

Charles Nash (1819-1901) and the Port of Bristol

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Fig 1 Charles Nash, from a photograph album in Australia

Introduction: The Port to 1845

From the thirteenth to the eighteenth century the Bristol docks retained their essentially mediaeval situation, being based around the three sides of what is now Queen Square. Ships were obliged to sit on the mud at low tide and port activities were controlled by the tides.

In 1791 the Society of Merchant Venturers asked the Bristol Corporation to set up a joint committee to examine the provision of deep water docks. However, the war with France intervened and no action resulted. The Merchant Venturers paid for many schemes until, eventually, in 1802, the engineer William Jessop's design for entrance locks to be placed at Hotwells was agreed, the River Avon being diverted to the south and thus forming a non-tidal dock area of 80 acres, the largest in Britain at that time. The estimated cost was £150,000 and the Bristol Dock Company was formed to supervise the project. The *Bristol Dock Act* of 1803 set out the basis of the funding: £150,000 in share capital, 4% interest being paid for the first six years, 8% thereafter, and a £50,000 mortgage. The share capital was fully subscribed by June 1802, but shortly afterwards the harbour scheme was

extended to include the Redcliffe arms of the River Avon and this meant a much longer diversion of the river and additional locks. The subsequent cost was estimated at £250,000.

War with France started again in 1803 and continued to 1815. Inflation during this period was so great that when the dock works were finally completed in 1809 the total cost had risen to £594,000, £326,000 being raised in shares and £268,000 in mortgages. A veritable jungle of port charges was built up to provide revenue and Bristol Corporation made the Dock Company the scapegoat for all financial problems! However, in spite of these charges the Dock Company was permanently short of money; right up till 1844, once the mortgages had been paid, the shareholders were only getting $\frac{1}{2}\%$ dividend. But from the point of view of the business interests of the city the dock charges were far too high and complex, and there was so much agitation that in 1823 the Bristol Chamber of Commerce was formed to fight for lower charges.

No significant action appears to have been taken until 1846 when the Free Port Association was formed in order to reform the archaic Dock Company. Under the leadership of Robert Bright, a leading Bristol shipowner, a scheme was proposed to:-

- i) Transfer the Dock Company to the Bristol Corporation,
- ii) Repay shares at 67% of their original value,
- iii) Replace the existing complications with one set of dock charges,
- iv) Reduce the 'Tonnage' rates on shipping by £9400 per annum in total, the deficit to be met by additional Bristol city rates of 4d in the pound.

The *Bristol Dock Act* effected this transfer in 1848 and the Docks Committee was set up to administer the affairs of the Bristol docks with 15 members, all being Bristol councillors with business interests in the city. An immediate result was that charges on foreign shipping were reduced to approximately 50% of their 1809 levels.

Charles Nash in the Years 1819-1863

My great-grandfather, Charles Nash, was born in 1819, the youngest son of James Ezekiel Nash (1778-1845) who was an oil and colour merchant (ie paint and varnish merchant) with premises in Nelson Street, Bristol and a Bristol city councillor. Early in

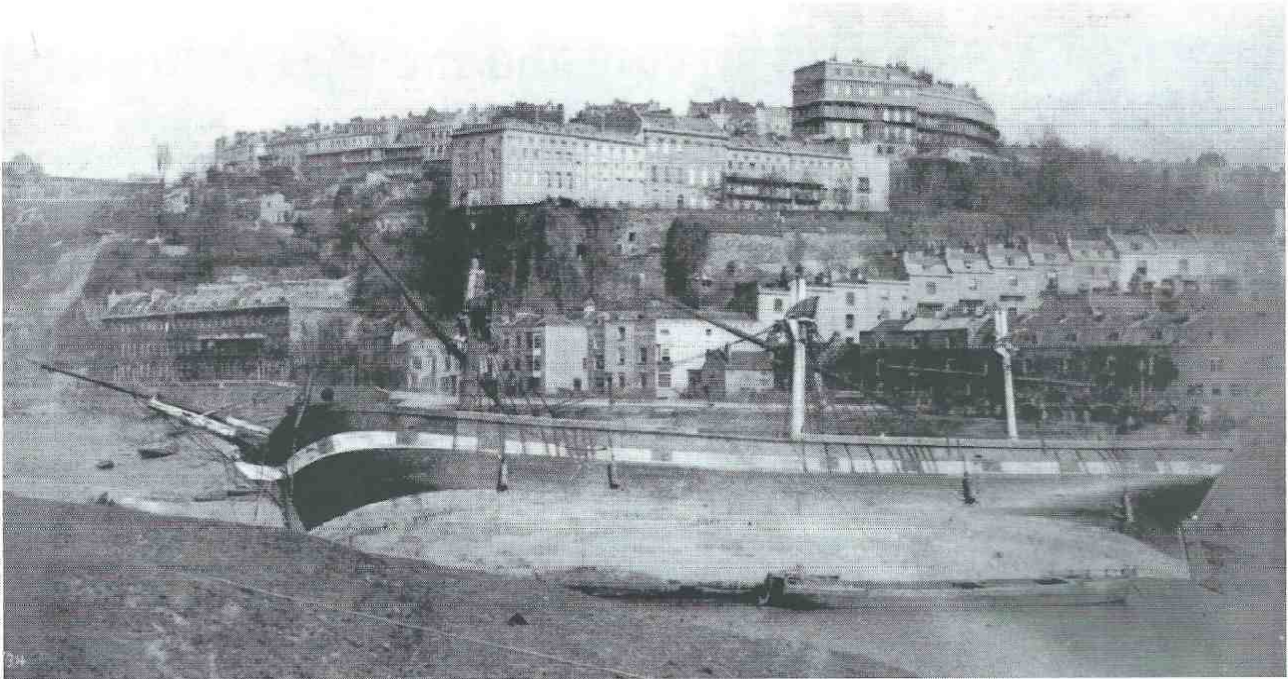


Fig 2 The major problem of Brunel's original entrance lock is seen in this photograph. In March 1854, as the ship *Refuge* was leaving the City Docks, its stern was caught by the ebb tide and swung towards the Gloucestershire bank. As the tide fell the ship fell on its side and its masts came down. Salvage operations were costly and temporarily closed the docks.

National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

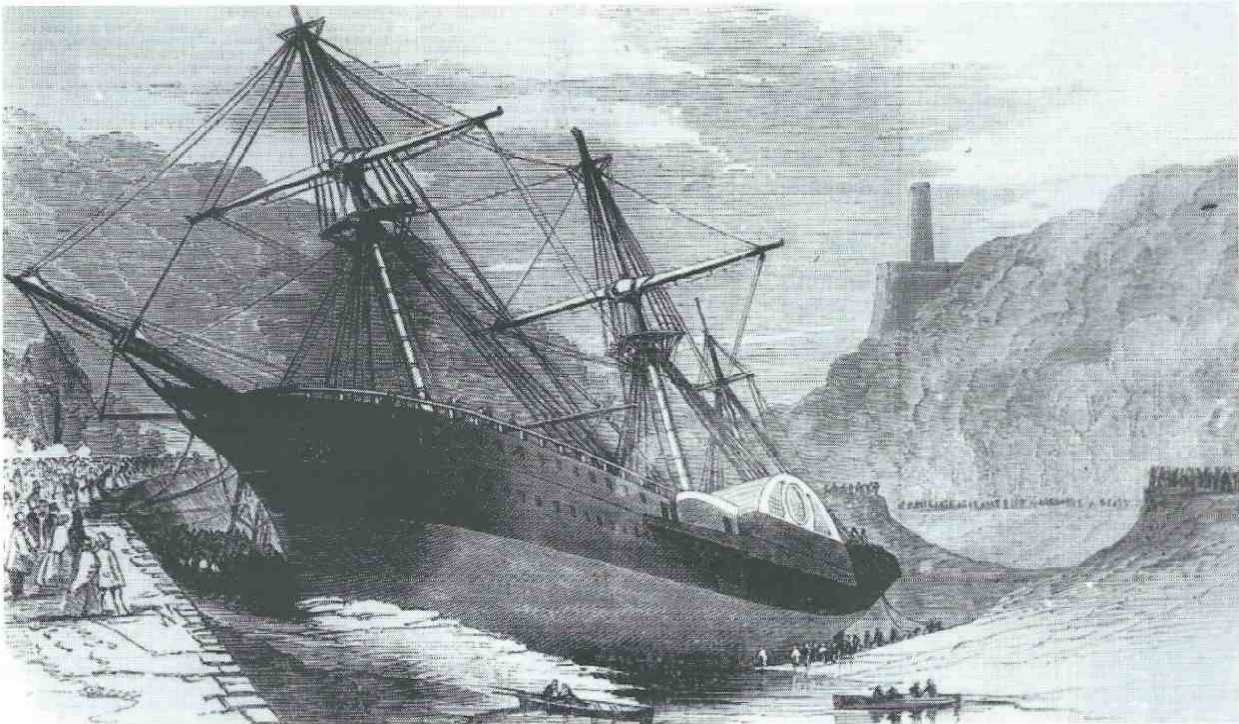


Fig 3 This painting also demonstrates the limitations of the City Docks as the steamship *Demerara* is wrecked in the Avon in 1851 as it was being towed to Glasgow to have its engines fitted. This ship was the largest to be built in Bristol since Brunel's Great Britain and caused major embarrassment to the City Council.

Bristol Museum

his life Charles worked in the office of Robert Bright, the Bristol shipowner mentioned above. In 1846 when the Free Port Association was formed Charles became an enthusiastic and energetic member of it. In 1851 he was elected a city councillor and in 1853 elected to the Docks Committee. Later he became a partner in the timber firm of Jones and Nash.

In 1858 a committee of influential Bristol citizens was set up at a public meeting to co-operate with the Bristol Council to consider the provision of a port to accommodate larger steamships than the existing city docks could handle. Bristol council subsequently approved the motion for new docks at the mouth of the River Avon where it joins the River Severn, the

proposal being seconded by Charles Nash. However an amendment to this motion that no schemes would be passed that would increase the city rate of 4d in the pound was narrowly approved by 25 votes to 24. This amendment had the important long-term consequence that the future Avonmouth and Portishead docks would be constructed over the next 20 year period by private companies, thereby producing competition between the three dock companies that was not in the economic interests of any of them. It is interesting that Charles Nash voted against this amendment, i.e. he wanted Bristol Corporation to fund the new docks. More importantly, the decision began to show the influence of wealthy Cliftonians, the so-called 'Fixed Property Party', who had no direct interest in the port or its trade; this is demonstrated by the fact that the proposer of the amendment, Mr Coates, was a surgeon! A further result of this amendment was that the Docks surplus of £10,000 was completely used up in 1861-62 by a 17% reduction in the port charges.

Charles Nash was elected Deputy Chairman of the Docks Committee during the period 1859-1872 and he was instrumental in putting in hand a new larger lock at Hotwells. He was also a director of the Bristol Steam Navigation Company which owned the *Great Western* steamship. It had been seen for some years that the existing lock was unsafe for the *Great Western* and other ships to use at many tidal conditions (see Fig 2) so that it was necessary to load and unload the ship at the mouth of the Avon onto smaller ships. Therefore Charles Nash was very aware of the need for an improved larger lock. The new lock measured 350 Ft by 62 ft and was to the design of Mr Howard, the Docks Engineer; it was 88 ft longer and 8 ft wider than Brunel's 1850 lock and produced a much easier entrance into the Cumberland Basin. It was approved by the Port authority in 1864 at an estimated cost of £300,000 but was not completed until 1871, since in a prudent manner not always evident in Dock affairs, the source of necessary funds had to be demonstrated before successive stages of the construction proceeded. This 1871 lock is as we see it at Hotwells today.

Charles Nash and the Avonmouth Dock

In 1863 Charles Nash proposed the Bristol Council motion to form a company to oversee the construction of a dock at Avonmouth to the design of Rendell and Thornton and this motion was passed. The entry lock of this new dock was to be 454 ft by 70 ft which was sufficient to take the largest ship of the day, Brunel's *Great Eastern*. This decision resulted in the formation of the Bristol Port and Channel Dock Company to construct the new Avonmouth dock. The necessity

for a dock facility at Avonmouth had already been clear for a number of years and the increasing size of ships made the provision of a dock at the mouth of the Avon even more imperative: disasters such as that shown in Fig 3 were a major embarrassment to the City Council. However, the Bill for the Avonmouth dock was obstinately resisted by a select committee of the House of Commons and was at first rejected in 1863. After a year of struggle the Bill was finally passed by the Committee in 1864. The following article in the *Bristol Times* of 7 May 1864 shows the extent of the battle that was fought in Bristol over the issue:

'It was like a sort of nightmare on the society of the city. Worse than politics, because more bitterly fought and more personally fought. It has cooled if it has not quite destroyed, many friendships and certainly broken up many associations. The struggle has been of a character to break up old acquaintances, to chill conviviality; to make men look pale and spiteful at one another when it was introduced at table, and to feel a personal invitation in discussing it which perilled the preservation of good manners amongst a company'

The financial situation in the country in 1864 was poor enough to prevent an early start on the new dock. However by 1867 financial prospects were much brighter, work on the new dock started and Charles Nash was elected deputy chairman of the newly-formed Avonmouth Dock Company. The chairman of the company was Mr P.W.S. Miles, whose family owned the muddy estuary lands on which the dock was to be built and, from feelings of delicacy, he declined to perform the dock opening ceremony. The result of this was that on 26 August 1867 Charles Nash, rather than the chairman, carried out the opening ceremony of 'cutting the first sod' of the new docks. The Dean of Bristol, Dr Elliot, blessed the new venture and the floating harbour was adorned with bunting in celebration of the event.

In November 1867 the Avonmouth Dock Company announced that £140,000 had already been obtained for the new dock but that work would not proceed until a further £20,000 had been raised; at this, the Merchant Venturers gave £2500. Mr Miles, the Chairman, £10,000 and a number of other donors £10,000 between them and so work began. However, a number of factors intervened to slow down progress on the new dock, notably the fall in railway stock and the subsequent slump. Bank Rate rose to 10% and so construction costs increased. In addition Bristol Corporation did not contribute to the cost of

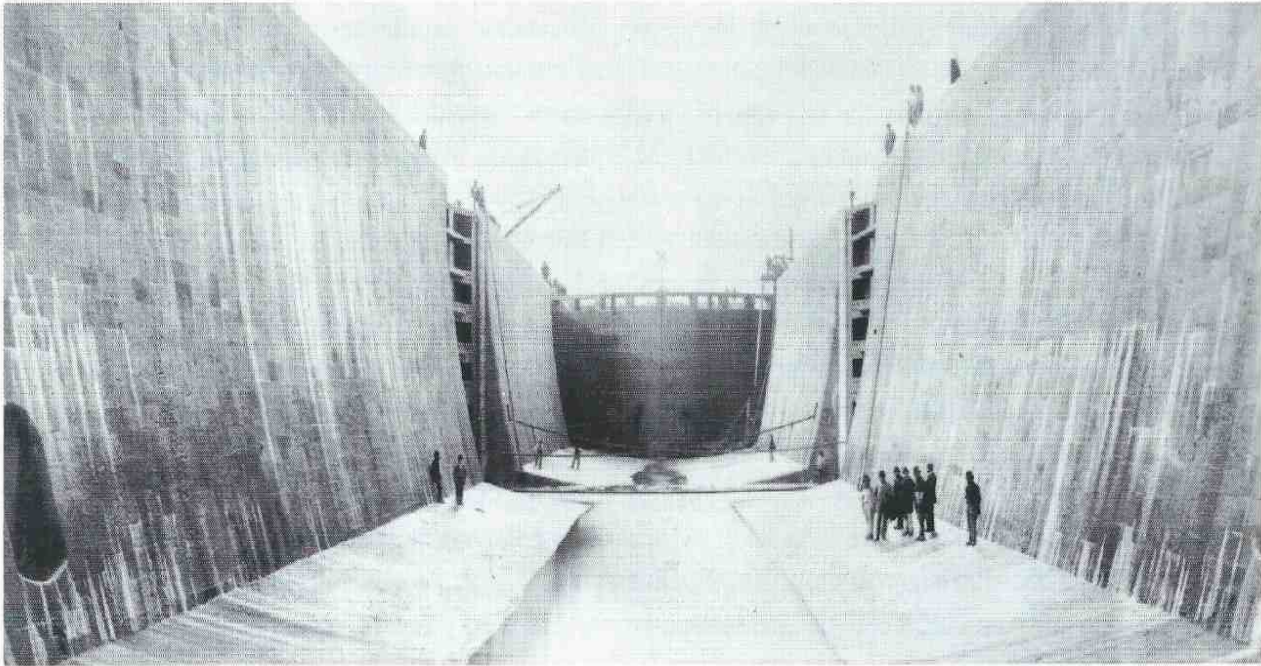


Fig 4 The entrance lock of Avonmouth Dock, shortly before completion in 1876, the gates shown closed. The lock measured 754 ft x 70 ft wide with the maximum water depth over the sill (beyond this photograph) of 38 ft. Bristol Museum

the Avonmouth dock, preferring to vote £100,000 to the rival Portishead Dock, where a number of council members had vested interests! The final outcome of this slump and Bristol politics was that the Avonmouth dock was not finished until 1877 and at a much greater cost than planned. Portishead dock was not completed until 1879 in spite of the financial support of Bristol Corporation. A view of the entrance lock of the Avonmouth dock is shown in Fig 4.

The Avonmouth dock was formally opened on 24 February 1877; the directors obtained the use of a large steamer, the *Juno*, to convey 600 prominent Bristol dignitaries and citizens, including the mayor, to the mouth of the River Avon and then to enter the new dock and proceed round it twice. The dock was surrounded by 15,000 people for the opening ceremony and the banks of the Avon were lined for two miles with crowds of onlookers. A prayer was read by the Archdeacon of Bristol, the Rev Canon Norris, the Mayor declared the dock open and complimented the directors on '*the successful conclusion of their arduous and public-spirited exertions*'. However due the rapidly-falling tide, the ceremony was brought to a speedy conclusion and the visitors returned with all haste to Bristol. That night a grand banquet was held in the Merchants Hall to celebrate the occasion at greater leisure.

On April 8 1878 the *Evelyn* was the first commercial vessel to enter the dock and it unloaded 1500 tons of barley. However shortly afterwards a minor disaster occurred and a dock wall collapsed so that the dock had to be closed; repairs cost £30,000 and the dock was not reopened until June 1879. Although relations with the city docks were never good, it is of interest that the Avonmouth Dock Company agreed to pay

the Bristol Dock Company 50% of the dues received for all sailing ships under 1200 tons cargo weight and for all steamers under 800 tons. However in spite of this income, as will be seen later, Bristol docks still continued to lose money.

The Years 1873 to 1888

In 1873 Charles Nash was elected Chairman of the Docks Committee in succession to James Poole (1859-1872), and during the period 1873 to 1877 my great-grandfather was clearly very much involved in the construction of the Avonmouth dock as well as in Bristol docks affairs. However, in 1875 a new very powerful figure, William Proctor Baker, was elected onto the Docks Committee; he had built up the largest flour mills in Western England on Redcliff Back, and was the champion of the city docks against the 'upstart' new docks at Avonmouth and Portishead. Proctor Baker was able to achieve such support for the city docks that in 1878 the Docks Committee voted that no Avonmouth or Portishead Dock directors should be eligible to be on the Docks Committee also. Charles Nash had clearly 'seen the writing on the wall' and had previously resigned from the chairmanship of the Docks Committee in 1877. And so started the rivalry and competition between the city docks and the Avonmouth and Portishead docks that was a major factor in Bristol losing its position as the premier west coast port.

Charles Nash was aware of the damaging effects of this rivalry; in 1880 he tried to arrange a meeting with the Docks Committee members to promote co-operation rather than competition but they refused to meet directors of the river-mouth docks companies to discuss the situation. By 1881 the Avonmouth and Portishead grain imports together had reached three

times the city docks level, and it appears that trade was so bad in the city docks that Mr Proctor Baker resigned as Chairman of the Docks Committee in 1882. However, the Bristol mayor from 1880 to 1884, Joseph Weston, successfully negotiated with the directors of the three docks to modify competition and then to arrange for the transfer of the river-mouth docks to Bristol Corporation. This took place in 1884 after a long, often acrimonious battle of four years and started a period of co-operation instead of rivalry. Avonmouth dock was bought for £550,000, although Charles Nash declared the capital of the Avonmouth Dock Company to be £800,000! The beneficial effects of this co-operation can be seen in the total tonnage of grain imports at all three docks which rose from 330,000 tons in 1881 to 755,000 tons in 1894. It was good that Charles Nash stayed active in dock affairs during most of this period to see the fruits of co-operation. He retired in 1888 from public affairs due to ill-health at the age of 69.

Figure 5 shows the dock in use in 1901, long before the construction of the Royal Edward Dock.

Bristol City Affairs

In other Bristol affairs Charles Nash was a town councillor for the St. Augustine's ward from 1851 to 1886, and was elected an alderman in 1886, being the first councillor to receive this honour during the period of the reformed Corporation, i.e. a period of more than 50 years. He was President of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce 1874-75. He was a staunch Churchman and a liberal supporter of all matters connected with church affairs. He was described in 1909, after his death, as:

'a man with many amiable qualities and strict integrity; in appearance he was a slightly built man with sharp cut features, wearing a beard and always neatly but plainly dressed'

He lived at 6, Bellevue, Clifton, a large town house just off Constitution Hill which has now been turned rather sadly into four flats with a mass of telephone wires spoiling its frontage. He retired to a large semi-detached house at 22, Leopold Road, St Andrews which was in those days a new suburb. The house has a pleasant outlook over St Andrew's Park and has now been turned into three flats. Now and again he contributed to newspaper correspondence on dock affairs, but did not take any further active part. He died at home in St Andrews on 17 July 1901 at the age of 82.

Charles Nash's Descendents

Charles Nash married Miss Sarah Anne Wilson and they had six children, the most eminent of whom was Vaughan who was private secretary to two successive prime-ministers, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman and Herbert Asquith. In 1998 Charles has 20 known surviving grandchildren, ten of whom live in Australia, two in the U.S.A. and the remaining eight in Britain. However, all are through the female lines so that none of them has the surname of Nash.

Conclusions

It has been seen that Charles Nash was an energetic member of the Free Port Council which was instrumental in Bristol Corporation taking over the Dock Company and he could see the importance of

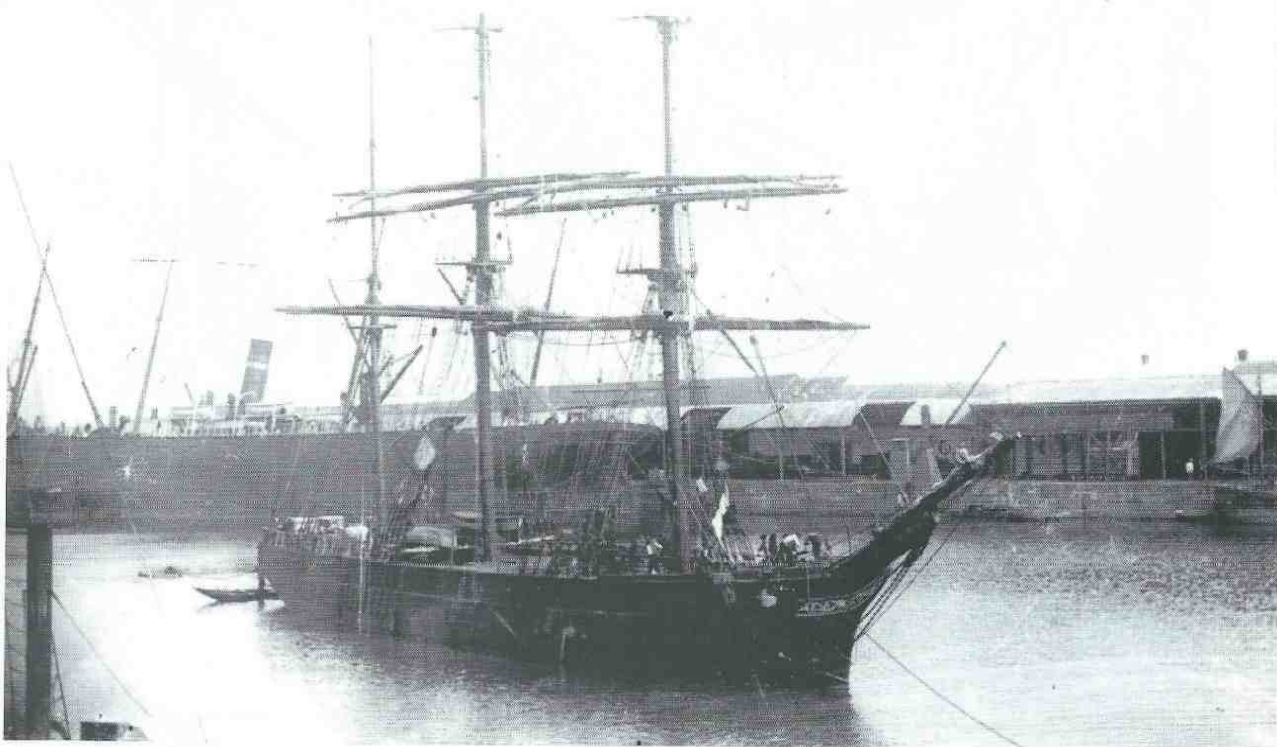


Fig 5 Avonmouth Dock still being used by the aging Petropolis in 1901. This sailing vessel was built in 1854 but was still carrying timber, grain and coal.

the development of a river-mouth dock for the long-term future and prosperity of Bristol as a major west coast port. However his attempts to obtain financial backing for the Avonmouth docks project by Bristol Corporation were thwarted by powerful lobbies, firstly of influential Cliftonians and then later of William Proctor Baker. The fact that Avonmouth dock was developed without Bristol Corporation funding had the long-term consequence that competition between the three docks reached such a level that all of them made losses until 1884 when Bristol Corporation finally bought out the river-mouth dock companies.

With the benefit of hindsight the vision of Charles Nash and his colleagues in building the Avonmouth dock has been seen to be vindicated; it was achieved in the face of great opposition and financial difficulties but he and his colleagues were able to see that the long-term requirements of the city were for docks to accommodate larger and larger ships. This view has subsequently been seen to be correct,

firstly with the building of the Royal Edward Dock at Avonmouth and then more recently of the Royal Portbury Dock. Also, commercial traffic in the city docks has virtually ceased, but the long-term benefits of the Bristol Docks history are now enjoyed by all Bristolians and tourists and make the Bristol city centre the attractive place we all know and love.

Sources: Docks

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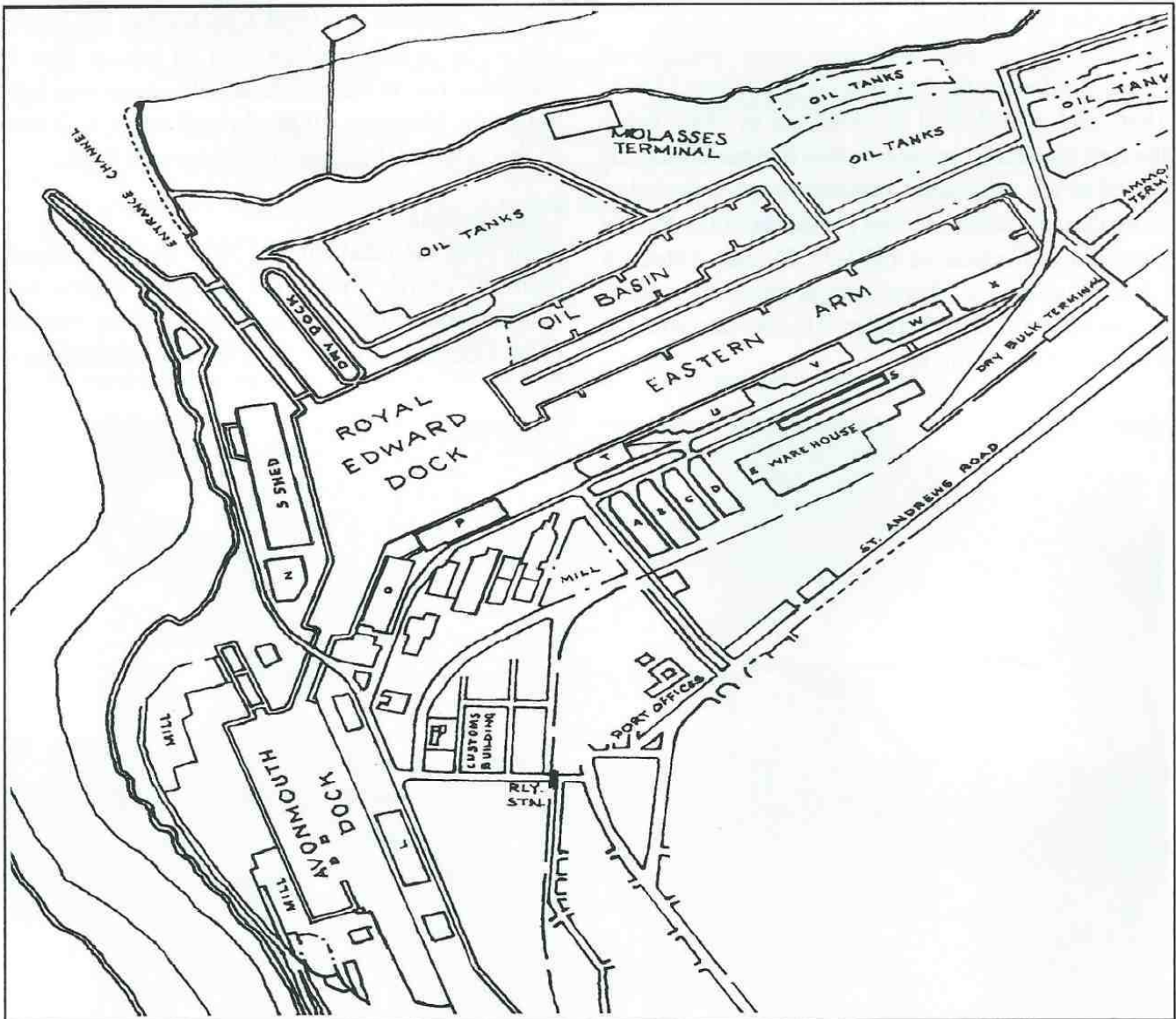


Fig 6 The docks on the North of the River Avon at Avonmouth