

The Floating Harbour

Ralph Hoyte

a poetry journey around
Bristol's Floating Harbour

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a celebration of the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Floating Harbour

The Floating Harbour an epic poem by Ralph Hoyte

Keep the water on your right. If you start at the Industrial Museum / Museum of Bristol (I) the works will follow each other in the right order.

You can download the mp3 / audio files for your iPod / mp3 player – as well as PDFs of the text, laid out by the poet.

Author's note:

The series of inter-locked poems entitled 'THE FLOATING HARBOUR' envisage the participant following the laid-out route and stopping off at the marked 'stops' to savour the poetry written for that spot. The 'conceit' of the poem is that each section relates to 'a material/element' which has left its particular resonance at that site or been particularly associated with that site; thus, for example, iron, timber, sugar, cloth, tobacco, wine, sand; or wind, water, mud etc.

Ralph Hoyte

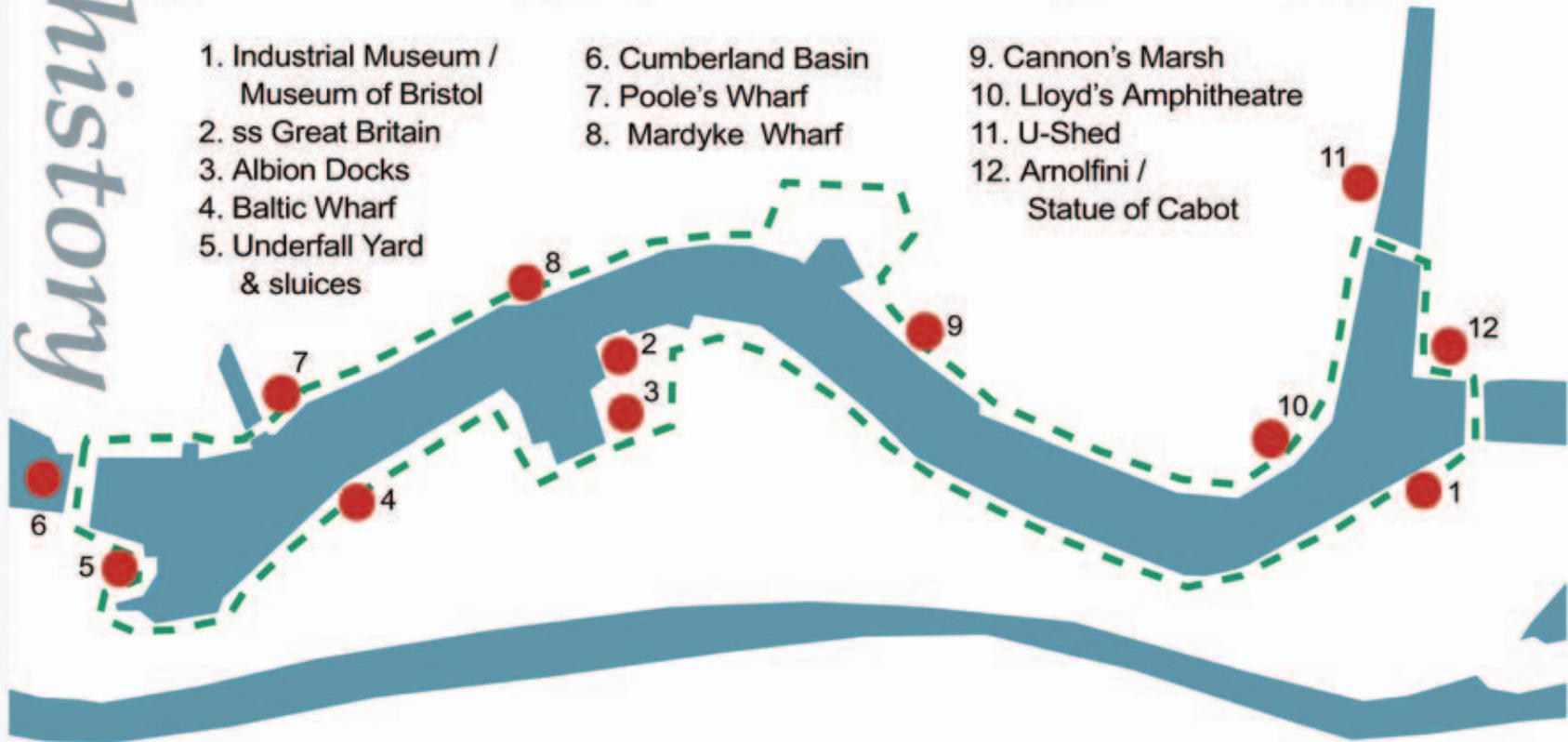
amidst the mumbings

history

1. Industrial Museum /
Museum of Bristol
2. ss Great Britain
3. Albion Docks
4. Baltic Wharf
5. Underfall Yard
& sluices

6. Cumberland Basin
7. Poole's Wharf
8. Mardyke Wharf

9. Cannon's Marsh
10. Lloyd's Amphitheatre
11. U-Shed
12. Arnolfini /
Statue of Cabot



a walk around Bristol's Floating Harbour with poetry by Ralph Hoyte

a liquid necklace of water

1 INDUSTRIAL MUSEUM BEGINNINGS

It's the monsoon in
Bristol; a sea
of masts
shoots up; fore-masts in
the Cumberland Basin, main-
mast at Mardyke; mizzen,
oh, somewhere up
the Reach. They spear into
the lobbys of
insurance companies, banks,
order takeaways, deposit
doubloons at the
Cheltenham & Gloucester. Saxons,
Normans planted their wimples
here, scowled over
bodices, squeezed the
old Frome into
a girdle. An
eyelash shading water
blinked
back at them, a
a liquid necklace of
water wherein
Frome Maidens gambol
amidst the mumblings
of History

*I'd build me a ship of a thousand ton
Hooraw, Santiano!
An' load 'er up with Jamaica rum,
All along the plains of Mexico!
Aaaaawaaaay Rio! Oh Rio!*

2 SS GREAT BRITAIN IRON

Wood;
floats on water. Iron.
Sinks. Yes? No. Floating iron?
Don't make me laugh. Ah, but Brunel wasn't
Joking. Iron doesn't
float, he said. Therefore -
I will make it float.
I am a man!
Accredited to failure
& the excoriating doubt
of
mud the hopeful, the outcasts
took passage on Brunel's ss
Great Britain. The stanchions
to which
they had attached their
life-threads
receded as they
cast off, spake with
albatrosses, mollymawks;
feasted on the springing
flesh of dolphins.
56 days later:
LAND AHOY! They
hopped along there, kangaroos
boxed them in at
night.

Thus it is. The stanchions
to which we shackle our
lives; fixed,
solid, immovable, to
BS 5950; we
move within
their radius, as a boat tied
up to a buoy,
bobbing up
and
down - but fixed to
a degree of
freedom. What then
if we are cast off and
afloat on the groundswell
of life? Pigeons bathe
in it, sparrows chirp of it.
Humans? Only
ever, and
never again.

*Mothers and sweethearts don't ye cry
Sisters and brothers say goodbye
A land of promise there ye'll see
I'm bound away across the sea*

3

WATER
ALBION DOCKS

Water,
that liquid element,
called to them, chuckling
to them in their waking
dreams, sea-water burped,
gurgling with
new life. Flailing, they struck out for
the New World; zephyrs
flirting out of skies
extending out to
a nameless infinity fill'd their fore royals,
set their halyards
to creakin', heeled her over to starb'd
and set sea to scudding till
they were puked out
on a foreign shore.

*Heave a pawl, O heave away!
Way ay roll an' go!
The anchor's a board an' the cable's all stored
Timme rollickin' randy dandy O!*

They
found there
only what they had taken
within them. Trees
are only
trees, maize,
maize; we are only
what we think
we are. Then
sing of Reuben Ranzo, Lucy Loo,
Hanging Johny, Eliza Lee,
Susianna; sing of
Sally Brown, Mother Shilling, Larry Marr; of
Shenandoah, Rio, The Broomielaw, Mobile Bay; of
Valparaiso,
Essequibo, Hilo where there be
Yaller Gals, Bulgines, Round-the-Corner Sallies;
bow to
Queens-in-the-Forest; seek out
The Wild Goose Nation; these
places
which lie
Within; where
a golden
three skys'l yarder
takes a seaman's soul
seeking that
which
shines out of dark
seas and hangs
around our
necks, pointing earthwards.

*Ooooh! Jesus Christ Almighty!
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!
Ooooh! Jesus Christ Almighty!
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!*

4 BALTIC WHARF STONE

None of these
conversations we have with
water
can take
place without
stone; a
Floating Harbour floats,
courtesy of stone; a
wharf, a
pier, a dock. Stone
bears us up; stone
weighs us
down; stone
marks the place where
once flesh
squabbled upon the earth. *'Here
lie the mortal remains of -'*
Stone
holds us
in
place; stone
holds
us
out of place. That which is
solid and;
immoving ...dances;
and quays that
replaced sloping banks.

Stone copes
without asking
'why?' The Back
The Grove
Mud Dock
The Gibb; grazing cattle
swishing on the Wapping
side. Call it;
a wharf, a jetty,
dolphin
landing stage
structure for
berthing mooring
any
adjacent pier bridge roadway footway
affording
access. Call it:
stone.
Yet here
this; stone, whose
birthing lay in
furnaces incomprehensible to
mind;
(the gap)
is piled up,
gasping, in air; swilled
by water; tickled
by eels. The roots of plants
seek out
its secret heart, what;
do we say
?

Set in stone. As
if
stone were something
solid. Did not Karl Marx say,
'Everything that is solid
melts
into thin
air'. The splinters
of theoretical granite
explode outwards
blowing societies
to smithereens; they are ground
in the mortar of
immortality

A
faded oligarchy of crabs
scuttles
into the
cracks, follows
the
way of all eels; and
belts down to
excrescences which
saddle newts with brats. Look!
There is scarcely a gap! But;
There is still
a gap; wild
men know of it, dogs;
pee in it. Mind.
The gap

5 UNDERFALL YARD

MUD

Mud
Is a microcosm of world;
It forms its own
continents, islands, shoals,
banks, drifts, eddies; its
own deep sea trenches;
Mud
is un-
edified, indeed, unedifiable. It doesn't care;
it has given up
all pretensions to
any sort of social standing

Mud
Rolls on, rolls off at will. It
forms its own
mid-Atlantic trenches, tectonic plates, it
covers anything, brings
anything to a halt; kingdoms arise out of mud;
kingdoms
slump back into mud. its
peaks, troughs, valleys
glower at those in a hurry,
the swift, the
light.

Mud
Keeps secrets to itself in its own
muddy little way; down there under the
Cumberland Basin
there is a perfect miniature Mount Everest
of mud; underwater mountains are not
snow-

Mud
Welcomes you
to the melting pot of the
nations. Here all is mud. All
secrets ooze in
here, all beings come unto ...
mud. Verily here endeth
Man's overweening vanity.
Underneath lie the
Ganges, the
Limpopo; over
there the Amazon. Our wellies
squelch.

Mud
Is the defeat of all dignity; it's
difficult to be
glorious
when you're stuck in -
mud.

Mud
What you see
before you; that which is sucked out
by sister moon, brother
tide under Brunel's
sluices is not
'mud'; it is pieces
of Luckington, Malmesbury, Chippenham,
Bradford-on-Avon,
Bath,

Bristol. Its
particles are scuba-diving
enzymes with mnemonic
receptors; they carry
the history of land, memories of
solidity; they
squidge

under the weight, slide out
sideways. Atrocities
leer out of mud; in
and out of
whose
jaws minnows
dance; they are green with
bilgewater. Things we
would rather not
know
scuttle over
a toothy grin;
except: toothless. In
the mini-universe
of mud, scroungers rule;
seagulls flop;
an upside-down
dead
rat bobs up
and down
with the swell; flotsam
& jetsam. shipshape &
Bristol
Fashion; we
gel again, like mud,
to
distant concords, are
etched to
fetching paradigms re-washed. In
this necklace
of Bristol the
Frome Maidens
particulate; come harken to
their siren song:

*we'll sink him down
with a long long roll,
where the crabs'll have his body
and the devil his soul ...*

6

CUMBERLAND BASIN

TIMBER

Water
is to
wood as
wood
is to:
water. Who is to
say where one
ends, and the other
begins? Trees
are gigantic
pumps, their essence
partakes of
liquidity.

It is true to say 'wood
floats' and that there is
therefore a
separation; it is also true
to say
humans float. Sort
of. But soon become water-
logged. Whereas
timber, which is
logs,
does not. Such is
life.

Trees
which were
lost in cirrus, altostratus,
skittered in here
in droghers; were off-loaded from stand-offs.

The economy
chugs along nicely, thank'ee,
kind sir. It feeds in
sugar
tobacco
rum
coffee
tea
cocoa
religion
torture
molasses
slavery
genocide
mahogany
colonies
empires
civil wars
pressganged sailors
estates in the country
Ming vases ...

It feeds out:

whose
lasting tenderness accrues
to dogleg of river

7 POOLE'S WHARF PEOPLE

*"Bristol
can only be understood
from the water"; do
you not feel the truth of this from
anywhere on this floating harbour? Houses
scramble up
the slopes from a
watery birth-cauldron, burst into
red, yellow, blue: Totterdown,
Clifton Wood.*

Dockers,
stevedores
shovellers
baggers
deal-runners
coal trimmers
ebbed and flowed with the tides,
obdurate as stone
cinched
in the gullet of ships. They
still spatter the landscape;
their legacy is:
water.

Then, as now,
various things have
fallen on them; squashed
their finger,
ricked
their spine; they stutter off
on Harley-Davidsons, Honda
CB 1300s, immaculately
maintained; a leather belt
holds up their
soiled jeans, their
smock, their
tunic;
whose buckle boss bears a beaming
skull,
a pirate hat, a
jaunty angle, a rictus; they
braid
their silvering hair.
"Yuright?" The
vowels have not
changed in a thousand
years, "yuright?"

This
is a sort of human
that
has always existed. The
sea surges through them,
the longing to be free, that wide-horizon
look. Our other excuses
were
extended, and
rejected amongst
the
bowels of kings. Somewhere
there's a Euclid
on
the block

8

MARDYKE

CLOTH

Pounded,
 dipped, and
 hung out to dry. Swift
 Frome tumbled raw wool,
 fullers pounded it,
 dyers
 dipped it. Then it was
 exported.
 Merchants' ships
 braved the hydra-headed horses of
 the sea, the viper's nests
 of pirates spat curses at them;
 agonised fleece-watchers held lookout from
 their Captain's verandas:
 Theseus? Yes, we know him. He lives down
 Cotswold way. Our
 Golden Boy outrigged to Ireland, down
 the Atlantic coasts of France, Portugal and Spain;
 the names of Castile, Gascony
 tripped off his tongue. We
 swoon
 like Vidal
 Sagoon; sleek-
 haired
 animal-coated buxom and
 cottage-
 spun amidst a wrack
 of Empire where
 Winter's turbulent bride
 awaits
 the slant of spring, and
 the ship home
 from the sea

9

CANNONS MARSH

RELIGION

OK, where's the bloody
 nightingale
 aboard this packet?
 Facing upstream, Mammon's
 on the right
 bank; God
 on the left; no, let's turn it round:
 downstream, Mammon on
 the left, God on the
 right. Let's cut
 the circumstances to
 our beliefs, not our
 beliefs to the circumstances. That's
 what humans do.

Carmelites
 Augustinians
 Franciscans
 held up their side
 of the sky
 on this bank,
 merchants; and townspeople
 wallflower
 on the other. Ships pass
 between, and
 ghost down to
 incandescence; they have
 batwings in their
 riggings. Their portholes
 ogle. It

is impossible to know what
 belief meant to the
 believing; what 'God' meant
 to the medieval mind. Aeons
 of specificity
 have led to conundrums; of mice-
 fed starvelings nattering obliquely
 on the matter of cheese. We
 tread on ballbearings,
 windmilling
 our arms to keep our
 balance,
 when all of the time: IS.

*'Belay
 all that!
 That'll do the hands!*

10

LLOYDS AMPITHEATRE

SUGAR

Let us take the one word:
sugar. Let us adduce its uses:
sweetener, food additive,
preservative. It
stinks like fish.

So

let us fillet its history :

Sugar. Slavery. Slavery. Sugar.

Both start

with 's'.

So does 'hell'. Oh

really? It came

up

the river; it was exchanged

for those sold

down

the river, out across the Bristol Channel, O,
Dahomey!

Dragons propelled
their minds, scales
weighed down
their feet; even
for the white sailors St
Vincent Rocks
framed
a turned-away sky

On

The Grain Coast

The Ivory Coast

The Gold Coast

The Slave Coast

cloud boiled away from the

edges, erupted over the curve of the world;

architraves of despair

surrounded a pitiless door; thus

is a Georgian House built, a

Colston Hall,

a city, an economy. Thus

is the future

seeded. Thus

dragon sporn struggle out of

the ground, hissing.

Thus.

Let us pray:

oh being which
is luminescent; and
fraught with
triangles,
open out and
square up to us!

Amen.

11

U-SHED (AT PEROS BRIDGE)

WINE/PLEASURE

Jerez de la Frontera
 El Puerto de Santa María
 Sanlúcar de Barrameda: a jolly
 triangle, for
 heaven's sake!

Oh
 Oloroso so so hic! hic! hic!
 Thou pungent gift of
 the Jerezanos; oh manzanillas,
 little salty sea apple of Sanlúcar;
 treacle-casket'd amontillado
 ' in the style of Montilla'; Pedro Ximénez'ed
 cream sherry, cold, with a slice of naranja
 shipping out from Cadiz, orange Spanish-skinned
 silken slip intimately imbibed
 in cool bodegas ice-cubed
 lovemaking
 to the sound of the lazy lace
 swish of curtains in Jerez de la Frontera; and
 a remote rasp of
 flamenco...

Have a glass of Vino Nobile di
 Montepulciano Torraccio 2004
 on me. Too good
 for the pickled ones
 still rolling in the
 gutters on a
 Saturday
 Binge,
 flashing their knickers,
 fished out of the harbour,
 fish on
 bicycles, spouting. Then sing:

Ronald Avery, oh! John Avery,
 ah! Harvey, gimme another
 glass of that there 2004 Vino Nobile
 di Montepulciano
 Torraccio
 before I's, hic, kicks the bucket, let me
 suck it; please, Louise, don't
 be a tease, break
 out the '95 Château Pétrus, that'll save us,
Pomerol, cru exceptionnel only 14,400 dollars the casket, they'd get even
 more if they'd ask'd it
 we'll broach the barrel, you'll get rid of your apparel, oh darling, do
 (anon. not found in extant drinking manuals)

THE FLOATING HARBOUR

This
Floating Harbour:
a liquid necklace of
water wherein
From Maidens gambol
amidst the mumblings
of History; a
secret harbour
woven around Avon,
spun
on a distaff of land and
stone by Saxons,
Normans;
whose
threads reach out to
Ireland, Africa, the
Amerikees. The
Floating Harbour chants
harmony
to land and water; a
singing line in earth
that flows forth
in the liquid element; and renews. A
necklace of liquid gold with
footings in fecund
mud, the
downpourings of
Luckington, Malmesbury, Chippenham,
Bradford-on-Avon,
Bath ...
Bristol

*Hooray and up she rises
Hooray and up she rises
Hooray and up she rises
Earl-i in the morning...*