

The Bristol Historical Resource CD

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Clive Lee

The *Bristol Historical Resource CD* includes over 30 individual contributions investigating different aspects of the history of the city. It also provides an updated version of the New Bristol Historical Bibliography, previously published in book format. Its principal aims, expounded in the introduction, include the provision of a significant historical resource, an overview of the history of the city, and a contribution to the discussion on the use of information technology in historical studies.

There are six principal sections that deal, respectively, with methodology, building, places and people, economy and commerce, health and welfare, law and crime and politics. These extended essays investigate many aspects of Bristol's development from its medieval origins to the present day. Thus the analysis of civic architecture and the built environment identifies the remains of the distant past, noting that a Romanesque arch may be found on College Green, while Bristol Cathedral incorporates a variety of styles reflecting its growth and embellishment between the 12th and 15th centuries, together with a large extension added in the 19th century. Pubs as well as churches have survived to reflect the earlier history of the city, the Llandogger Trow remaining as an illustration of medieval stone and timber construction. More recent, and celebrated, contributions to the built environment include the Clifton Suspension Bridge and Temple Meads Railway Station, both designed by Brunel. The latest phase of the evolution of the city manifest in the development of satellite suburbs, a characteristic of 20th-century development, is also charted.

The long and varied history of Bristol provides an abundance of topics for discussion and investigation. The dominance of the city in the slave trade in the first half of the 18th century generated wealth that financed the elegance of the city centre, large houses in suburban Clifton, and the first provincial bank in Bristol. The same resources were prominent a century later in developing the Great Western Railway. In the 20th century, Bristol acquired a new modern industry in aeroplane manufacture that started in two sheds rented from the city tramways at Filton in 1910. Only in the Second World War did production become a large-

scale operation, providing the base for the major defence industry complex that now exists, and that was confirmed by the transfer of the Defence Procurement Agency to the city in the mid 1990s. BAE Systems remains located at Filton, while defence industries have become a major element in the economy of the region with the Navy heavily committed to Plymouth and the Army similarly based at Warminster. A host of small companies supply major producers like British Aerospace and Rolls-Royce, and the industry generates a variety of high income jobs for scientists, technicians and skilled craftsmen.

The problems of health provision in the inter-war period provided another source of investigation. Anticipating contemporary problems, this period witnessed the growth of demand for medical services, encouraged by medical advances but hampered by a shortage of funds. The voluntary sector thus struggled to keep up with growing demand and local authority hospitals had to try to fill the gap. A variety of interesting statistics are reproduced, demonstrating amongst other significant data the variation in death rates and cause of death in different districts of the city.

Following modern convention, women's history is not neglected, paying note to the distinctive contribution of women to philanthropic movements in the 19th century. Their efforts are well illustrated by a series of biographies of individuals such as Agnes Beddoe who served on the Bristol School Board, as a Poor Law Guardian, and on the Industrial School Committee. She was a committed feminist and was also active in the movement for women's suffrage. Mary Carpenter, a celebrated local philanthropist, opened ragged schools in the city as well as reformatories for both boys and girls.

The political section provides a full exposition of the growth of local government in Bristol, and a survey of local and national politics. Electoral results, the extension of the franchise and changing ward boundaries are all analysed. Providing the human dimension there is a detailed biography of Sir Michael Hicks Beech, long serving parliamentary representative for Bristol and an equally resilient Chancellor of the Exchequer serving for seven years as the Victorian era ended and the Edwardian decade began. Appropriately for a Conservative Chancellor, Hicks Beech's period of office was most marked by the reduction of the national debt.

It is probably in the collation of large data sets that the CD form of presentation is most useful. There are four principal databases included here, relating respectively to unemployment, health, poor law and election results, mainly for the 19th and 20th centuries. In addition there are many aids for further investigation including an extremely useful introduction to the Bristol Record Office. There are other collections of data, with full supporting explanation of the historical context and the nature and quality of the resource. These include returns for the first income tax levied in 1799–1802, probate inventories, an introduction to the Port of Bristol archive, the finances of Bristol City Council, and a collection of obituaries and wills covering a 50-year period from 1871. In addition, there are full bibliographical details.

In sum, this CD provides a wide range of extremely interesting information about many aspects of the history of one of the great cities of Britain. It provides a wealth of information and access to extremely useful data sets. For anyone interested in urban history in general, or specifically in the history of Bristol and its region, this CD provides an excellent starting point for further investigations, not least because all aspects of the city's history have necessarily not been covered. Would it have been better as a book? There would have been some losses. The abundance of coloured illustrations, many maps and portraits copied from the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, that greatly enhance the text would have been very costly to reproduce in book form and might have been too expensive to tempt many publishers. Some individuals, like the present writer, might find material in book form easier to digest. But there are obvious benefits in the collection of a substantial volume of information on disk, providing highly convenient access to bibliographic and statistical data as well as to the academic essays. Those who aspire to collecting information about urban society and pursuing comparative studies will hope that this CD may serve to stimulate similar studies of other cities. Its pioneering efforts deserve recognition both for its aspirations and for its considerable achievement.

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