

# From Bridgehead to Brewery

## The medieval and post-medieval archaeological remains from Finzel's Reach, Bristol

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*Front cover image:* Aerial view of the city of Bristol looking north, highlighting Finzel's Reach within the medieval town and its defensive walls, and the Rivers Avon and Frome

*Back cover images, from left to right:* a wooden bridge from a medieval stringed instrument; machines and archaeologists commence excavations in Area 1 with the former Tramway Generating Building in background; a medieval oak barrel used as a lining to a well

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## Summary

A combination of archaeological, geoarchaeological, documentary and historic building investigations was undertaken at Finzel's Reach during the redevelopment of the former Bristol and Courage Breweries' site on the north side of modern Counterslip in the Port City of Bristol. Historic building recording was undertaken on the surviving brewery buildings prior to demolition; the Tramway Generator Station, Compressor Room, Fermentation Building, Well House, Bath Street Terrace and elements of the Finzel Building and George's Building were retained and repurposed. Initial archaeological evaluation had revealed significant truncation from 19th- and 20th-century brewery development, with large areas destroyed by basements and foundations. Outside of these areas, archaeological excavation was targeted on ground that was to be impacted by the new development.

The site sits on low-lying ground adjacent to and within a large northwards loop of the River Avon (now called the Floating Harbour), an area that was naturally a floodplain salt-marsh affected by daily tidal and seasonal river flood cycles. Upstream from Bristol Bridge and on the opposite bank from the town and its castle, the site had historically been the location of the medieval Temple Cross which stood at a principal junction between Counterslip and East Tucker Street at the northern end of Temple Street - the major thoroughfare from the south-east through the 'southern suburb' to Bristol Bridge and the borough.

The majority of the archaeological evidence related to urban development throughout the medieval period from the first half of the 12th century to the mid-16th century, initially under the ownership of the Knights Templar and then, after c 1312, the Knights Hospitallers. The high water table allowed for excellent preservation of organic remains, which when studied in combination with the less fragile artefacts, offered significant evidence for people's lives and economic activities, as well as their diet and health during a period for which there are limited historic records. More fragmentary archaeological evidence came from the post-medieval period, for which, however, more documentary records survive and which also benefits from cartographic evidence. For the last 300 years the site was famous for its sugar refining and brewing which form the focus of the historic building studies.

The sequence of about 900 years of urban development was not only shaped by the site's topographic situation but also by the ongoing influence of the earliest feature, a very large curvilinear

ditch whose second phase dated to the 11th-early 12th century, and was later referred to as a Law Ditch, a major property boundary between the land holdings of the Redcliff and Temple Fees (established in the 1130s). Parts of this ditch probably had their origins in the late Anglo-Saxon period as an element of the defences around a bridgehead on the south side of the crossing over the Avon to the settlement of *Brycg Stowe* which was situated on the drier and defendable promontory between the Avon and the Frome immediately to the north.

Originally within the Manor of Bedminster, the area to the south of the crossing began to be developed in an urban form in the early 12th century when the Law Ditch was recut and the land to its east was granted by the then owner, Robert of Gloucester, to the Knights Templar and became known as Temple Fee. The land to the west of this boundary ditch fell within Redcliff Fee (the smaller, and probably older, areas of Stakepenny and Arthur's Fee lay to the north of these principal landholdings). Together these Fees were to become the fully developed walled 'southern suburb' to the town, although Temple Fee did not officially come under the borough's administration until after the Dissolution in the 16th century.

Initial drainage and reclamation of the site enabled Temple Street and its tenement plots to be laid out. The earliest structures were built in wood, one with a timber post that was dated by dendrochronology to AD 1099-1131. Iron smithing and leather working were some of the earliest activities at the site. Urban development continued throughout the 12th and 13th centuries. Temple Street was built up along both sides and the first evidence for development along the medieval route of Counterslip occurred. The first stone buildings appeared in the late 12th century; some were domestic, whereas others were clearly workshops. Iron smithing continued mainly on the east side of Temple Street, and cloth dyeing and finishing, as well as tanning, commenced and continued throughout the 13th century. Textile working was focused predominantly on the west side of Temple Street, with tanning on the east side. The southern bank of the Avon and parts of the Law Ditch channel which had been crudely stabilized with timber revetments in the 12th century, were partially formalized with stone walls, enabling further land reclamation in the 13th century, and then again, more comprehensively, in the 14th century.

By the late 14th century and during the 15th century the Law Ditch was a formalized stone-lined channel with adjacent workshops on some tene-

ments. Improvements saw stone-surfaced lanes leading from Temple Street to backplots, as well as many robustly constructed stone-lined drains. Some of the properties along Temple Street were amalgamated to make larger properties. One unusual building contained a 'workshop' adjacent to the Law Ditch and another adjoining the rear of the frontage where four equally spaced large circular ovens or hearths for vats protruded from the back wall, perhaps for cloth working. Similar hearths were seen on other tenements.

An apparent hiatus after the Dissolution saw the demise of the site's previous medieval productive activities, but continued occupation of the medieval street frontages. By the late 17th century rebuilding was taking place, and the 18th and 19th centuries saw industrial-scale sugar refining and brewing activity grow at the site. A significant

proportion of the historic fabric in this area was destroyed during the course of the 19th century with the growth of these new industries but also when access to central Bristol from the southeast was improved by the borough with a realignment away from Temple Street and its junction at Temple Cross. Initially, the awkward route along East Tucker Street and Tucker Street was replaced with Bath Street which was subsequently linked by the construction of Philip Street to the new Philip Bridge over the Floating Harbour. Finally, the construction of the modern route of Counterslip, linking Philip Bridge and St Thomas Street, allowed the expansion of the Bristol and then Courage Breweries, and saw the demise in this area of the remaining buildings on Philip and Temple Street to make way for modern warehousing and lorry-parks.

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*The excavation team in front of George's Building, 2007*