

The Bristol Floating Harbour

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Twenty-two years ago (*BIAS Journal* 6, 1973) we carried an editorial on 'The Future of Bristol City Docks'. This reviewed the various plans for redeveloping the docks in the centre of Bristol which had recently become commercially obsolete. The article set out six principles which we felt should govern planning policy on this issue. In abbreviated form, these principles were:

- 1 That the existing water surface of the Floating Harbour should be retained in its entirety...
- 2 That accessibility to the water-side of the Floating Harbour should be maintained and maximised...
- 3 That redevelopment of the areas adjoining the Floating Harbour should be planned as a whole...
- 4 That comprehensive redevelopment of the City Docks should be integrated with plans for the city centre area...
- 5 That the road schemes for the city centre should be modified in keeping with the above principles...
- 6 That specific buildings and areas of industrial heritage significance should be defined for preservation...

A great deal of success has been achieved in relation to nearly all these principles. All attempts to fill in or cover any part of the Floating Harbour have been successfully resisted. The water surface has been preserved as an amenity for visiting ships and racing events and as a marina for hundreds of small vessels. The road schemes have been re-directed, so that no new roads impinge on the harbour. Much interesting and mainly sympathetic development has taken place around the harbour and its Basins. We would have liked more co-ordination between some of these schemes, and too much has taken place by a piece-meal process. But on the whole the developments of the last quarter century have been most gratifying, and members of BIAS are entitled to a legitimate glow of satisfaction for their positive participation in this conservation of an

industrial townscape. Indeed, it would be fair to claim that the outstanding achievement of BIAS as a society has been its contribution to the preservation of Bristol Floating Harbour.

There are, however, no grounds for complacency. The forces of change exert a continuing pressure on the Floating Harbour, as new proposals arise for development, often without due regard for its historical significance. The Bank development on Canons Marsh, for example, has taken place without proper care being given to the waterfront or other features on the site such as the early concrete goods shed. The proposals by the Bristol Development Corporation, moreover, for a tidal barrier to create permanent high water in the upper part of the New Cut, could be disastrous for the hydraulic system of the Floating Harbour. And the proposal for a footbridge across St. Augustine's Reach threatens to disrupt the splendid maritime prospect from Neptune's statue, while plans to develop the Industrial Museum wharf will destroy one of the last authentic sections of mercantile waterfront. There is, in short, much to be done, and we venture to bring up to date the principles which we formulated so many years ago:

- 1 That the existing hydraulic system of the Floating Harbour, the Feeder Canal, and the tidal New Cut, should be preserved as designed by William Jessop and refined by W.C.Mylne, I.K.Brunel and Thomas Howard.
- 2 That the visual integrity of the Floating Harbour should be maintained by avoiding all new fixed crossings for vehicles or pedestrians, and by preserving the existing Industrial Museum transit sheds with their supporting apparatus of cranes, wharves, preserved ships, and locomotives.
- 3 That the surviving industrial and transport buildings on Canons' Marsh, including the concrete goods shed and the shells of the gas works, should be preserved and sympathetically redeveloped.

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- 4 That Cumberland Basin and its adjoining area, including the Brunel Entrance Lock and Bridges, the Jessop Junction Lock, the Ashton Railway Bridge and the three tobacco bonds (one of which has already been skillfully adapted for re-use by the Bristol Record Office) should all be carefully conserved as features of a fascinating heritage complex.
- 5 That the old PBA workshops, pumping engine and sluices in the Underfall Yard should receive similar attention.
- 6 That a comprehensive scheme for the control and sympathetic redevelopment of the whole of the Floating Harbour, so long overdue, should be devised forthwith on the lines suggested here.