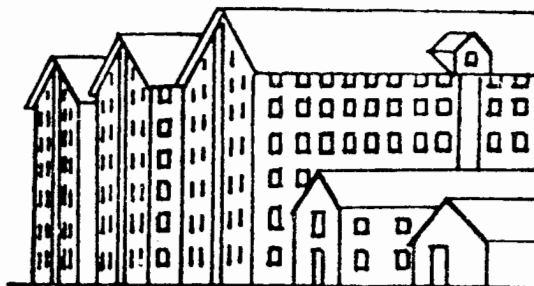


THE WAREHOUSES AT GLOUCESTER DOCKS

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The main basin at Gloucester docks was opened in 1812, although it was to be fifteen years before the Sharpness end of the canal was completed. At first, access to the basin was only through the lock from the River Severn, but after 1820 some traffic came along the completed section of the canal from the junction with the Stroudwater Canal. During these years, the traffic was mainly coal, stone and timber, and there was little need for any warehouses (although a small one is shown on a map of 1824).

As the century progressed, the need to feed the growing number of industrial workers led to increased demand for foreign corn. Relaxation of the corn laws in 1828 allowed a considerable increase in imports with a sliding scale of duties, and complete repeal in 1846 removed all restrictions. Dock charges at Bristol were very high during this period, and the developing port of Gloucester was able to capture a large share of this new trade. Gloucester became the main corn port for the south-west and one of the seven major corn ports in the country (1). A corn exchange was built in Southgate Street in 1856-7.

This growth in the corn trade necessitated the building of warehouses in which the corn could be kept in bond until the market price was favourable. The usual practice was for the canal company to lease a plot of land to a merchant (often for a period of 21 or 63 years), and for the lessee to erect a warehouse for his own use or for sub-letting. The original architects drawings of many of the warehouses have been preserved by the canal company (now the British Waterways Board), and have recently been deposited in the Gloucestershire Record Office. This article is mainly based on a study of these drawings and of the buildings themselves, with some additional information from the directories of the period and from the minute

books of the canal company (2). It is intended that an account of the associated development of the waterspace and the quays will be published separately (3). Information on the drawings often include the name of the merchant for whom the warehouse was erected, a date, and sometimes the signature of the architect and/or builder. Some of the drawings also have notes of subsequent modifications.

All the warehouses were built of brick with slate roofs. The timber floors are supported on rows of cast iron columns. The floor spacing is often variable, as is indicated by the window array, and is usually least for the uppermost floor. There are loading doors on all floors, and hand operated hoists were mounted in small gables projecting from the roof. The early warehouses usually had three or four floors (and a basement mainly below ground level) and loading doors at the front and sometimes at the back. The later warehouses usually have five or six floors (the lowest being at or only just below ground level) and loading doors at each side and each end. Many of these later warehouses are around 100ft long and 40ft wide, with a capacity of around 20,000 sacks, equivalent to 10,000 quarters or 2,250 tons of grain. On some of the warehouses, the remains of painted lettering can be seen showing who occupied the building sometime earlier this century.

The North Warehouse (A) was the first of the big warehouses. It was built in 1826-27 for the canal company who were expecting an increase in trade as the canal was nearing completion. The original design was by B.Haigh of Liverpool and was for three five-storey units joined end to end. Haigh also provided a design for groups of warehouses to be built to the east of the basin. The canal company advertised plots of land for sale for the first five of these warehouses, but there was no response. Perhaps because of this, they decided to cut back on the size of their own warehouse. They signed a contract for only two of the original units, and then during construction, they agreed with the contractor to reduce the height by one storey.

The warehouse was built by William Rees and Son in collaboration with George Williams (timber merchant) and John Chesterton. (victualler). The contract was signed on 18th May 1826, and required that the building should be roofed by 18th Nov. 1826 and finished ready for goods by 18th Feb. 1827. The total cost was £6,600 (reduced later by £820 for one less floor), to be paid as the work proceeded. Bricks were to be obtained from up the river above Westgate Bridge (probably Walham), and were to be set in the best manner, Flemish Bonded. Stone cills were to be of Bath or Forest Stone, and good large blue "Welch Ton Slates" were to be used. Timber was to be of good sound Memel or Dantzic. The cast iron columns were to be seven inches in diameter with one inch tickness of metal, and solid pieces of cast-iron were to pass through holes in the main floor joists to transmit the loads. A 'jigger room' was to be formed in the roof for hoisting purchase above each set of loading doors.

The canal company leased individual floors in each of the two units to various merchants over the years. In 1851, the annual

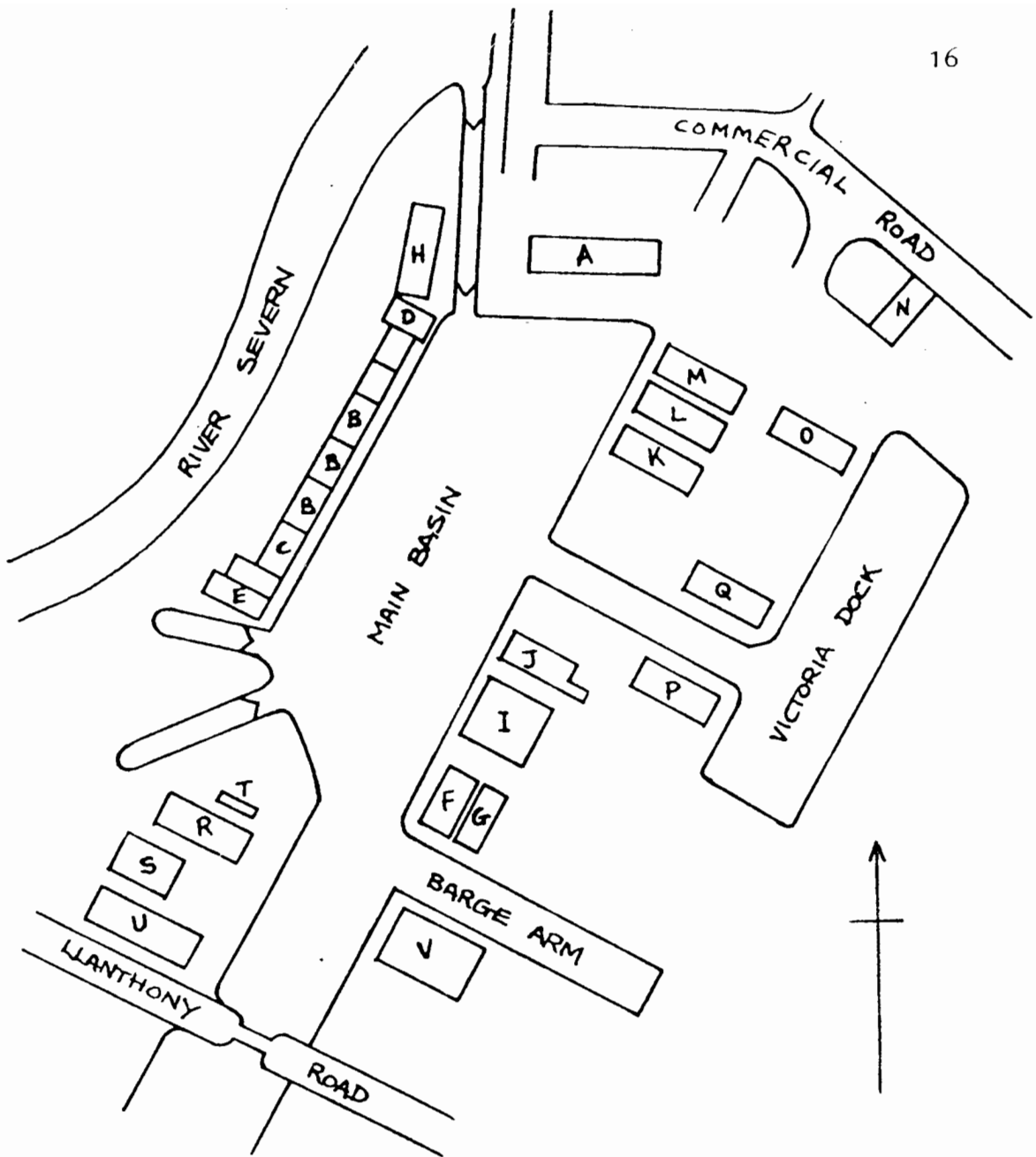
rents were £60 for floor 1 dropping down to £40 for floor 4, subject to one months notice to quit on any quarter day. The building remained two separate units until the 1920's, when Priday Metford & Co leased the whole building and made some doorways in the dividing wall.

Between 1829 and 1835, eight three-storey warehouses of various designs were built in a continuous row along the west side of the basin. Three blocks (B) were built in 1829 for Joseph and Charles Sturge, Birmingham based corn merchants, who built up a large business importing corn through Gloucester and distributing it throughout the Midlands. A fourth block (probably the one marked C on the map) was built in the same year for Humphrey Brown, a substantial merchant and carrier who also has a yard at the Barge Arm and probably operated on the Gloucester and Cheltenham tram-road (4). Two other blocks were built to the south of these and two to the north. Adjoining the north of this row was a four-storey warehouse (D) with the upper floors projecting out over the quay and supported by pillars.

The most southerly block (E) was converted to a corn mill in the 1860's and became known as St. Owens Mill (after the church that had formerly stood near Southgate Street). It was operated by J. & H. Hall until 1879, and then by Charles Priday who was later to start the firm of Priday Metford & Co. The other blocks have had a number of different occupiers over the years, the most notable probably being William Cowcher & Son, corn merchants, who continued into the present century. In 1888 it was noted that some of these blocks had settled unevenly and were three to five inches off vertical, possibly because they had been built on made up ground where once had been a second channel of the River Severn. The four-storey block with supporting pillars was destroyed by fire during the first world war, and the remaining blocks were demolished in the early sixties.

Across the other side of the basin, two other warehouses were also built during the 1830's just to the north of the Barge Arm. The westerly one (F) was built for John Biddle of Stratford Mills Stroud, who was the largest miller in the district until he retired in 1854. The original design by W. Franklin of Stroud (dated 1830) had four floors, but this was modified to include an extra floor with some reduction in headroom. By 1864, the building was in poor repair, and it was leased to John Weston on the condition that he put it in good order again. It is possible that it was at this time that the original hipped roof (shown in the painting of Llanthony Bridge by Edward Smith in the City Museum & Art Gallery) was replaced by the present gabled roof. The adjacent warehouse to the east (G) was designed in 1833 for James Shipton. He was a general merchant who later specialised in importing timber and had a big yard on Bakers Quay to the south of Llanthony Bridge (5). In the present century, both warehouses were used by the Severn and Canal Carrying Company.

It seems likely that the large warehouse to the west of the lock into the Severn (H) was also built in the early 1830s. A building of the right configuration is certainly shown on a sketch map dated 1835 (6). If so, it may be considered as the prototype of



what was to become almost standard design. Unfortunately, no drawings are available in the Record Office. In the 1890s, it was used by Spillers and Bakers, corn merchants, and after 1920 it was used by Gopsill Brown and Sons, sack contractors.

By 1840, the corn merchants business of J. & C. Sturge must have been flourishing, and they wanted more space than in their existing three blocks on the west side of the basin. They therefore had built a huge new warehouse (I) just to the north of Biddle's and Shipton's warehouses. This was designed in 1840 by S.W. Daukes, who is best known locally for his work on the Royal Agricultural College near Cirencester. It was built by the same William Rees that had built the North Warehouse some fifteen years earlier. Sturges continued using it until the late 1880s, and after several other occupiers it was used in the present century for storing and bagging flour from the nearby Albert Mills (see below).

Also in 1840, the Bristol based corn merchants Charles Vining and Sons decided to build a warehouse in Gloucester, presumably attracted by the lower dock charges. The warehouse (J), just to the north of Sturges new building, was designed by T.S.Hack and built by William Wingate. As well as the main warehouse, there was a two-storey extension to the east which contained offices and further storage space. This extension was shortened a few years later as part of the reorganisation with the building of the Victoria Dock. Vinings continued using the warehouse until the 1880s, and later it became the store for the nearby Albert Mills (see below).

Further north, three very similar warehouses were built in 1846 to cater for the expected increase in trade following the repeal of the corn laws. The most southerly (K) was built for Abraham Phillpotts who had offices in Commercial Buildings (on the other side of Commercial Road). The warehouse was designed in 1845 by John Jacques, who also designed the Mariners Chapel in the Docks four years later. It also seems likely that he was responsible for several of the later warehouses which are of very similar design, although no name is recorded on the other drawings. Phillpotts and Co. continued to use the warehouse well into the present century. The middle warehouse (L) was built for Humphrey Brown, the son of the Humphrey Brown who had built one of the west quay warehouses in 1829. Humphrey junior was a railway enthusiast and was one of the promoters of the Birmingham and Gloucester Railway. He sat as Liberal M.P. for Tewkesbury from 1847 to 1857 (7). It is not clear whether he used the warehouse for trade himself or whether he merely leased it to others. Prior to 1850, most of the warehouses had been built by individual merchants for their own use, but it will be seen that many of the later warehouses were built as a form of speculative investment. Brown seems to have been associated with John Kimberley, a corn merchant who like Phillpotts had offices in Commercial Buildings, and certainly Kimberley & Co were occupying the warehouse later in the century (8). A clearer example of speculative building is the most northerly of this group of warehouses (M), which was built for Samuel Herbert, a local solicitor. By 1856, it was occupied by J. & T. Robinson, corn merchants and manufacturers of artificial fertilisers, and their firm continued to use the building well into the present century. Thomas Robinson became a city councillor, and was M.P. for the city for ten years from 1885. He was knighted in 1894 (7).

The City Flour Mills near Commercial Road (N) were built for Joseph and Jonah Hadley in 1850. This is an early example of the late nineteenth century movement of the corn milling industry from the water powered mills in the river valleys to new steam powered mills near major docks. At that time, milling was still by stones although roller milling was introduced later. In 1860, the Hadleys were succeeded by Joseph Reynolds and Henry Allen, who had taken over part of John Biddles business in 1854. Their firm went bankrupt in 1886, and the mill was leased by Priday, Metford and Co. This company was formed by Charles Priday (who had been operating St. Owens Mills across the other side of the dock basin) and Francis Metford and F.T.Pearce. Members of these three

families have been running the firm ever since.

The Victoria Dock was opened for vessels in 1849, and during the next twelve years three further warehouses were built along the west side of the new dock. All three were built for William Partridge, a corn merchant and carrier from Birmingham, who seems also to have become an early property developer. The contract for the Victoria Warehouse (O) was signed in 1849, the builder being William Jones. A block of offices and a small store were built round a yard immediately to the north. It is possible that Partridge & Co occupied these premises for a few years, but it seems that Wait, James & Co, a large firm of Bristol corn merchants, were using the warehouse by 1853. In the present century, the warehouse was used by Turner, Nott & Co (also Bristol based) who were one of the last corn importers in the docks. The contract for the Albert Warehouse (P) was signed in 1851, the builder being Joseph Moss. In 1869, it was converted to a flour mill by James Reynolds, the son of Joseph Reynolds who was running the City Flour Mills. Ancilliary buildings were added to the south, and the whole complex was known as Albert Mills. In 1882, it became the first mill in the district to install roller milling, and as noted earlier, Vinings and Sturges warehouses were later taken over to provide additional storage. The Britannia Warehouse (Q) was built for William Partridge in 1861, and it was soon sub-let to Henry Adams & Co, corn merchants. A few years later, they built the single storey warehouse immediately to the north, and they continued to occupy both buildings for many years.

The next two warehouses to be built were to the south west of the main dock basin. The Great Western Warehouse (U) was started in 1863, and was the fourth to be built for William Partridge. In this case Partridge assigned the warehouse to William Lucy, a corn merchant who had previously leased space in the North Warehouse and in one of those on the west quay. As to the name of the warehouse, I have not come across any positive connection with the Great Western Railway Company except that they operated a goods yard on the opposite side of Llanthony Road. The Alexandra Warehouse (R) was designed in 1870 for Messrs. J.E. & S.H. Fox, corn merchants and millers. Around 1889, the firm became known as Fox, Clinch & Co, and a malthouse was built to the south (S) and offices to the north (T)(both designed by J.P.Moore). A 12 horse-power vertical steam engine worked one pair of stones and also worked the hoisting machinery in the warehouse and the malthouse (9). Around 1930, both the Alexandra and the Great Western Warehouses were used for storing sugar. The Great Western Warehouse was seriously damaged by fire at the end of the last war, and only the lower part of the walls survive in the present single storey building.

The last of the big warehouses to be built, the Llanthony Warehouse (V) to the south of the Barge Arm, was designed by Capel N. Tripp in 1873. It was built for Wait, James & Co. (who had previously occupied the Victoria Warehouse) and they continued using it until they went out of business in the 1920s.

Even as the Llanthony Warehouse was being built, however, great changes were taking place in the nature of the corn trade. The rapid spread of railways in America and Australia etc. and the increasing size of steamships allowed vast quantities of cheap corn to be imported into Britain. But the canal to Gloucester had been built for sailing ships, and was only suitable for ships up to 750 tons capacity. New docks were built at Sharpness in 1870-74 that could accommodate ships up to 5000 tons, but competition with Avonmouth was intense and the previous importance of Gloucester as a corn port began to decline. Business was still thriving in the early part of this century, and other uses were found for the buildings as the corn merchants moved out. During the war, many of the warehouses were put back to their original use in order to provide a strategic reserve of corn, but in recent years one building after another has become vacant. Let us hope that some use can be found to justify preservation of this unique collection of memorials to the nineteenth century corn trade.

Acknowledgements

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References

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2. Minute books of the Gloucester and Berkeley Canal Company. P.R.O. RAIL829/1 to 13.
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6. Sale Particulars. G.C. NZ 15.1.
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G.C. - Gloucester City Library, Gloucestershire Collection.

G.R.O. - Gloucestershire Record Office.

P.R.O. - Public Record Office.