

Redland Past Revisited for the Redland Directory - No. 25

Celebrating Bristol Ingenuity© Julian Lea-Jones. Aug 2009

I felt that the 200th Anniversary of the Floating Harbour merited an article going beyond Redland. The conversion of the city's Avon into a harbour unaffected by tides, the second highest tides in the world, meant that in 1809 for the first time in 769 years Bristol had a harbour where ships could remain docked without being stranded on the mud. One effect of tidal extremes on medieval shipbuilders had been the requirement for very strong ships that could withstand being left high and dry twice a day, allowing Bristol explorers to sail further and importantly return to tell the tale. Also if your ship was going to be lying on its side for a good part of 24 hours, everything needed to be well stowed, hence the expression 'Ship Shape and Bristol Fashion'. The engineering feat of converting a tidal river into a floating harbour was achieved by diverting the River Avon around the City from Netham to Cumberland Basin and maintaining a constant dockside water level by a series of Lock Gates. The history and development of our Floating Harbour has been



superbly charted in Redcliffe's new book by Peter Malpass and Andy King, (ISBN 978-1-906593-28-5) which leaves me free to tell of an unexpected consequence of the grand Plan. Traffic and pedestrians crossing a busy city centre junction little realise that they are passing over the culverted River Frome on an invisible but still functioning ancient bridge. Until the 1990s, River access was marked by this famous Bristol landmark. When this 'pillar box' was opened it revealed a staircase down beside a buttress of the Stone Bridge to the Frome

still flowing beneath the Centre. My knowledge of this hidden bit of Bristol's history arose from a clandestine exploration - and a near miss with the local Bobby.

To learn what happened next, as well as more about our hidden waterways in my book 'Bristol Curiosities' or book one of my talks" listed on our website

<http://www.history4u.info/talkswalks.htm>