

Pill Ferry

by Richard Coates

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The Pill ferry by Richard Coates



The ferry is the rowing boat in the foreground in this postcard of about 1904 (?). No gangplank is apparent.



The ferry at the slipway on the Shire side, with Pill in the background (1940s?).

<http://www.hamgreenlake.co.uk/local-history/>

It must have been realized many centuries ago that once you reached Shirehampton or Pill by land there was nowhere further downriver for you to cross the Avon safely: both banks, in Shire and Portbury, were marshland.

The spot where The Lamplighters stands was the last bit of riverside terra firma in Gloucestershire, and the banks of the creek at Pill more or less the last in Somerset. So the Shire-Pill ferry which connected cobbled slipways at these points was an important element in the local transport network, from time out of mind till its demise in 1974 when the slightly more ambitious M5 bridge opened. But however convenient it was, it was attended by practical difficulties. The boat had to beach in deep mud on both banks to let the passengers out across a wooden gangplank onto the slipway, especially at lower tides, and the strong tidal flow meant that rowers - and the later motor-boat ferrymen - had to describe a broad arc upstream or downstream to counteract it.

Importance of the crossing

Its importance may have been enshrined in medieval times in special arrangements about which lord held what land here. Shire, in Westbury parish, formed a big hole in Henbury parish (but it was within the administrative hundred of Henbury). Pill, sharing a parish in later times with Easton in Gordano, formed a big hole in the ancient Portbury parish (but it was within Portbury hundred). If we knew who held responsibility for these holes in Anglo-Saxon times it might give us an insight into why, and for whom, the ferry was important, but things are quite obscure. Henbury hundred belonged to the bishop of Worcester, a powerful magnate; Portbury hundred was in royal hands before the Conquest and was held afterwards by Geoffrey, bishop of

Coutances (a particular favourite of William the Conqueror), who was lord of large tracts of land elsewhere in Somerset too. Within those hundreds, Shire was held from early times as part of the endowment of the religious institution which became Westbury College, and Pill (with Easton) was held by persons or bodies unknown. Ælric held Pill/Easton in 1066, and Roger son of Ralph was lord in 1086, but we do not know who either of these men was. After the Conquest, Robert FitzHamon was granted the earldom of Gloucester (including Bristol and its castle) by William II, and also the manor of Easton in Gordano, so he too would have had reason to use the ferry when going direct from Gloucester to Easton, and will have exercised some measure of control or influence over it too by virtue of his earldom.

To get a fuller sense of the importance of this crossing: the Avon was an international boundary for much of the early Anglo-Saxon period.

Somerset was in the kingdom of Wessex; what became Gloucestershire belonged to Wessex for a short time before falling into the hands of the king of Mercia. If the ferry belongs to this early era, then at that time there would have been no bridge across the Avon lower than Bath. Bristol Bridge dates only from the time after the two kingdoms had united to become England in the tenth century. So there can only have been ferries during this early period, and no other crossing downstream of the Avon Gorge is recorded. That puts the Pill ferry in a position of considerable importance.

The ferry may well therefore have been ancient already, after the Conquest and the period of interest of the Earls of Gloucester, when members of the Berkeley family held not only Berkeley Castle and hundred, but also Portbury hundred and the governorship of Bristol. They sometimes found it convenient to go directly from Berkeley to Portbury rather than via Bristol Bridge, for example when spending Christmas at their Portbury manor, as their 17thC historian John Smyth tells us:

The abiding of this Lord William [whom Smyth calls Waste-All] in his fathers life time, was for most part at Portbury; Afterwards at Berkeley Castle, between which places his usuall travell was by water and over at the passage called Crockerspill [Crockern Pill, i.e. Pill].

The Berkeleys apparently asserted a right to cross the river free of toll towards the close of the fifteenth century, to the annoyance of the ferryman and the lord of Easton manor who collected the dues. John Smyth again:

The passer [ferryman]... in the time of Henry the sixth, exhibited a petition against this lord William to Richard Duke of Yorke... then lord of the manor of Easton... complaining that this lord and his servants passed and would passe at their pleasure without paying anything for their feryage ... [document date 1491].

The earliest definite evidence for the ferry's existence is in the name of the hamlet of Lodway next to Pill, adopted from the name of the ancient track from Portbury to Pill. This is from the Old or Middle English for 'way to the ferry' (OE (ge)l?d-weg > ME lod-wei). There is a possible mention of the ferry in the 1380s, involving rent paid by John the ferryman of Keterenpull', i.e. Katherine Pill, the creek east of Ham Green. But since there is never any other mention of a ferry there, it is probably a mistake for Crockern Pill, the historic name of today's Pill. The first indisputable mentions come in 1430/1 when a payment was made *custodi passagij apud Crockernepul* ('to the guardian of the ferry at Crockern Pill') for rowing Lord Berkeley and his retinue across the river; and in 1465, when Isabel, the daughter of Philip Mede (Mead) of Failand, was warned that she crossed the ferry at her peril on her marriage, daringly above her station (or so it used to be thought), to Maurice Berkeley, *de jure* 3rd Baron Berkeley (1435-1506) during the latter's feud with his elder brother Waste-All.

Later in the 15th century, after the petition against the Berkeleys, Richard, Duke of York, as the current lord of Easton manor, appointed a Welsh minder, Thomas Morgan, to ensure all passengers paid their fare, and this service remained in the Morgan family for many years. They also came to hold Easton manor, and therefore to own the ferry, from 1544. The ferry-house is mentioned in 1633/4 when Richard Morgan was accused of a range of offences tending to deprive the Crown and the Bristol merchants of revenue, and he was ordered to

remove several obstructions, including houses, except for one to serve the ferry. These facts also indicate that the rights and responsibilities for the operation always rested on the Somerset side and may always have been bound up with the lordship of Portbury hundred or the manor of Easton.

It needs to be said that the ferry was not the only maritime operation at Pill, and the boatmen's other well-known occupations included piloting and hobbling, the escorting of deepwater vessels up the Avon to Bristol docks. Many families were involved in more than one activity. But we will concentrate only on the ferry.

The usual western English word for a ferry in recent centuries was passage, as in Old Passage at Aust and New Passage at Severn Beach, and as we see in the quotation from John Smyth above. The passage here turns up as early as 1711 in a local field-name on the Shire side, Passage Leaze, which still survives as a street-name uphill from The Lamps.

Despite its potential importance, it seems nothing very remarkable ever happened at, on or to the ferry. But its mundane existence was acknowledged by the turnpike road, whose iron milestones can still be seen, built in 1758 from Bristol through Clifton to Shirehampton, and on down Station Road to the slipway at The Lamps. The position of The Lamps is no accident: more of a commercial opportunity taken by Mr Swetman, the Bristol lamplighting contractor, to rebuild the Old Passage House as a reputable inn.

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Advert for the Lamps, date unknown; image from Paul Townsend, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/brizzlebornandbred/8727659571>, used according to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/2.0/>

The Kaiser

The one exception, if you like celebrity trivia, occurred in 1844. On his way to luncheon with the Harfords at Blaise Castle House, the Prince of Prussia, the later Kaiser Wilhelm I of Germany, crossed the ferry from Pill after visiting the s.s. Great Britain, which was then undergoing fitting-out in the Cumberland Basin, and then Leigh Court, in the company of Professor Robert Bunsen

(the inventor of the burner) and the Duke of Beaufort. They must have done a loop from the Beauforts' mansion at Badminton through Bristol, then along to Pill.

Ownership of the ferry



Undated photo of ferry departing Pill: gangplank visible.

We know the names of some of the people having an interest in the ferry in latter years, but it is not always crystal clear who owned the rights, who leased them, and who (and how many at a time) actually wielded the oars. In the seventeenth century, in Thomas Morgan's time, John Lullet was the ferryman. In 1783 Thomas Wilkins Morgan let the rights to John Gilmore, whose ferryman may have been Morgan's servant Gamage Henderson. Joseph Shepherd plied the oars in the 1830s, and he was followed by Joseph Dickens, George Gilmore, James Collins, Charles Hunt, a man known as Old Wergen (Worgan? a well-known local surname of Welsh origin), William Russell, John Henry Russell, James Simmons, Amos Buck, Tom Paine and the two Albert Sharps: a list including many familiar Pill surnames. In 1840 the owner (as of most of Pill village, since he was lord of the manor) was James Adam Gordon, and the lessee and occupier was Elizabeth Gilmore, an annuitant, according to the 1851 census. From 1850 the rights were exercised by Messrs Reed (from a family of Pill pilots) and Russell, and from 1880 they were owned by John Porter, from a dynasty of builders, and his family. They had bought the rights from the then lord of the manor Richard Bright, for £700, and during the 1890s family member Captain Sydney Porter leased the operation for £300. Sydney's widow ran the operation in 1895, and Captain Enoch Porter three years later, with Charles Hunt as his ferryman. Sydney's son John built a metal tollhouse on the Shire side in 1928. During the Porters' tenure, a special kind of floating horse-box-cum-berge was maintained on the Shire side firstly for the convenience of Dr Hayward who also had patients on the Somerset side, and then for transporting horses to and from the Remount Depot. The cobbled slipways were too steep for them to walk up and down to get to the regular small vessel - which would not have been suitable for hooves anyway. Any equine traffic had dried up by 1939, and Albert Sharp the then ferryman burnt the special contraption in 1954.

There were minor legal issues regarding access to the slips on both sides of the river in 1851, but they seem not to have had any consequences.

The ferry was probably at its busiest in its last century, taking folks from Pill to work at Avonmouth docks or to the pubs and cinema in Shire, and taking Shire and Avonmouth folks to the train for work at Portishead power station, or to Ham Green hospital, or to the pubs in Pill when closing time in Somerset was half an hour later than on the Gloucestershire side - often for one of the notorious weekend brawls.

Leases and rights

Motor boats were first used in about 1934/5, the original one being imaginatively called the Pilshire. During the Second World War the ferry was operated by the Port of Bristol on behalf of the Ministry of Transport, but it was returned to the Porter family in 1949-50 and run by John Porter's son-in-law, Mr Millard. Amos Buck was the ferryman during this period. The rights were sold to the tugmasters C. J. King and Sons of Avonmouth in 1951 (about whose running of the ferry there were complaints investigated by the South West Regional Board for Industry), and at the end of 1952 the operation, by then known as the Pill Ferry Company, was leased to Jim Rice, who was drowned on the day he took it over. According to a radio broadcast by Mrs Rice in the 1990s, when the ferry opened at 5 a.m. Jim had gone up to the toll box on the Shire side because there was a fault with the turnstile. The boat had drifted away, so he waded in after it, but died of a heart attack in the process. His family carried on the business for seven years until it was sold off to Hunt Bros and Withers, who ran it until 1968 when a Mr Bob Brown took it over for its final six years, using, like his predecessors, a mix of powered boats and rowing boats according to the level of demand. Hunts and Withers had threatened to close the operation in 1966, despite the fact that it was being used for 300 return journeys a day at 8d [= 3 and one-third decimal pence] a trip. It had carried almost half a million passengers a year (over 1300 on an average day) shortly after the Second World War, but that level of trade had not been sustained.

Members of the Sharp family were the ferrymen in its last decades. Albert Sharp junior undertook the last journey, in the Margaret, at 10.20 p.m. on Friday 1 November 1974, six months after the first opening of the motorway bridge. The ferry must have been able to stagger on because only one lane of the bridge in each direction opened either as planned on 23 May or one week later, depending which source you trust; it was October or November before it opened fully, depending which source you trust. Albert's ashes were scattered on the river at the ferry site in 2005.

Bristol Harbour

The Margaret still survives in service as Bristol Harbour's original Yellow & Blue ferry boat. Is there anything else left apart from the memories of the kind which Angela Thompson Smith published in her book *Shire* in 2006, and others in *Shire* newspaper over the years? The ferry concern's building in Pill (apparently one of those marked as a pub on a local plan of 1928), was bought up by Portishead Cruising Club, to be replaced by the present clubhouse in the early 2000s. The toll box in Shire, which features at the top of the slipway in the 1928 plan, has disappeared. Where were tolls collected before then? Some old photos show a shed-like structure west of the top of the slip. The cobbled slipways on both sides of the river are still there, the one on the Shire side being about twice as long as the one in Pill.



Pill ferry slipway 2018

Ferry Anthem

No fame attached to the Pill ferry until the singer Adge Cutler from Nailsea (with The Wurzels) praised it, during the last decade of its existence, in his Scrumpy & Western anthem Pill, Pill (I love thee still) (released in 1967, Columbia SEG 8525; and as Pill Ferry two years earlier by the Bristol band The Crofters, Saydisc SD 113):

When the nights are dark and stormy
And the bitter north wind blows

Cross the fields from Shirehampton
Where the muddy Avon flows

Where the Pillites gaily ride
Over on the ferry from the other side

The boat starts swingin'
You'll hear them singin'
Floatin' on the tide.

Tabitha Miggins: Ship's Cat



(On the Pill Ferry)

Philippa Perry

Tabitha Miggins - Ship's Cat

Since then the defunct passage-boat has had a literary revival in the hands of another local author, writing two books featuring his feline heroine Tabitha Miggins - Ship's Cat (on the Pill Ferry). He is Mark Clinton Jones (a.k.a. Philippa Perry - Phil Perry - Pill Pherry - OK?).

Last boat!

A one-off nostalgia trip took place on 30 August 2004 (reported in the October issue of the Shire newspaper), and there was a brief flurry of interest in 2015 in the possible reopening of the ferry, possibly to take bikes as well as people. This was fronted by Charlotte Leslie MP, but it sank in the political mud when it must have been realized that local authorities didn't even have enough cash to buy a rowing boat.



Almost as if it never ceased: the whited-out Shirehampton Ferry signpost in Pill, February 2018

Reminiscences in print which include references to the ferry

- From the memoirs of François Baron (1823-1899), unpublished but quoted in Ethel Thomas' *The continuing story of Shirehampton*, pp. 90-91:

I used to enjoy crossing the river to reach [Pill], ferried over by Old Wergen, a bronzed and weather-beaten old sailor. ... He used to dip persons in the Avon who had been bitten by dogs to avoid hydrophobia. The sufferers were taken to the middle of the river and then plunged into the water until nearly insensible, and then allowed to recover their breath, when they were again plunged in and after several such submersions were supposed to be safe.

Gallery of pictures and videos on the Web

1. www.bristol247.com/news-and-features/features/historic-photos-of-shirehampton/ , photo no. 17 (scroll down), from Bristol Archives no. 43207/9/23/75, the slipway at Shire, with queue; photo no. 18, from Bristol Archives no. 43207/9/23/78, shows the cutting for the Shire slipway in the immediate foreground
2. www.flickr.com/photos/brizzlebornandbred/6781968085 ; postcard of about 1904, same image as the first one in this article www.flickr.com/photos/brizzlebornandbred/6933100044 ; the ferry is the rowing boat in the background
3. www.flickr.com/photos/brizzlebornandbred/6933100798 ; the ferry at Shire
4. www.flickr.com/photos/brizzlebornandbred/7168959521 ; same as first item in this gallery
5. picclick.co.uk/Pill-Somerset-from-Shirehampton-c1930-local-302619561018.html#&gid=1&pid=1 ; grainy image of Pill taken from Shire, about 1930
6. picclick.co.uk/HB-SON-Postcard-POSTED-1906-PILL-FROM-312054460084.html#&gid=1&pid=1 ; tinted postcard of Pill with ferry, 1906
7. www.worthpoint.com/worthopedia/1920-postcard-pill-ferry-shirehampton-1475697770 ; view of Pill from Shire, 1920
8. www.ebay.co.uk/itm/PILL-Somerset-from-the-Ferry-Slip-Old-Postcard-Unused/182544863054?hash=item2a80858f4e:g:JjEAAOSw5UZY~y01 ; undated postcard view of Pill from Shire slipway
9. www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/pill-pilots/ , two drawings of 1919 by Samuel Loxton, from Bristol Central Reference Library; ferry shown in middle of river in one and in front of pilot cutters in the other (search on Loxton or scroll down)
10. www.shire.org.uk/shire.php?edition=534, drawing of 1987 by Betty Marten showing the slipway (search on Marten or scroll down)
11. www.shire.org.uk/shire.php?edition=393; photo including Albert Sharp, ferryman; nostalgia ferry trip (scroll down, or search page for ferry)
12. www.shire.org.uk/shire.php?edition=438; view from Pill, courtesy of Anthony Mitchell (scroll down, or search page for ferry)
13. www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/five-six-pick-sticks; on the art work of Sir Richard Long; includes image of both slipways (scroll down)
14. www.johndavies.org/2009/08/doing-almost-nothing.html; on the art work of Sir Richard Long; includes image of Shire slipway - in the background the Pill Ferry slipway, Long's home territory, source of the River Avon mud which he uses to create many of his works (Richard Long: My talent as an artist is to walk across a moor or place a stone on the ground.)
15. www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9rZdEXRqt8 Pill, Pill, performed by Adge Cutler and the Wurzels
16. www.bristolferry.com/our-boats/margaret/; on the m.l. Margaret and her history

Other interesting web-inaccessible illustrations

1. Advert for the Pill ferry, apparently the top of a tear-off calendar (undated) in Bristol Archives [BrArch], Ethel Thomas Collection, illustrating the motor launch Betty Brown. BrArch reference PBA/X/5.
2. Plan of the ferry slipways (1928). BrArch reference BristolPlans/arranged/170.
3. Early photo from the Lamplighters side, showing a rowing boat in the foreground, photo 441 in Reece Winstone (1983) *Bristol as it was, 1845-1900*. Bristol: Reece Winstone. [The author suggests that the boat, close to the Shire bank, is a Pill hobbler's boat, but that seems unlikely to me - it must have been in use as a ferry at the moment the photo was taken.]

Acknowledgements

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All web-pages mentioned were accessed safely between 6 February and 1 March 2018.

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6. Jones, Mark Clinton, writing as Philippa Perry (2013) *Tabitha Miggins, Ship's Cat (on the Pill Ferry)*. Bristol: Bristol Folk Publications. Jones, Mark Clinton (2015) *Further adventures of Tabitha Miggins, Ship's Cat on the Pill Ferry*. Bristol: Bristol Folk Publications.
7. Leslie, Charlotte, @CharlotteLeslie (2015) Tweet with image at 11:37 AM - 20 March 2015: Recce of potential Shire-Pill ferry site with @CllrWHarvey - lots of issues to overcome, but, nothing ventured...!. twitter.com/CharlotteLeslie/status/578988777575702528.
8. *The London Gazette* 19871 (1840). Notices by James Adam Gordon, pp. 2539, 2667, 2869.
9. Sabin, Arthur, ed. (1960) Some manorial accounts of Saint Augustine's abbey, Bristol. Bristol: Bristol Record Society vol. 22. Available online at <http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/History/bristolrecordsociety/publications/brs22.pdf>.

10. Shire newspaper, articles, notes and photos, October and November 2004, March, April, July and November 2008, March and December 2010, August 2011, July 2016,
11. Smith, Angela Thompson (2006) *Shire*. Baltimore: Publish America. [See pages 55-56 for a vivid description of ferry trips as childhood treats.]
12. Smyth, John, of Nibley, ed. by Sir John Maclean (1883-5) *The Berkeley manuscripts. The lives of the Berkeleys, lords of the honour, castle and manor of Berkeley, in the county of Gloucester, from 1066 to 1618* (2 volumes). Gloucester: J. Bellows, printer. [See volume II, pages 136-137, 172-173.]
13. Thomas, Ethel (1993) *Shirehampton story*, second edition. Privately published. [See pages 77-79, with two photos.]
14. Thomas, Ethel (2002) *The continuing story of Shirehampton*. Privately published. [See pages 90-91 on the ferryman's cure for hydrophobia.]
15. Wigan, Eve (1971) *The tale of Gordano: a history of the Gordano region of Somerset*, second edition, with notes by A. B. L. Reid. Bristol: Chatford House. [See pages 54-55, 91-92.]
16. The Wurzels (undated) *Wurzel World. Lyrics: Pill, Pill*. Available online at www.thewurzels.com/lyricspillpill.htm.