

Bristol Archives  
**Bristol's maritime records:  
selected sources**



Image: Bristol's Floating Harbour, [Ref. 43207/1715](#)

**A chronological list of archive sources on the history of the port and docks of Bristol.**

This list was originally compiled for educational sessions at Bristol Archives, with some additional items added since.

It is intended as a starting point for research and further sources are available. For more information about collections held at Bristol Archives, please see our catalogue.

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**Online catalogue**

[archives.bristol.gov.uk](http://archives.bristol.gov.uk)

**Website**

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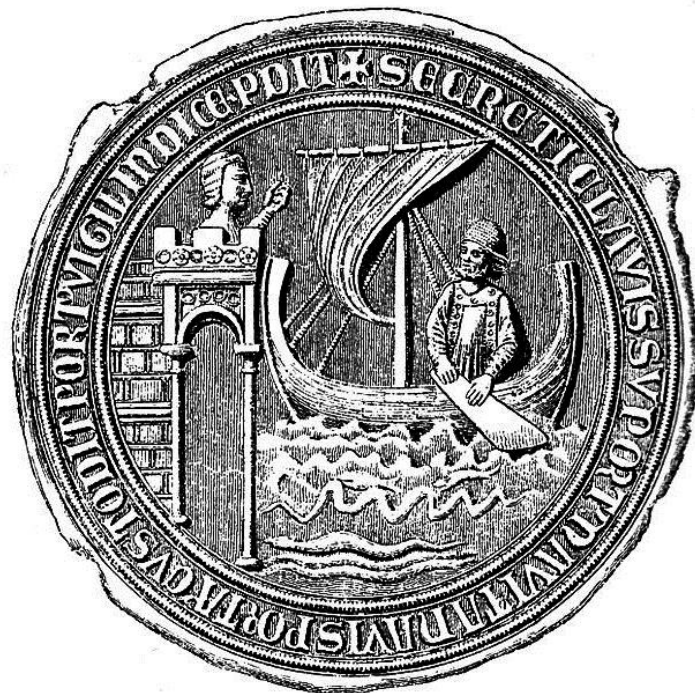
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**The common seal of the burgesses of Bristol, engraved in the reign of Edward I (1272-1307) (Ref. 32229/1)**

The obverse portrays the great stone keep of Bristol Castle, built between c1130 and c1150.

The reverse demonstrates the early history of Bristol as a port. It shows a merchant ship approaching the castle's Watergate along the River Avon, which teems with fish, including a large eel. The device of the eel is explained by the Latin legend around the edge, which may be translated as 'I am the key of the hidden port. The sailor watches the port side of the ship. The watchman points out the port with his finger.'



**Great charter of liberties, 47 Edward 111, 30 September 1373 (Ref. CC/1/9)**

Until this charter was granted, Bristol was divided administratively by the River Avon. Parishes to the west and north of the river lay in Gloucestershire, while those to the south were in Somerset. The charter of 1373 established Bristol as a county, independent from the Gloucestershire and Somerset authorities.

The boundaries of this new county extended down the Avon and into the Channel, giving Bristol jurisdiction over shipping in this area.

- Printed text: N Dermott Harding (ed). 'Bristol Charters 1155-1373', Bristol Record Society i (1930), pp146-165 (Ref. J/BRS/1).

[This document is currently on display at M Shed]

## **Ordinances for the establishment of a Guild of Sailors in Bristol, 14 September 1445**

From the Little Red Book of Bristol, folios 150-152v ([Ref. CC/2/1](#)).

This was a fraternity established to support a priest and twelve poor sailors to pray for seamen 'when passing and labouring upon the sea'. It was established at the Hospital of St Bartholomew, part of which still stands at the bottom of Christmas Steps today.

- Printed text: F B Bickley (ed). 'The Little Red Book of Bristol II' (1900), pp186-192 ([Ref. Bk/117](#)).

## **Admiralty Court seal, c1461 ([Ref. 32229/5](#))**

This seal portrays a single-masted vessel with fore and aft castles, probably a warship, in full sail and charged with the royal arms which are also flown in the stern. Another banner bearing the cross of St George is fixed in the bow, and a pennant, also with St George's cross, flies from the masthead.



Bristol was granted an Admiralty Court by Henry VI in 1446 and therefore exempt from the jurisdiction of the High Court of Admiralty. The court had power to try cases of theft, piracy, murder and other offences on the sea within the county of Bristol. It could also try cases of obstruction of the river, such as wrecks. The court was abolished in 1835.

## **Record of a crane being built on The Back and presented to the town by Alice Chester, a merchant's widow, 1475 ([Ref. P.AS/Chw/1](#))**

From the church book of All Saints parish, Bristol.

This is the first evidence of a crane in the port.

- Printed text: Clive Burgess (ed). 'The Pre-Reformation Records of All Saints, Bristol: part I', Bristol Record Society xlvii (1995), p17 ([Ref. J/BRS/46](#)).

## **Inventory of John Smyth's ship *Trinity*, 1539 ([Ref. AC/B/63](#))**

From John Smyth's ledger, folio 61.

Smyth's chief venture was shipping West of England cloth to Gascony and the Iberian Peninsula, in return for wines and dye-stuffs. His inventory values the *Trinity*, fully equipped, at £250. This includes a substantial amount of armaments,

which suggests that the boat may then have been in the service of the king. Smyth, like other merchants at the time, sought to evade customs and licence dues on certain products, as a careful rereading of these accounts by Evan Jones of Bristol University has revealed.

- Printed text: Jean Vanes (ed). 'The Ledger of John Smythe 1538-1550', Bristol Record Society xxviii (1975), p97 ([Ref. J/BRS/28](#)).

#### **Will of Nichols Thorne, 4 August 1546 ([Ref. JOr/1/1](#))**

From the Great Orphan Book and Book of Wills No 1, folio f273.

Most of Bristol's leading citizens had an active interest in shipping and foreign trade. Thorne, for example, left money for 'the making of a dam-head with stone to the dock at the Key, for the making and repairing of ships'. He also bequeathed his astrolabe, charts and maps to Bristol Grammar School, which he had co-founded.

- Printed text: T P Wadley. 'The Great Orphan Book and Book of Wills', (1886), pp184-187 ([Ref. Bk/105](#)).

#### **Regulations for carpenters, 1558 ([Ref. 04272](#))**

From the first volume of Bristol Ordinances, folio 17.

These demonstrate the emphasis that the city placed on ensuring the smooth operation of trade.

- Printed text: M Stanford. 'The Ordinances of Bristol 1506-1598', Bristol Record Society xli (1990), p27 ([Ref. J/BRS/41](#)).

#### **Port books (overseas outward/inward and coastal), 1565-1570**

([TNA ref. E 190/1128/2 to 17](#))

For each port, three series of books were compiled by local customs officials every year. One recorded the collection of import and export dues, another was concerned with cargo rather than revenue and the third recorded coastal shipping, which was exempt from the payment of dues.

Bristol Archives holds these books on microfilm as the originals, covering 1565 to 1799, are held at the National Archives. There is not a complete set for every port.

## Documents relating to the wreck of the *Golden Lion*, 1578-1580

- Ricart's Kalendar (Ref. CC/2/7, folio 168)
- Adam's Chronicle of Bristol (Ref. 13748/4, folio 166)
- Mayor's Audits, 1575-1586 (Ref. F/Au/1/11, folios 286-299; Ref. F/Au/1/12, folio 21-34)

The *Golden Lion* sank in the channel of the river at Hungroad whilst returning from a voyage to Andalusia in 1578. For a time, the river seems to have been impassable.

The Common Council made every effort to shift her but eventually and admitted defeat and, in early 1580, sent a team of carpenters to cut her down.

- Printed texts: Lucy Toulmin Smith (ed). 'The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar', The Camden Society (1872), p60 (Ref. 42512/34) and Francis F Fox (ed). 'Adams's Chronicle of Bristol' (1910), p116 (Ref. Bk/110).

## Deposition concerning the fate of John Chetwind alias Farwell Meredith, 1654 (Ref. JX/1/2)

From the second volume of Bristol Depositions, pages 373, 392-4 and 422 (Ref. J/BRS/13).

With port and trade so important to Bristol, many of the depositions given in Bristol's courts inevitably relate to shipping. In this example, depositions were given against merchant Marlin Hiscox, owner of the ship *Dolphin*. Farwell Meredith, an 18 year old boy, persuaded the ship's crew to take him on a voyage to Barbados, giving his name as John Chetwind. On arrival, he was sold to a plantation owner as a slave; he was known to have been mistreated but his eventual fate is unknown.

The registers described below were introduced to prevent incidents of this sort.

- Printed text: H E Nott and Elizabeth Ralph. 'The Deposition Books of Bristol II: 1650-1654', Bristol Record Society xiii (1947), pp166-167, 174-5, 192 (Ref. J/BRS/13).

## Registers of servants to foreign plantations, 1654-1679 (Ref. 04220)

These two volumes contain the names of over 10,000 young people who passed through Bristol en route to British colonies, as servants bound to masters in Virginia, Maryland and the West Indies.

The records were kept by order of the Council as an attempt to prevent the 'inveigling, purloining, carrying and stealing away' of 'boyes, maides and other persons, and transporting them beyond the seas & there selling or otherwise disposing of them for private gain & profit' in the plantations of the New World.

- Printed text: Peter Wilson Coldham (ed). 'The Bristol Registers of Servants to Foreign Plantations 1654-1686', Genealogical Publishing Co Inc, Baltimore (1988), p20 ([Ref. Bk/438](#)).

#### **Account book of John Day, merchant, 1698-1704 ([Ref. 40044/1](#))**

John Day came from Cornwall in 1691 to be apprenticed to the Bristol merchant William Swymmer. In 1698, he completed his apprenticeship and became a burgess and a member of the Society of Merchant Venturers.

This volume shows the early years of his career as a merchant in his own right. In addition to paying for lessons in dancing (f11) and, more importantly, navigation (f20), the records show him fitting out ships such as the *Mary Rose*, the *Lyon*, the *Squirrel Brigantine*, the *Elizabeth Galley* and the *Virginia Merchant*.

Destinations are mentioned only occasionally but Jamaica and Antigua are named, as well as Irish ports. On folio 105 he refers to 'the arrival of the First Virginia Fleet', and to 'Richard Green of Rappah River, Virginia'.

#### **Papers of Samuel Munckley (1720-1802), ship owner and merchant**

- Letters from Herman Katenkamp, merchant of Exeter, concerning the Hamburg trade and the securing, by Munckley, of a passage to New York for a 'young Mr Wilcocks', 1751 ([Ref. AC/MU/1/5a-d](#))
- Vouchers for work done to fit out the ship *True Briton* (sailmaker, rigger, brazier, shipwright, baker, brewer, barrel maker, carpenter), 1761 ([Ref. AC/MU/3/4a-k](#))
- List of necessities for a sea chest for six weeks' voyage, 1782 ([Ref. AC/MU/3/10](#))

Munckley, originally from Exeter, established himself as a merchant in Bristol, where he seems to have specialised in the Hamburg trade. This was a traditional market for Bristol merchants, pre-dating the more lucrative but risky Atlantic one.

#### **A muster roll for the ship *Ulysses*, 1754-1755 ([Ref. SMV/9/3/1/3](#))**

From records of the Seamen's Hospital Fund in the archive of the Society of Merchant Venturers, list 62.

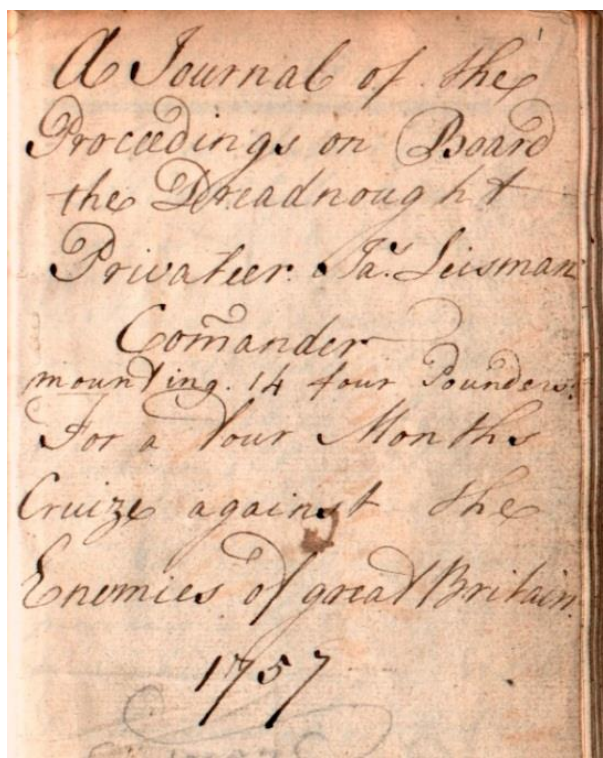
An Act of Parliament of 1747 established a pension scheme to encourage young men to enter the Merchant Navy and in Bristol, this scheme was administered by the Society of Merchant Venturers.

On each ship, muster rolls were now kept to record the money that seamen paid into the fund. The lists also show each man's date of entry, his previous ship, his usual place of abode and where or whether he was discharged (or if he deserted or died).

On the muster roll for the *Ulysses*, two of the crew were described - in the language of the day - as 'a black' and 'an Indian'. It is noted that both were sold in Jamaica as slaves.

**A journal of the proceedings on board the *Dreadnought* privateer, James Seisman Co(m)mander, mounting 14 four pounders: for a four months cruize against the enemies of Great Britain, 1757 (Ref. 44938)**

The journal, written by the ship's unidentified surgeon, describes the four month privateering cruise from beginning to end. Included are descriptions of the capture of two French vessels and remarks about life on board ship, as well as notes on medical treatments and an account of the prize money paid to the surgeon for the voyage.



**Certificate for financial help for Patrick Dennison of the *Salisbury* privateer, 1760 (Ref. SMV/9/3/3/3/84)**

From records of the Seamen's Hospital Fund in the archive of the Society of Merchant Venturers

The pension scheme allowed seamen who were incapable of service due to injury or old age to apply for financial relief; the widows and children of seamen could also request support.

Patrick Dennison was maimed and blinded on the *Salisbury* privateer during an engagement with a French privateer.

**Insurance policy for the voyage of the ship *Sally* from Africa to America, 1762 (Ref. 16073)**

The policy did not cover 'mortality of negroes by natural death'.

**Account book for the snow *Triton*, 1770-90, 1803 (Ref. 39654/3)**

One of several similar volumes held at BRO. These are records kept by Bristol merchants of their ships, with details of journeys, cargoes, sailing instructions, accounts, etc.

The *Triton* traded in the West Indies. On 30 August 1777, during the American War of Independence, the ship was issued a letter of marque 'for cruising against the Americans' and fitted with twelve guns.

**Log book of the ship *Lloyd*, 1771-1772 (Ref. 38032)**

This beautifully illustrated log was compiled by the marine artist and ship's master, Nicholas Pocock. It relates to four voyages made by the *Lloyd* between Bristol and Dominica, via Madeira, the Canaries and the Caribbean Islands.



**William Jessop's design for improving the harbour of Bristol, 1802 (Ref. AC/PL/64)**

In the second half of the 18th century, the Avon's notorious tidal rise and fall (the second greatest in the world) made the port unusable for much of the year and posed a serious threat to Bristol's position as the country's second port. Ships were increasing in size and the harbour's steep mud banks at low tide meant that vessels leaned outward from the quays, risking serious damage. Something had to be done to keep them upright at all times.

Various schemes were proposed and William Jessop's plan for a Floating Harbour was accepted in 1802; it was completed in 1809, providing a tide-free enclosure for the city docks. The Bristol Dock Company was established to oversee the new harbour.



### **Minute book of the Bristol Dock Company, 1832-1837 (Ref. PBA/Corp/M/7)**

The Floating Harbour quickly became unsanitary, with rubbish and sewage trapped in the city centre by the locks. Although the Bristol Dock Company attempted to resolve the pollution, the harbour remained unpleasant throughout the 19th century, though increasingly due to industrial rather than domestic overspill. Silting was another problem, with the restricted flow of water insufficient to prevent the formation of the mudbanks which were such a danger to shipping.

In 1832, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, whose design for the Clifton Suspension Bridge had just been accepted, was invited to report on the problem. He recommended efficient dredging and a constant current and, after some deliberation, the company installed culverts to control water levels and carry dredged mud into the New Cut.

This volume contains Brunel's first reports to the Bristol Dock Company and shows the beginnings of the long and uneasy relationship which grew up between them and which culminated in the construction of a new entry lock at Cumberland Basin - now disused but still known as Brunel's lock.

### **Bristol Presentments or Bills of Entry, 1801-1858 (Ref. F/D/P)**

These handbills were produced for subscribers twice weekly during the 18th and 19th centuries, to inform them of shipping activity at the port. They listed vessels arriving and leaving, with the names of their masters and the port from which they had sailed or for which they were bound, plus details of their cargoes.

### **Edward Bowles Hare's ship log books**

- Log of the *James Cropper* (Bristol to New York), with pen and ink cartoons, 1831 (Ref. 40785/P/1, item b)
- Log of the *Duchess of Athol* (London to Bombay, China, Cape of Good Hope, St Helena, towards England), 1832-1833 (Ref. 40785/P/1, item c)

These logs were apparently kept by Edward Bowles Hare. They are part of the archive of John Hare & Co (a floorcloth, linoleum, white lead and colour manufacturers based at Temple Gate) but it seems doubtful that Edward had any connection with the family business or that these voyages were related to it.

The log books seem to have been written purely for Edward's gentlemanly amusement, with comments in the passenger list for the *Duchess of Athol* reminiscent of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

**Journal of an anonymous Bristol Quaker who travelled on the ss *Great Britain* from Liverpool to Melbourne, Australia, 1852 (Ref. 30100)**

When Brunel's ss *Great Western* (1838) and ss *Great Britain* (1843) were built in Bristol, he envisaged that his steamships would provide an onward route to New York for passengers on the Great Western Railway. Ultimately, however, the size of the ships and the high dues charged in Bristol meant that they made Liverpool their home port.

Then, after just two years in service, the ss *Great Britain* foundered on the Irish Coast and the Great Western Steamship Company came to an end.

The ship was bought by the Bristol families of Bright and Gibbs and used to transport passengers to Australia, which was developing rapidly as an emigrant destination. Between 1852 and 1876, she made 32 trips to the continent.

This journal was written by a passenger on what must have been the first voyage of ss *Great Britain's* to Australia. He describes his experiences as a passenger in steerage and the ship's progress towards its destination.

The ss *Great Britain*, after a chequered career, now stands where she began, in the Great Western Dry Dock at Wapping, Bristol.



**Registration for the bark *Macedon*, 1860-1868 (Ref. 37908/1/11)**

From the Bristol shipping registers, 1824-1868, folio 59.

Since 1786, customs officials in each port (as agents of the Board of Trade and its successors) have maintained registers of ships and their owners. Being listed in these register constitutes a document of title to property, whether for all or part of the ship - property in ships was traditionally divided into sixty-four shares. Volumes at Bristol Archives cover 1824 to 1868; later volumes are held at the National Archives.

The registers provide full details of the dimensions, ownership, history and ultimate fate of each vessel registered; these are listed chronologically by registration date and most are indexed by name. The entry for the *Macedon* shows that the ship was built in Sunderland in 1862 and registered in Bristol and fully owned by a William Brass. When he sold the ship to a master mariner from Cornwall, the registration was transferred to Falmouth.

**Crew lists, agreements to serve and log books of the ship *Macedon*, 1871-1872**  
(Ref. 30182/466)

Since the mid-18th century, and especially since the Merchant Shipping Acts of 1835 and 1854, records have been kept of crews employed on British vessels. Besides showing who crewed locally registered vessels, these documents, particularly the log books, provide considerable information about life on board.

The log of the *Macedon* shows the chief mate trying to control the crew after the captain died in the East Indies. Whilst one man said of the captain, 'He is not the first bluddy man that has died - he is only a nine days wonder', another threatened to cut out the livers of some of his fellow seamen. Drunkenness is also mentioned, as the cargo had been broached.

**Superintendent's entry books for the Bristol Sailors' Home, 1866-1902**  
(Ref. 40311/D/1)

Bristol Sailor's Home was set up by local shipowners and merchants in 1851 to 'protect sailors from vicious associations and to promote among them orderly and sober habits'.

The home stood on The Grove (close to the Welsh back) and remained on this site until the organisation closed in the 1990s. The building has since been converted into offices.

**Registers of boys at the National Nautical School, Portishead**  
(Ref. 38087/NS/A7)

In 1869, Bristol businessman Henry Fedden, with other sponsors, leased an old wooden warship from the Admiralty for use as an 'industrial' school for young boys considered to be at risk of turning to crime because of destitution or abandonment (or those under 12 who had already been convicted of criminal offences).



On board the *Formidable*, moored off Portishead Point, they were trained for the Royal or Merchant Navies. In reality, both services were reluctant to take candidates from the *Formidable* or the twenty-odd similar institutions throughout the country.

By 1906, the *Formidable* had become unsafe and the institution moved to purpose-built premises on shore at Portishead and became the National Nautical School. It closed in 1982 and the imposing building was redeveloped as residential flats.

[This document is currently on display at M Shed]

### Papers regarding the apprentice sailor Roland Theophilus Bryant, 1912-1913

- Letter from Roland Bryant to his parents, Mr and Mrs EJ Bryant of St Paul's, Bristol, on his first voyage as apprentice on board the *Denbigh Castle* when rounding Cape Horn, 5 April 1912 (Ref. [40474/8](#))
- In memoriam card for Roland Bryant, January 1913 (Ref. [40474/14i](#))
- Photograph of Roland Bryant (Ref. [40474/5](#))



Roland Bryant joined the Liverpool-registered ship *Denbigh Castle* as a teenager but did not enjoy his chosen career: 'I must tell you that I have had a dog's life aboard the ship since we have been at sea... we get hunted round the decks like sheep. He [the skipper] finds us all the dirty rotten jobs to do... I have never heard such swearing and blaspheming...'

The wreckage of the *Denbigh Castle* was washed up at Bridport in Dorset in January 1913. She had sunk with all hands and her stinking cargo of guano. The 'in memoriam' card shows that Roland was amongst those drowned.

[These items are currently on display at M Shed]

### Dues clearance sheets, 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ref. [PBA/Mgt/AD](#))

From the Port of Bristol Authority archive.

In 1848, the Corporation of Bristol took over the docks in an attempt to prevent their decline at the hands of the Bristol Docks Company. Dues were lowered and trade improved, but a small harbour eight miles up a highly tidal river could not attract the new larger shipping of the day.

From the 1850s, docks at the mouth of the Avon were proposed and three camps developed: those pro-Avonmouth, those pro-Portishead and those in favour of

improving the city docks. New docks opened at Avonmouth in 1877 and Portishead in 1879.

The companies who owned them and their supporters became bitter rivals but the problem was solved when the Corporation bought both and united them with the city docks under management of its Docks Committee, acting as the Port of Bristol Authority.

In 1991, the docks returned to private ownership when the port - except for the city docks, by then virtually unused - was taken over by the Bristol Port Company.

The dues clearance sheets provide detail information about goods being shipped in and out of the port of Bristol.

### **Films of the Bristol, Avonmouth and Portishead docks, 1902-1972**

(Ref. BROFA/0059)

The Port of Bristol Authority was always committed to the promotion of its facilities through the medium of film.

The earliest examples depict the cutting of the first sod of the Royal Edward Dock at Avonmouth by the Prince of Wales in 1902 and its subsequent opening in 1908.

The majority of the films were shot by the local firm of F G Warne between the 1930s and the 1960s.

