



Extracts from

'Bristol as I knew it'

by David E. Hurt

Introduction

These notes are a bit disjointed, as they are extracts from my full set covering all of Bristol. Whilst some are not specifically of St. George, they are still places, people, and services that played a part in the life of my mother's family there. Some are actual memories, others hearsay, and all are 55 to 75 years ago. So they may be inaccurate or apocryphal, but hopefully still chime with their era. For any errors I apologize.

Although in my early years I lived in Worcestershire and Lancashire, Bristol was my 'home town'. It was where we went most holidays, and where my mother's family belonged. It was also where I went to University. My grandparents lived at 36 Summerhill Road in St. George, and my father met my mother when he became minister at St. George Baptist Church, and for a short while lodged with my mother's family, who were members of the Church.

The River Avon

Whilst the Avon was just below us in St. George, its connection to the Severn estuary made it very important in Bristol's history, as it was the basis of its commercial life.

It was restricted by tides, and really only navigable up to Hotwell [provided you didn't get stuck on the mud at Horseshoe Bend]. However, at Hotwell boats went through locks into the docks area. There was then a cut which went on to the east of the city, from the Floating Harbour, through the feeder canal, to re-join the Avon at St. Annes, above locks which maintained its depth. Barges used to go to factories here – particularly the 'St. Anne's Board Mills', and Butler's Tar works.

Trams

Trams were important to our life in St. George. They were one reason why Summerhill Road was a convenient place to live.

We could go very cheaply from 'The Avenue' to anywhere in the City. Our line from Hanham, and the one from Kingswood which joined it at 'The Fountain' just below us, went down to Old Market Street ["Old Market"] which was a major junction. Our trams went on to Bedminster and Knowle, and others went round to The Horsefair and "Tramways Centre" [officially St. Augustine's Parade], another major junction. From these junctions all parts of the City were accessible.

'The Fountain' was named from an ornate horse-trough on the fork of the two roads. It was there originally from days when the trams and most commercial and private transport were horse-drawn.

By my day trams were electric. They had open tops, with room under the stairs for luggage, and plenty of standing inside. Being open top, the upper deck was always called 'outside'. For years after changing to buses, conductors still used to call "Room outside" when downstairs was full.

In those days boys used to have pea-shooters – a sort of thin tube of tin, with a little mouth-piece at one end. You put a dried pea in the mouthpiece end, blew hard, and the pea shot out at quite a speed. Sometimes they [not *us*, of course!!] used these from the tops of trams on unsuspecting pedestrians. It was important to do it as the tram started accelerating away from a tram-stop, so that it was too far for anyone at the receiving end to catch up with you.

The seats 'outside' were slatted wood, with swivelled backs to change the way they were facing when the tram reversed at the termini. I can still remember the 'rat-a-tat' noise when conductors walked down the gangway slapping them over. There was also a trailing arm with a pulley which ran on the overhead wire, picking up electricity. To reverse the tram, the conductor used a rope attached to this, to swing it down against its spring, and back onto the wire the other way round.

Conductors carried a bar on which staples held blocks of different coloured tickets, covering all the necessary prices. They took the fare, pulled the ticket off the bar, and put it into a 'punch' to make a hole against the fare-stage where it was issued. The punch rang a little bell when it worked. After this system was scrapped, the tickets became quite a collectors' item.

From time to time inspectors boarded trams to check the tickets – often waving drivers down in between stops, so that they could swing on to make checks more effective.

Bells were used to signal trams to stop [for passengers] and start [for conductors]. One ring for a passenger to get off at the next stop, two to start off again. Three meant that the car was full, and if no-one wanted to get off, the tram wouldn't stop for people waiting to get on. [This only applied at 'request' stops. Trams always stopped at fare-stages.]

Because of this signal, people often said 'I'm three bells' when they'd had enough to eat at a meal.

The trams were in a blue livery with gold lettering. On the ends the panel below the driver carried the number of that particular car in gold. Destination signs were at the top, and were wound round at the beginning of each journey. I don't know where the trams were made. [The Company later used Bristol buses, which may have been built at a coachworks near Hanham - possibly 'Boddy's', but I can't find a way to confirm this.]

Tram drivers stood on the platform at the front, with lots of gleaming brass controls. There was the controller, a brass pointer, which rotated to control the speed. Then a big brass brake-wheel which they spun round with an impressive expansive gesture. I think they had a quick release foot-pedal for the brakes when starting off. They had a clanging bell, to warn pedestrians and other traffic.

At rail level in the front of the tram was a metal mesh trap, in case anyone fell on the track whilst it was moving. The trap dropped automatically when it came into contact with any object. Cyclists were a particular hazard, because it was easy for them to get a wheel stuck in the rail, and fall off.

Living on a tram route was useful because of their big advantage that, being on tracks, they kept going in dense fog. 'Pea-soupers' were not uncommon. They also had sand-boxes in front of the wheels, to release sand onto the rail for grip in bad weather.

In narrow streets, trams were reduced to single track, as in the section between The Fountain and The Avenue. To allow them to pass, they had short double-track loops, usually at stops. So a car in the loop waited for a car approaching to clear the single section.

Tram depots, where they returned at night, were sometimes at the end of routes [Kingswood and Brislington for instance] and sometimes nearer in [like Easton and St. George]. They ran in over inspection pits, so that they could be cleaned and checked ready for the next day.

Their electricity came from their own power stations. The bombing of these in the war was partly to blame for the final demise of the tramways. One of the last stations supplied the Old Market area. It was on Narrow Plain by a bridge over the water called 'Halfpenny Bridge', as it was originally a halfpenny tram stage from Old Market.

When my grandfather was working for B.T. & C.C., he had an allotment at the Kingswood depot, and used to take me there with him in the early mornings. There would be trams in the yard, and he let me get up on the driver's platform, and ring the bell, and drive the tram a few feet.

Trams were a very practical way of transport, and the hum of them running, with wheels clanking, and bells clanging, was very reassuring. They were friendly 'creatures' and attracted a lot of sentimental affection, including mine, which buses never did. When they started phasing them out, my grandfather said they would regret it. Whilst it took some time, he was eventually proved right.

Shopping

There were the City centre areas with major multiples in Old Market Street, Broadmead, Baldwin Street, College Green and Park Street, and Whiteladies Road. There was also a super arcade in two parts off Broadmead – full of fascinating shops, like model shops, bookshops, wireless shops, and many second-hand shops. Clifton was its own town.

But the day-to-day shopping was local. Like other suburbs, St. George had its own shops, and most family shopping was done 'just round the corner'. We had milk delivered, but other daily necessities, whether food or household, were bought at shops a few minutes away.

There seemed to be a clear difference between the roads above the Fountain. Summerhill Road was purely residential. All the shops were either just below The Fountain in Church Road, or over on Clouds Hill Road. The Post Office was in a little lane which cut through between the two roads opposite St. George Church. A library was down by the High School and the entrance to the park.

One shop that always fascinated me was the ironmongers - 'The Electric Spark' - which I think was owned by the Tinknells. They had two branches, the other one being on the railway bridge at Lawrence Hill. I can still remember Mrs. Tinknell quite clearly, usually in a brown overall. I can also remember the distinctive smell of the shop, a mixture of paraffin-oil-cum-Lifebuoy-soap-cum-polish. Gangways were narrow, with displays a bit higgledy-piggledy, and there were lots of things you didn't know you needed until you saw them there.

There were several old-named pubs in the area. One down below on Church Road was 'The Fire Engine', as there used to be a fire station there. It was near the local tram depot. Past our house on the way to Hanham I think there were also 'The Nag's Head' and 'The Air Balloon'. Whether these were named after the two hills of the same name, or vice-versa, I don't know.

[As an aside, it seems a pity that many names of streets and areas nowadays don't have much meaning. In those days there were several interesting names. Round us there were Troopers Hill, Air Balloon Hill, Two-mile Hill, and Crews Hole. Whilst I don't know where the names came from, it looks fairly certain that they had a bit of history.]

Churches.

Bristol was largely protestant non-conformist. Broadmead and Tyndale were major churches in the Baptist Union, always with well-known ministers. There were several interesting C of E churches, apart from the Cathedral. Most famous of all was St. Mary Redcliffe, above the river on Redcliffe Hill. Elizabeth I called it 'the fairest parish church in all England'.

St. George had its C.of E. Church and vicarage, plus the Baptist Church, and, I think, a Wesleyan. Our next-door neighbours were Roman Catholic, and went to a church near Lawrence Hill

My family and St. George, Bristol.

'Family' to me was my grandparents and my grandmother's brothers, all of whom lived within a couple of miles of her. My grandfather was William Clement. I think his family had roots just south of Bristol, but we only knew a few of them. Most of his relations were by now in Hertfordshire.

36 Summerhill Road was, in those days, a very nice house in a very nice area. Next door were two sisters, Ethel and Renie Blackmore. They were friendly with Sir Stafford Cripps, who was a Labour M.P., and became Chancellor of the Exchequer. He often visited them.

Summerhill Road was a very convenient location, with the trams and our local services.

For recreation we were half way between St. George's park and the gloriously untamed Troopers Hill. I think the Hill was originally a quarry. It had an old chimney, which originally cleared smoke all the way from the works below. From Internet pictures, it looks virtually unspoilt from those days.

The Hill was a lovely place with lots of space for a small boy, running through all the little dips and over the tumps, through the scrub. You could stand inside the base of the chimney and gaze up at the tiny piece of sky, way up above, letting your imagination run riot with fancies and horrors. If there were clouds passing over the top of it, you could feel quite dizzy.

I still recall the lovely smell from Butler's Tar Works, and the screeching and clanking noise that an overhead gantry used to make when it was working. I think it was at St. Anne's Board Mills, loading or unloading barges. I used to sit for ages looking down on this.

The more civilised, but less exciting, St. George's Park, had lawns and a boating lake. We also used to walk over to Speedwell, where there was an indoor public swimming-baths.

Opposite us and a bit higher up on Summerhill Road was a large house, which may have been a mental care-home. Whether it was 'Dr. Fox's' I'm not sure, but the name strikes a chord. I believe there may have been a similar home on the Bath road just outside Brislington, and perhaps that is where the name belonged.

From our back garden a gate opened onto a cinder cul-de-sac lane, which went into The Avenue. From here we could go through Queen's Road and Malvern Road over to Troopers' Hill, and also, by back lanes, down to the river. There was a steep winding lane called Strawberry Hill which led up from Crews Hole and the river, and came out alongside the Church in Harvey's Lane.

Our house was always immaculate inside and out, with a holystoned step to the front door, and shining brasswork on the edge of the step and the bell-pull. This worked a wire to one of the bells on a board in the kitchen. Other bells on the board were attached to pulls in various rooms. The short path from the front door to the gate was in red tiles, always washed clean every day.

Grates and ranges in the house were kept 'blacked', using a liquid which would probably be banned nowadays, as I'm sure its smell must have been addictive. It was applied with brush and polishing cloth, and if you didn't wear gloves to do this, the hands needed scrubbing to get clean.

The house was on a hill, with four levels at the back, and three at the front. The extra level at the back was the cellar. Steep stone stairs twisted up to the hall passageway on the ground floor.

On the ground floor there were four rooms. The front sitting-room with a big bay window, then a dining-room, which was now used as a second sitting-room. Both had 'cut moquette' furniture. All chair and settee arms and backs had ecru crochet covers, made by my grandmother and aunt.

Next was the original kitchen, with a range and huge dresser; the top full of china, and drawers and cupboards full of household necessities. This was now used as the family dining-room. A couple of steps led into the big scullery, now the kitchen, with scrub-top table, a few wood chairs, and all the kitchen equipment. A glass back door opened to a tiny balcony, with wooden [very slippery if wet] steps down to the garden. There were honey-suckle and rambler roses on the trellis of the balcony.

On the first floor there was a lovely front bedroom, and another bedroom behind it. Then down a couple of steps off a half-landing at the back of the house to the bathroom, with a big claw-foot bath. The top floor had another three rooms, one of which was turned into a billiards room.

It was always called my 'grandmother's house'. My grandfather was recognised as, and given the respect due to, the bread-winner. He was served first at meals, and his needs and comfort had priority. After the evening meal, or Sunday lunch, he had a pint of cider [very rough 'scrumpy'] from the barrel in the cellar, and 'retired' to the sitting-room with his pipe. His clothes were kept perfect to ensure that he was well turned-out. [He was, as we used to say, 'a bit of a nib'.]

However, it was my grandmother's house, as she made all the decisions regarding running it - an arrangement which I imagine was normal in those days, and certainly it worked well.

My grandmother was a strong personality, severe when she thought it necessary, but also very motherly. She was always 'respectably' dressed in black, brown, or purple. Her Sunday hats had floral adornments round the brim, making them very attractive.

She liked to take me with her when she was doing local shopping, and on these expeditions taught me the courtesies expected of a gentleman. I had to walk on the pavement-edge side of her, and offer her my arm. In no circumstances could I put my hands in my pockets, and I was expected to make sure that shop doors were open for her, or any other lady or elderly person, to pass through.

Vegetables were mostly provided by my grandfather, who always had an allotment, but our herbs came from the back garden [my grandmother's domain] and were either fresh or picked and dried.

My mother had two brothers, Ernest, who was killed in the first war, and Stuart, who joined the Bristol paper-producing company of E. S. & A Robinson as an apprentice. He eventually became their managing director in South Africa, where they had plants in Capetown and Johannesburg.

She had two sisters, Freesia and Gwen. Freesia died young - of consumption I imagine. Gwen stayed at home, living first with my grandparents and later with my mother and father.

My grandmother had four brothers nearby. The surname was Harris. [It seemed to be a common local name, and was, I think, the original name of Troopers Hill a long way back.] To some extent the family seemed a bit Dickensian, which was, I suppose, fitting, as they were born in that era.

Her outer front door [polished wood] was always open during the day, and the inside door [stained glass] was left unlocked. Most days one of them would drop in to see her, or she would drop in to see them. It made for lovely relaxed family relationships. Probably the fact that she was the only girl, with four brothers, had something to do with it.

There was **Ernest**, married to Winn. He was shortish. Winn was round, and always wore black. They had a small general store on Bell Hill Road, just above Marling Road. Originally he was a tram conductor, but one day he fell under the trailer and had to have his leg amputated. As I understand it there was not much in way of an anaesthetic. The leg was replaced by a wooden one, which meant he could still get about, although with some difficulty.

The family joker was **Fred**. He wore a bowler hat, and when we were very young, used to put his thumb in his mouth, blow hard, and as he blew, he made his bowler go up and down at the front. It took some time before we realised that he was standing against a wall, and pushing the back brim of the hat against the wall to do the trick. Fred's wife Elsie was very slight, and dressed a little bit ethereally. They ran a herbalist shop near Lawrence Hill, which I think did quite well.

Of all my great-uncles, **Sam** was my favourite. I loved spending time with him in his shop in Church Road, opposite the High School. He was a cobbler, and usually had a mouthful of tacks when he was doing shoe repairs. His wife was Annie, largish built, and like Winn, always in black.

Sam was a bit of a black sheep, because my grandmother's family were religiously strict, having roots in the Quakers, and the problem was that Sam liked to go over to the pub every night for a glass of Guinness after work. He was a lovely character, very Dickensian, and treated me like a fellow human, instead of a small boy. I was very sad to lose him.

The last of the brothers I recall was **Arthur**. His wife's name may have been Emily. He worked for the estate agents, C. J. Hole. He was always well turned out, with a waxed moustache, stiff collar, and bow tie. Although he lived in a new house just up the road, he was the least frequent visitor.

There was another Harris, who lived in Kingswood, probably a cousin of my mother. He was quite a musician, and played the Colston Hall organ. He had a son, Gordon, slightly younger than I was.

My favourite relative was my grandfather – **William Clement**. Probably, of all my family, he was the one to whom I was closest. I only wish I had an authentic history of his interesting life. What

I have is mostly anecdotal. I know that, after he retired in 1936, BBC Bristol asked him to do a programme recording his memories, but he wouldn't agree. Such a pity.

He worked all his life, from the age of eleven, for the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Company.

In those days B.T.&C.C. [under Sir George White] was run very strictly. Uniform dress and the carrying out of their duties had to be exactly right. Timetables had to be exactly adhered to, and drivers were allowed one warning for bad timekeeping. After that, they could be dismissed. Whilst this may now seem unjust, it was acceptable then, and certainly resulted in a very efficient service.

My grandfather worked a six-day week, with long days, and virtually no guaranteed holiday, except Christmas Day off every year. His first job, as a 'points boy', was at Old Market Street, where the junction of several routes meant trams had to cross sets of lines. He had to keep an eye on them approaching, and, from their destination board, switch the points to put them on the right track.

In his early days the trams were pulled by horses. After his time as a points boy, he progressed in the Company, firstly to conductor, and then driver, and inspector.

In the 1927 General Strike, he was one of few employees who refused to stop work. I think he may have been Inspector by then, but went on driving trams while it lasted. Although he sympathised with some of the strikers, he felt that the Company, whilst very strict, had always treated him and other employees fairly, and he thought it was wrong to strike against them.

Throughout his time in uniform, photos show he was very smart. 'A bit of a nib' as my grandmother used to say. He was quite a handsome man, always wanting to look his best. From Inspector, he moved into the offices in Tramways centre, and eventually became Traffic Manager – quite an achievement for someone who started as a points boy.

Over the years, as I grew to know Bristol well, he and I used to compete about our knowledge of places and street names. From his working days, he had built up an encyclopaedic knowledge of the City. He would be sitting in his chair, hands folded across his middle, and would suddenly say 'Now then, young man, where's so-and-so?' This was always a serious challenge, with a lot of honour at stake, and I tried hard to be able to reply. If I did, I got an approving look from him, but if I failed, then he had a quiet smile of achievement.

I think that he enjoyed having someone who knew and loved his City as much as he did.

He also loved his allotments, and always provided the family with virtually all their fresh vegetables. Apart from an early one at Kingswood tram depot, he later rented one on Troopers' Hill, just a few minutes from our house. It was through Malvern Road, and on a track past a piece of open field or common, just before the Hill itself.

This was his biggest and best allotment. It was always immaculate – not a weed dared grow on his garden or the path round it. He had a permanent small bonfire smouldering away. All the ash from the bottom of the fire was scraped out regularly and dug back into the soil. The mixture of smell from the fire, plus that of tar from the works on the river below was lovely. It was mixed, too, with the creosote from his garden shed, which was never in less than perfect condition.

The allotment was in a lovely position, and I often went to give him a hand. We would do whatever work was necessary, and then get out the deck chairs, and sit chatting outside the shed, or, in poor weather, just inside it, looking across the valley. Often neighbouring allotment-holders would stop for a chat. They always seemed to have a high regard for 'Mr. Clement'.

Looking back, I suspect that this was his haven, away from the domestic routine and the women in the house. My grandmother occasionally strolled up there to sit down for a few minutes, but it was really his preserve. We had good times there, with our little local knowledge chats, and his stories about old Bristol.

One day on the way back, as his wheelbarrow was nearly empty, he decided that I should give him a ride home. So he sat there in regal state, beaming away, bowing to people we met, and politely raising his straw hat to any ladies he knew. Unfortunately my grandmother was standing on the porch at the back of the house as we were coming up The Avenue, and gave him a bit of a telling-off for being such a 'gurt fool', and making her a laughing-stock in the neighbourhood.

I don't think he was ever bored. After retiring in 1936, he had a pass on the trams and buses, and used to get about quite a lot. Even if he was between stops when a tram came along, the drivers knew him, and would always slow down to let him swing on. Having been used most of his life to getting on and off trams whilst they were moving, he was still doing this well into his seventies.

Then there was the allotment to be tended, the paper to be read, the radio, and his billiards, and people to chat to, either at home, or when he went out. Even after my grandmother died, and he and Gwen moved to Croyde Bay with my parents, he still strolled into Croyde or up to Georgeham, and became one of the local characters, chatting to people he got to know.

Like my mother, he lived until his late nineties. A super character, and a big part of my life.

Wartime Bristol.

During the war we still managed to go to stay in Bristol, which was very much in the front line. It was a port, and rail centre, and had an important aircraft manufacturing plant. Being on the river, it was not difficult for planes to target, because of light reflecting from the water.

Also it seemed to be one of the 'fly-overs' for targets in Wales and the Midlands, and sometimes had bombs dropped on it from German planes in trouble and wanting to unload.

Our house had an Anderson Shelter in the back garden, but my grandparents also converted the cellar into a shelter, with chairs and a couple of small beds. Whilst a direct hit on the house would probably have meant being temporarily blocked in, anything else should have left us fairly safe.

My recollection is that most dark nights about six o'clock the sirens would sound, and we would go down to the cellar, and stay there for the night until the 'All clear' sounded. When Bristol was being bombed, it was unlikely that our suburb would be a target, but they did seem uncomfortably close at times. We had windows blown in [or out], despite the adhesive tape criss-crossing them. We were quite experienced during raids in recognizing the tone of enemy bombers, and that of our fighters if they were sent up to intercept them. In daytime there were sometimes visible dog-fights going on, which we would watch rather than take shelter – not sensible, but irresistible.

As Summerhill Road was fairly high up, at night if you wanted to take the risk, you could watch the sight of the searchlights combing the sky, and, if they caught an enemy plane, using a couple of lights to hold it in a cross whilst the anti-aircraft gunners tried to shoot it down. Looking back, there was little technology available to help them, so it was quite something when they had a success.

The real devastation was in the City centre, and round the docks and rail yards. During fire-bomb raids, the unbelievable sight of the City centre ablaze was devastating. Much of the shopping area, particularly Castle Street, was flattened, and not re-built until after the war.

Soon after the war my really close association with the City was over.

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A few years ago, I did a run round to visit the old houses and areas. It was, as perhaps it often is, a mistake, because it was no longer as I remembered it.

I know now that, to refresh my memories, one place I should have should have re-visited was Troopers Hill Maybe one day.....!

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