

Sperry Bristol on Temple Back – A thousand year overview of the site’s history.

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Note: This account, and hence the tense, was written when the firm Sperry Gyroscope (UK) Ltd had opened their new design & research centre in Bristol. However the UK operation, who’s HQ was at Bracknell in Berkshire, (including Bristol establishment) was sold to British Aerospace, and the Bristol site at Temple Back was closed and all the positions made redundant or relocated to existing BAC sites.

--oOoo--

Although Sperry Gyroscope have only been in Bristol since 1978, when the move was started in to the ultra-modern office block with the graceful curving lines, known lately as ‘Sperry House’, the move in fact completed a ‘full turn of the circle’. For an explanation of this enigmatical statement, consider two available clues. Firstly, the former name of the building erected in 1973 was ‘Temple Colston House’, and secondly, the fact that Sperry Gyroscope started in Brentford, Middlesex, in 1919 - Brent ford being the home of a charity school

The reader may ask what possible connection could there be between Sperry and Bristol. Indeed one could be forgiven for thinking, when looking at our new home, that the only link with the past is the leaning tower of Temple Church which overshadows our building. However, we will see that the links with the past, and possibly Sperry employees, are much more far reaching and surprising than could be envisaged.

These links, which extend not only to Bristol, but also to Brent ford, Plymouth and New York, are explained by examining the history of the Bristol site.

It seems fitting that this site, now the home of some of the most advanced engineering designs and techniques in the country, (or even the world), should have also been the home of innovative industry throughout the centuries.

To find the reason for this, we must first consider the topography of the area in which Sperry (Bristol) finds itself, lying as it does on the south side of the Floating Harbour section of the River Avon.

This area was originally outside the main town and as a result of this developed its own characteristics.

To understand the part this partitioning played in the industrial growth of the area, and how it came about that the site of Sperry House and its immediate locality was also the home of more than twenty-two skills and professions, it is necessary to go back to the very beginnings of Bristol.

If we peel back the centuries, we will meet the ghosts of stonemasons, warehousemen, ironfounders, sugar refiners, potters, clay pipe manufacturers, gallipot makers, coopers, distillers, rope makers, weavers, tuckers, dyers, fullers, cordwainers, hermits and Knights Crusaders. But we must continue past these on down the centuries until one thousand years

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have elapsed when we can look around at Bristol or ‘Bric’ as it was in the year 979.

Now read on.

Bristol was a prosperous community and trading centre. Evidence for this is the facts that coins exist that were minted at Bristol in the first decades of the eleventh century.

The coins at that time carried the name of the Mint and the moneyer responsible for the coin, e.g. Ethelred the Unready, 979-1016 at ‘Bric’.

An example of the relative importance of the Bristol Mint, and hence the town, is that from the reign of Cnut (1016 - 1035 A.D.), as many as six moneyers were possibly employed minting coins of each issue.

Prior to the eleventh century, the amount and size of the Anglo-Saxon settlements is known only by conjecture. However, Oswald, Bishop of Worcester, founded a small monastery about 960 A.D. and the Romans, who had villas in the district, also had a ferry station down river at Abona (Sea Mills).

The Anglo-Saxon name for Bristol, “the assembly by the Bridge”, has left little or no physical remains, barring pottery fragments, possible church foundations, (which could be Norman), and the line of the defensive ditch as well as a coin of Harold Godwinson.

Prior to the Norman Conquest, coastal trade with Ireland was much in evidence. This included English slaves.

One of the outcomes of the Norman Conquest was the building of Bristol Castle by Geoffrey, Bishop of Coutances, outside the borough precincts. Test borings indicate that the wall line followed a medieval Saxon defensive ditch line.

The outline of the castle walls built in the eleventh century, which were apparently reinforced in both the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, can be seen to-day in Castle Green (opposite the Holiday Inn).

Bristol became a strategic centre when the castle came in to the possession of Robert, bastard son of Henry I, in 1109. (He later became Robert, Earl of Gloucester). It was at this time that part of Geoffrey’s castle was demolished to build the Great Keep.

South of Bristol, there was a small township in the Royal Manor of Bedminster. This included the part adjacent to Bristol, on an outcrop of new red sandstone, known appropriately as “Redcliff”.

The Order of Knights Crusader, who wore a white robe as a symbol of purity, emblazoned with a red cross to remind them of their oath to be ready to shed their blood in defence of Christendom, known as the Knights Templar, or the Poor Soldiers of Jesus Christ, were

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founded in 1118 as an order of ‘Soldier Monks’ to guard pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem. Although their preceptory was at Templecombe, approximately twelve miles away, they were granted a part of the Manor of Bedminster to build a small church and dwelling with twenty-eight adjacent premises. This land extended from the site of the church, (whose oval¹ remains, 43 feet by 23 feet, discovered during excavations in 1872, can be seen inside the main church) to the banks of the river (adjacent to the Sperry car park).

The Knights Templar were in continued conflict with the officialdom of Bristol because of their ability and strength to exercise their rights of jurisdiction over the inhabitants of ‘Temple Fee’. These rights included exemption from local taxes, Courts and tolls, and that of providing sanctuary for wrongdoers. They were also allowed to hold their own Courts. Their exemption from local tolls brought them in to conflict with the Burgesses of Bristol who, by Edward II’s charter of 1317 to Bristol, were allowed collection of tolls in goods, etc., entering the town to finance repairs to pavements, roads, walls, quays, etc.

There were many petitions to the King (Edward II) to curb their powers and, although many of the claims may have been false, in 1307 (20th December), Edward II finally yielded to pressure including demands from the Pope and a Writ was issued for the apprehension of all Templars, including the Preceptor of Gutinge, and confiscation of their lands. The Order subsequently was dissolved in 1312.

Their property was then granted to the rival Order of St. John of Jerusalem, two years after they had taken the Island of Rhodes and started the building of their famous hospital. They were also permanently at loggerheads with the Burgesses of Bristol for the same reasons as their predecessors. In 1318, (12 Edward II), Sir Richard Amory granted the St. Augustinian Hermits an acre of land which was adjacent to their abode against Temple Gate.

However, the Knights Hospitallers of St. John or Holy Cross encouraged a market, and two rich merchants settled in the area and contributed to the building of the church tower. The ordinances of the weavers were renewed in 1369.

Weaving was in evidence as early as 1299, as shown by the Weavers’ Chapel, and a piece of ground granted by Edward I “for their use forever”. If this information, as indicated on a wall inscription, is correct, then as the Knights were in residence, it must have been they who in fact granted the land to the Weavers’ Guild.

Other related trades in the district were those of fullers, dyers and tuckers. The area inhabited by the latter can still be seen in Tucker Street, adjacent to Bristol Bridge, and now part of Courages Brewery. In 1331, John Fraunchey, Junior, provided for the foundation of a

¹Subsequent excavations have shown this to be circular, as were all Templar churches.

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Chantry in Temple Church, followed in 1335 by an endowment of a messuage in Temple Street and nine shops, including four new shops. This possibly indicates the date of the building of Temple Street.

The licence for the Weavers’ Chapel was again granted in 1392 by Richard II. This was known as St. Catherine’s Chapel.

One of the inhabitants of Tucker Street was Edward Blanket, a guildsman and weaver. It is to him that our word ‘blanket’ is attributed, supposedly due to a faulty piece of weaving - serendipity? Whether or not this is true, he did receive Royal patronage, and in 1362 became a Member of Parliament. His tomb can be seen in St. Stephen’s Church (City).

Another reminder of the Knights of St. John is in the colour of the hood of Bristol University gowns - brick red. This is taken from a local flower, a campion, now established on the banks of the Avon Gorge. This is called “Campion of Constantinople - Nonsuch”. It is about three feet high, with brick red petals of a Maltese cross.

The Knights of St. John, having had similar charges laid against them as their predecessors, were suppressed in 1540 by Henry III, who purchased their lands and granted them to Bristol Corporation.

Records show a steadily increasing number of inhabitants in the vicinity of Temple Church from 1300 onwards. During the 1400’s many important Burgesses and Merchants made their homes in the district.

It is known that a rope manufacturing works was first set up in Temple Parish in 1645 by Thomas Taylor, adjacent to the river at Temple Back.. In 1706, the business was continued after his death by his Widow, who took on Joseph Bryant as an apprentice. In 1711 he was enrolled as a Freeman of the City and took on his brother William in 1734. Work apparently carried on until 1745.

The land between this and the yard of Temple Church was known as Rack Close.

Millerd’s map, (1673), shows in addition to this rope house and Rack Close, an inlet and dock at the end of Water Lane, (possibly the origin of its name?), on the land now occupied by the entrance to Sperry’s car park. A note in 1676 stated that the rope house was available during Temple Fair for the buying and selling of leather.

A house in Water Lane, owned by a Widow, Anna or Hanna Jordan, was sold in 1682 with one acre of ground, extending from the house to the Rack Close to Edward Ward, the Brislington potter. He commenced building his factory on the site. It continued as a pottery in his family until 1741 when it was continued by Thomas Cantle. When, in 1756, he was made a Governor of Newgate Prison, the pottery was sold to William Taylor.

Rocque’s map of 1750 shows the site built up and a 1762 survey of the parish describes

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Temple Bac

In 1673, the land which was held by Thomas Taylor/Abraham Wild, granted the close of meadow (Basteavon) for ninety-nine years at forty shillings per annum. He was to build a new dwelling house and arch over the dock at the east end of Water Lane.

William Taylor became proprietor until he married Susannah Stevens, the then owner. He continued as Pottery Manager or Head Potter until the end of the century. Evidence for a subsequent partnership between Joseph Ring and William Taylor is given in the form of an old timekeeping bell engraved “Ring, Taylor & Co. 1789”. Ring’s interest was carried on by his Widow after his accidental death. A short while later, Carter joined the firm, and in 1813, when the firm was known as Carter, Ring & Pountney, the Ring referred to was in fact Joseph Ring, Junior, (son of the deceased). However, Joseph Ring II also died that year, and in 1816, after Carter, whereupon Pountney formed a new partnership with Edwin Allies. This carried on until 1835 (on paper), 1817 in fact. During this time, Pountney had acquired all parts of the freehold and leasehold properties showing the pottery, including implements, fittings, etc. For instance, the distillery at the corner of Water Lane and Temple Back, previously owned by Ring, had been converted by him to a part of the pottery premises (possibly as part of the partnership deal). On the 15th February 1820, he also got Williams Fifield (the pottery artist) to paint the four tiles representing the pottery (see Museum). When the partnership with Allies was dissolved, Pountney took on Gabriel Goldney. This continued until 1849 when Goldney left to work for Conrad Finzell’s sugar refinery on the Counterslip (now Courages Brewery). Pountney continued on his own until his death in 1852. The tomb of John Decimus Pountney, Potter and sometimes Lord Mayor of Bristol can be seen in the middle of Temple Churchyard. His Widow continued to run it until 1872 when it was finally sold to Captain Cobden. It only ran for a few years before being sold yet again to Patrick Johnston. During this period the pottery in Temple Back site finished, the business being transferred to Feeder Road and subsequently reappearing in the 1880’s at Fishponds in a much enlarged (four times) form. Adjacent to this pottery, but on the other side of Temple Back, was the Tobacco Pipe Manufactory of Robert Ring, cousin of Joseph Ring, Junior, referred to previously. A Plymouth chemist, Cookworthy, had a nephew Frederick who married Susannah Ring on 11th August 1789. Cookworthy and Ring were partners in the Temple Pottery producing stoneware. They also had other business interests in the vicinity, for instance Ring also had a cooperage adjacent to the Bristol Pottery, while Cookworthy traded as a Worsted Dealer and Haberdasher at the premises in Union Street. The cooperage was incorporated in to the Bristol Pottery in December 1806. In Felix Farley’s Journal, issue dated September 1802, appeared an advertisement “Tobacco - Pipe Manufacturers.”

To be continued...

k as ‘formerly a rope walk’, with parcels of ground being leased for development.

Sources:

- Old Bristol Potteries, W.J Pountney.
- Rocque’s map of 1750,
- Evans Chronological History of Bristol,
- Latimers Annals of Bristol, 3 Vols, Kingsmead Press, Bath, reprint.

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