

First Edition Ordnance Survey 1 in map, 1830

## Bristol and the Optical Telegraph: further details

### Robin Stiles

In *BIAS Journal* 28 Monty Ellis referred to the remote possibility (mentioned by Geoffrey Wilson in his book *The Old Telegraphs*), of the City of Bristol having installed a Watson system. Further research confirms that Wilson's original surmise, and Monty Ellis' information, is correct in that B.L. Watson's 1839 application to the Bristol Corporation, Port Charges Committee fell on stony ears. However, there is distinct evidence to show that a system of sorts was installed a few years before, probably by private enterprise. Information thus far is very sketchy.

The First Edition Ordnance Survey 1 in map, published in 1830, clearly marks 'Signal Staff' on Durdham Down at a point on Sea Walls which can be seen from most points within the Avon Gorge. It is also drawn at this location by T.L.S. Rowbotham for a famous series of panoramic pen and ink sketches in 1830 and is noted as 'No. 71 Durdham Down and Signal Post'.

A local Artist, Belinda Sharples, in a painting of 'Durdham Down Race Track' thought to be completed in 1836 (she died in 1838) shows the high pole in the background, with stay ropes or wires but no flag or signal.

An engraving by J. & H. Storer (1826) of the centre of Bristol refers to the 'Signal Station' on the small tower located beside the Floating Harbour. Apparently this was intended for the operation of the drawbridge further up St Augustine's Reach.

To sum up, it is quite definite that a signal pole existed on Durdham Down before Watson appeared on the scene, but who actually installed or operated it remains a mystery, as does its true purpose. One possibility could have been to supplement the tide posts set up in the river to show when it was safe and legal to navigate larger craft round the notorious Horseshoe Bend. Steam Packets in particular would seem to benefit from such information. What is certain is that by 1853 the signal pole, for whatever reason it was set up, would have been made redundant by the new Shirehampton electric telegraph.

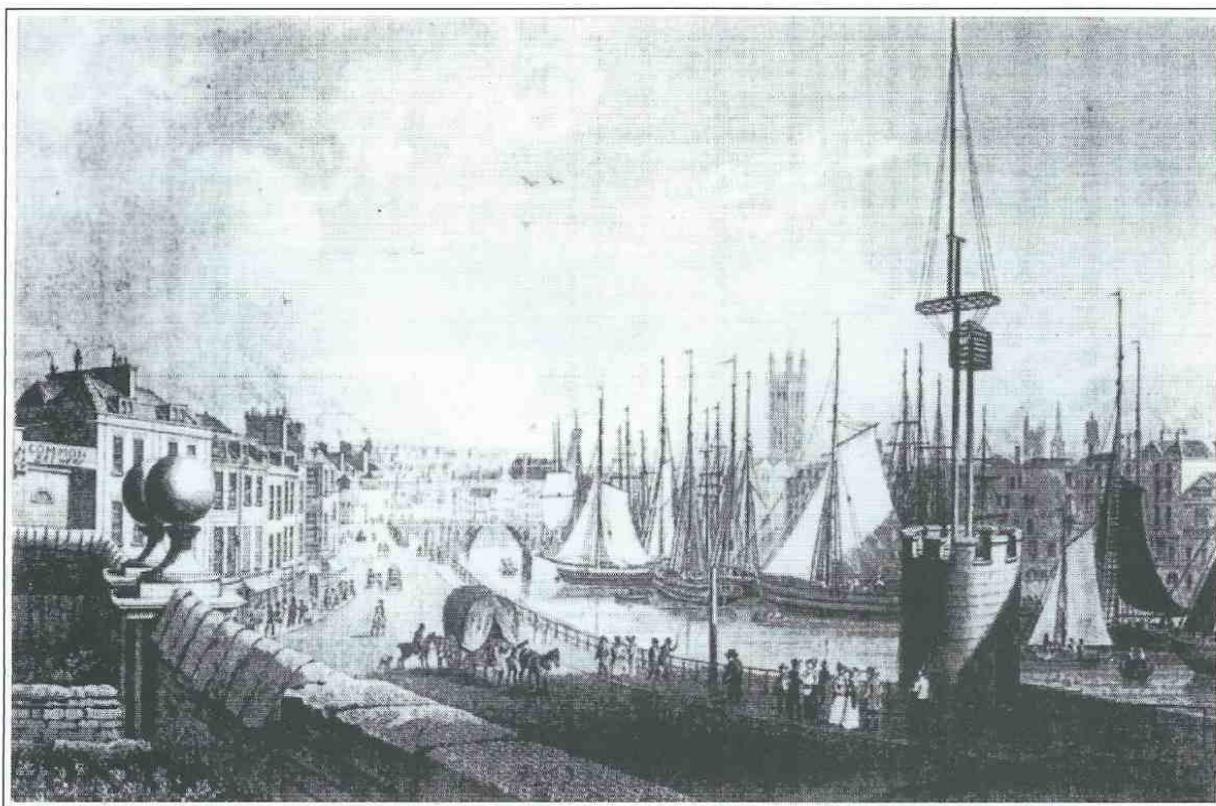
There remains one further mystery on signal poles in the Avon Gorge. Another slender pole with what appears to be a semaphore signal is shown on a watercolour sketch on the edge of Observatory Hill, allegedly by Nicholas Pocock in 1785 (Braikenridge Collection). If that date is correct, then that would appear to be far too early for any Revolutionary War connection.

### Sources

Monty Ellis, 'Bristol and the Optical Telegraph', *BIAS Journal*, 28, (1995) 35-38  
Geoffrey Wilson, *The Old Telegraphs*, (Chichester, 1976)

### Acknowledgements

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Bristol by J. & H. Storer, 1826.