An Early Example of the Decline of the Industrial Spirit? Bristol 'Enterprise' in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century.

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Britain's industrial decline from its position as the 'workshop of the world' has attracted much attention. The finger of suspicion has frequently been pointed at second and third-generation entrepreneurs who, it is alleged, concentrated not on profit maximisation and technological advance but on acquiring landed estates and sending their sons to public school and ancient university where they were educated to be gentlemen not businessmen.[1] Of necessity such interpretations concentrate on the period after 1850. However, certain areas of Britain were experiencing decline even while the economy as a whole was establishing international dominance. I want to look at one of these, Bristol, to see whether its comparative decay fits into the 'third-generation' 'aristocratic embrace' pattern or whether the story is rather more complicated.

I

Bristol in the eighteenth century had been not only a major port but also a substantial manufacturing centre. Even early in the following century James Dugdale was impressed: 'From twenty to thirty sugar houses with sulphur, turpentine, vitriol and coal works, brass and iron foundries, distilleries, glass houses etc. are constantly at work' and the etc. could have been expanded to include ship yards, rope walks, potteries, lead and spelter works, soap boilers, tobacco processors, chocolate manufacturers, tanners, boot makers, breweries, cotton mills and Hare's floor cloth factory.[2] Despite this impressive catalogue, however, Bristol was now on the fringes of industrial advance, in part the result of continued reliance on obsolete techniques and possibly, caution, of which there was an interesting hint a century earlier when Abraham Darby, one of the founders of the Bristol Brass Company 'wanting to enlarge the Brass

Works and his partners not being willing, drew his share out of it' and departed for Coalbrookdale.[3] However, Bristol's industrial prominence had long survived such caution. More fundamental factors were the exhaustion of Mendip ores, the decline of the West Indian market and developments in transport, particularly canal construction, which opened up the Midlands to Liverpool, London and Hull and which opened up the virgin iron ore and, later, coal of South Wales. The metal industries of the Midlands and the Principality left Bristol's far behind, though ironically it was Bristol money which did much to develop the latter.

Bristol's mercantile role was also declining. In the eighteenth century it had been the metropolitan centre for south-west England, South Wales, the south Midlands and for parts of the West Indies too.[4] In addition it was the principal port for trade with southern Ireland. Yet at the close of the century Bristol was dangerously dependent on West Indian commerce which was worth twice as much as the rest of its overseas trade put together. Unlike Liverpool, links with the U.S.A. were not fully re-established after the American Revolution and so advantage was not taken of the development of that dynamic economy. The West Indies, in contrast, declined in the nineteenth century as soil exhaustion and labour problems rendered them vulnerable to competition.[5] Ireland, too, became a less valuable trading partner as her population withered relative to that of the rest of the United Kingdom, while her poverty increased.

Yet Bristol still possessed considerable advantages. A well-established banking and mercantile centre it was able to finance an impressive range of enterprises designed to facilitate readjustment of which the Floating Harbour and the Great Western Railway and associated enterprises were the most notable. For by the early nineteenth century Bristolians were well aware that they had fallen behind, particularly behind Liverpool, and they took energetic measures in a bid to rectify the situation.

The first such measure involved turning some 1½ miles of the rivers Avon and Frome, including practically all the existing quays, into a Floating Harbour about 80 acres in extent. This was achieved by damming the existing river, access to the impounded water being gained through entrance locks and a basin, and by cutting a new bed for the Avon. The scheme's advantages were that ships would no longer be deposited on the bed of the river at low tide – a real deterrent to vessels which had not been specially strengthened – and there would be a plentiful supply of water to combat any fires in the ships or in the city. All this would be achieved without making redundant valuable warehouse property near the old quays.

The disadvantages, however, were greater. First, the expense involved; at the original estimate of £300,000 this was heavy enough. By the time the scheme was completed in 1809, its cost had almost doubled. The size of this sum may be placed in context by comparing it with the amount proposed to be spent at Liverpool in 1809 to provide extra dock space: the cost was estimated at £560,000, to be financed by dues designed to produce £60,000 per year.[6] But Liverpool was an expanding port which could afford such sums without pricing itself out of the market – its annual dock dues by 1835 amounted to nearly £200,000.[7] Bristol was not, and the method adopted of financing the scheme secured the worst of all worlds. A separate dock company was set up, with twenty-seven directors, one-third chosen by the Corporation, one-third by the Merchant Venturers and the final third by the shareholders, who were to provide all the money and who alone were entitled to receive dividends. The Corporation and the Merchant Venturers put in nothing, but retained rights to their existing dues. The shareholders could only be recouped by charging additional heavy dock dues and every ship which came within the boundaries of the port of Bristol – and these extended all the way down the Avon to the Bristol Channel and to part of that Channel itself – had to pay these dues whether they wished to use the dock facilities or not. In other words, at Bristol the shipowner had not the option that he had at London or Liverpool of ignoring the enclosed docks and having his vessel unloaded at less costly wharves or by lighter: he had to pay.

The Floating Harbour was an exceptional if costly achievement. But it had one basic defect: it failed to solve the problem of access to the port. The 7 miles or so of the Avon from the harbour to the Bristol Channel remained tidal and tortuous with a virtually immovable bottleneck at the gorge now spanned by the delicate lines of Clifton suspension bridge. As ships grew larger the Avon became impassable to them. A fortune had been spent without the basic problem having been solved. Yet the very fact that a fortune had been spent, and a grand design adopted, made it harder for Bristolians to contemplate, or afford, the eventual solution to their problem, the development of docks at the mouth of the Avon.

To Bristolians at the time, however, the major disadvantage of the scheme was summed up in one word, dues. The imposition of heavy dock charges, on top of the municipal levies and those leased to the Society of Merchant Venturers, rendered Bristol highly uncompetitive. Naturally the merchants agitated and in 1823 their agitation was institutionalised by the formation of the Chamber of Commerce, the Merchant Venturers' Society being too closely identified with the Corporation and the Dock Company adequately to prosecute an energetic campaign. The Chamber enjoyed good support in the local press, even in the local Tory organ, *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, which might initially appear surprising since the first object of the Chamber's strictures were the town and mayor's dues, levied on goods and shipping using the port to the profit of the Tory Corporation.

The municipal dues were an understandable first target, however, for, whereas the Dock Company clearly performed some services, however badly, for the charges it levied, and the Merchant Venturers had at least in the past done something to justify the collection of wharfage, the Corporation appeared to do precisely nothing in return for its imposts. Nevertheless, the Corporation *was* concerned about the state of the port – given a large merchant membership this was to be expected. Agreement was not easy, but eventually an Act was passed in 1825 abolishing the town and mayor's dues entirely on the Irish and coasting trades and greatly reducing them on certain other articles.

Seriously though the 1825 Act curtailed the Corporation's income – the average net amount of town and mayor's dues in the five years after the act were £2,325 per annum as compared with £5,454[8] – the effect on port charges was generally speaking marginal. Other means were now sought to improve the trade of Bristol, namely railways. As early as 1828 parliament carried the first act setting up a railway in Bristol: the Bristol and Gloucestershire Railway (B. and G.), whose proprietors included prominent Bristolians such as Robert Bright, J.M. Gutch, Henry Bush, William Fripp jnr, Joseph Storrs Fry (along with three Fry sisters), James and Christopher George, John Hare jnr, John Harford, George Jones, Samuel Lucas, four Ricketts (Jacob Wilcox, Richard, Henry, Frederick), Nicholas Roch, Thomas Stock and John Vining. Five of these men were later members of the first Bristol Committee of the G.W.R Several of them were heavy users of coal. For despite its name, the railway was designed to link the collieries of Coalpit Heath, some 9 miles north of Bristol, with the city and, via the Avon, with Bath.

The idea of a railway connecting Bristol and London originally broached in 1824 was revived in 1832, stimulated, no doubt, by the success of the Liverpool and Manchester, opened two years earlier. The company which eventually became the Great Western Railway can be traced back to a meeting between Jones and Harford of the B. and G. and the engineer and sugar refiner Thomas Richard Guppy and iron master William Tothill in the autumn of 1832.[9] Their idea was taken up by the Dock Company and the unreformed Corporation (institutions not usually associated with progressive initiatives) as well as the Society of Merchant Venturers, the Chamber of Commerce and the B. and G. It is important to emphasise that the G.W.R. was conceived by Bristolians as one link in a new chain of trade which would revive the fortunes of the port of Bristol. This can be seen from the report of the committee of deputies from the five bodies set up to survey possible routes:

> The Committee cannot close their Report without adverting . . . to the consequences to the City, as a *Port*, from the successful establishment of a certain, cheap and speedy communication, between Bristol and the Metropolis. The latter (the residence within a small area of nearly two millions of the most wealthy inhabitants of this opulent country) would be brought within a few hours, both for personal communication and the transit of goods, of Bristol which is more favourably situated than any other Port in this Island for the commerce of the whole civilised world, the North and East of Europe excepted.
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> The proposed communication together with the local advantages of Bristol, could not fail to cause a large and rapid increase of her Shipping, of her Imports and Exports, of activity in all the branches of business connected with foreign trade, and ultimately in every other. The enduring impulse thus given to her industry, the importation of materials, and the facilities afforded by her neighbouring coal-fields to manufacturing establishments would probably be the means of exchanging the melancholy aspect of the Commerce of Bristol, for that state of progression which is the only healthy condition of human society.[10]

The story of the G.W.R. has been well told elsewhere. My purpose here is to outline the reasons which prevented it from fulfilling the functions Bristolians required of it. Paramount was finance. Despite favourable gradients, the line would be expensive – the earliest estimates suggested almost £3m. and these were optimistic. Bristol money alone could not finance the undertaking and while Bristol merchants were well placed to mobilise support from London and Liverpool inevitably control drifted away to London and Lancashire. As the company which it had created began to serve other interests and even other ports, such as Birkenhead, Plymouth, Milford Haven and Fishguard, while at the same time in the view of Bristol merchants, exploiting its monopoly position in the west to offer unfavourable rates and poor service, so Bristol became bitter and relations with the G.W.R. difficult.

This was especially unfortunate since the problem of connecting the railway with the port of Bristol had not been adequately solved. The selection of Temple Meads as the terminus was understandable enough. It was a large site, largely owned by one institution, the Corporation, which was favourable to the railway, located on the outskirts of the built-up area and thus avoiding the necessity for the purchase and destruction of expensive urban property. In all this, Temple Meads fitted classically into the pattern described by J.R. Kellett.[11] Where the experience of Bristol differed was that opportunities were not taken in subsequent decades to push the terminal nearer to the city centre and the main quays, this for a combination of reasons including the poverty of the G.W.R, its relative monopoly position in Bristol over the formative first railway years, the diversion of its attention elsewhere and the difficulties presented by geography. However, for Bristol this failure was especially serious, since an essential element in the original concept of the G.W.R had been the linking by rail of its port with the port of London. It was true Temple Meads had water-access, but only to the shallow part of the harbour above Bristol Bridge, which meant that only barges and lighters could reach the railway. Isambard Kingdom Brunel who had been appointed as engineer by the Bristol provisional committee on 7 March 1833 was closely questioned on this point when the Great Western Bill was before the Commons Committee in 1835 and showed much less grasp than that with which he is usually credited. After contradicting himself over who had chosen Temple Meads, first denying, then accepting responsibility, he then expressed the pious hope that Bristol Bridge could, perhaps, be made a draw-bridge. As an alternative he then suggested that the railway could at some future time be extended 'to embrace another portion of the Docks without any great expense opposite Queen's Square', but he retreated under cross-examination and denied the possibility of bringing the railway to the ships at Bristol.[12] He was in fact wrong on both accounts: it was possible to bring the railway to the ships but it would be extremely expensive because valuable property was involved and because the terrain presented serious engineering problems. Because of this, direct railway access to the port of Bristol was not achieved for thirty-five years.

The G.W.R. by no means exhausted the railway energy of Bristolians. In 1836 an act was obtained setting up the Bristol and Exeter Railway Company (B. and E.) with a share capital of £1½m. Of the first sixteen directors of the new company, twelve were Bristolians, among them John Hare, Frederick Ricketts and W.D. Wills, of the growing Bristol tobacco firm.[13]

Involvement with the G.W.R. and the B. and E. drew Bristol capital into other west country railways, but before an attempt is made to assess Bristol's contribution to the development of railways in its area we must consider the Bristol and Gloucester line. The Bristol and Gloucestershire in 1835 was really only a horse-tramway to Coalpit Heath, built on the standard 4′ 8½″ gauge. Not unnaturally it suffered from comparison with the G.W.R.; indeed, the G.W.R. represented a serious diversion of attention from what could have been a vital link between Bristol and the manufacturing districts of the Midlands. Brunel decried the importance of a line to Gloucester; it was practicable, but it would not pay, 'the traffic is so trifling', besides they were both on the same river.[14] Brunel does not seems at this stage to have envisaged the possibilities of the Midlands, London and New York bulked larger in his imagination. However, with a line from Birmingham to Gloucester sanctioned in 1836, the G.W.R. saw attractions in a Bristol – Gloucester link and supported a plan whereby a new company, the Bristol and Gloucester Railway absorbed the old Bristol and Gloucestershire and undertook to extend the line to a junction with the Cheltenham and Great Western Union Railway near Gloucester. The capital of the company was fixed at £400,000. The act was silent as to the gauge of the new railway, though Brunel was questioned about this and seemed to be assuming a broad gauge. He dismissed the problem of a gauge-break at Gloucester: 'there would be some inconvenience, but I don't think any great inconvenience'.[15] The gauge issue had not, however, been decided. George Jones, the chairman of the new company specified to Brunel that the line be constructed on the narrow gauge and Brunel accepted this. But in 1843, after negotiations for a merger with the Birmingham and Gloucester had broken down, the B. and G. felt the need for close connection with the G.W.R. and the broad gauge was adopted, over the objections, incidentally, of Jones, who did not allow the fact that he was also a director of the G.W.R. to obscure his sense that a uniform gauge was essential from Bristol to Birmingham. The line was opened in 1844. Within months the need to operate it from Bristol to Birmingham as a unit was recognised and the B. and G. and Birmingham and Gloucester agreed to amalgamate, an event which was overtaken in 1845 when the Midland Railway agreed to lease both lines in perpetuity. Thus a second major railway company, the Midland, gained access to Bristol, but insofar as it came in as the heir to a concern which had been in the grip of the G.W.R., it came in a subordinate position.

The gauge problem remained for almost ten more years, for it was not until 1854 that the Midland completed laying narrow gauge metals to Bristol. Thus the port of Bristol had to labour under the additional handicap, in its bid to capture the Midlands' export trade, of goods trans-shipment at Gloucester. Given the inadequacy in other respects of the port the gauge-break was probably not a major factor limiting its development, but it didn't help. The whole gauge issue provides an illustration of the way Bristol suffered from the erratic genius of Brunel and some explanation of the critical attitude adopted towards him by Latimer, the first historian of the nineteenth-century city. To him, Brunel was an 'inexperienced theorist, enamoured of novelty, prone to seek for difficulties rather than to evade them, and utterly indifferent as to the outlay which his recklessness entailed upon his employers'.[16]

Enough has been said to show that Bristolians played a major part in the development of railways in the west country. Any financial estimate of Bristol holdings in the various companies, there and in South Wales, must be tentative, but a sum of £2m. invested in the ten years after 1835 seems reasonable. The whole range of Bristol's capitalists involved themselves, it was not the whim of 'new men' or manufacturers as distinct from merchants. This willingness to become involved with the transport revolution raises doubts about interpretations of Bristol's stagnation which emphasise sloth and lack of enterprise: miscalculations, yes, but the part played by Bristol capital in the development of railways does not support the opinion that its mercantile class slumbered while the first half of the nineteenth century passed them by. Merchants like Bright, Bush, Gibbs and Visger, West-Indian proprietors, like Thomas Daniel, bankers and landowners like P.J. Miles, old established industrialists like John Harford, the Ricketts, whose fortune was based on glass and found a temporary outlet in tobacco as well as railways, the Georges with their brewing and shot-making activities, and the Fripps, with their soap factories; sugar refiners, like Vining and Guppy (who transformed himself into an engineer); newly established or establishing industrialists like the Frys and the Wills, plus, of course, solicitors and spinsters, anyone with a bit of cash to spare, all helped to finance the railways of the west country and South Wales.[17]

But did the railways benefit the port of Bristol? Obviously, to some extent improved communications were an advantage but on balance railways helped Bristol less than other ports, partly because there was no adequate connection between the railway and the quays until the 1870s. In addition the railways enabled larger ports such as London and Liverpool to compete successfully for the trade of Bristol's hinterland, especially while Bristol's dues remained high. This did have benefits for important Bristol industries, however, such as sugar refining, which was able to survive the potentially damaging consequences of the port's decline by drawing upon and despatching supplies from other ports by rail.

It is important to realise that the G.W.R. was seen as only part of a general Bristolian strategy involving also a steamship company to develop the link with New York and a giant cotton factory to further the city's trade and broaden its industrial base. Like the G.W.R., however, the Great Western Steamship Company was bedevilled by lack of finance. Formed in 1836, with a capital of £250,000 and a core of directors who were also associated with the G.W.R., the company's aim was to establish 'regular lines of steamships between Bristol and those Western Ports to which her geographical position renders her most eligible, the first to be directed towards the United States of America'.[18] Nor did the imagination of these Bristolians stop at making their city a vital link in a chain connecting London with New York. A year later the G.W.R. successfully obtained the co-operation of the reformed Bristol Corporation in moves to promote 'the establishment of steam intercourse with India, via the Mediterranean through Bristol', the better as the Council put it in a petition to the House of Commons, 'to introduce into our vast Indian possessions, the capital, the Civilisation and the Religion of England, and thus mutually promote the glory and prosperity of both countries'.[19]

Stimulated by the visionary dreams of Brunel the Steamship Company constructed at William Patterson's yard in the Floating Harbour the largest steamer yet built in Europe, the 'Great Western'. The epic achievement of this ship in establishing the record for crossing the Atlantic cannot obscure the disastrous mistake which she represented for her company and for her home port. She was too large to get into the Floating Harbour and had to sail from the mouth of the Avon, thus clearly demonstrating the inability of Bristol to handle large modern ships. Brunel produced ideas for a pier at Portishead but though an act of parliament was obtained, nothing more was done. There was no money. The 'Great Western' had cost over £50,000 and the company, far from learning its lesson, had already embarked upon an even larger vessel, eventually to be called the 'Great Britain'. Again a tremendous pioneering achievement (the first large vessel built in iron and the first to be powered by a large screw), she was a financial disaster. Since no shipyard would build her, the company had to set up its own yard at a cost of over £117,000. She was not ready until 1844 (so much for the idea of 'regular lines of steamships') and it was then found that she was too large to pass through the locks out of the Floating Harbour. It took over half a year and considerable ingenuity to winkle her out. By the time she came into service in 1845, her sister, the 'Great Western' had migrated to Liverpool, the final straw being the Dock Company's insistence that she pay dock dues even though she could not use the dock.

The Great Western Steamship Company, dogged by disaster (the 'Great Britain' was wrecked in 1846) and betrayed by over-ambition, could not compete with the regular service that Cunard established from Liverpool in 1840, with four smaller steamers. Its ships were sold, and the company wound up in 1852, its original share capital being totally lost.

The third part of the grand strategy of the 1830s was the setting up of the Great Western Cotton Factory. The constant reiteration of the words 'Great Western' and the appearance of the same people as directors of the railway, steamship company and cotton factory, show how all three enterprises were envisaged by Bristol merchants and bankers as part of one scheme to restore the city's fortunes. As Liverpool's prosperity had been based upon King Cotton, so would Bristol's thereby be regained; as Liverpool had been connected by rail with Lancashire's metropolis, so would Bristol with England's. For it was clear in the 1830s, with the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, that Bristol had to establish new markets to replace those of the West Indies and in part, slave compensation money gave Bristol merchants and bankers like Bright, Gibbs and Miles, funds to invest in great enterprises.

In 1816 Bristol had possessed four modest cotton mills. The omens appeared favourable for the establishment of the industry on a larger scale. The local Chamber of Commerce, in a report in 1828 pointed to the advantages the city possessed: cheap and sufficient supplies of coal, water and building materials, ready access to foreign raw materials, 'while the moderate rate of wages and the large population, present to the Manufacturer the means of procuring and maintaining any number of Artisans, with the advantage of keeping them independent of that system of combination . . . which had been found to check the prosperity of extensive works'.[20] A further bonus was the easy availability of agricultural produce. The report specifically advocated the establishment of cotton manufacture.

It took some years before action was taken but in 1836 the prospectus was issued of the Bristol Cotton Twist and Power Loom Cloth Company, the direct antecedent of the Great Western Cotton Company. Its capital was fixed at £200,000 in £50 shares. Symbolically, the S.S. Great Western brought a cargo of cotton for the new factory on its maiden return voyage from New York. Symbolically, too, the factory, a six-storey building, capable of accommodating 2,000 employees, was built on the hitherto rural Barton Hill with the prospect of a good rail link with the G.W.R. The *New Bristol Guide* of 1842 was sufficiently impressed to give the factory a section to itself, the only Bristol industrial concern to be so honoured. The statistics were lovingly catalogued: six steam engines, 150 tons of coal consumed weekly, 1,500 gas lights, consuming 4,500 feet of gas per hour ('when lit'), 1,800 employees earning from 5*s*. 0*d*. to £1 10*s*. 0*d*. a week, healthy and well-dressed: 'indeed the appearance of the workpeople altogether forms a striking contrast to those caricatures with which thousands are acquainted, who have never seen the interior of such an establishment'.[21]

The Cotton Company failed to realise the hopes of its promoters. Despite the scale of the enterprise and the financial backing of prominent merchants and bankers – the list of partners in 1841 reads like a Debrett of Bristol capitalism with P.W.S. and J.W. Miles, Charles Pinney, George Gibbs, Bright, Bush, Maze, Richard and Frederick Ricketts – losses occurred. With the failure of the steamship line, the company had to draw its supplies of raw cotton from Liverpool, thus incurring transport costs which weakened its competitive position, nor could Bristol hope to compete as a marketing centre for cotton with Manchester.

The grand design of the eighteen thirties had failed. Yet the concept of a railway enabling Bristol to become an outport of London, freeing ships from the journey up the English Channel and round North Foreland, which could be a difficult manoeuvre in the days of sail, was not an unworthy one. After all Southampton successfully proved its viability. But much more needed to be done to fit the port of Bristol for such a role and for that both money and will were lacking. Mistakes didn't help. It would have been wiser for the Steamship Company to have built a succession of smaller ships capable of using the docks at Bristol and establishing a regular service to New York rather than investing everything in two pioneering monsters. Another mistake was the gauge-break at Gloucester, which hampered prospects of developing an export trade from the Midlands so providing ships with return cargoes. Mistakes and lack of resources combined to defeat the grand strategy of the eighteen thirties.

II

One factor traditionally cited in Bristol's failure to modernise is the city's unreformed, self-elected Corporation. Unreformed corporations have generally had a bad press. Though it has long been recognised that much evidence presented by the 1835 Commission of Enquiry was biased, Derek Fraser still asserts that the few corporations that had served their towns well were the exceptions. 'Most corporations were corrupt, inefficient and insensitive to local needs'. The exceptions, however, are multiplying: not only Liverpool, which Fraser names and whose energetic docks policy was recognised by B.D. White as long ago as 1951, but also Bath, whose old corporation played an energetic role in its expansion, Gloucester and Glasgow, to mention but three.[22] Bristol Corporation, however, because of its great responsibilities especially with regard to the port aroused even more bitter criticism than similar bodies elsewhere; because the deficiencies of its police were disastrously manifested by the 1831 riots, so anger and contempt were more vehemently directed against it; because of its supposed wealth, both in its own right and on behalf of the charities it administered, envy of it was all the greater.

The Corporation consisted of the mayor, twelve aldermen and thirty common councilmen. The mayor was elected annually by the whole council; aldermen were elected for life by the mayor and surviving aldermen; councillors for life by the whole council. By 1835 there were twenty-nine Tories to thirteen Whigs. There was little party feeling however: the fact that such Whigs as were elected were put there by the Tory majority ensured that they were from the 'acceptable' section of the party, i.e. the West India interest. The only Whig mayor in the last fifteen years of the Corporation's existence was Charles Pinney, whose misfortune was to be in office in 1831. The most powerful man on the council, Alderman Thomas Daniel, also came from the same West India stable. The largest single group, as one would expect, were merchants who on average formed 37 per cent of the Council; manufacturers accounted for 30 per cent of whom nearly half were sugar refiners and/or distillers and some of the others shipbuilders – in other words the manufacturers' interests were closely connected to those of the West-India merchants; 9 per cent were bankers, 9 per cent professional men, 15 per cent of 'independent means'. The wealth of council members ranged all the way from Samuel Henderson who died in the debtors' prison at the Fleet in 1821 – his twenty-two months' sojourn there had not prevented him from remaining a Bristol councillor – to Peter Maze junior, who left £360,000 and Daniel, £200,000. At least a quarter of the council members were worth over £30,000 at death.[23]

Such a body, clearly representative of powerful and wealthy interests in the city, might have been expected to command respect. Bristol Corporation didn't. Often it was difficult to fill vacancies, despite a by-law imposing a £300 fine for refusal to serve. Nor was discontent confined to Dissenters and progressive Whigs: among the Corporation's most bitter assailants were Tories. Reform of the Corporation seemed necessary if economic progress were to be achieved and the direct linking of the political and economic endowed the reform crisis of the eighteen-thirties with especial bitterness in Bristol. Yet paradoxically Bristol was one of the few boroughs where the Tories retained control of the new Council after 1835 as they had the old Corporation. How is this paradox to be explained?

The first point to make is that the old Corporation was not as obstructive as some contemporaries and later historians made out. For example, take the steam packets which reached Bristol in 1821. They laboured under the mighty burden of the mayor's dues, levied at forty shillings per vessel over sixty tons on each occasion it entered the port, thus subjecting these tiny craft to far more expense than a stately West Indiaman paid for his annual voyage. When dock dues were added – and they came to £468 in one year for the 'Albion' on its regular Cork to Bristol run – the disadvantages under which enterprise laboured at Bristol can be judged.[24] Yet when owners petitioned the Corporation for reductions in dues they met, not so much with blank refusals, as with well-intentioned sentiments allied to delay. At its meeting on 12 March 1823, for example, the Corporation declared itself anxious to encourage the packets, but as it was unwilling to raise doubts about the legality of its imposts in the face of the Chamber of Commerce's mounting assaults, the dues would still be collected, the Corporation expressing the intention of returning amounts in excess of what was necessary to maintain its legal rights. At a subsequent meeting Alderman Daniel successfully proposed that 1,000 guineas be placed at the mayor's disposal to encourage steamers to use the port.[25]

The Corporation was endeavouring, however unsuccessfully, to square the circle and encourage progress while at the same time preserving its legal rights. The part it played in encouraging the 'Grand Design' of the eighteen-thirties has already been noted. Finally, though admittedly this was in the nature of a death-bed repentance, the Corporation, once it had recognised the inevitability of its demise, acted to meet the situation: in March 1835, town dues were reduced (as from the following November) on a wide range of goods, some by as much as two-thirds. Six months later, at its penultimate meeting, the old Corporation entirely abolished town dues on exports, thus earning a letter of thanks from the Chamber of Commerce which ironically forms the next to the last item in the Corporation's final minute book.[26]

The Chamber of Commerce's gratitude symbolised the reunification of Bristol 'conservatism'. The reform crisis which had spawned a powerful radical Bristol Political Union and the violent riots of 1831 united Tories in defence of established institutions. They thus had to back the old Corporation and were more inclined to do so when it was responding to the needs of progress.

I use the word 'conservatism' advisedly, to describe a phenomenon not confined to Tories, a phenomenon which reflected the association of key Bristol interests with causes best defended under the old system, slavery, the Navigation Laws, the West Indies. These interests permeated Bristol Whiggery, yet the strength of Bristol Nonconformity meant that there was considerable Whig opposition, especially to slavery. Thus the Tories faced divided opponents, some of whom quickly identified with them rather than risk association with the Radicals. This was exemplified at the first meeting of the Reformed Council. Under the Municipal Reform Act of 1835 the Council consisted of sixty-four members, sixteen aldermen elected by the councillors for six years, forty-eight councillors elected by the burgesses for three. Any man who lived within 7 miles of the city and who had occupied any house, warehouse, counting-house or shop within the city for the previous two and a half years, provided that he had been rated for the poor during the whole of that time and had duly paid the rates, was eligible to be placed on the register. Those in receipt of poor relief were excluded.

The city was extended to include those parts brought within the parliamentary borough in 1832 and the whole was divided, rather arbitrarily and hastily by two barristers sent down by the government, into ten wards.

Considerable interest was shown in the elections. Eighty-nine candidates were nominated for the forty-eight places; all of them had party affiliations. The Liberals emphasised the need to keep out opponents of municipal reform and to support economy. The Conservatives claimed that their candidates were the natural leaders of the community and should be elected on that score. Polling took place on 26 December 1835, nearly 80 per cent of the electorate voting. The result was a tie, twenty-four councillors each. Ten of the successful Conservatives, four of the Liberals had been members of the old Corporation; six of their former colleagues stood and were beaten, five Conservatives, one Liberal; the latter was Charles Pinney.

The councillors met on 31 December 1835 to elect the sixteen aldermen. Thomas Daniel, who had topped the poll in his ward, was voted to the chair as the senior surviving alderman from the

Corporation, a significant mark of respect for the old order; he had no casting vote. Deadlock ensued. Eventually it was decided that each party should nominate one alderman in turn; in this way, three Conservatives and two Liberals, one of whom was Pinney, were elected unanimously. The nomination of the third Liberal, William Tothill, a Quaker, provided the turning point. The Tories pressed a vote and Tothill was defeated by twenty-five to twenty-three. Christopher George, an old-fashioned Whig, member of the old Corporation, brother-in-law of William Fripp, one of the newly-elected Tory aldermen, voted with the Conservatives. Latimer, writing some fifty years after George's defection, was still moved by the political bitterness aroused; after all, he was still living under the political consequences of George's vote for it determined that the Tories would control municipal Bristol for nearly seventy years.

Mr Christopher George, a member of the old Corporation, had won some popularity three or four years before by his ardent advocacy of Reform principles. But, as frequently occurred among old-fashioned Whigs about that period, Mr George's admiration of political improvements came to an end when they threatened to affect his own interests and position. The abolition of rotten boroughs was all well enough, but the purification of effete corporations, of one of which he was a member, was not to his taste.[27]

Only two more Liberal aldermen were elected. The final blow came when Pinney joined the Tory camp. Thirty-seven Tories thus faced twenty-seven Liberals across the Council chamber, and some of the twenty-seven were of dubious reliability. Of the sixteen aldermen, eleven had been rejected at the polls less than a week earlier; four of them were members of the old Corporation which meant that almost all the members of the old regime who sought a place in the new had achieved their ambition. The Tories emphasised their triumph by electing Alderman Fripp, the Corporation's most ardent defender, as mayor and Fripp inaugurated the new order with a bitter political harangue. Not surprisingly, the Council voted to confirm the principal officers of the Corporation in their positions.[28]

III

The move towards elective municipal democracy had no immediate impact on Bristol's economy. Its problems were far more deep-seated and solutions, insofar as they existed, lay elsewhere. How far were solutions inhibited by Bristol's 'conservatism'? How does Bristol 'conservatism' relate to the 'third-generation phenomenon' and the 'aristrocratic embrace' referred to at the beginning of this article?

A number of Bristol's industrialists at the beginning of the nineteenth century *were* second or third generation and had invested in land or retained the landed estates where they had originated. Yet this landed involvement did not prevent families like the Harfords, Protheroes, Miles and Pinneys investing in the Floating Harbour and railways (in some cases using the proceeds of slave compensation money resulting from the Emancipation Act of 1833) and operating Bristol banks. How does this relate to the undoubted decline of key Bristol industries like glass and brass? The historian of the latter notes the lack of forceful leadership, failure to compete with Birmingham in adapting to the Industrial Revolution, distance from supplies of Anglesey copper ore which replaced worked-out local and Cornish sources, and failure to modernise: water power was retained, slow, but cheap and capable of producing high quality goods. By 1860 only the diminished remains of Harford's Brass Company existed.[29]

The case of Bristol glass is more complex. Its quality was much praised and for at least one concern, the Phoenix Glass Works, whose partners included J.W. and Henry Ricketts, the years of 1815 to 1820 were particularly prosperous. Profits rose from 10 per cent in 1815 to 18 per cent in 1819. The following year, however, demand collapsed and from 1822 onwards, heavy losses were recorded. Henry Ricketts' son wrote in the eighteen-fifties: 'When I joined the Concern July 1845 they had lost heavily for years . . . There [sic] bad debts where [sic] 3 or 4000 £ dreadfull', and by 1860 there were only four small glass works left in the city.[30]

To what should this decline be attributed? Partly to the loss of export markets, partly to the lack of a growing domestic market such as Pilkingtons' enjoyed in Lancashire and partly to the penetration of Bristol's hinterland by competition from elsewhere as transport developments removed an element of protection. Alford, however, sees the decline as typical of the nature of Bristol enterprises. He traces a coterie of local businessmen around J.W. Ricketts, prominent in brewing (Ricketts was a founder with Philip George of the Bristol Porter Brewery, a sensible involvement for a bottle manufacturer), tobacco, banking, sugar, brass, shipping and iron founding, prominent, too, in the city's municipal affairs, and hence associated with the Corporation's obscurantist attitude and the backward docks policy. 'It seems reasonable to suggest that the whole commercial ethos of the city was, by the 1830s, unfavourable to the kind of change and adaptation in Bristol's commercial and industrial life which was necessary to rescue it from economic stagnation'.[31]

Here we have the third-generation phenomenon. J.W. Ricketts died in 1839 leaving £250,000 which, according to his grandson, writing in the eighteen-fifties was 'nearly all gone. The Ricketts were too grand and lived in too fine places ever to be rich'. Henry Ricketts died in 1859, leaving a mere £70,000.[32]

In view of this indictment of lack of enterprise, it is perhaps ironic that one of the reasons Alford cites for the Phoenix Glass Works suffering so heavily from the eighteen-twenties slump was that in the years 1818 to 1820 over £7,000 was ploughed back from profits into new equipment. 'Instead of taking their fat profits, they had decided to invest them in enlarging capacity, just at the point when conditions turned for the worse'.[33] Still, J.W. clearly had enough left to invest in railway shares, and his erstwhile partners in tobacco, the Wills, were able to build a fortune sufficient to permit them to live in fine places and still be rich. What was more important than a pervading Bristol complacency and lack of enterprise were secular developments – changes in trading patterns, technological advance – which benefited other areas far more than Bristol. In such circumstances enterprising Bristol capital sought other outlets, for example in South Wales or railway shares.

Mention of Wills leads to another point. Bristol's economy *was* capable of throwing up entrepreneurs who prospered in the second and third generations as well as the first. (The Frys are another such case.) The way the Wills benefited from a partnership with the Ricketts shows the way old enterprise acted as midwife to new. The alliance of old and new was replicated in the soap industry when the up-and-coming Thomas Thomas entered into partnership with Fripp and Co. on the way to becoming Christopher Thomas and Brothers.[34]

I don't, therefore, think that Bristol's 'conservatism' was a fundamental factor in the city's relative decline. The 'conservatism' of Ricketts' glass was balanced by the boldness, indeed, the over-boldness of the eighteen-thirties Grand Design. This over-boldness led to mistakes and outran available capital resources. One is tempted to apply Payne's general comments: 'With the development of competitive economies, British entrepreneurial errors and hesitation, *always present* . . . became more apparent and the belabouring of the businessmen who seemed inadequate in their responses mollified the frustration of those who believed that British industrial supremacy before the mid-eighteen-seventies was somehow normal and her accelerating relative decline thereafter, abnormal'.[35] For British, read Bristol, for mid-1870s read mid-eighteenth century.

Notes

[1] For a critical discussion of this theme, see P.L. Payne, *British Entrepreneurship in the Nineteenth Century* (1974), for the stifling of the industrial ethos in the aristocratic embrace, see M.J. Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850–1980* (Cambridge, 1981).

[2] James Dugdale, *The New British Traveller*, iv (1819), pp. 209, 210; J. Mathews, *The Bristol Guide* (Bristol, 4th edn., 1815), pp. 6, 90–5; F.E. Cooke, 'The Economic Development of the Port of Bristol 1900–45' (unpub. M.Sc. (Econ.) thesis, London Univ. 1953), p. 13.

[3] A. Raistrick, *Dynasty of Ironfounders: The Darbys and Coalbrookdale* (1953), p. 50, quoting Hannah Rose.

[4] See W.E. Minchinton, 'Bristol – Metropolis of the West in the Eighteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Series, IV (1954), pp. 69–89 and *The Port of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1962).

[5] C.M. MacInnes, *Bristol, A Gateway of Empire* (Newton Abbot, 1968 edn.), pp. 226, 332, 358.

[6] T. Baines, *History of the Commerce and Town of Liverpool* (1852), pp. 540–2.

[7] Ramsay Muir, *A History of Liverpool* (1907), p. 263.

[8] *Reports of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the Municipal Corporations of England and Wales*, P(arliamentary) P(apers) 1835 XXIV, p. 1217.

[9] E.T. MacDermot, *History of the Great Western Railway*, i (1964 edn., revised by C.R. Clinker), p. 2. See also Geoffrey Channon, *Bristol and the Promotion of the Great Western Railway* (Bristol, 1985) which brings out well the role of Bristol's established merchants and manufacturers in the creation of the G.W.R.

[10] B(ristol) A(rchives) O(ffice), Proceedings of Common Council, 23 Feb. 1833.

[11] J.R. Kellett, *The Impact of Railways on Victorian Cities* (1969), pp. 4, 7, 8.

[12] H(ouse) (of) L(ords) R(ecord) O(ffice), G.W.R., 1835, H.C. 24 Mar., pp. 42–52. The quotation is on p. 44.

[13] MacDermot and Clinker, *History of the G.W.R.*, ii, pp. 68–9.

[14] H.L.R.O., G.W.R., 1835, H.C. 24 Mar., p. 17; H.L. 24 June, p. 8.

[15] H.L.R.O., Bristol and Gloucestershire Railway, 1839, H.C, 26 Ap., p. 75.

[16] J. Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Nineteenth Century* (Bristol, 1887), pp. 191–2. For the Bristol and Gloucester Railway generally, see C. Maggs, *The Bristol and Gloucester Railway* (Lingfield, Surrey, 1969).

[17] The various subscription contracts are in the H.L.R.O.

[18] G. Farr, *The Steamship Great Western* (Bristol, 1963), pp. 1, 2. See also Farr, *The Steamship Great Britain* (Bristol, 1965).

[19] B.A.O., Proceedings of Council, 1 Feb. 1837.

[20] Bristol Chamber of Commerce, *Reports of the Committee on Manufacture* (Bristol, 1828), pp. 4, 5.

[21] *New Bristol Guide* (Bristol, 1842), p. 41.

[22] Derek Fraser (ed.), *Municipal Reform and the Industrial City* (Leicester, 1982), p. 4; B.D. White, *A History of the Corporation of Liverpool 1835–1914* (Liverpool, 1951), especially pp. 10, 11; Sylvia McIntyre, 'Bath: the rise of a resort town, 1600–1800', in *Country Towns in pre-industrial England*, ed. Peter Clark (Leicester, 1981), especially pp. 199, 222-43; Peter Clark, 'The civic leaders of Gloucester 1580–1800', in *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns 1600–1800*, ed. Clark (1984), especially pp. 311, 336–8; A. Gibb, *Glasgow: the Making of a City* (1983), especially pp. 69–78, 85–8.

[23] The best source for the last years of the old Corporation and the first of the new is

G. Bush, *Bristol and Its Municipal Government 1820-1851* (Bristol, 1976). For a more detailed account of matters in this paragraph, see Bush, 'The Old and the New: The Corporation of Bristol 1820–51', (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Bristol Univ. 1965), pp. 46 fn., 263 ff.

[24] *Reports on Municipal Corporations*, P.P. 1835, XXIV, pp. 1207, 1214.

[25] B.A.O., Proceedings of Common Council, 12 Mar., 11 June 1823.

[26] Ibid., 11 Mar., 15 Sept., 9 Dec. 1835.

[27] Latimer, *Nineteenth Century Annals*, p. 212.

[28] B.A.O., Proceedings of Council, 31 Dec. 1835, 1 Jan. 1836; Latimer, *Nineteenth Century Annals*, pp. 210–13; Bush, *Municipal Government*, pp. 118–25. For another view of Bristol's 'new conservatism', this time in rélation to the propagation of scientific culture, see Michael Neve, 'Science in a commercial city: Bristol 1820–60', in *Metropolis and Province: Science in British Culture, 1780–1850*, eds. Ian Inkster and Jack Morrell (1983), pp. 179-204. Even Neve cannot resist a swipe at Bristol's 'notoriously self-protective Corporation' (p. 183).

[29] See Joan Day, *Bristol Brass: a History of the Industry* (Newton Abbot, 1973).

[30] B.W.E. Alford, 'The Flint and Bottle Glass Industry in the Early Nineteenth Century: A Case Study of a Bristol Firm', *Business History* X (1968), pp. 12–21. The quotation is on p. 21.

[31] B.W.E. Alford, 'The economic development of Bristol in the nineteenth century: an enigma?' in *Essays in Bristol and Gloucestershire History*, eds. P. McGrath and J. Cannon (Bristol, 1976), pp. 252–83. The quotation is on p. 266.

[32] Alford, *Business History*, p. 13.

[33] Ibid., p. 19.

[34] For Wills, see B.W.E. Alford, *W.D. and H.O. Wills and the development of the U.K. Tobacco Industry 1786–1965* (1973).

[35] Payne, *British Entrepreneurship*, p. 56.