

## AUTUMN MEETING 2009

The Autumn Meeting in 2009 was held in Bristol from 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> October – the first time, surprisingly, that the Association had met in the City, despite its close connections with south Wales and Bristol Channel ports. Lectures and evening meals were held in Burwalls, the University of Bristol's Centre for Continuing Education, where some of the party stayed adjacent to the western end of the Clifton Suspension Bridge. Others were based at the Avon Gorge Hotel in Clifton close to the eastern end of the Bridge. A total of 29 attended the Meeting, a smaller number than normal.

The party assembled at 3 pm outside Burwalls to be welcomed and escorted across the Clifton Suspension Bridge by Dr Peter Fleming who was the mainstay of the Meeting. He then introduced his colleague Dr Madge Dresser, of the History Department of the University of the West of England and his co-director of the Regional History Centre. Heroically, despite recovering from bronchitis, Dr Dresser led the party on a walking tour of Clifton. Dr Dresser is a specialist in the socio-economic life of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Bristol. Looking down on the Avon Gorge and the Bridge from below the Observatory, she indicated the views that artists of 'Romantic' scenery were drawn to – even though there were many contemporary limestone quarries on the slopes of the Gorge and it was thronged with shipping. The natural springs of Hotwells at the foot of the Gorge were developed as a Spa from the later 17<sup>th</sup> century when half of the Manor of Clifton was purchased by the ever-entrepreneurial Bristol Merchant Venturers. But financial difficulties at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century ('credit crunches' being by no means exclusive to our own recent experiences) halted development of the Spa which thereafter declined. More seriously, what had been a housing development boom over the heights of Clifton with fine Georgian terraces, crescents and villas came to a juddering halt. Viewing the splendid houses of Worcester Crescent, for example, Dr Dresser pointed out that their initial construction had nearly bankrupted the builders and for some 20 years the houses stood empty and roofless until completion in 1853. Their fortunes had fluctuated ever since, with some of the party remembering the buildings as rather dilapidated 1960s flats, unlike their present fine condition. The afternoon reached a highlight with a private visit to Clifton Hill House which is now a University Hall of Residence. It was built between 1746 and 1750 for Paul Fisher, a wealthy Bristol merchant, who employed Isaac Ware, the nationally famous Palladian architect. This semi-rural villa, restrained in decoration, yet elegant and imposing was very influential in Bristol house building. Mrs Annie Burnside, the Warden, has brought about a remarkable programme of restoration, described in her recent book, in what is still very much a working and much-loved building,

After dinner Dr Peter Fleming, Principal Lecturer in the History Department of the University of the West of England, welcomed the party to Bristol, and recalled his under- and post-graduate years at the History Department of Swansea University. He then gave a comprehensive overview of Bristol's history, especially in the medieval period in his keynote lecture 'Bristol: the City and the Port'. The name derives from the Anglo-Saxon *Brigstow*, testimony to an early bridge. Dr Fleming firmly identified the protected defensive position of the city, surrounded by water on three sides as the primary reason for its location and foundation as an Alfredan 'burh'. He highlighted the rerouting of the River Frome into a new cut in the 1240s to make a deep water harbour as an astonishing achievement of medieval civil engineering, testament to the energy and enterprise of the Bristol merchants. He stressed that the City has always had a diverse economy and has always been more than a port. The late medieval city had expanded beyond its early walls when marshes were drained and a new bridge built. Its coastal, Bristol Channel and Irish sea trade also expanded into the

western Atlantic seaways, trading with Spain and Portugal. The Welsh had a strong presence in late medieval Bristol as on-going research demonstrates. He ended with an intriguing suggestion that whilst there was no evidence for a Roman civil settlement on the site of the early medieval city, the old Welsh name of *Caer Odwyr y Nant Badon* possibly referred to the Roman Abona or Sea Mills, lower down the Avon and might have been later transferred to Bristol.

A brisk walk for some to Burwalls for 9.15 am on Saturday was rewarded by an informative and visually illuminating talk by Gail Boyle, Curator of Archaeology, on highlights of the Roman collection at the Bristol City Museum, with an emphasis on links with Wales. Gail Boyle has worked at Bristol for twenty two years and is now engaged, together with advisors who include Peter Fleming and Madge Dresser, on the new Museum of Bristol currently being developed at the City docks. The City Museum's collections come from a wide area in the modern county of Avon and some date back to early antiquarian collecting. She emphasised the history of the collections and collectors themselves and Cambrians were particularly interested in her reading of extracts from letters by the schoolboy George Boon who was paid 'pocket money' by the then curator from 1944 to help record and - a remarkable achievement for a young man - secure the preservation of the Kings Weston Roman Villa from obliteration by immediate post-war housing development. A recent find of national importance was a huge coin hoard of some 11,000 Constantinian issues. Urban development in the Roman period was centred on the small town of Abona, which had military origins. Tiles stamped with the Second Augustan legion's stamp hint at connections with the legionary fortress at Caerleon. Numerous excavations in Bristol city centre and suburbs have shown that the whole area was quite densely farmed and settled in the Roman period.

After coffee (taken by many on the terrace overlooking the gardens at Burwalls in steadily improving weather) the final talk of the morning was by Duncan Taylor of the University of Bristol on 'Bristol Channel Trade under the Tudors', the subject of his recently completed Ph.D. he has researched the trade of the Bristol Channel ports on both the Welsh and English sides principally from Customs Accounts. English records were fuller than Welsh and in addition he had made use of the unique Bridgewater Water Bailiffs' accounts for 1541 and 1597 which show the under-representation of some trades in the Customs accounts. His research has attempted to provide a more nuanced picture of the whole 'Severn Sea' trade (the term Bristol Channel was not widely used in the 16<sup>th</sup> century) by showing that Bristol did not dominate all its aspects. Using well presented and comprehensible statistical charts he showed distinct local patterns particularly in the different proportions of Irish trade in commodities like smoked fish and leather - Ireland being a much more important trading partner for the Somerset ports than for Bristol and North Devon for example. Other differences were demonstrated between west Wales, where the Milford ports sent almost all of their wool to Ireland, whereas south-east Wales ports like Cardiff traded more in wool with France and the main Channel ports. In other words there were segmented markets, with bi-lateral trading, most marked in places like Pembrokeshire and Minehead with strong Irish communities in those ports.

After lunch at Burwalls, the party set off by coach to the city centre. Chronologically we began in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century where, under the guidance of Dr Stephen Jones, a thorough inspection was made of the different parts of Temple Meads Railway station. We began in the engine shed of I.K. Brunel's Old Station (built 1839-1841) for the Great Western railway beneath its cantilevered roof, with mock hammer-beams above cast iron columns. Behind the Tudor Revival style frontages of the station

complex were several innovative and efficient features such as arrivals and departures on opposing sides and turntables for the engines moved onto different lines. We moved onto the platform in today's station built by Mathew Digby Wyatt in 1871 when the Bristol and Exeter and Midland Railways also used the station. Finally, viewing Brunel's terminus building, now in part a pub, Stephen Jones, speaking above the noise of the traffic, pointed out the innovative one-way system for carriages to drop off departing passengers and go round to pick up arrivals in what is now the oldest surviving railway terminus building in Europe.

Taking over from Stephen Jones, and moving to the quieter recesses of a hermit's cave in the rock face at the rear of the Quaker Burial Ground, close to Temple Meads, Peter Fleming noted the association of the area with the Knights Templar in what was, in the Middle Ages, open ground south of the City. We then walked to the magnificent church of St Mary's Redcliffe. It is hard to believe that this was in origin a small chapel of ease. Dr Fleming concentrated on two aspects of the church (worth a day's visit in its own right). He stressed the ornate and flamboyant style 14<sup>th</sup> century east porch with its almost Spanish Moorish cusped arches (a trading influence?) and the fact that the porch faced towards the city bridge and heartland and was evidently built for effect and grand entrances and exits. The party viewed the two tombs of the 'very rich and very wise' 14<sup>th</sup> century Bristol merchant, William Canynge, one figuring him as a merchant with his wife and the other as a priest, since he took holy orders in his widowhood and became Dean of Westbury College.

The party then progressed towards the medieval bridge and then skirting the core of the medieval city and sites of town gates to the splendid Georgian Queen's Square. From there a somewhat breathless progress was made across the northern arm of the floating harbour to College Green to reach the Lord Mayor's Chapel, shortly before closing. This was in origin St Mark's medieval hospital and traces of the medieval hospital arrangements survive. The Pointz chantry chapel is one highlight, the other the extraordinarily rich and numerous funerary monuments from the late medieval to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The party could not but concur with Peter Fleming's assertion that this really is a relatively unknown gem of Bristol's ecclesiastical history. Some of the party then visited the cathedral before returning to base, and an intrepid few continued to explore the topography of the heart of the medieval city. Duly rested, the party enjoyed a dinner in an upstairs dining room at the Avon Gorge Hotel which provided a striking view of the illuminated Suspension Bridge.

Sunday morning began with an intriguing lecture by Dr Evan Jones of Bristol University on 'The Cabot Mystery'. Recent new work (which can be followed on the University of Bristol's History Department website, 'The Cabot Project') has transformed our ideas about what happened to Cabot's Second Voyage of 1498. Dr Jones sketched the background to the Cabot voyages stressing the willingness of Bristol long distance traders to back ventures to extend their trade and break monopolies. Although a failure, a valiant try had been made to break the Italian monopoly of Mediterranean trade in the 1450s when Genoese pirates killed the Bristol voyagers after capture of their ships. Cabot impressed Henry VII with his North American discoveries and got support for a second voyage. But after the departure of Cabot on his second expedition to North America with five ships, nothing more was heard. By the time Hakluyt was collecting material for his accounts of the Great Age of Elizabethan voyages of exploration information on Cabot was scanty. But why a mystery? Dr Jones explained that he had become aware that Dr Alwyn Ruddock, a respected academic at the University of London and doyenne of the Age of Discovery studies had discovered new information in Italian archives on further voyages on for example a church founded in north America and evidence

suggesting that Cabot traded in the Caribbean for two years and did return. Alwyn Ruddock never published her findings and, unfortunately, instructed her executors to burn all her papers after her death in 2005. Evan Jones has discovered a synopsis of a proposed book on her research which she submitted to Exeter University Press and through the Cabot Project, on-going work to substantiate Ruddock's claims are being pursued.

The final lecture of the Meeting was by Dr Stephen Jones, Heritage Tourism Manager for Cadw and author of three volumes on *Brunel in South Wales* speaking on 'Bristol, Brunel and Wales'. He began with Brunel's never- to- be realised plans for a Severn Crossing between Bullo Pill and Lydney well up stream of the present bridges, a plan rejected by the Admiralty for impeding navigation. He discussed the Avon Gorge Suspension Bridge before moving on to Brunel's ships. The Great Eastern was based at Milford and adapted for cable laying across the Atlantic and in his well- illustrated talk he showed a rare photograph of the Great Eastern at low tide on the grid at Neyland. Interesting details were provided of Brunel's 'management style' and contacts with his on- site engineers during his many Welsh projects. He concluded with the story of Brunel's final ship, the SS Great Britain – a fitting introduction for the afternoon's visit.

After lunch at Burwalls, the party set off again by coach and boarded the *Mathew* for a leisurely cruise around the floating harbour. Cambrians explored the ship and talked to the crew – and the General Secretary was even allowed to steer the vessel with a somewhat unfamiliar whipstaff tiller. The *Mathew* was built as a replica of Cabot's original caravel to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Cabot's discovery of Newfoundland. Dedicated in the floating harbour at the first International Festival of the Sea in 1996, she successfully crossed the Atlantic in 1997 with the same number of crew on board as Cabot had sailed with. Today the ship is used for cruises, festivals and filming.

The final event of the afternoon was a visit to the SS Great Britain and the excellent dockside Museum. The party was welcomed by Bob Evans and won over by his enthusiasm and commitment for the project with future plans for secondary and higher education and training projects now well developed. After a descent down into the dry dock, now sheeted over with glass in order to maintain dry conditions to preserve the iron plates of the enormous hull, Cambrians were then free to explore the ship and the Museum, reconvening in late afternoon in the Haywood Saloon to consume the Bo'sun's Buffet. This provided the opportunity for Frances Llewelyn to thank Muriel Chamberlain and Nansi Mascetti and all the speakers for an extremely enjoyable and highly informative meeting.

Members dispersed after breakfast on Monday.

Heather James