of these elusive ways, some promising avenues exist. The first is suggested by the larger building firms, once scattered over the city and exemplified by Stephens and Bastow. They occupied sizeable premises housing much fixed plant as well as portable equipment, about which little seems to be known. The second avenue is suggested by the firms of extractors, processors and suppliers of goods used in building. Some of the better known ones were dispersed over suburbs and surrounding country, but, largely in a narrow zone stretching from St. Philips westwards to the docks, were multitudes of others. Together these brickworks, iron works, sawmills, slate yards, and all the rest contained much of fascination. Here was all the paraphernalia of combustion, power, cutting, working, lifting and so on which are near the centre of industrial archaeology.

Acknowledgements

Grateful acknowledgements are extended to the British Architectural Library, Avon County Reference Library, and BIAS member Roger Wilkes.

Notes and References

- 1 Powell C G *An Economic History of the British Building Industry 1815 1979*. Architectural Press, 1980. p68-84 discusses the industry, in general terms.
- 2 Census of Eng/and and Wales (43 & 44 Vict. C37) 1881, Vol. III. London, 1883. p250 refers only to people in the Urban Sanitary District, omitting many heavily-populated adjoining districts.
- 3 *Kelly's Directory of Somersetshire, with the City of Bristol*. Kelly, 1883.
- 4 *The Builder* various dates. Other periodicals consulted were *The Architect* and *Building News*.
- 5 *Progress: 1893, Commerce*. London Printing and Engraving Co., 1893. p195; and Savage R D *Histories of Famous Firms, Bristol Survey* (Pt. 7). Published by author, 1959.
- 6 *Building Contractors. Stephens, Bastow & Co. Ltd., Montpelier*, Bristol. 1909.
- 7 Ward O 'The Mills of the Bristol Frome', *BIAS Journal* 11, 1978, p28. The site was formerly occupied by Rennison's Baths, popular during the late 18th and 19th centuries, which had in turn incorporated the former site of Terrett's Mills. (Editor's note).
- 8 *Kelly's Directory of the Building Trades Comprising Every Trade and Profession*. Kelly, 1886 contained more than 75 trades, but some overlapping and grouping together existed.