

Castle Park

Medieval Bristol

Once upon a time there was a castle, one of the largest castles in the country. Bristol Castle covered about half of the area now occupied by Castle Park. To the west of the castle were streets, houses, taverns and businesses that had probably originated in the Saxon period. Bristol Bridge (most probably situated close to the site of the present bridge) is likely to have led to the development of this industrious activity on the north bank of the River Avon.

Long ago, in the late Saxon period, about 1000AD, on the southern side of the Avon, legend has it (supported by documentary evidence and some archaeological investigations of the site of the former Courage's Brewery) that there once existed a defended enclosure known as Arthur's Fee. Archaeological and historical evidence suggest that this formed a defensive bridge head around the area of the northern end of Redcliff Street and St Thomas Street, where modern day Victoria Street now meets Bristol Bridge.



Map of Bristol by Braun and Hogenberg, c.1561

There were once two churches, St Peter's and St Mary-le-Port that are both now only ruins within Castle Park.

Evidence of Saxon occupation in St Mary-le-Port was discovered in the 1960s by the archaeologist, Philip Ratz. St Peter's has never undergone archaeological excavation, but is known from documentary evidence to date back to at least the 1100s. The church stands in an unusual location between the town and the castle, neither inside the town walls or the castle walls, but alone, close to the cross roads of Mary (le) Port Street, Peter Street and Dolphin Street.





Local people came to these cross roads to collect the water from St Edyth's Well (sometimes referred to as St Peter's Pump). The public water source was first recorded in 1391, though it has been suggested that St Edyth might relate to an earlier Saxon origin. A large stone cross was added above the well in the mid-1400s.

Between Dolphin Street and High Street, the area became known for its slaughter houses and butchers along a road originally called Worshipful Street, but later The Shambles (another word for slaughterhouse). Writing in 1480, William Worcestre describes cellars beneath the area that belonged to the



An early 1800s illustration of the St Edyth's Well Head at its current location in Stourhead Gardens. Image courtesy of Bristol Reference Library, Bralk.XVIII.326

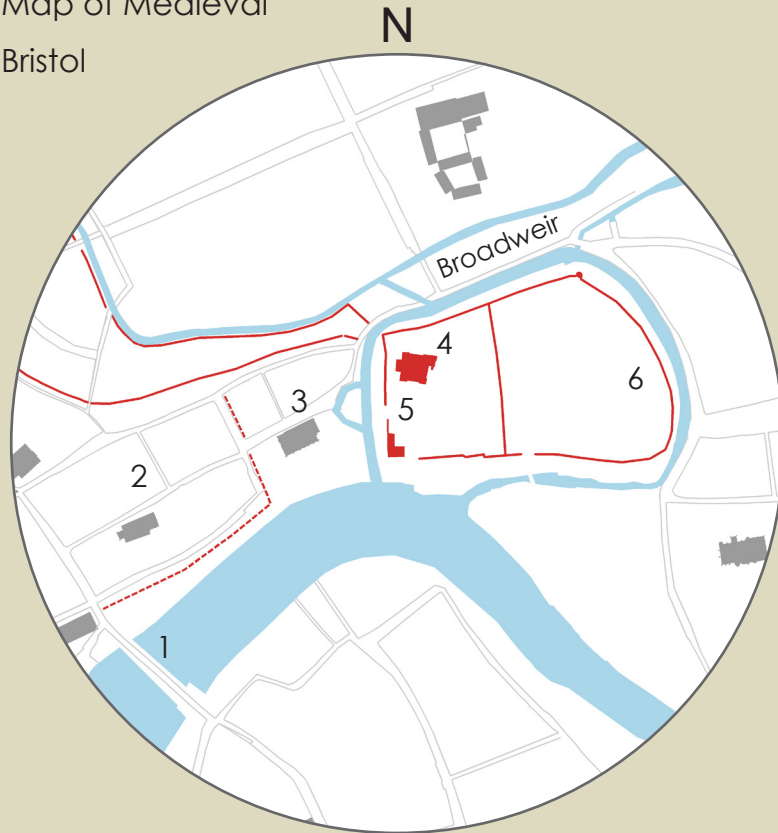
king, "In the street called The Shambles there are three extremely deep cellars of the king, beneath three halls of great size and built high, which were established for the safekeeping of wool and merchandise, for loading Bristol ships (bound) for foreign parts beyond the seas." (William Worcestre: The Topography of Medieval Bristol, Frances Neale, 2000).

But though legend (and William Worcestre) has it that these cellars were royal wool warehouses, Bristol had never been a major exporter of wool. Coates and Scherr suggest that Worshipful Street may have originally been 'Worslip' or 'Worslimy' referring perhaps to the treacherously muddy route to the river, but there is nothing to link the first part of the street name to wool.



A surviving medieval vaulted cellar on High Street

Map of Medieval Bristol



- 1 Bristol Bridge
- 2 St Mary Le Port
- 3 St Peter's Church
- 4 The Keep
- 5 Site of the Sally Port
- 6 The Vaulted Chambers

Professor Peter Fleming acknowledges that royal taxes on wool exports were levied in 1202 and 1204, but these were short-lived, and a regular customs administration was not established until 1275, when Bristol was no longer a major wool exporter. It may have been that the cellars were built for the storage of wool long before 1275, but only after this date was it assumed that their function was to store customed wool.

Many people believe that Dolphin Street is a derivation of 'Defence' Street, suggesting that this ran along the inside of one of the town walls as an 'intra-mural' lane or relates to the defensive wall constructed during the Great Rebellion of 1312-16, but that is another story that you can read about in the Bristol Castle leaflet.

Further information available at
www.locallearning.org.uk/castle-park/

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