

## New Dock at Pill

**John Rich**

### The Location

The hamlet of Pill in the middle of the eighteenth century was so vastly different from the village we know today that a few comparisons are worth looking at in order to set the scene.

For instance, the row of tiny tenements alongside the creek, shown on the annexed map as numbers 3 to 22 were already gone by 1850 and the stark brickwork of today's railway viaduct would never have been where it is if the Pill Dock Bill had become an Act of Parliament. It is interesting to speculate just where the railway line would have passed through the village of Pill, for it could never have crossed a 200 ft wide dock with a single span in 1840, on purely economic grounds alone. It is very likely that if the dock had been built then the railway line would have had to have gone over the valley on a huge viaduct stretching from halfway up Hamgreen Hill, across the bottom of Westward Drive, on over the area of land at the rear of the new blocks of flats and into Church Path Road. No doubt there would also have to have been a massive cutting from Church Path Road through Lodway to meet the flat land leading to Portbury and Portishead.

Without doubt Pill was the most important part of the Gordano Valley at the time and to justify that statement a study of the 1841 census reveals that the Hamlet of Pill had 360 inhabited dwellings whilst the whole of the rest of the valley could only muster 408 in total, Portishead having a mere 159 houses. Clevedon, for instance, returns its number of inhabitants as 1748 which is exactly the same as the Hamlet of Pill, but remember that the Watch House, Hamgreen and Haperton areas were in Portbury at the time and the first two mentioned could add a further 32 dwellings and 150 people, thus bringing the population of the creek side hamlet to a true figure of 1898. A complete breakdown of census returns are appended to this paper.

Before starting the account of the new dock let us look briefly at the row of creek-side tenements, long gone and, until the rediscovery of the dock plans in April 1978, long forgotten. By reference to the official census of 1841 it is possible to get a fairly clear picture of these buildings and the people who lived in them. It seems that most of the male inhabitants were connected with the water in one capacity or another as the census names most of the occupants of Union Row, as it was called, as females or children and a footnote states '85 men (pilots) were at sea on the night of the return' It is very doubtful if they were all pilots one would think.

There were 20 dwellings all with their backs falling sheer to the creek side, some being of three storey construction whilst having as little as 8 ft frontage. The lane between the two rows of buildings narrowed in some parts to as little as 5 or 6 feet and must have made the passage of transport to and from the ferry-side pubs very difficult indeed at times.

Numbers 3 and 4 were already derelict in 1841 and probably mark the start of the decline of that particular row of buildings, although no firm date for the demolition of the tenements has yet been discovered. In number 5 lived 28-year old Charles Rumley with his 25-year old wife Jane and their two sons, George aged 11 and Charles at 5. His neighbours in number 6 were Sarah Adams, the 33-year old mother of young Sarah aged 7 and, whilst no licensed pilot by the name of Adams is listed for 1841, the name of Adams was linked with the sea before and after this date, so we assume Mr Adams was one of the 85 men at sea.

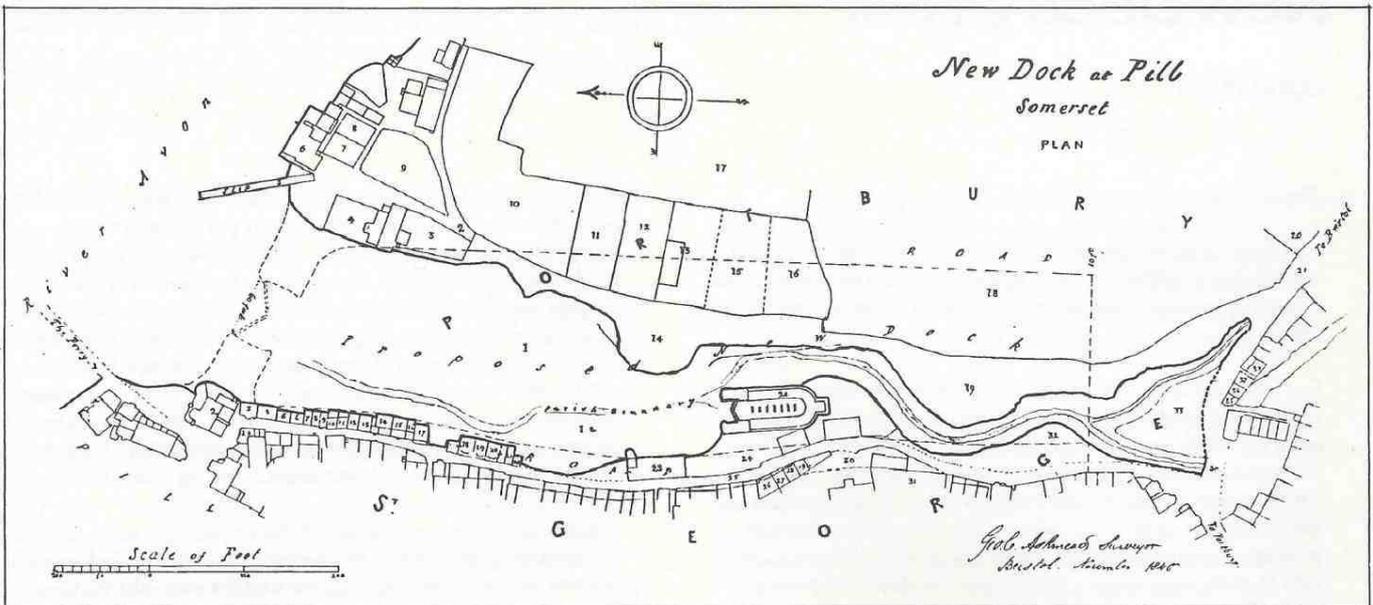
It is not possible to trace all of the occupants accurately but, remembering the size of the tenements, one or two more are worthy of note. Number 11 housed 64-year old William Dyer, the mason, plus Harriet (29) and Charlotte (25). Mr Dyer was probably a widower as it was a rare thing indeed for women to be away alone in those days. Next door in number 12 was James Rowles a 38-year old shoemaker, with his wife Elizabeth (35) and their five children, Mary (15), James (13), Louise (8), Elizabeth (3) and Eliza (1): seven people in a minute tenement without any mains services, although there is little doubt where any effluent went, yet the road frontage of the property was less than twelve feet. 60-year old Edward Seville lived in number 14. A tombstone in Portbury churchyard names one Seville 'Boatman', probably of the same lineage.

Finally it is safe to assume that number 19 was a shop of some kind, for here lived one Elizabeth Parker, shop-keeper, aged 48 and her daughters Mary (19) and Sarah (17). Also recorded in the same building are James Smith (38), Thomas Hook (21), and another Sarah Parker aged 66. If her husband was still alive, and perhaps one of the 85 away on the night of the census, then no less than five adults and two teenaged girls lived in number 19, even though it was a shop.

### Dock proposals

1840 was drawing to a close. The penny post had been established since January, with its, now valuable, penny blacks. Captain Wilkes had discovered the Antarctic coast soon after and Beau Brummel had died in March, the GWR opened its route from Bristol to Bath. Not a particularly outstanding year, 1840, but for The Crockerne Pill and the inhabitants of its surrounding hamlet, especially those who worked from it, the month of November must have been one of the most important in their lives. It was then that James Adam Gordon, the then Lord of the Manor, put forward his plan to dockise the Pill in order to compete with Bristol for the increasing mercantile traffic that was using the river Avon and its attendant Roadsteads.

The Pill Dock was to be some **880** ft long with a maximum width of 220 ft, thus requiring a massive amount of excavation and consuming both boat-building yards and dry dock, not to mention the local sawmill and a large number of



Plan for Dockising the 'Crockerne Pill' in the County of Somerset  
Original map is at The Somerset Record Office, Obridge Road, Taunton, Somerset.

Drawn in November 1840 by George C Ashmead

dwelling houses. It was to have a single pair of gates at the mouth of the creek, opening to a width of 60 ft, placed between two large piers which were to be built out from either side.

Unfortunately no copy of the Pill (Somerset) Dock Bill has yet been found although searches of the House of Lords Records' Office have shown that James Adam Gordon petitioned the House of Commons for leave to bring in the bill on the 12th of February 1841. On the 24th February 1841 a committee reported that the bill complied with the standing orders of the house and leave was given to Sir William Miles (Conservative) of Leigh Court and Colonel William Gore-Langton (Liberal) of Newton Park, both members of parliament for the then East Somerset constituency, to bring in the bill. The bill was read for the first time on the 19 March 1841 and a second time on the 30 April.

The feelings of the water-side people of the day must have been very mixed indeed and it is doubtful if the plan had much local support. Mr Gordon owned practically the whole of the property to be affected in addition to the banks of the creek and it is unlikely that the opinions of local residents had even crossed his mind for at that time, there were no laws of protection from unscrupulous and profiteering landlords.

### The Opposition

It was not only some of the local residents who felt concern over the plan but the Corporation of Bristol together with the merchants, who had very large capital investments in their own dock scheme some five miles further up the river. For Wednesday 21st April 1841, a minute of the Bristol Corporation reads:

Upon the consideration of two bills now pending in parliament, the one for making a pier in the parish of Portbury in the county of Somerset, with works and approaches connected

therewith - and the other for making a dock adjacent to the river Avon at Pill in the county of Somerset.

It was resolved that the said bills be referred to a special committee now to be named with a request to report thereon to an early meeting of the Council and that such Committee shall consist of,  
Alderman John Vining, Alderman Edward Harley,  
Councillors John Evans Lunell, Robert Edward Case, Charles Bowla Hare, William Done Bushell, and William Tothill.

This committee completed its report in time for the Quarterly Meeting of the Bristol Council held in May 1841 which was chaired by the Mayor, the Right Worshipful Robert Phippen Esquire. The *Bristol Gazette* of 5th May 1841 reports the discussion in detail, and the minutes of the meeting are preserved in the Bristol Record Office, the following extracts from both being worthy of note.

*Bristol Gazette report:* 'The usual Quarterly Meeting of the Council was held this morning, The Attendance of members was not numerous.'

After preliminary statements the following heading appears.

### The Portbury Pier Bill, the Pill Dock Bill, and the Severn Navigation Bill.

The Mayor said it would be necessary to take these subjects at once into consideration, as the bills were in progress through the House of Commons, and the Pill Dock Bill was fixed for a second reading on Friday; and if any opposition was intended a petition must be sent off that day.

The report of the Committee, to which these subjects were referred, was accordingly read.

The actual report does not appear in the Gazette but fortunately is preserved in the City archives and reads thus.

With reference to the bill for making a dock adjacent to the river at Pill, your Committee consider that it embraces various points requiring the particular attention of the Corporation. Your Committee would first notice that the Company to be

appointed by the bill is a private Company who are to carry the objects of the bill into execution for their own individual benefit, and, as it appears to your Committee, with power to admit to, or exclude vessels from the proposed dock, as they may think fit. That the Corporation are the owners of the Port of Bristol, and Conservators of the rivers within the same, and that the Pill or Creek proposed to be inclosed, is a part of the river Avon, which, at the spot where the works are to be made, is of barrow breadth. That the Company propose to take possession of the aforesaid Creek or Pill, and apply the same and use the water of the river Avon flowing into it, for their own purposes. That such Creek or Pill, has been for a long period used by the pilots of the port, as a place for the mooring and laying up of their boats when not on service, and that great inconvenience would arise, if they were deprived of this place for the aforesaid purposes.

That there are several clauses in the bill prohibiting vessels navigating the river Avon from laying or being moored within certain distances of the entrance of the dock, which might tend to prevent the free use of the river and be attended with great public inconvenience, if not with danger to the navigation.

That the powers to be invested in the Dock Master to be appointed by the Company, will interfere with the rights and duties of the Haven Master of the Port.

That there appears to be no time limited for the completion of the works.

Your Committee are of the opinion, that on the points referred to, and on other details, it is quite necessary for the Corporation to interfere and it is therefore submitted that the bill should be referred back to your Committee, with power to affix the City Seal to any petition to parliament, in respect of the same, and to propose such alterations and modifications in the bill as may be deemed expedient - and also, if necessary, to oppose the bill in parliament, and that The Treasurer be authorized to make the necessary advances for those purposes.

*The Bristol Gazette* report continues.

Mr Hellicar moved that the report be received and confirmed.

Mr Clarke seconded the motion.

Mr Powell strongly opposed the formation of a pier at Portbury and the Pill Dock, and contended that the Dock Company had no power to reduce the tolls upon vessels using such pier, and not coming into the harbour or works of the Company, as had been agreed to at a meeting of the proprietary.

(Discussion had taken place earlier regarding charges to Portbury Pier).

After much further discussion on tariffs and other matters surrounding the proposals, the original motion that the report be received and adopted, and the necessary steps taken for carrying its recommendations into effect, was

carried unanimously. Remembering that *The Bristol Gazette* states that the attendance at the meeting was small it is fair to say that just a handful of City Fathers had hammered the first nail into the coffin of the Pill Dock.

Patrick McGrath in his book, *The Merchant Ventures of Bristol* notes that during the period when the Society was so well represented on the Board of the Bristol Dock Company,

It did not show any enthusiasm for schemes which might interfere with the prosperity of the City Docks. In 1841 it joined the Corporation in opposing the Pill Dock Bill. The Society claimed that the proposal to convert Pill into a public creek was put forward by 'a private company . . . for their own individual benefit'.

Just what were the Merchants doing in Bristol one might think?

The urgency put forward by the Mayor at the Quarterly Meeting was taken up and on 7th May, just two days after the meeting, petitions from the Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of Bristol were presented to Parliament, seeking leave to be heard against the bill. On 12th May 1841 the House ordered that the bill be withdrawn.

The final episode was enacted in London and as a report to the Corporation from the sub-committee set up to look into the matter states:

Your Committee referring to their report made to the Council upon the subject on the 5th day of May last, now report, That they caused a petition to be presented to parliament against the said bill, and obtained evidence in support of the allegations contained therein. That subsequently a negotiation took place in London by the sanction of your Committee between the Solicitor of the Corporation and Mr Gordon and his Solicitor the result of which was the abandonment of the bill.

No further mention of the plan occurs in any known records and one wonders what actually is meant in the preceding paragraph by the word 'negotiation'. Did money pass hands? Surely James Adam Gordon did not just back down having incurred no small expense to prepare and present his plan. We may never know, but the search will continue.

**SCHEDULE FOR PARISH OF ST GEORGE**

otherwise Easton in Gordano

No on Plan	Description of Property	Owners or reputed owners	Lessees or reputed lessees	Occupiers
1	The Ferry	James Adam Gordon Esq	Elizabeth Gilmore	Elizabeth Gilmore
1a	The Pill	The Corporation of Bristol & J A Gordon		
2	Red Lion Inn	James Adam Gordon Esq		Ann Raw

**BIAS JOURNAL No 16 1983**

<b>No on Plan</b>	<b>Description of Property</b>	<b>Owners or reputed owners</b>	<b>Lessees or reputed lessees</b>	<b>Occupiers</b>
2a	House in two tenements	ditto	James Edington	Edward Williams & Charlotte Colburn
3	Tenement	ditto		void
4	Tenement	ditto		void
5	Tenement	ditto		Charles Rumley
6	Tenement	ditto		Sarah Adams
7	Tenement	ditto		Joseph Gold
8	Tenement	ditto		William Buck
9	Tenement	ditto		John Cox
10	Tenement	ditto	Ann Rogers	John Hale
11	Tenement	ditto	ditto	William Dyer
12	Tenement	ditto	ditto	James Rowles
13	Tenement	ditto	Samuel Bailey	Edward Seville
14	Tenement	ditto	Elizabeth Gilmore	Elizabeth Athersuch
15	Tenement	ditto	ditto	John Barnabas Young
16	Tenement	ditto	ditto	William Preston
17	Tenement	ditto	ditto	Elizabeth Thomas & Joseph Bull
18	Tenement	ditto	ditto	Jane Duncan
19	Tenement	ditto	ditto	Elizabeth Parker
20	Tenement	ditto	ditto	George Thayer
21	Tenement	James Adam Gordon Esq	Elizabeth Gilmore	Richard Light
22	Tenement	ditto	ditto	John Lawless
23	Coal Yard & Building	ditto	Henry Clutsam	Henry Clutsam
24	Dry Dock, Yard & Buildings	ditto	George Wilkins de Winton	William Morgan
25	Parish Road	Surveyors of Highways		
26	Tenement & Court	James Adam Gordon	Ann Thayer	Alfred Chiswell
27	ditto	ditto	Samuel Hodges	William Lewis
28	ditto	ditto	ditto	George Thomas
29	ditto	ditto	ditto	James Mitchell
30	Star Inn, Garden & Yard	ditto		William Morgan
31	Garden	ditto		ditto
32	Timber Yard	ditto	George Wilkins de Winton	ditto
33	Ancient Mill Site	ditto		ditto
34	Parish Road & Bridge	Surveyors of Highways		
35	Tenement		Richard Durbin	James Porter
36	Tenement		ditto	Richard Case
37	Tenement		ditto	William Hunt
38	Tenement & Court		ditto	Ann Porter & John Wade

**JAMES ADAM GORDON Esq** Lord of the Manor of St George, otherwise Easton in Gordano

SCHEDULE FOR PARISH OF PORTBURY				
No on Plan	Description of Property	Owners or reputed owners	Lessees or reputed lessees	Occupiers
1	The Pill	The Corporation of Bristol & J A Gordon		
2	Road & Bank	James Adam Gordon Esq		
3	Garden & Shed	ditto		William Cripps
4	Cottage & Garden	ditto		Thomas Hill
5	Watch House Slip	ditto		
6	Watch House	ditto		Her Majesty's Board of Customs
7	House & Garden	ditto		William Quick
8	House & Garden	ditto		William Murphy
9	Garden	ditto		Samuel Shorland
10	Garden	ditto		John Deacon
11	Garden	ditto		John Luce
12	Garden	ditto		William Murphy
13	Garden & Boathouse	ditto		Thomas Flowles
14	Yard & Bank	ditto		ditto
15	Garden	ditto		Michael Press
16	Garden	ditto		Thomas Reynolds
17	Pasture	ditto		Thomas Hunt
18	Pasture	ditto		ditto
19	Garden	ditto		Jane Crossman
20	Turnpike Road	The Commissioners of the Bristol Turnpike Trust		
<b>JAMES ADAM GORDON Esq</b> Lord of the Manor of Portbury				

**Statistics for 'Pill' in 1841**

**Population**

Parish of Easton in Gordano 2199 total  
992 males  
1207 females

District of Easton in Gordano 214 males  
98 males under 20 years  
116 males 20 and over  
237 females  
105 females under 20 years  
132 females 20 and over

Hamlet of Pill 778 males  
449 males under 20 years  
329 males 20 and over  
970 females  
463 females under 20 years  
507 females 20 and over

(It was assumed that 85 mariners were at sea at the time the census was taken, thus making the total of males in Pill 863).

There were 28 licensed pilots and 25 pilot boats working from Pill 1841.

**Buildings**

District of Easton in Gordano 91 inhabited  
8 uninhabited  
0 building  
Hamlet of Pill 360 inhabited  
13 uninhabited  
0 building

(The 1851 census shows 16 less actual properties in the Hamlet of Pill, this could account for the demolition of the small tenements alongside the creek, shown on appended map, numbers 3 to 22).