



Image credit: Coat of Arms of the Society, 1569 (ref. SMV/1/1/2/1)

A Guide to the archives of the Society of Merchant Venturers



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Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the archives staff and volunteers who have worked on this collection and guide. Thank you also to Sophie Evans (University of Exeter) who contributed to revising this document in 2022.

Originally produced 2006
Revised August 2022
Reformatted and links added 2024

Introduction

Bristol Archives holds the archives of the city's Society of Merchant Venturers, which are publicly available for research.

The catalogue for this collection is available online (ref. [SMV](#)) and the records themselves can be consulted in our searchroom at B Bond Warehouse.

This guide explains the history of the society, how the archive is arranged, and key sources for finding records of people, such as members, students and almshouse residents.

Extracts from the collection have been published by the Bristol Record Society - *Records Relating to the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol in the 17th Century* (Volume XVII - [J/BRS/17](#)) is available as a PDF on the [Bristol Record Society website](#).

Background to the records

From the 15th century, the terms 'Merchant Venturer' and 'Merchant Adventurer' were applied to organised groups of merchants founded in, for example, London, Newcastle and York.

From the 16th century, these groups were generally under the control of the Merchant Adventurers of England. However, the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol is an independent body with no connection to the Merchant Adventurers of England, of which the only remaining example is the Merchant Adventurers of York.

The independent corporate existence of Bristol's Merchant Venturers begins in 1552 with a Royal Grant from Edward VI to a number of merchants incorporating them as the 'Master, Wardens and Commonalty of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol', with the Master sworn in each year by the Mayor. In 1569 the Society and the City were each granted a Coat of Arms and there are many other links between the history of the Society and the history of Bristol. Its members have traditionally been prominent in the civic and political life of the city.

Subsequent monarchs granted further charters and the present constitution was set out in the charter of 1639 granted by Charles I, by which the Master and Wardens were given 10 Assistants. This formed a Standing Committee which increased from 13 to 15 members in 1989, through a charter from Queen Elizabeth II. This committee still forms the executive body of the Society; in accordance with the charter, it is elected annually on the 10 November by all the members.

From its early days, the Society was involved in exploration and colonisation of the Americas. Individual members of the Society backed various voyages of exploration in the 16th century and these increased in the early 17th century. The voyages to Newfoundland, however, were a particular Society project and the first Governor of the colony, John Guy, was Master of the Society in 1622. Another Merchant Venturer, Thomas James, later led a

successful expedition to the Hudson Bay area. Both Thomas James and John Guy were also Aldermen of the city.

As trade with the American settler colonies became established, European merchants developed a triangular route via Africa, to the West Indies and mainland America, and back to Europe. Bristol merchants were heavily involved in this trade.

The system relied on the enslavement and labour of African people. Trade goods were shipped from Bristol and other European ports to the west coast of Africa, to be exchanged for enslaved people. Those people were transported to labour on plantations in the West Indies and southern United States. The goods they produced – sugar, tobacco, cotton and rum – were brought back to Europe to be sold and processed. These goods drove further investment in trafficking African people to be enslaved on plantations.

Records within this collection reflect the activities and overseas connections of Bristol merchants. They also document the Society's role in expanding and running 'forts' or 'castles' on Cape Coast, where enslaved African people and goods for trade were held, as well as intervention in conflicts between tribes, such as the Ashantees and Fantees, according to interests of trade.

"Slave trading from Bristol reached a peak in 1732, surpassing London and accounting for almost half of the ships sailing to Africa. In 1750, the African Company was set up by Act of Parliament and any merchant, whether a member of the Society or not, could join on payment of a fee. The managing committee of nine representatives was shared between London, Liverpool and Bristol, with the Society collecting the local membership subscriptions. Bristol's share of the trade was progressively overtaken by Liverpool and by 1775, had declined to 10 per cent."¹

From the beginning of the 17th century until 1848, the Society controlled Bristol's docks through a succession of wharfage leases with the city council. They were, in effect, the port authority responsible for keeping the River Avon navigable, extending the quays as trade increased and controlling the pilots. As a result, the 18th century, during which trade with the West Indies and Africa grew, was a particularly active period in its history.

The influence and wealth gained through trade based on the trafficking and labour of enslaved people, enabled the Society to redirect its resources to transform Bristol's social and physical structure as well as its economy. From the 1830s the Society developed the Manor of Clifton (acquired in the late 17th century) and in 1861 presented Clifton Downs to the people of Bristol 'in perpetuity'. They were also involved in setting up the Great Western Railway Company and with the building of the Clifton Suspension Bridge.

With the loss of the American colonies and the abolition of the slave trade, the commercial influence of the Society waned but its role in the field of education and charitable works continues into the modern day.

¹ www.merchantventurers.com/who-we-are/history/transatlantic-slave-trade/. Accessed 6/12/2021.

The Society had already accepted responsibility for Edward Colston's hospital for 100 poor boys. This later became the co-educational Colston's School (which announced it would change its name following a public survey in July 2021) and Colston's Girls' School (which changed its name to Montpelier High School in September 2021). The Society also took over the Bristol Trade and Mining School, the first of its kind in England. This later became the Merchant Venturers' Technical College and (until 1949) the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Bristol.

The Society also became trustee of Merchants' Almshouses on King Street, Colston's Almshouse on St Michael's Hill, and more recently the Cote Charity which operates two homes for the elderly. It also manages the endowment of St Monica's Trust.

The grant of arms

The Society's coat of arms was granted in August 1569 by Queen Elizabeth I. On the same day, the city of Bristol received a formal grant of crest and supporters to accompany the long-established city arms.

The SMV coat of arms includes the following elements:

- The blue and white wavy lines are a convention for the sea and signify a body of people carrying on overseas trade
- The 'red chief' with the lion of England indicates that the Merchant Venturers were established by the king
- The two besants (gold coins) are a common symbol for wealth and trade
- The green dragon may be compliment to the Berkeley family, who had long been interested in the navy and ships
- The crest is a ship's top and the supporters are a mermaid and an unusual depiction of Father Time
- The Society's motto, 'Indocilis pauperiem pati', means that a merchant will not willingly learn to endure poverty. This quote from the Roman poet Horace was added in the 19th century.

The arms illustrate one of the essentials for being a member of the Merchant Venturers – a connection with the sea, preferably by owning ships which traded to foreign ports and the cargoes they carried. A merchant would usually have shares in several ships to spread the risk. This ruling relating to the sea was not formally rescinded until 1861, although by then, Bristol had not been primarily a port city for some time.

The original coat of arms is retained by the Society. The catalogue entry can be viewed online (ref. [SMV/1/1/2/1](#)), a transcription is available (ref. [SMV/1/1/1/9](#)), and a digital image is also available.

The Downs

The Society's land holdings included the manor of Clifton, which included 220 acres of Clifton Down.

In 1859, in agreement with the Society, Bristol Corporation (now Bristol City Council) purchased the manor of Henbury, which included Durdham Down.

Together, they jointly dedicated Clifton and Durdham Downs, a total of 440 acres, for the use and enjoyment of the citizens of Bristol 'in perpetuity'.

Under the Clifton & Durdham Downs Act of 1861, the Downs are still administered by a committee with an equal number of members from the Society and the city council.

Records relating to the Manor of Clifton within the Society's collection will mostly be found under ref. [SMV/6/5](#). Records of the joint Downs Committee will be found within the main run of council minutes under ref. [M/BCC/DOW](#).

Custodial history

The archive of the Society of Merchant Venturers was transferred to Bristol Archives on indefinite loan in 2005, to provide easier access to members of the public and ensure professional care, cataloguing and storage.

A small number of items, notably the charters, are listed in the catalogue but retained by the society at Merchants' Hall, where some are on display.

Arrangement

The records have been arranged to reflect its various functions of the society during its existence.

SMV/1 – Foundation & Membership

Papers relating to the foundation of the society, such as charters, the grant of arms, and ordinances. Also records relating to membership of the society, including apprenticeships, admissions, lists of members and honorary members, and some other related records.

SMV/2 – Administrative

Records including the proceedings of the hall, such as hall books (minute books), calendars of records. Also society correspondence related to the interests of society members, including petitioning for free trade with Africa, regulations and duties on trading enslaved people, and opposition to abolition.

SMV/3 – Financial

These include accounts, vouchers and investment records.

SMV/4 – Charities

Administrative records of the Merchants' Almshouse, Colston's Almshouse, Hill's Almshouse, St Nicholas Almshouse, the Almshouse charity, St Monica Home of Rest, and other related records.

SMV/5 – Education

Financial, legal and administrative records of Colston's Hospital, Coston's Hospital Trust, Merchants' Hall Marine School, Trade and Mining school, Merchant Venturers' Technical College, and the University of Bristol. These include records of candidates for Colston's Hospital (school).

SMV/6 – Estates management

Administrative records of the property of the society including deeds, leases, rentals, valuations and surveys, maps and plans, sales, accounts, development and war damage. Properties include various Bristol properties, the Manor of Clifton, Hotwells, and several Somerset manors and properties.

SMV/7 – Trade

Port and Docks: Records of the administration and development of the port and docks, including pilotage, imports and exports, accounts, wharfage and crantage records and related material.

Overseas Trade: Records relating to trade with Africa and the West Indies, America, Ireland, customs and excise duties and various legal matters, including correspondence, account books and other materials related to the trafficking of enslaved people from sites on the west African coast to the West Indies, and documentation regarding financial interests in maintaining the slave economy.

Local trade and development: Records including Acts of Parliament, and relating to canals, lighthouses, and the Great Western Railway.

SMV/8 – Associated clubs and societies

Records relating to the Dolphin Society, the Steadfast Society, and the West India Association. The latter includes correspondence, resolutions, petitions and newspaper cuttings related to financial interests in opposing the abolition of slavery in the West Indies, compensation for the loss of 'colonial property' (including enslaved people) and the religious conversion of enslaved African people, as well as issues around taxation and duties on the goods produced through this trade. It also includes evidence of resistance to the slave trade in Bristol, such as a Report of the Bristol and Clifton Female Anti-Slavery Society.

SMV/9 – Seaman's Hospital Fund

Records of the management of pension payments and financial relief for seamen and their dependents, primarily administrative, financial and legal papers. These include deeds, minutes, hospital accounts, ships' muster rolls, records of pensioners (such as seamen's petitions and certificates), and hospital orders.

SMV/10 – Indexes

These relate to the society's officers and members (including CVs), pupils in Colston's Hospital (school), almshouse residents, ships and their captains. The indexes to the Hall Books or minute books of the Merchant Venturers are divided into various headings, such as trade and public affairs, schools, and the Manor of Clifton.

Finding a member of the Society of Merchant Venturers

Background

Until recently, admission to membership of the Society of Merchant Venturers was obtained through apprenticeship, patrimony (being the son of a member) or redemption (paying an admission fine). Present day members are all admitted by redemption. Women have only been admitted since 2003.

In the past, membership could be given gratis (for free) but these members could not pass on privileges to their children or apprentices.

Apprenticeship was the most common method by which new members joined the Society. Under the Society's Ordinances of 1618 ([SMV/1/1/3/3](#)) every apprentice would be bound for at least seven years and his term would not end before he was 21. During that time, he could not marry or be absent from his master for more than two months. He was forbidden to deal as a merchant without a licence from his master.

Members were merchants who dealt in commodities in a large way (i.e. wholesalers) and retailers or artificers (craftsmen) could only be admitted through approval by a special court or meeting of the membership.

The Ordinances also ordered that every new apprentice should be enrolled within six months in a book kept by the Society's clerk, who was to be paid 4d for every enrolment. This was in addition to the enrolment at the Tolzey Court that the City required of all apprentices.

In spite of this instruction, the Society's register of members' apprentices ([SMV/1/2/1/1](#)) did not begin until 1653 and only 35 names had been recorded by January 1685.

It was then ordered that future enrolments should be made in the Hall in the presence of the membership. Records of enrolments were therefore entered in the Hall Books ([SMV/2/1/1](#)) from 1685 onwards, including the signature of the new member.

Anyone claiming membership by apprenticeship had to give notice to the Clerk and produce his indentures. If his master was not present, he had to bring a certificate from him.

The fees for those admitted by apprenticeship or patrimony, were 4 shillings 6d to the Treasurer, 6d to the Clerk and 4d to the Beadle. Sons of redemptioners also paid a fine of 4 shillings.

Between 1639 and 1699, more than a quarter of the members were admitted by redemption. There was no fixed admission at this time, with fines of £10 and £15 being common. This is low in comparison to the 18th century – for example, the fine was set at £200 in 1768.

Example

Bristol Archives received an enquiry asking whether members of the Combe family had joined the Society: Henry Combe the elder, his sons Henry and John, and Richard, son of Henry junior. Henry Combe the elder probably came to Bristol around 1670.

In the records:

- Neither Henry Combe the elder nor his son John are listed, and therefore were not members, but Henry junior and Richard Combe were.
- The list of members ([SMV/10/1/2/1](#)) confirms that Henry Combe junior was admitted in 1720
- The Register of Apprentices ([SMV/1/2/1/1](#)) confirms that he had been apprenticed to John Batchelor
- The Book of Charters I ([SMV/1/1/1/7](#)) confirms that he was Warden of the Society in 1731 and Treasurer between 1734 and 174
- The list of members ([SMV/10/1/2/1](#)) confirms that Richard Combe became a member in 1749
- Hall Book volume 7 ([SMV/2/1/1/7](#)) confirms that Richard became a member in 1749 on payment of 4/6 via patrimony (i.e. as the son of Henry Combe junior)
- The Book of Charters I ([SMV/1/1/1/7](#)) confirmed that he was Warden of the Society in 1757

See also the members' CVs ([SMV/10/1/4/1-12](#)) which are a useful shortcut to finding whether someone belonged to the society. These are folders of information about individual members which the Society created in the 1960s.

Finding a seaman in the muster rolls

Background

By an Act of Parliament of 1747 aimed at encouraging young men to enter the Merchant Service, provision was made for all seamen to pay 6d a month out of their pay into a pension scheme. This scheme provided financial relief to merchant seamen rendered incapable of service by 'wounds, accidents, misfortunes' or 'become decrepit and worn out' by age. It also provided financial support to widows and children of such seamen as 'may be slain, killed or drowned'.

Under Section 28 of the Act, the Merchant Venturers were appointed trustees for receiving and applying monies paid in the Port of Bristol into this Seamen's Hospital Fund.

Once a merchant seaman had completed five years' service, he was entitled to apply for relief which could be a one-off payment or a pension, usually £12 a year for captains paid quarterly and 3/- a week for an able seaman, which could be collected every Saturday morning from Merchants' Hall.

Nearly 500 petitions or certificates for financial help have survived, giving extensive details of the voyage concerned, injuries received and family members in cases where widows are applying for relief.

Records of service were recorded on muster rolls. Each muster roll records the personnel involved on each voyage out of Bristol, usually in order of precedence. The roll also includes the time each crew member served, along with details of his previous ship to give a continuous record of service.

By working backwards through the muster rolls, it is possible to trace a seaman's previous career, assuming that captains kept accurate records of their crews.

Finding a captain or a seaman on a known ship

If you know a seaman's ship – or if he was a ship's master – you can find the relevant muster roll by searching our [online index of ships and captains](#) (taken from Thomas Rothley's account book, [SMV/9/2/1/13](#)).

Finding an ordinary seaman

Without knowing a ship's name, finding records of seamen is more complex.

We were asked to search for records of a James Burwell, who came from Dover but crewed Bristol ships in the 18th century.

He appears in the following records, although the spelling of his name varies, which is common in records from that period.

- The index to seamen's petitions ([SMV/10/5/2](#)) lists a James Burville of the *Virginia Packet*, who petitioned for financial relief on 5 September 1759 (petition number 73).
- His petition (within records of payments to pensioners, [SMV/9/3/3/2/73](#)), gives some additional information, showing that he was described as incapable of further service and giving details of his ships and masters.
- Thomas Rothley's account book, 1747-1787 ([SMV/9/2/1/13](#), available via our [online index of ships and captains](#)), lists a voyage by the *Virginia Packet*, for which we hold a muster roll.
- This muster roll (number 77 in section 1757-1758, [SMV/9/3/1/3](#)) confirms James Burvil as a member of the crew and his previous ship as the *Duke of Cumberland*. From this, we could map out Burville's previous career at sea, by working backwards via the ship index and relevant muster rolls. One of these earlier rolls confirms that his usual place of abode was Dover, so we know we found the right person.
- Returning to the pension records, the Treasurer's Account Book No I ([SMV/9/2/1/7](#)) confirms that following his petition for relief, James Burville received a weekly pension from the Seaman's Hospital Fund from 1 September 1759 to 15 August 1767.
- Looking at the index of Merchants' Almshouse residents ([SMV/10/3](#)), there appear to be no later entries for variations on James Burville's name, so presumably he died in August 1767.

Note: Some pensioners of the Seamen's Hospital Fund (seamen or their widows) entered the Merchants' Almshouse and exchanged their pension for a weekly payment from the almshouse charity.

Finding a resident of Merchants' Almshouse ([SMV/4/1](#))

Background

The original almshouse was founded by the Guild of Mariners. It was situated on King Street behind their chapel to St Clement, the patron saint of mariners. The chapel became the first Merchants' Hall and the Society took on responsibility for the almshouse residents when they were granted the chapel.

The Society renamed it the Merchants' Almshouse. They rebuilt it between 1696 and 1699 around a courtyard with a wide entranceway onto King Street, to provide peace and seclusion. The almsmen and women were all former sailors, or the widows or daughters of sailors.

The Society set out rules for the residents, which included fines and even expulsion for not attending weekly sermons or being absent from the almshouse. The punishment for swearing was less harsh – the residents were former sailors, after all.

Day to day running of the almshouse was in the hands of the Elder Brother. He was the only resident allowed to be married until this rule was abandoned in 1749. Various bequests and gifts provided weekly pay for the residents. This was given out by the Elder Brother, who oversaw day to day running of the almshouse. A Visiting Committee of members of the Society dealt with disciplinary matters.

The Merchants' Almshouse suffered severe bomb damage during the Second World War (1940/1941) and about half of the property was destroyed, although the remaining wings were restored in 1959. The building has since been redeveloped as private residences.

Key records

- Hall Books, 1639-1733 ([SMV/2/1/1](#)) for residents prior to 1733
- Admission records for Merchants' Almshouse, 1733-1914 ([SMV/10/3/1/1](#))
- Indexes to Hall Book, 1708-1841 ([SMV/2/1/2](#)), which give additional information about expulsions, suspensions, loss of pay
- Merchants' Almshouse paybooks, 1748-1915 ([SMV/4/1/1](#)), for records of payments showing how long a person was resident. Their date of death is often included.
- Nominations and candidates books, 1862-1938 ([SMV/4/1/2](#)) offer more information including previous address and the father's or husband's occupation at sea
- Index to seamen's petitions, 1750-1809 ([SMV/10/5/2/1](#)) to cross check whether they were formerly in receipt of a Seamen's Hospital Fund pension, which if found could provide a record of service and details of family.

Example

A researcher was interested in the seaman Abraham Galley. He apparently sailed on Bristol ships in the 18th century, though no dates or timescales were known.

- The index to seamen's petitions ([SMV/10/5/2/1](#)) records that Galley petitioned for relief in March 1775. His petition (number 254, [SMV/9/3/3/7/254](#)) contains a record of his service from 1732 to 1763. As a former captain, Galley was awarded an annual pension of £12.
- Treasurer's Account Book No. 1 ([SMV/9/2/1/7](#)) shows that Galley received a pension from around March 1775 until July 1778.
- Records of elections to Merchants' Almshouse, 1733-1914 ([SMV/10/3/1/1](#)) note that Abraham Galley was elected to the almshouse in April 1778 and appointed Elder Brother in August 1778.
- The Merchants' Almshouse pay book, 1780-1797 ([SMV/4/1/1/3](#)) provides evidence that as Elder Brother, Abraham Galley was paid 5/- a week and that he died on 22 October 1784.

Finding a resident of Colston's Almshouse ([SMV/4/2](#))

Background

In 1690, Edward Colston bought land on St Michael's Hill for an almshouse and chapel. He paid the city corporation £100 for the site and the almshouse cost £2,500 to build.

Colston asked the Society to be trustees of the almshouse. They were instructed to appoint 12 poor men and 12 poor women as residents, with one resident appointed Chief Brother.

The residents had to be members of the Church of England and attend a daily service in the chapel, with extra services on Sundays. Colston's financial settlement included money for a clergyman to take the services and a weekly payment to each 'inmate'.

Key records

- Records of elections to Colston's Almshouse, 1733-1913 ([SMV/10/3/2/1](#))
- Indexes to Hall Books ([SMV/2/1/2](#)) recording residents between 1708 and 1733, including details of expulsions and suspensions
- Candidates' books, 1829-1938 ([SMV/4/2/3](#))
- Weekly pay books, 1844-1924 ([SMV/4/2/2](#)) to confirm dates of deaths
- Visiting Committee minutes, 1852-1874 ([SMV/4/2/3](#))

Finding a pupil of Colston's School

Background

In 1708, Edward Colston established a school for 100 poor boys and appointed the Society of Merchant Venturers as governors. The school opened in 1710 in the Great House on St Augustine's Back. This later became the site of Colston Hall, now called Bristol Beacon.

It was initially a boarding school called Colston's Hospital, because it provided pupils with seven years' free education and board (i.e. hospitality).

Boys generally entered the school at age 10. They had to be baptised in the Church of England and resident in a Bristol parish ('town' boys), or one of the adjoining counties of Somerset, Gloucestershire or Wiltshire ('country' or sometimes 'foreign' boys).

Many boys came from Temple parish because Edward Colston was born there. Boys called 'Colston' (even as a middle name) were given preference for admission.

The Society ran the school with a group of Colston's own Nominees. Until 1875, pupils were either recommended by the Society (Hall boys: H) or elected by the Nominees (Nominated boys: N or C). Nominated boys sometimes came from outside Colston's prescribed catchment area.

After 1875, when a new charity scheme was put in place, paying scholars were admitted and the school became Colston's Boys' School.

Key records

If their date of birth is unknown, check if they appear in the alphabetical index of Colston's pupils ([SMV/10/4/1](#)) which will usually give at least the year they left.

Once found, consult the school registers ([SMV/5/1/5](#)), which include records of pupils, admission orders etc.

The Candidates' books from the 19th century onwards ([SMV/5/1/4](#)) are more detailed than the registers, providing the boy's family circumstances by recording the number of children living, and the father's job or if he was even alive. Preference for admission was given to boys whose fathers were incapacitated or deceased.

If a boy's rough date of birth is known, their approximate date of entry into Colston's Hospital can be found by adding 10 to that year.

Some researchers discover from a census return that their ancestor attended Colston's School. As these show a person's age, it is again possible to find their entry into the school (and family situation etc) in the candidates' books.

Finding more information

It is difficult to find more details about early pupils, except boys who were apprenticed to sea captains.

Their careers at sea can be followed through the muster rolls ([SMV/9](#)). The name of the captain to whom the boy is apprenticed will appear in the apprentice register ([SMV/5/1/5/3](#)). If a boy is described as 'apprenticed to the sea', the name of the ship's captain will be found on the relevant voucher within [SMV/3/3/1](#).

After 1836, the Society set up a visiting committee which produced minutes from which a clearer picture of life at Colston's emerges ([SMV/5/1/7/16-18](#)). Other records provide further insights. Prizegiving began in 1846 (for example, see [SMV/5/1/7/20](#)), while there are pupils' record books for 1857-1858 and 1861-1862 ([SMV/5/1/5/21](#) and [SMV/5/1/5/22](#)). Two teachers' record books survive for 1900-1901, giving details of the school's curriculum and daily life ([SMV/5/1/5/23](#) and [SMV/5/1/5/24](#)).

Bibles presented to Colston pupils

We received an enquiry about a bible presented to Samuel Edward Gwyer in 1874 by the Merchant Venturers. His grandson asked how he came to attend Colston's School and what other information was available.

Boys were only presented with a bible after attending for seven years, so subtracting seven from 1874 shows that Gwyer joined the school around 1867.

The following records contain references to Samuel Gwyer:

- Boys admitted and apprenticed, 1762-1874 ([SMV/5/1/5/3](#)): this records that he entered Colston's Hospital in June 1867 as a Hall boy. He lived in the parish of Clifton.
- Gwyer was a Hall boy and the Hall candidates' book, 1858-1873 ([SMV/5/1/4/3](#)) shows that there were 45 candidates in 1867, and that he was one of five boys given a place at Colston's Hospital at the merchants' April meeting.
- However, he was not found in the prizegiving book, 1844-1869 ([SMV/5/1/7/20](#)).

Finding a student of the Merchant Venturers' Technical College

Background

From at least 1595, the Society supported instruction in the 'art of navigation' in a schoolroom in the Merchants' Hall. This Navigation School (or Marine School) merged with the Bristol Trade School in 1863.

In 1880, the Society bought the old site of Bristol Grammar School in Unity Street. Here it built a new school to house the renamed Bristol Trade and Mining School, which had outgrown its site in Nelson Street.

In 1885 the Merchant Venturers agreed to meet all costs for the Trade & Mining School and renamed it the Merchant Venturers' School.

The school grew to offer an increasing range of courses and qualifications, including degrees from the University of London. In 1894, its name was changed to the Merchant Venturers' Technical College (MVTC). From 1909, it provided the Faculty of Engineering for the new University of Bristol. After 1919 the MVTC became concerned exclusively with teaching applied science at university standard.

The college continued to expand in the 1930s but struggled with pressure of numbers, increasing costs and the problems arising from the Second World War.

In 1949, the city council and the University of Bristol took over the non-faculty and faculty work respectively. Meanwhile, the Technical College became Bristol Polytechnic, the precursor to the University of the West of England. All the older local universities – the University of Bristol, University of the West of England and University of Bath – have a connection with the MVTC.

Example

Bristol Archives received an enquiry about former student Douglas Rudolf Pobjoy, born 15 March 1894.

Boys usually joined the school aged 11, so Pobjoy was admitted around 1905.

- The Secondary School Record, 1891-1919 ([SMV/5/5/4/8](#)) confirms that he joined MVTC in September 1905 (admission number 3612). His entry also records his parent/guardian and address.
- In the MVTC fee book, 1900-1909 ([SMV/5/5/4/17](#)), Pobjoy is listed under his admission number and the book shows that he entered MVTC as a BJS (Bristol Junior Scholar). His entrance fee of 5/- was paid, along with all annual fees of £6.10s for 1905-1909.
- The Secondary School record shows that he left the secondary school on 17 July 1909, aged 15. He was described as a BSS (Bristol Senior Scholar). He gained a first-class certificate from the Board of Education in Theory and Practical Inorganic Chemistry. He also gained third-class honours in the senior Oxford exam in 1909 and was due to join MVTC's Faculty of Engineering.

- Newspaper cuttings, 1906-1911 ([SMV/5/5/7/2](#)) show that the *Daily Chronicle* (21 July 1910), reported that he gained a pass in his BSc intermediate exams.
- In the MVTC class lists (day students only), 1908-1910 ([SMV/5/5/4/12](#)), Pobjoy appears on the autumn 1909 list for the BSc engineering course. In 1910, he is listed as one of four students who completed a motor engineering course. We could not find Pobjoy's final result at the MVTC because the records are incomplete. The next class list begins in 1914 and his name is absent.

Note: The majority of students attended evening classes but those class lists have not survived. However, exam results were often reported in local newspapers, so some are available in the news cuttings in [SMV/5/5/7](#).

You could also consult local newspapers held at Bristol Reference Library. Evening class scholarships were reported in late May and exam results in July and August.

Merchant Venturer Technical College records in other collections

- College rolls 1906-1924 for boys only (ref. [17914](#), also available on microfiche).
- Student record cards, c1909-1948 for boys and girls, but surnames M-Z only (ref. [21131/FE/MerA/1](#)).
- Navigation department admissions 1896-1935, lists of students 1900s-1910s, yearbooks 1890s-1910s, calendars, prospectuses, exam papers (ref. [40659](#)).