

A short history of West Town by Richard Coates

This is a short history because the history of West Town was short. It was not in existence in 1840, maybe not even in 1850, and it ceased to exist in the early hours of 17 January 1941. The only obvious evidence that it ever existed is the name of West Town Road, which leads southwards to its former site on the bank of the river Avon. There are no surviving complete buildings or other structures. The site of West Town is now dominated by the piers and the shadow of the M5 bridge across the Avon, which runs just south-east of the original line of West Town Road and over the site of the Mission Hut. But we will meet these architectural characters in the story that unfolds below.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Shirehampton was an agricultural community. It acquired a small local tile and brick industry, but it is not certain when. There were a few claypits of unknown age in the marshland beside the Avon, from which brickearth was extracted: near Lamplighters, and at West Town, with one further inland near Barrow Hill farmhouse. There is a local report in 1855 of “an exhausted clay pit at Broad Pill” in which two brothers were drowned. The unfortunate pair were employed “at the pottery”. This could refer to the known tileworks at West Town, which is only a few hundred yards from Broad Pill, but what looks suspiciously like a factory chimney is visible not far from West Town in two of Nicholas Pocock’s views from Kingsweston painted in the late eighteenth century, and one by Francis Danby painted in 1822. It seems to be at Broad Pill, downriver from West Town. It may have been moved from elsewhere or added to the scene for “picturesque” effect, though its appearance in the works of two different artists suggests that it was real. If so, it is not known what factory it served, but it could well be a brickworks chimney if the report of the “clay pit at Broad Pill” really does mean “at Broad Pill”. Other Bristol-area brickworks of the time were also called potteries.

In the 1841 Tithe Award, there is a field called Brick Yard Ground at Lamplighter’s (where the children’s playground is), suggesting that there was a small business there. But it is not clear when the industrial-scale works at West Town came into being. There is nothing marked on the Tithe Map of 1840. On H. A. Lane’s map interpreting the Tithe Award, the riverbank south-east (upriver) of the lane later called West Town Road is marked as a coal wharf. Three Shirehampton men are also mentioned as being in the coal trade in the 1851 census, and that may have to do with these early coal wharves. North-west (downriver) from this lane is a field called Wamp Hills, also with no sign of the brickyards or tile works which came to occupy it. Local historian Ethel Thomas’s “sketch from Ordnance Survey to the year 1840” showing “Tile Works” must be mistaken as regards the date. The first-edition 1” map of 1830, the only OS map before about 1880, shows no such thing. We know from the census of 1851 that there were brickmakers living in Shirehampton then, so that might suggest that the tile works at West Town were established by 1850. But this might really have happened somewhat later, as we shall see.

This little industry must have been established in the first place to provide tiles and bricks for local buildings, perhaps originally pantiles for some of the many local houses and outbuildings built in stone, and later also perhaps bricks for the Lifeboat Inn built in about

1860 (but now with rendered walls) and for the nearby shops in Shirehampton High Street. It must have received a boost if it supplied material for the buildings of the Bristol Port Railway and Pier Company operating from Hotwells to Avonmouth, the first sod for which was cut in 1863 and which was completed in 1865, and for the new docks, the first sod for which was cut in 1868 and which were opened in 1877.

The railway, which was eventually absorbed and operated jointly by the Great Western and the Midland companies, always hemmed in West Town on its north-eastern side, with nothing but the residents' allotments in a field on the Shirehampton side of the West Town Road level crossing.

At first there were no houses close to the site of the works. West Town Road (sometimes referred to as West Town Lane, especially in public documents of the 1930s) had existed as a country lane for access to the marshland meadows and fields before the tile works was built. It came out at the lowest point on the riverbank before the beginning of the wall or seabank protecting the marshland from flooding between this point and where the Avon flows into the Severn. It was at this point that the coal wharf was built. The lane must have served this coal wharf and gained a more important role when the new brick pits were dug sometime after 1840.

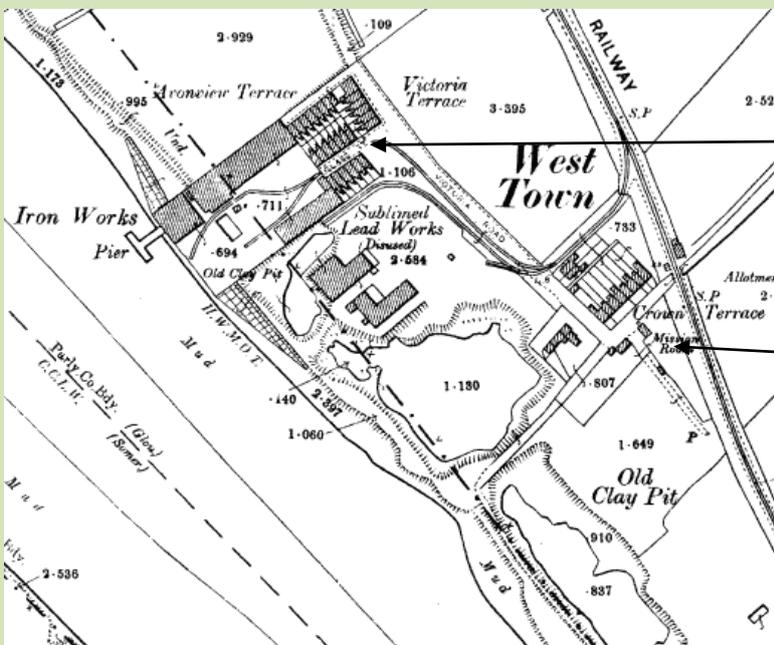
The 25" OS map surveyed in 1879 (Map 1) shows the first dwellings, a terrace of eight houses on the north-west side of West Town Road known as Crown Terrace, from the patriotic name of what was by then called the Crown Brick Works. Also in West Town Road, opposite Crown Terrace, was Rose Cottage, occupied in the early 1900s by the gamekeeper of the Kingsweston estate, who was probably the only adult male resident of West Town not employed there. Crown Terrace must have been made of bricks produced at the works itself. The earliest additional factory at West Town, a glass or bottle works, also appears on the 1879 OS 25" map. The industrial buildings of the brickworks and the bottle works were erected on the riverward side of the original protective seabank, which would have been a risky undertaking unless their new riverside flood defences were of a strength which is not fully apparent from the map. The new works were served by additional houses in the little knot of terraces at Victoria Terrace, Avon View or Avonview Terrace and Glass Street. These were accessed from West Town Road by means of Victoria Road, which was a new track, and later a road, built on the line of what was left of the former seabank. There was a pair of semi-detached cottages in Victoria Road. Ethel Thomas describes some of these modest workers' dwellings as back-to-backs, but that is not true, to judge by the large-scale OS maps of the period. All these streets apart from Crown Terrace appear with their names for the first time on the OS 25" map surveyed in 1900 (Map 2), ironically after the works which brought them into being and gave them a purpose had closed down. Victoria Road, with its patriotic name, still exists as an access road into the modern light industrial estates called Avonbank, Victoria Road and Avon Riverside.

A survey taken in around 1890 indicates that the population of the little community was about 200, and around 1900 that community lived in about 36 or 37 houses. These people, apart from the Kingsweston gamekeeper, consisted of the families of brick workers and



Crown Terrace
 Avonmouth to Hotwells
 railway
 West Town Road

Map 1: West Town in about 1879 (reproduced from contemporary Ordnance Survey 25" map, not to scale), showing West Town Road, Crown Terrace, and the two earliest factories



Glass Street
 Mission Hut

Map 2: West Town in about 1900 (reproduced from contemporary Ordnance Survey 25" map, not to scale), showing West Town at its maximum extent

workers in the new factories which adjoined the brickworks from the late 1870s onwards. Let us now have a look at what is known of the businesses which employed them.

The tile and brick works, c.1850 – before or during 1891

The Crown Brick Works are shown as such on the 1879 OS 25" map (Map 1), on which some nearby clay pits are already described as "old" and were presumably disused. On this map there is one active pit. A tall chimney can be seen in some old photos. The company had kilns on both sides of West Town Road, and the main one, north-west of the road, was served by a railway siding which ran along the south-west side of Victoria Road before turning down what later became Glass Street and into the works. This must have been operated as part of the Avonmouth docks system, since it trailed into the Hotwells-Avonmouth line in the direction of the docks. There are no brickworks marked on the later OS 25" map (Map 2, 1900-3), and the works were presumably closed by then. There is no sign of the remains of either kiln on the map of 1900-3, only "old" or "disused" brickpits.

The works were closed perhaps as early as 1891, if we can trust what the census returns for that year imply. The occupations of Shirehampton men listed in the censuses of 1851 (two brickmakers and one assistant) and 1861 (two brickmakers and nine brickyard labourers) indicate the existence of the tile and brick trade. Three jobs mentioned in the 1861 census returns indicate that the factory also produced stoneware and drainpipes. Brickmakers continue to be mentioned in 1871 and 1881, the latter including two members of the Stride family who became locally well-known builders and lived in Station Road, but the 1891 returns make no mention of this trade. The large upturn in numbers between 1851 and 1861 might suggest that the 1851 figures relate to those employed in the little operation at Lamplighter's, and therefore that the Crown works came into production between 1851 and 1861. The absence of brickworkers in 1891 suggests strongly that the works had closed by then.

The creation of new docks sidings at Avonmouth led to the establishment in 1904 of a junction, Avonmouth Dock Junction, just west of the West Town Road level crossing (which had at first been called Crown Brickyard crossing), near the northern end of Crown Terrace. This was superintended by a handsome wooden Midland Railway type 3D 28-lever frame signal box, a monument which survived until 1988 when automatic barriers were installed across West Town Road. It was claimed at that date to be the only former Midland Railway signal box still in normal use south of Birmingham. It has particular local interest because it was staffed between the wars by our historian Ethel Thomas's father.

The bottle works or glass works, before 1879 – 1885

On the OS 25" map (Map 1, 1879), just to the north-west of the brickworks, we also find the Crown Bottle Works, which specialized in glass-stoppered green bottles. To judge by the name, this must have been an enterprise begun by the owners of the brickworks. It appears in trade directories from 1879 to 1886, and six of the nine workers listed in the 1881 census were born in Yorkshire or Derbyshire. It gave its name to Glass Street. We know that a

(sadly) unidentified glassworker was buried in Shirehampton churchyard in 1884. This bottle works was a short-lived business. A suit for its liquidation was filed in 1885, though it was not struck off the Register of Companies till 1905, and the Glass Works Clubroom was renamed the Lead Works Clubroom in 1887. The name *Crown* and the presence of Yorkshire workers may suggest a link with a company of the same name based in Hunslet, Leeds, but that is not certain. Its managing director was Mr Nelson Fedder, and its head office was at 26 [St] Nicholas Street, Bristol.

The lead works, about 1887 – 1893

The Sublimed Lead Works (the title by which it appears on the 1900-3 OS 25" map, when it had already long been closed down) must have taken over at least part of the site of the brickworks and glassworks in or by 1887. The brickworks sidings mentioned above had been extended to serve the lead works, and are shown still in place on the 1900-3 map. In its short heyday, the Bristol Sublimed Lead Company Ltd was grand enough to have its own private goods wagons, rather than relying on the standard stock of the railway companies.

The West Town plant was the sole plant outside America using the Lewis-Bartlett process. Anyone interested in what actually happened in such a “sublimed lead” works, and why, can be informed as follows:

The aim of the process is to volatilize the lead from galena and the gr[e]y slag and burnt blue powder of the ore-hearth, by smelting in the oxidizing atmosphere of a slag-eye furnace, and to recover the oxidized fume in a bag house. The products are waste slag, some metallic lead, and so-called sublimed lead, a finely divided white powder with about 80 per cent. PbSO_4 [lead sulphate] and 20 per cent. PbO [lead oxide], which is used for paint, the manufacture of oil-cloth, stained paper, and rubber goods. (H. O. Hofman, *Metallurgy of lead*, page 121)

The process excited a good deal of interest in Germany, and was described in German technological publications. Readers with stamina can find a description in German of the process actually carried out at West Town in the *Berg- und Hüttenmännische Zeitung* (‘Miners’ and Metallurgists’ Newspaper’) volume 47 (Leipzig, 1888), page 346, in the *Zeitschrift für das Berg-, Hütten- und Salinenwesen im Preussischen Staate* (‘Journal of Mining, Metallurgy and Saltworking in the State of Prussia’) volume 36 (Berlin, 1888), page 103, and in the prestigious *Dingler’s Polytechnisches Journal* (Dingler’s Polytechnic Journal’) volume 271 (Stuttgart, 1889), page 180.

Despite this international interest, the lead works was a short-lived operation like the bottle works before it. A resolution for the voluntary winding-up of the Bristol Sublimed Lead Company Ltd was passed by an emergency general meeting on 13 October 1893, recorded in the *London Gazette* of 20 October, but the winding-up was not finalized till 1905. The factory is marked as disused on the 1900-3 OS 25" map (Map 2). The carcasses of some of the tall

sheds were visible in a photograph taken about 1920 (illustration 26 in Ethel Thomas's *Down the 'Mouth*, page 44).

The ironworks, before 1890 – about 1920 (?)

The Avonmouth Iron Works had been established on the site of the former glassworks between 1886 and 1903, probably early in this period. It had a T-shaped jetty in the river Avon, which was still there on the OS 25" map of 1949. Its ruin is visible near the pylon in the frontispiece of Ethel Thomas's book *Down the 'Mouth*, but only the reinforced wall close to where it emerged from the riverbank is visible today (Image 1). Although there is no map evidence, the jetty was probably built during the glassworks era, since it is known that coal was delivered by barge from South Wales somehow during that period. The siding mentioned above had been extended to serve the ironworks by 1903, and went nearly as far as the jetty but not onto it. The works buildings can still be seen, but they are not named, on the 1916 OS 25" map, and it is not known whether they were still in use by this date.

I have discovered little about the history of the ironworks, but we can get an indication of its achievements. The firm, trading as Charles Frederick Millar & Co., exhibited a "wrought-iron thorn-bush reversible harrow" in 1890, and in the same year Mr Millar "of Shirehampton" was granted an American patent on a new improved metallic hurdle. If the firm was still active in 1941, it would have made them, as potential military hardware manufacturers, a reasonable target for the Luftwaffe, though they are not picked out specifically on a German aerial intelligence photo I have seen. In any case, the site appears to have become at least in part a Bristol Corporation "sanitary yard" by 1920, and it must be strongly suspected that the ironworks was no longer in operation by that date.



Image 1: What's left: the retaining wall by the ironworks jetty, with the M5 bridge in the background

Paul's or British Oil and Cake Mills Ltd animal feed business

Paul's mill or warehouse (whose complicated business history and eventual merger with BOCM is not charted here) was established in Victoria Road between West Town and the docks entrance at an unknown date, probably in the 1930s, and a railway siding was provided to serve it. Its purpose was the production and storage of animal feed. Its site was chosen to make the most of the residues of milled grain and other crushed seeds produced from imports into Avonmouth docks. A massive new plant for the production of animal feed was installed here in the early 1950s, but by then West Town no longer existed.

What West Town made – where is it?

Presumably there are bricks made at West Town in some of the buildings in Shirehampton and Avonmouth, but there is no certainty about which. The Bristol Museum's collections do not seem to contain any West Town bottles, lead or leadworking exhibits, or ironwork. Does anyone know the whereabouts of any surviving West Town products at all? If there is any animal feed left from the period, it will not be in an appetizing condition.

Other features of West Town

The spiritual needs of the inhabitants were served by the Mission Hut, a corrugated iron and wood-lined building erected by the Anglican parish of Shirehampton in November 1885. This was next to Rose Cottage on the south-east side of West Town Road opposite Crown Terrace, now under the M5. The whole of West Town, like the docks village of Avonmouth, was originally in Shirehampton parish, but when the new parish of Avonmouth was created in 1917, the centre of West Town Road was taken as the boundary. All the buildings of West Town were therefore in the new Avonmouth parish except the Mission Hut, and the gamekeeper's cottage if it still survived by then, which remained in Shirehampton. The Hut supported Sunday services, harvest festivals and Christmas services, and Sunday school, and it is also recorded that some open-air evening services were held there. It was also used for amateur entertainment, including concerts and pantomimes.

There were also two shops. One was Cook's, on the corner of Avonview Terrace and Victoria Terrace, a general store where "anything from a pin to an elephant" could be bought, and the other was Russell's, on the corner of Crown Terrace and Victoria Road.

Residents' memories include two oil street-lamps, lit and trimmed by a lamplighter from Shirehampton, one by the Mission Hut and one on the corner of Glass Street and Victoria Terrace.

Other features mapped in West Town in the early years of its existence were a letter box, a pump a little way behind the Mission Hut whose purpose (water supply or drainage) is unknown, and the allotment gardens in a field on the northern (Shirehampton) side of the Bristol-Avonmouth railway. The site of the allotments is now bisected by the realigned West

Town Road between the piers of the M5 bridge and the Portway, and part of it is used by a crane hire firm.

The name of West Town

The community seems to have always been known as West Town, i.e. the settlement in the west of Shirehampton parish, and its earliest buildings were probably in existence before Avonmouth and its docks (opened in 1877). It was also referred to loosely by the names or descriptions of the various factories: “The Brickyard”, “The Bottle Works”, “The Lead Works” or “The Iron Works”, depending on which were operating at the time of speaking. In 1890, some well-meaning souls, finding the uncertainty and the temporariness of all these labels disturbing, attempted to impose the name *Riverside* “with the consent of those chiefly interested in the place”. The proposal was probably not put to the ordinary inhabitants; they must have met it with indifference, since the place remained *West Town* until the end. But it has come into effect over half a century later, perhaps accidentally, through being used in the name of Avon Riverside industrial estate on the eastern side of Victoria Road.

Luftwaffe attack of 16/17 January 1941

The end came on 17 January 1941, when the area was struck by German incendiary and high explosive bombs. Aerial photos taken in 1946 reveal the loss of any remaining plant and houses except some buildings on the site of the former ironworks. The inhabitants were evacuated as the bombs fell; anything that was left of the lost works and dwellings was never rebuilt; the little community which lived here was dispersed forever. The land was taken over in part by the Port of Bristol Authority, who positioned the West Town Gate to Avonmouth Docks at the south-eastern end of Victoria Road. The gate has now been pulled back to the north-western end of the road to allow space for private industrial units. But the name of West Town is no longer on the signage there. There used to be, from about 1951, some sidings running east of West Town Road and south of the railway, and old rails embedded in concrete can be seen amongst the weeds there. These were two lines belonging to British Railways (called “the earth sidings”, for unknown reasons), and two additional ones of the Port of Bristol Authority, intended to deal with the entire banana traffic of Avonmouth, but in the end they were used only for storing trains of banana vans, until the West Indies banana boats stopped coming to Avonmouth in 1967.

Part of the ironworks site is marked as “sanitary yard” in around 1920, and after the war the site of the ironworks is mapped as “corporation yard”. This facility must have included what an ex-resident refers to as an “old incinerator” (presumably the municipal dust destructor in which waste of all kinds was burnt). Eventually a warehouse was built over the filled-in claypits of the main brickworks site. But by 1970 West Town was little more than a convenient gap to push the new M5 through, and the bridgeworks were duly completed in 1974.

Now

Few places can have been so comprehensively erased as West Town. If you look around now, at about OS map reference ST 520771, you can see the wall by the ironworks jetty mentioned above (Image 1), and some concrete gutters under the motorway bridge that might or might not have been part of the roads at the edge of the brickworks compound (Image 2). But you will be hard pushed to find anything else. As noted, the claypits were filled in after the war to accommodate a warehouse, and the site now has light industrial units perched where the warehouse was. The site of West Town is roughly the area covered by the 26 light units of the Avonbank industrial estate, along with part of the compound in Victoria Road belonging to Elliott's, suppliers of relocatable buildings, and unit 1 on the opposite side of Victoria Road, occupied till recently by DHL Global Forwarding Ltd.

The way it all was is captured in the three rather remote aerial photos at the very end of this short history (Images 3-5). But memory is fading, of course. Ethel Thomas, even as long ago as 1992, called West Town the "forgotten suburb". Anyone who ever lived there must now be at least 73 years old, and anyone who worked there at least 85. If any former resident or a descendant can correct or add to anything I have written about this close-knit and apparently contented community, please contact me on richardc.yb@gmail.com.



Image 2: What's left: a possibly old concrete gutter in West Town Road. Not much archaeology, is it?

The end

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Appendix: List of families recorded as living at West Town, not necessarily at the same time (from recollections, not censuses)

Rose Cottage (gamekeeper's cottage)

Bird

Crown Terrace

Hopper, Smyth; Russell (shop)

Glass Street

Bennett, Bennett, Chivers, Cummins, Gray, Hicks, MacLeod, Pearson, Rees, Swallow, Wallace, Webster, Wiltshire

Avonview Terrace

Evans, Ford, Gray, Hembrough, Morrison, Reid, Rudyard, Weston

Victoria Terrace

Buffin, Gray, Hillman, McMullen; Cook (shop)

Victoria Road

Green, Matthews, Pugh

Address uncertain

Carter, Dunne, Gordon, Martin, van Duesburg

Sources

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Maps

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Shirehampton tithe map (1840-1) Bristol Record Office documents BRO EP/A/32/34 and BRO (Sturge) 37959/39.

Web resources

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Images 3-5: West Town from the air: sections of photos from *Britain from above* web-site (copyright status unknown)



Victoria Terrace

Old clay pit and old sublimed lead works buildings

EPW 005498 (20 March 1921)



Ironworks/sanitary yard

Victoria Road

Rose Cottage?

EPW 005524 (1921)



jetty

Avonview Terrace

EPW 046975 (1935)