

SIR GEORGE WHITE, BARONET, BRISTOLIAN

As we are in a churchyard looking at a tomb, plainly I have decided to start this account of Sir George White's life at the end. We shall go to the site of his birthplace, where there is one of the few public memorials to him. Until recently there was only one, which we shall also see. Another, a fake blue plaque has recently disappeared. Many associated sites, Brislington Tram depot and the Bristol Bus Factory, Filton where he set up the British Aerospace industry, Ashley Road where he and Caroline Thomas, daughter of a coach trimmer married at St Barnabas simply can not fit in to one morning walk.

We shall wander by some significant and interesting sites. According to custom on my urban history walks, you may drift off at any convenient point; though I advise you that some of the most striking sites and some of Bristol's best pubs are at the end

Bristol seems to overlook one of our most prominent and useful citizens of the 19thC; perhaps because he was a stockbroker and a thoroughly self-made man. Brunel, a second generation engineer, gets the accolades. They had some things in common: dying of overwork and cigars.

We could have started from Sea Mills Station on the Port and Pier railway and Clifton Extension Railway. Typically, White bought shares in the Port & Pier when they were dirt cheap, became the largest single shareholder, proposed a scheme to link the Avonmouth Docks to the mainline, challenging the GWR monopoly and, when this project was under capitalised, sold the company to the Midland Railway. So, no George White, no Clifton Extension Railway?

We would have reached here through Old Sneyd Park and the Glenavon development on the site of the house which George White briefly occupied at the end of his life: later the Nazareth Orphanage. But on a short winter's day we can't do everything. Certainly, we can't visit every George White site in or around Bristol. He bought Hollywood Towers for his son and visited at length while establishing Filton (at the end of one of his tram lines) as a centre of the newfangled aeroplane industry. The tram network we'll return to when we reach its ganglion.

Today's walk isn't much about trains and planes; it's trams, personal life, good-works and double-glazing. Nonetheless, before we set off across the Downs you may like to know that flying demonstrations arranged by White took off there. Flat ground, good photo opportunities with the Suspension Bridge, and trams to bring the public in to gawp. Practicality, publicity, money in the till; the White touch.

Here he is buried with the wife, a woman of complementary character, whom he did not long survive. He died at his desk and the Cathedral bells tolled.

Route Mariners' Path and cross Downs to top of Blackboy

You may regard this as rather a strange traffic layout. Once, it made perfect sense, designed for the discipline of trams not the anarchy of cars. Here, by 1908, three lines met. One came up Gloucester Road, Zetland Road, Redland Hill. Another came via Park Row and Blackboy Hill. The last went to Westbury. Here, the cars met and reversed, the passengers changed. If you accept Kipling's aphorism "Transportation is Civilisation" this was a nodule of suburban civilisation.

The node was the Centre, which old-fashioned Bristolians still call the Tramway Centre, in front of the Hippodrome where those pathetic fountains squirt, George White's tramlines met, coming from Westbury, Filton, Staple Hill, Kingswood, Hanham, Brislington, Knowle, Bedminster Down, Ashton Vale, Hotwells. The popular name for one part of the Centre was Skivvies' Island, where the girls from the poor parts waited for a tram to work; unless they worked in Clifton which was too posh for trams. Real Clifton, I mean, the Spa, not this missionary territory, haunt of quarrymen and cheap whores. In the Historical Association Pamphlet about Sir George White, a Nimby letter from the *Bristol Mercury* is quoted snobbily denouncing a Clifton tram proposal. The authors take it at face value; I suspect irony, even though I do recall a more recent generation of Cliftonians suppressing their street fair because outsiders like me, from the wrong side of Whiteladies Road, attended it.

Sir – is it not something terrible and most wicked that the disgusting tramway is to bring the nasty, low inhabitants of Bristol up into our sacred region? We have nothing common or unclean amongst us as present. Poor people do not walk about on Clifton streets . . . Why must the common people be allowed to walk about here? They should stay in their own homes. They would feel more comfortable, surely among their own houses and streets than here. The policemen should stop it.

I'm saying this here, not on the Centre because we aren't obstructing the pavement and I needn't raise my voice.

For the same reasons, I'll touch on money now. George White began with little, he was the son of a domestic servant and a painter and decorator who must have done better than the ragged trousered philanthropists as George stayed at St Michael's National School, till, at 15 he took a Junior Clerk's post in a solicitors' office. In his late teens, he was effectively running the bankruptcy section: Denry Machin without the Five Towns grim jollity.

George White was certainly a brilliant financial performer: and by those standards honest. He surprised the board of the Severn Wye & Severn Bridge Railway by achieving share holder's control and selling the company behind their backs; he humiliated the London Bears when Georges Brewery was floated and even saw off J P Morgan in a battle for a London Transport project.

Next we follow the tram route towards Redland. We could follow it further down Redland Rd where his son was born at No 96, to Zetland Rd then divert to his first marital home a semi called Fairlawn, 10 St Matthews Rd but surely the history of double-glazing has more allure.

***Route** Redland Hill FP Clyde Rd– Napier – Clyde Pk – FP –Chandos – Cowper – Melville –Hampton Rd – Cotham Hill -*

This is the back door to White's grand surviving home. Note the Cotham Landscape Marble and squint to catch the early double glazing. We shall see the front of this obscure grand house. The public can glimpse inside on Open Doors Day: recommended. Sir George insisted on high standard fittings. He lived there for about twenty five years, hosting charity events and a grand wedding for his daughter in the grounds. He even kept a cow.

***Route** Woodland Road – Tyndalls Park Rd (up and back to front of Cotham House) – St Michael's Hill –Birthplace (Paul St) – Marlborough Hill.*

You can find fault with the way Sir George made his money, but looking at the Infirmary Building you'd have to be very doctrinaire to condemn the way he spent it. By fundraising and match funding he became the "Second Founder" of the House. The stone opposite used to be the only memorial to him in the city. Again he insisted on quality: the architect was Charles Holden (also responsible for the Central Library) and the result "one of the most important buildings in the history of modern architecture" Admittedly, it reminds me of the monkey temple : appropriate as the fundraising carnival was held in the Zoo. Before the surroundings were remodelled in the ghastly sixties there were broad stairs on either side. Yet, the building itself was always asymmetrical.

You all know the bus station: it developed from a tram depot serving Sir George's system. The Perry Road stable (now a micro-brewery) and its awkward turn history wished upon him, I suppose. We shan't get to Old Market where he ran an electric tram before London had one. Sir George's policy of low wages, high fares and velvet-pawed union bashing set an evil example for Bristol's public transport, but you have to admit that he really was an entrepreneur (unlike the fly boys who were sold public utilities at knockdown prices in the late 20thC) and he did provide such an efficient system that no-one has yet seriously revised his routes. (A contemporary American study rated it below municipal systems.) The Tramway Centre, I've already referred to. White

campaigned for a “fixed bridge”, a stage in the loss of the Frome, and wanted a railway station there too; posing the question: “conservation or integrated transport?”

Route Upper Maudlin St – Johnny Ball Lane – cross Tramway Centre to Broad St

What, you may ask has this startling William Morris style facade to do with the highly technological, blatantly capitalist White? Answer: Edward Everard was White’s brother-in-law and effectively, very effectively, ran his advertising. We are now in the heart of the City where George White “of Bristol” though he had many interests outside, made his career and had his power base. When he died a Bristol canon preached “What Cecil Rhodes was to South Africa, what Herbert Kitchener was to Egypt, George White was to this nation and Bristol in particular.” With the benefit of hindsight, we can say that George, stockbroker of this city, did more good and less harm than Cecil, the tricky, megalomaniac imperialist, or Herbert, the prancing, prima donna, bisexual poster. Even George White’s great military project the “paravane” or “otter”, developed in the kitchen garden of Hollywood, saved lives. Admittedly, BAE hasn’t over the decades.

When we come out from the ancient back alleys, Bell Lane and Leonard Lane, we shall be at the junction of Corn Street, where young George held his first office job, and Clare Street where his office building used to flaunt an unofficial blue plaque, which the Council ought officially to replace. The architect who worked on Everard’s printing house, Henry Williams, also designed the Bristol Stock Exchange: now a curry restaurant – that White paid for. Another asymmetric building: was this a fad of the decade? Or White’s personal taste? The facade of Everard’s printing works is symmetrical. (*Perhaps, an architectural historian can correct this screed?*)

Route Bell Lane/Leonard Lane – St Nicholas St – Bristol Bridge Victoria St – Counterslip – St Philips Bridge.

Here we end, looking at two buildings that demonstrate George White’s strong, effective, commercial principles and the defects of competitive capitalism. To your right, the Municipal Electric Power Station that might have supplied the juice for the trams; to your left, the Generating Station White required as he disliked municipal enterprise “Gas & Water Socialism”. Two power stations were economically inefficient; but the Luftwaffe resolved this ideological debate by taking out the bridge and the power lines. BCC wanted to shut the system down anyhow; so, not for the last time, Goering and the planners had a common policy for old Bristol.

We could go on to Old Market where George White's electric tram put Bristol ahead of London. We could go on and on: all the way to the French Riviera where he endowed a hospital in memory of Queen Victoria. But, I'm ending here to visit a pub that commemorates a commercial enterprise neither Brunel nor White promoted. Neither an engineer nor a stockbroker; who did have the bright idea of shipping caulis from the soft climate of Cornwall to the market and railhead in Bristol? These days the Cornubia is known for real ale and cider; to date, it doesn't have a Famous Cauli-Cheese on the menu. I bet Sir George wouldn't have missed that opportunity.

Information was culled from

Sir George White of Bristol, Charles Harvey & Jon Press

Tramlines to the Stars, George White

Godfrey OS reprints

Annals of Bristol John Latimer

And, of course, the internet especially about the architect Henry Williams

Otherwise the opinions in this article are my own and the Ramblers' Association deserves neither blame nor credit for them.

Peter Gould

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