

Bristol's small shops

David Helps

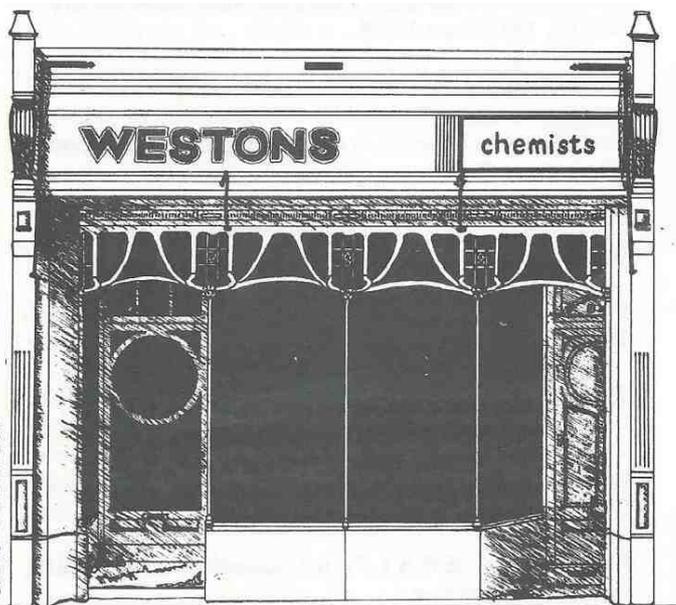
Much research based on archaeological evidence is carried out on manufacturing industries and transport routes but relatively little on sites where the goods were finally distributed to the public. This is an aspect of industrial archaeology which merits more attention, as the physical evidence is being lost at an alarming rate. Increasingly, the main outlet for goods has been through shops, which started to take over from markets in pre-roman times and, in Bristol, there still exists a representative range of shop-fronts which reflect the steady increase in level of retailing sophistication, and also the economic and artistic standards of their era.

Unfortunately, as shops are usually in still active business areas, the archaeological evidence they provide is in constant danger of being swept away. The insertion of modern shop-fronts in the more prosperous areas, or the drastic revision of period styles, especially in the 'down-market' shopping areas by tatty strips of plastic laminates and ply-wood, coupled with modern stick-on lettering, obliterates much of the original evidence still remaining. It was the realisation of drastic loss of valuable examples of shop-fronts that led the writer about five years ago to commence seriously the photographic recording of the relatively pure examples remaining. In this short intervening period very many of those items photographed have gone for ever.

Illustrations by Jennifer Birkett
and Catherine Gordon

is very pronounced, and those of the 1920s and the Edwardian era can now only be found by very diligent searching. Victorian and even Regency shops have often fared better, although apart from those, say in Clifton, most are in run-down inner-city areas and often they are in a deplorable condition.

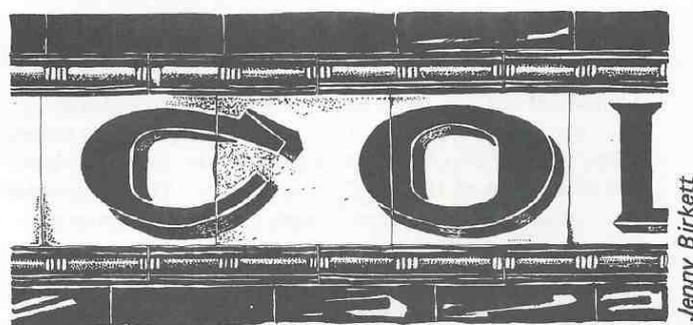
One interesting group of good examples of the 1930s art-deco style of shop is in Bedminster, and their survival here is due to economic factors. In the mid-1930s, at the height of the art-deco period, Bedminster was a comparatively prosperous area. This was owing to the presence of factories belonging to Wills, Robinsons, Mardons and other major companies who were not so badly affected as other firms by the depression of the earlier years of the decade, and who recovered sooner. Their workers of those days lived relatively close-by and, for the period, had a comparatively high disposable income. Inroads into the trade of the Bedminster shops had not then been made by the later supermarket chains, so the local shopkeepers were able to afford the latest styles. After World War II there was a general migration out of the area, and business there has steadily declined to the extent that few of the surviving shops can now afford to replace their 1930s shopfronts with the all-conquering aluminium of the present day, so valuable period examples survive.



Westons, chemists, North Street, Bedminster

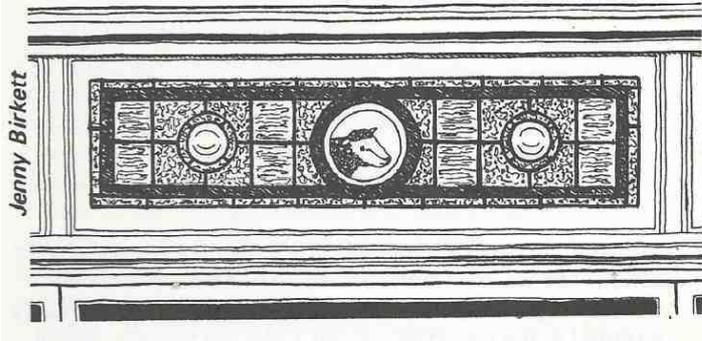
The fascia of this shop, originally a grocer, has been replaced and is totally out of sympathy with the remainder.

Unlike factory buildings and similar industrial remains the loss is greatest not among the oldest examples but among the more recent specimens. 'Yesterday's styles' are going before they have even become 'the-day-before-yesterday's styles'! The loss of shop-fronts erected in the late 1930s



Lettering on glazed tiles under the windows of Collard's Bedminster shop illustrated on the front cover of this Journal.

In the absence of access to the title-deeds of the buildings, which would be difficult to obtain, the dating of shops, or more precisely the shop fronts which are the most susceptible to change, can never be precise, especially when dealing with well over a hundred representative types which have been noted so far. Therefore other methods of dating have to be used which, if intelligently applied, can give an accuracy to about ten years, and sometimes to five years or so. This can be achieved by noting the surrounding building material, the finishes applied to metal surfaces (for example bronzing, or later, anodising), types of glass, and perhaps that most useful, but strangely often overlooked guide to dates, namely typefaces. Very old typefaces can often be detected under several subsequent coats of paint.



The textured and coloured leaded lights over the windows at Collard's shop.

Once brightly-polished-brass window sills, on many inner-city shops now painted over or abandoned to dirt, will often reveal incised lettering in styles of typeface which give a good guide to their period. It is possible to find attachments to shops which provide dating material; one shop still has over the door an old fan-tail gas-light fixture predating the introduction of the incandescent mantle. A guide to the original trade of the shop can often be established by structural items; butchers and fishmongers prior to refrigeration used to incorporate large areas of wrought or cast-iron grilles for ventilation, often coupled with sliding sash windows - even plate glass of considerable weight and area was made to open. Another example, of an ironmongers premises, still has rows of hooks over the shop from which were hung the long battens studded with nails on which items, such as mop-heads or brooms, were displayed during the day. Certain areas of the city such as Easton, have an interesting siting of their shops, completely different but in some ways more practical for the local shopper than later ideas.

This is an area of research which is almost impossible to deal with in the form of a conventional article. Without reproducing the full photographic record it is only possible to try to point out the scope of the subject, and to indicate the practical approaches which can be useful in building up



a background to any shop or location. Given time for further research, this outline can form a reasonable basis for more detailed study in the appropriate areas of economic and social history, and the municipal records surrounding a particular shop or group of shops, should you wish to investigate in depth. It must be remembered however, that in this field one may be dealing in archaeological terms with a hundred or more different sites, so it has to be accepted that one is then starting work on a very broad canvas, and such detailed research is not feasible for many industrial archaeologists. In a short item such as this the writer has had to over-simplify and only refer to some of the practical lines of approach to a subject that can become surprisingly extensive but I hope may have awakened an interest in this field to others. It is desirable at least to create some record of what has gone before. Many of the shop fronts erected even in the 1950s, in places such as Broadmead, have been replaced several times; change has been that rapid. Furthermore, it has not been possible to describe such specialised sales outlets such as garages, which in themselves have changed out of all recognition in a period of fifty years or so. You try to find a garage of the Edwardian period or even the 1920s. Here is another field wide open and as far as is known quite unrecorded.

Below left: Stirret's shop at North View, Redland, Bristol.

Most of this shopfront is original and above the door is a cast-iron ventilation grille. The hand painted lettering beneath the window is typical of poster typeface dating from around 1900.

Directly below: A good example of early corporate design. David Greig's grocer chain used the thistle motif extensively. This tile example is from a shop in **Meadow Street, Weston-super-Mare** which also has cast-iron brackets incorporating this design



Shops are where the goods went, and the writer submits are just as much a part of industrial archaeology as the iron works and factories that made them, and the canals and railways that carried them.