

# Coastal and River Trade in Pre-Industrial England

---

BRISTOL AND ITS REGION  
1680 –1730

DAVID HUSSEY

COASTAL AND RIVER TRADE IN  
PRE-INDUSTRIAL ENGLAND

BRISTOL AND ITS REGION  
1680–1730

David Hussey



*Regatta Press Limited*  
Ithaca, New York

---

*To my mother and father*

---

First published in 2000 in Great Britain by  
University of Exeter Press  
Published in the United States of America by  
Regatta Press, 2000

© David Hussey 2000

The right of David Hussey to be identified as author of this work  
has been asserted by him in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Hussey, David, 1963-

Coastal and river trade in pre-industrial England : Bristol and its region, 1680-1730 /  
David Hussey.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-9674826-4-X (alk. paper)

1. Bristol (England)--Commerce--History. 2. Inland water  
transportation--England--Bristol--History. 3. Bristol (England)--Economic conditions. I.  
Title.

HF3520.B7 H87 2000  
380.1'09423'9309032--dc21

00-051784

Typeset in 11/12.5pt Garamond by Exe Valley Dataset, Exeter

Printed in Great Britain by  
Short Run Press Ltd, Exeter

## PREFACE

This book is inspired by two main concerns. Firstly, whilst completing my doctoral thesis, it struck me that in many ways, the coastal and river trade of pre-industrial England and Wales has remained the eternal bridesmaid, the ‘forgotten sector’ of British economic history and that some revision of T.S. Willan’s seminal work was long overdue. Secondly, my interests in my native city, Bristol, led me to reconsider its role in the organisation of early modern trade. As my researches progressed, I became increasingly aware that although the great narratives of Bristol’s overseas trades had been painstakingly described by generations of historians, scant attention had been paid to either the city’s core internal trades, or the commercial linkages it fostered with a wide and productive domestic hinterland. The book is an attempt to fuse these themes into a coherent analysis.

In undertaking the research for this book, I have many debts to acknowledge. In terms of financial support, the *Economic and Social Research Council* and the *Leverhulme Trust* provided the main funding for the Portbooks Programme, the pioneering, computer-based historical research group within which this project was conceived and nurtured. In addition, the History Research Committee of the University of Wolverhampton must be thanked for recognising the worth of this work and granting me the sustained periods of sabbatical leave from teaching, without which completion would have been severely delayed.

Naturally, I am greatly indebted to my colleagues at Wolverhampton in general and those associated with the Portbooks Programme in particular. Amongst these, Malcolm Wanklyn and Nancy Cox deserve special mention for their consistently helpful suggestions and sound criticisms, and Peter Wakelin and Barrie Trinder were invaluable in offering knowledge and support in the early incarnations of the project. In the course of my research, I have also been fortunate to benefit from the generous advice of many historians and scholars in the field. For both their formal and informal comments and suggestions, I wish to thank: Jonathan Barry; Maxine Berg;

Angela Brown; Peter Cloughton; Chris Evans; David Hey; Pat Hudson; Walter Minchinton; Kenneth Morgan; Michael Power; Jon Press; Michael Price; Richard Rodger; Göran Rydén; Marie Rowlands; Geoff Timmins; Peter Wardley; and Joyce Youngs.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the archivists and staff of the record offices and libraries listed in the bibliography. Their gracious responses to my many requests, even the most banal and facile, have greatly aided this work. Similarly, Hugh Conway-Jones and the team of volunteer transcribers based at Gloucester (in particular, Jane Bradshaw; Josie Collings; Pam Daw; Jean and Reg Edwards; Johanne Lewis; Jim Simmonds; and Len Vear) were central to the processing of much of the Bristol Channel port book data. Sue Giles and Sheena Stoddard, respectively Curator of Ethnography and Curator of Fine Art at Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, David Hopkins, Librarian of The Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust, Tim Bridges, Collections Manager at the Worcester City Art Gallery and Museum and Tony Carr of the Shropshire Records and Research Unit procured the illustrations with much courtesy and good humour, despite the rather forced time schedule and my slightly garbled stream of messages. At Wolverhampton, Marek Paul and Mike Griffiths were the main avenues of technical and computer support for a project that was demanding on both time and resources; Simone Clarke undertook additional, last minute work at the PRO; and Martin Roberts applied a much-needed geographer's sense of spatial awareness in digitising the maps from my crude sketchings. At the University of Exeter Press, Simon Baker, Rosemary Rooke, Anna Henderson and Genevieve Davey have provided much enthusiasm, patience and help throughout the writing and delivery of the book.

My final thanks go to my mother, father, brothers and friends for their unstinting support. I am eternally grateful to the blue half of Bristol for times of both sublime inspiration and abject disappointment that have uncannily mirrored the shifting fortunes of undertaking long-term research in not always supportive conditions. In this last respect, I owe a huge debt of gratitude, as well as much love, to my partner, Lisa Taylor, for her encouragement and her belief in the realization of this work. However, my greatest thanks are for my colleague and friend, Penny Robson. She has not only spared much of her own research time in casting an admirably critical eye over the various drafts of this book, but she has also provided many positive suggestions of both an academic and stylistic nature and much needed moments of levity along the way. Any faults that remain are entirely my own.

David Hussey  
*September 2000*

## INTRODUCTION

By the late seventeenth century Bristol was a vibrant mercantile centre with a long and illustrious maritime past and a seemingly boundless age of commercial opportunity stretching out before it.<sup>1</sup> Situated at the heart of a wide and productive hinterland, the city dominated regional trade and its burgeoning overseas interests permeated the very fabric of the transoceanic world.

Bristol was a major player in a vast 'Empire of goods', second only to the capital in the value and range of its trade.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Defoe intimated, the city, alone amongst domestic ports, traded 'with a more entire independency upon London than any other town in Britain'.<sup>3</sup> Yet the remarkable feature of Bristol's development was its heterogeneity. Bristol was 'not more a commercial than a manufacturing town'.<sup>4</sup> The industrial spin-offs from the Atlantic trades, notably the processing and redistribution of tobacco and sugar, vied for commercial and physical space with a host of domestic enterprises. The large-scale production of iron, lead, brass, glass and soap flourished alongside the brewing, distilling and ceramics industries in the early years of the eighteenth century. By this time, Bristol's population had risen to around 20,000–25,000 souls, outstripping Norwich as the largest provincial town.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, the improvement of the city lagged behind commercial opportunity: for much of the period trade, industry and society were still uncomfortably and somewhat uneasily crammed into the old medieval core of the town. None the less, the jostling press of commerce and humanity, the 'strange mixture of seamen, women, children, loaded Horses, Asses, and Sledges with Goods dragging along' that choked the quays, backs and famously narrow streets of the city,<sup>6</sup> was beginning to be transformed by the gradual addition of enhanced commercial and civic amenities.

Given the maritime experience of the city, it is perhaps understandable that the history of Bristol is inextricably linked to the development of overseas commerce. A persistent symbiosis exists between the chronicled fortunes of the great western city and its control of vital sectors of foreign trade in this

period. Just as deliberately and in many ways as laboriously and conservatively as the port was reshaped to keep pace with expanding levels of trade, so has the historiography of Bristol been fashioned piece by piece from the weighty narratives of overseas commerce. The progressive capitalisation of Bristol's trade, in particular the aggressive commercial exploitation of the colonial markets of the north American seaboard and the West Indies, has occupied generations of historians and filled many pages of academic and more popular literature. Historical attention has focused upon not only describing these trades, but also charting the impact of transoceanic commerce upon the port's merchant oligarchy and the wider economic, social and cultural development of the town.<sup>7</sup> The lustrous 'Golden Age' of Bristol thus rests squarely upon an extended discourse of overseas trade. In this view Bristol was the 'Gateway of Empire', the jumping-off point to brave new worlds and unlimited mercantile fortunes. In return, the city acted as a provincial 'navel of the world': a great centre where a plethora of foreign goods and exotica were brought back, the profits of which were reinvested in domestic business and nascent financial services, or laundered into suburban estates and Clifton's leafy parades.<sup>8</sup>

The association between civic development, mercantile wealth and overseas trade was not lost on contemporary observers. As the seventeenth century progressed, the image of the sober, substantial Bristol merchant of Pepys's time gave way to North's more ambivalent portrait of energetic speculation in a range of trades including human cargoes.<sup>9</sup> By the eighteenth century, the prevailing consensus was that Bristol, for all its commercial prowess, was, as Walpole memorably described, 'the dirtiest great shop', populated by insatiable, low-born creatures of mammon.<sup>10</sup> Even the clergy, it was reported, 'talk of nothing but trade and how to turn a penny . . . all are in a hurry, running up and down with cloudy looks and busy faces'.<sup>11</sup> Unlike their London counterparts, Bristol merchants were roundly condemned as oafish hogs disporting themselves in the tawdry swill of commerce. Yet, however caustic such comments may appear, they were shot through with a veiled admiration, an awe at the extent and almost obsessive activity generated by trade.

No matter how seductive or indeed entertaining these constructs appear to modern eyes, the emphasis on foreign trade has conspired to obscure the full picture of Bristol's commerce. As Jackson has stressed, overseas trade, 'the sort that involved the merchants, made the money, and gained the prestige', has monopolised critical analysis.<sup>12</sup> But it is surely crass to suggest that we can read the development of Bristol, or indeed other major port cities, solely in the most conspicuous aspects of external trade. If Bristol can be seen as an 'open gateway', a dual portal through which commercial and cultural stimuli were filtered, the city's domestic trade needs to be studied in much greater depth.

To an extent, historical accounts have always been aware of a domestic perspective to Bristol's more high-profile trades: they merely have not been afforded much weight. Most work has tended to return to Professor Minchinton's brief exposition of Bristol's role as a 'quasi-metropolis' of the west.<sup>13</sup> Minchinton's main argument was that eighteenth-century Bristol formed both the cohesive and the dynamic element to provincial trade. As a result of its physical situation, unchallenged dominance in key overseas goods, and the demographic and industrial growth of the city itself, Bristol imposed a vital polarity upon a wide hinterland, stretching from the Midlands and the Welsh borderlands to the south-west of England and south Wales. In this model, a kind of debased commodity peonage was played out: the fragmented and localised economies of the hinterland were progressively subjugated to Bristol, the dominant regional centre of commerce and consumption.<sup>14</sup> In turn, the hinterland became increasingly dependent upon Bristol for high-quality producer and consumer wares; overseas goods; sources of capital and finance; and, rather more vicariously, diluted forms of 'metropolitan' cultural experience.<sup>15</sup>

The durability of Minchinton's work is testimony to its breadth of vision and conception. However, whilst it would be churlish to deny the profound impact the metropolitan model has had upon subsequent analyses of Bristol, it is equally not difficult to unravel many of its premises. Primarily, there is a distinct lack of hard data relating Bristol to its core hinterland. As a consequence, the assumptions underpinning the study become increasingly attenuated. Similarly, the emphasis upon the centrality of Bristol above and beyond the regional periphery has necessarily polarised discussion around models of control and dependence.<sup>16</sup> Yet, if the full extent of Bristol's regional hegemony and, by implication, its wider economic prosperity is to be grasped, research must be embedded in a far more comprehensive critique of the internal trade not only of Bristol, but also of its nominally subordinate hinterland.

The aim of this book is to cast new light upon these issues by subjecting the coastal trade of Bristol and its surrounding region to fresh analysis. This has been facilitated by integrating quantitative data derived from the Exchequer coastal port books for a period between 1680 and 1730 with more illustrative and, in many ways, more elusive evidence gleaned from merchant accounts and commercial papers. In so doing, the study reasserts the importance of sensitively-applied quantitative approaches, recently and somewhat unhelpfully dismissed as 'more useful for pathology than for diagnosis'.<sup>17</sup>

The analysis is divided into five chapters, each addressing a central aspect of the trade of Bristol and its domestic hinterland. Chapter 1 describes the main features of the regional basis to the study, providing an outline of the principal methodological and interpretative issues underpinning the main



body of port book data rendered available for this and, hopefully, further research. In chapter 2, the spatial patterns of trade are identified and analysed in more depth. Voyages are mapped according to their direction and frequency and a comparative functional hierarchy of commercial activity amongst regional ports is constructed. The chapter concludes by gauging the impact of such variables as seasonality, war, weather and marketing strategies upon the major patterns of trade. Chapter 3 provides an insight into the extent and range of goods traded, arguing that bulk staples—coal, for example—did not dominate trade as fully or completely as has been implied elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Chapter 4 discusses the level of mercantile organisation, crewing, boat provision and operation. The pervasive thesis that Bristol merchants, particularly those involved in overseas trade, were prepared to leave the business of organisation to provincial operatives is examined more rigorously, and the physical provision of trade in terms of the number and location of regional coasters and their operatives is also subject to fresh critical appraisal. The discussion outlined above is brought into sharp relief in the final chapter. Here port book data are combined with the accounts and correspondence of Hoare and Company and William Alloway, two important regional merchant houses. The chapter analyses the development and organisation of the trade in a wide range of commodities, and pieces together the patterns of finance, shipping, factorage and distribution that bound regional systems of trade into a coherent commercial network. In 1712, William Goldwin published a laboured if earnest *Poetical Description of Bristol*. Naturally, trade figured prominently in his eulogistic verses to this most commercial of cities. To Goldwin, the old conceit that Bristol was but London writ small was not enough to communicate the majesty of his subject. Whilst London still had half an eye fixed on the old European and Mediterranean trades, it was Bristol that was the truly dynamic centre,

Whose Oozy Banks with two great Streams inlaid  
And Naval Strength alternately convey'd  
Command[ed] the Staple of the *Western* Trade.<sup>19</sup>

Although Goldwin was rhapsodising on overseas commerce, his assessment has perhaps even greater resonances for the city's core internal trades. Yet, hamstrung by the obscurity and impenetrability of the sources, research has been conspicuously limited in describing these western staples. This book, by teasing out the full spectrum of trade within Bristol's coastal and riparian hinterland, seeks to invert the centrality of foreign commerce. If this study encourages a re-interpretation of Bristol based not so much upon the grand discourses of overseas trade, but upon the city's domestic arena, it will have satisfied its major objective.

Plate 1

James Millerd, *An Exact Delineation of the Famous Cittie of Bristol, 1671*

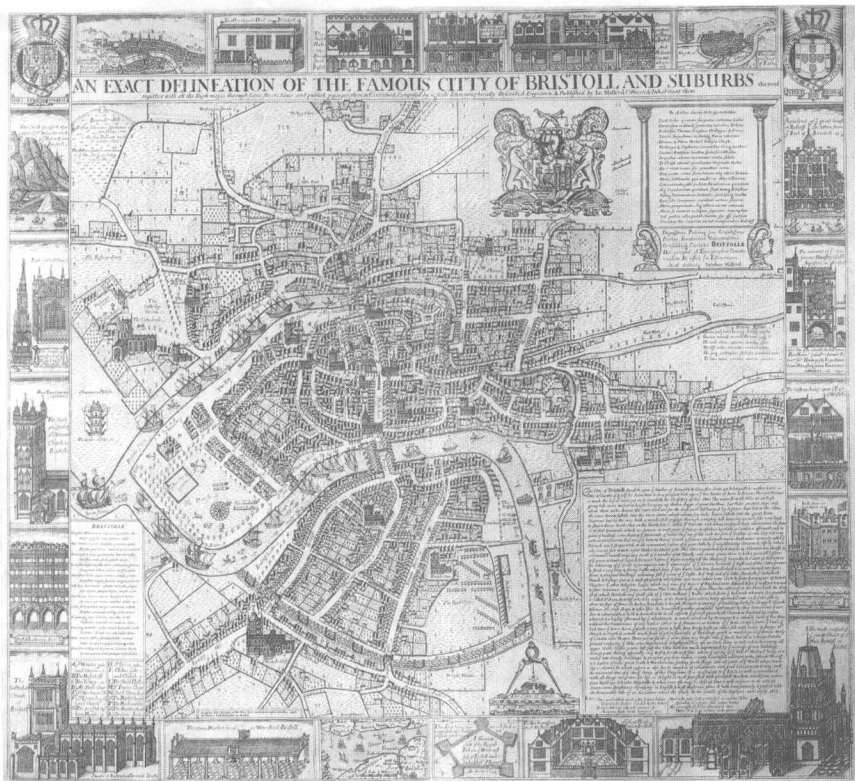


Plate 2  
 S. and N. Buck, *The North West Prospect of the City of Bristol, 1734*

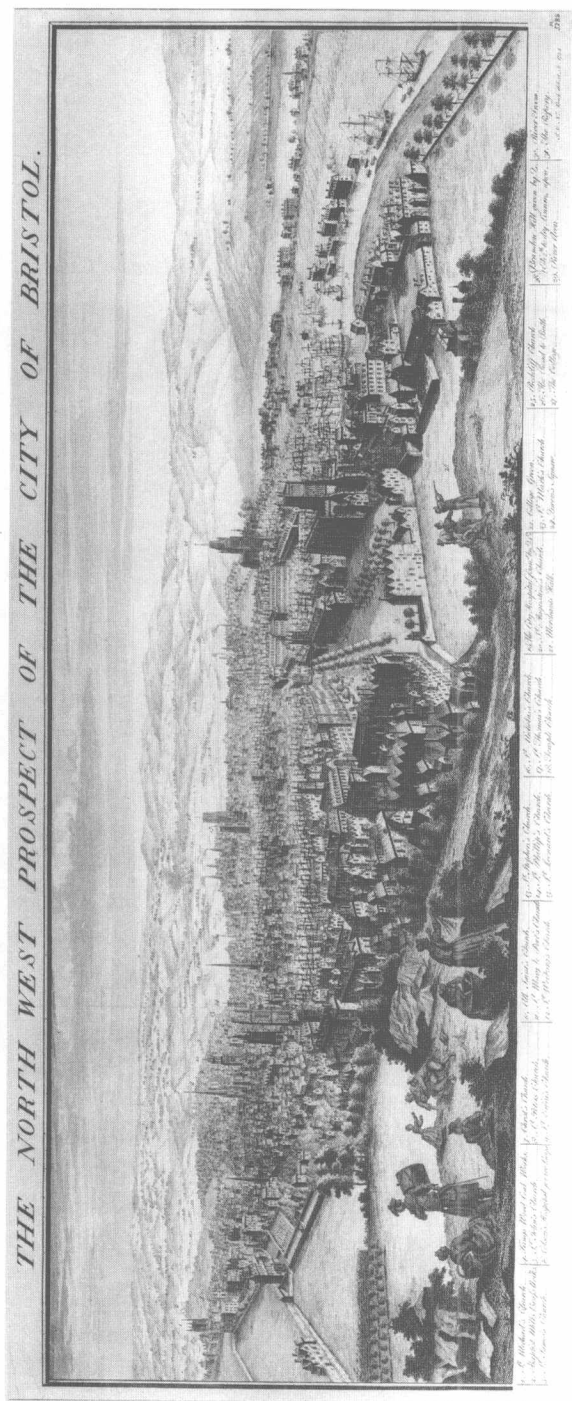
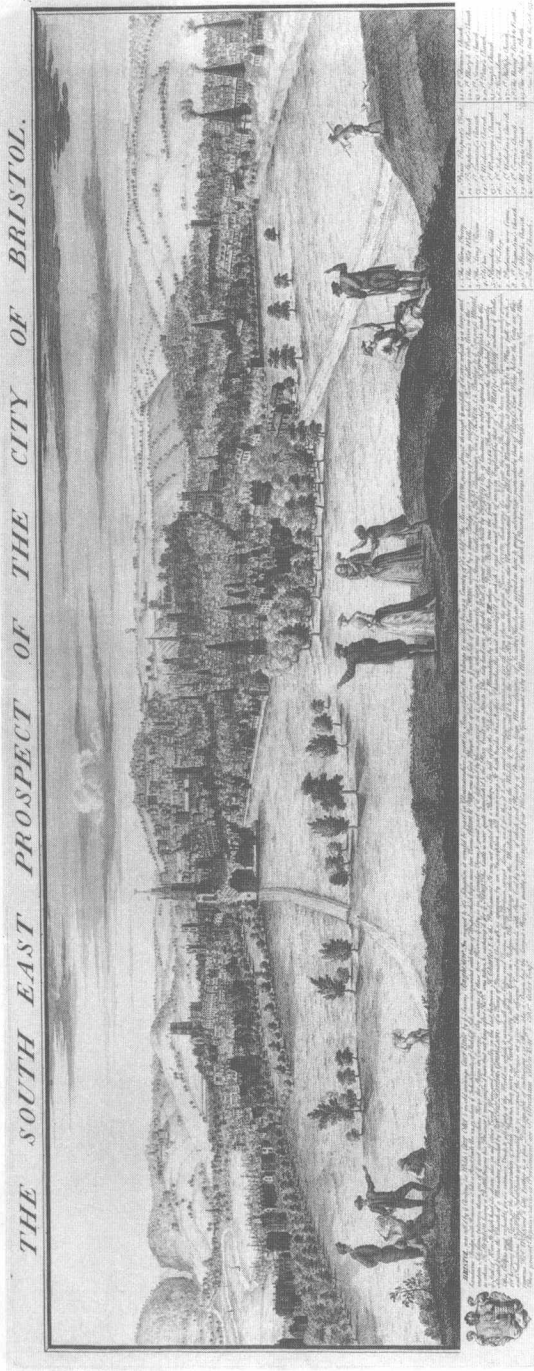


Plate 3

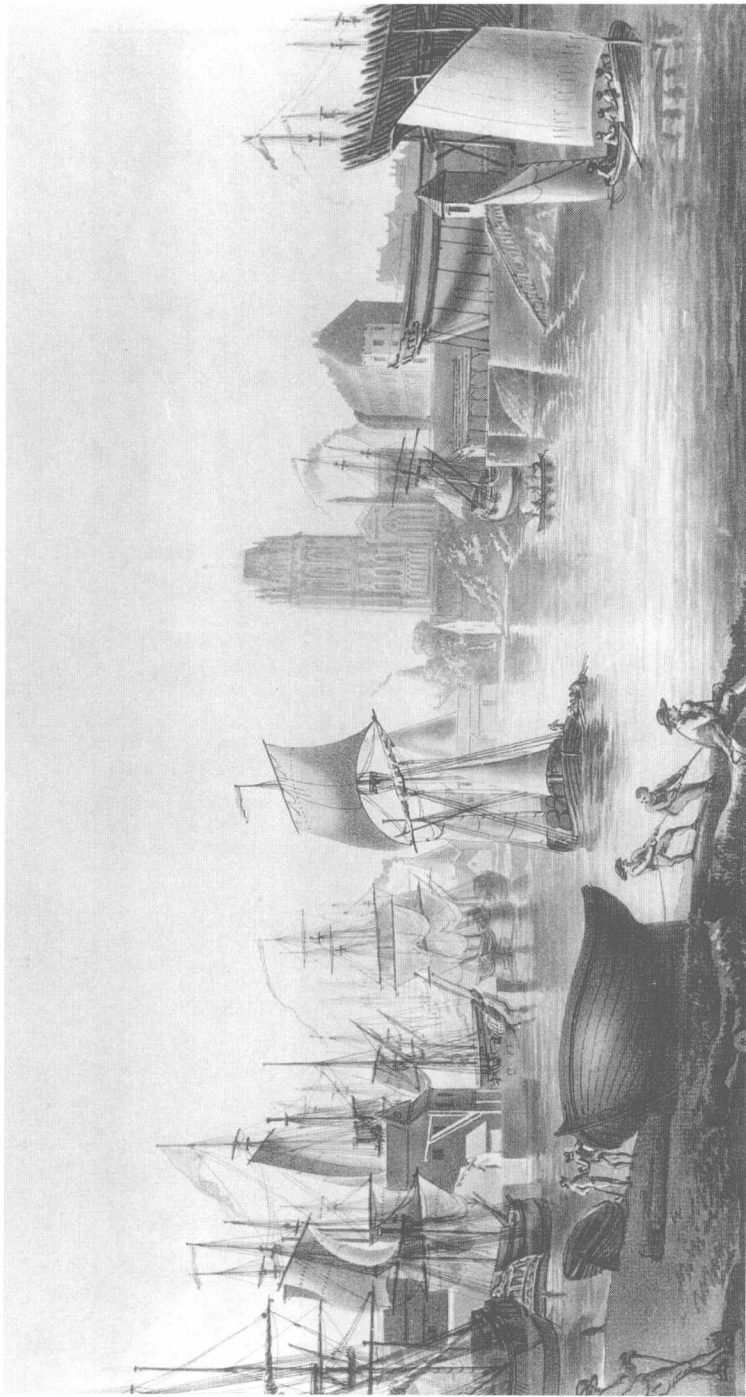
S. and N. Buck, The South East Prospect of the City of Bristol, 1734



## Plate 4

Nicholas Pocock, *View of St Mary Redcliffe from Sea Banks, 1785*

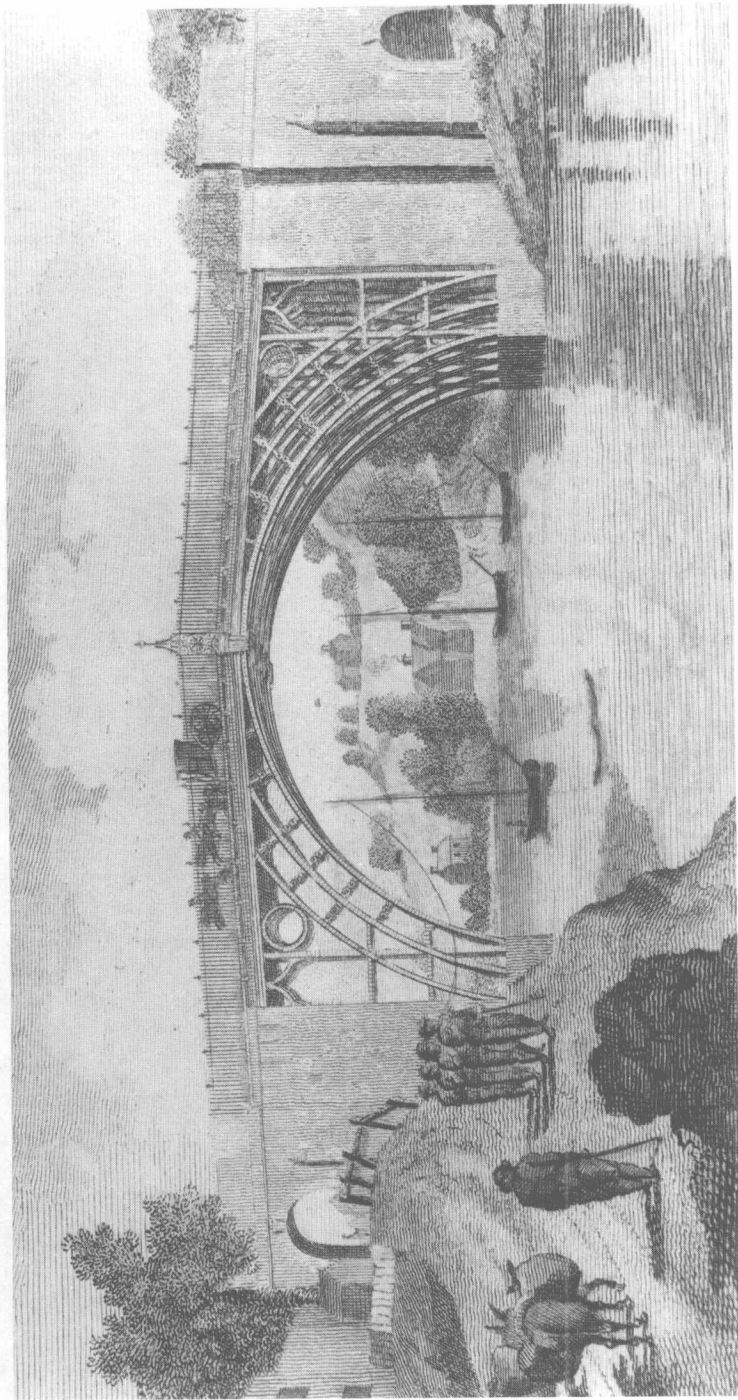
Pocock's View shows the bustling, yet largely unimproved port of Bristol thronged with overseas and coastal vessels riding at anchor on the river Avon. In the centre of the picture, a small market boat, characteristic of many that plied the Bristol Channel in the early eighteenth century, prepares to sail; note the goods stacked on its deck.



## Plate 5

An engraving of the Iron Bridge, Shropshire, c. 1790

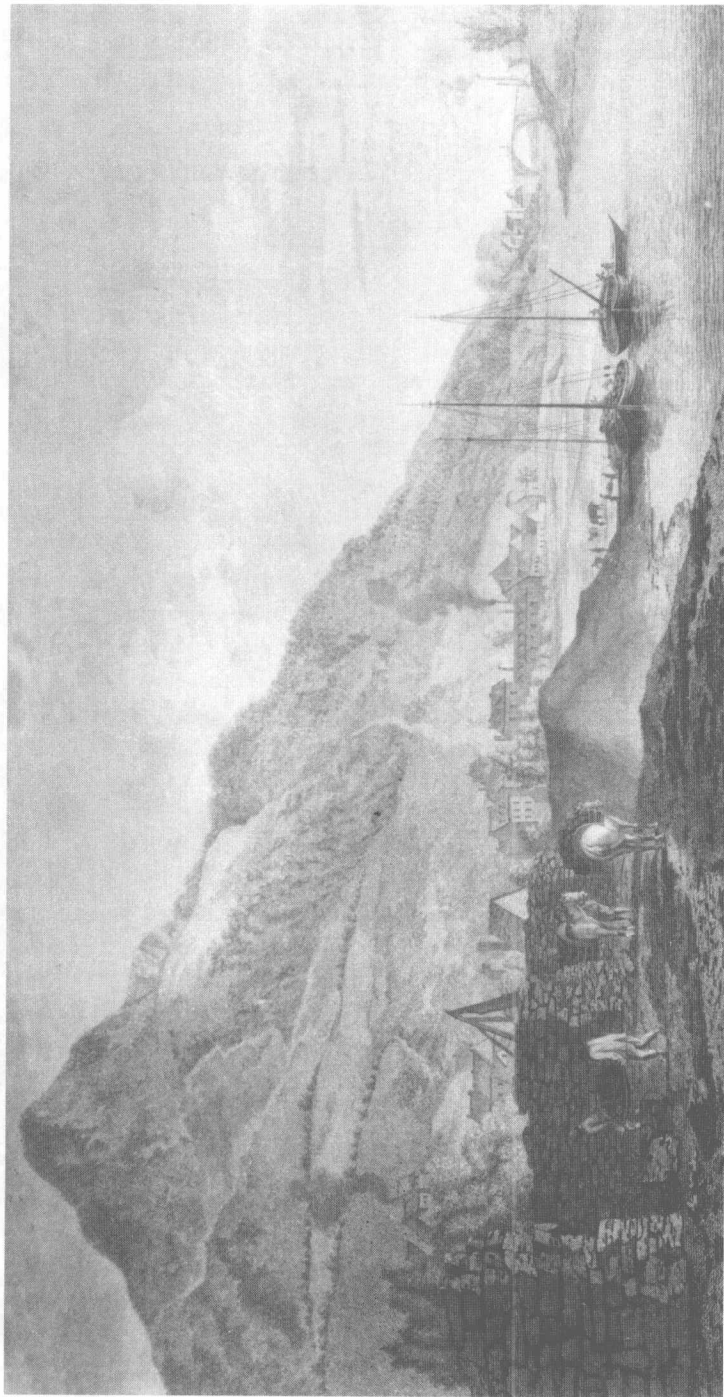
A late depiction of the river Severn at the newly-constructed Iron Bridge. In the foreground a loaded packhorse team shares the towpath with a gang of four bowhaulers, pulling a heavily-laden single-masted Severn trow upstream. Two further trows await downstream.



## Plate 6

George Robertson, engraved by James Fittler, 1788, *Lincoln Hill and the Iron Bridge from the river Severn*

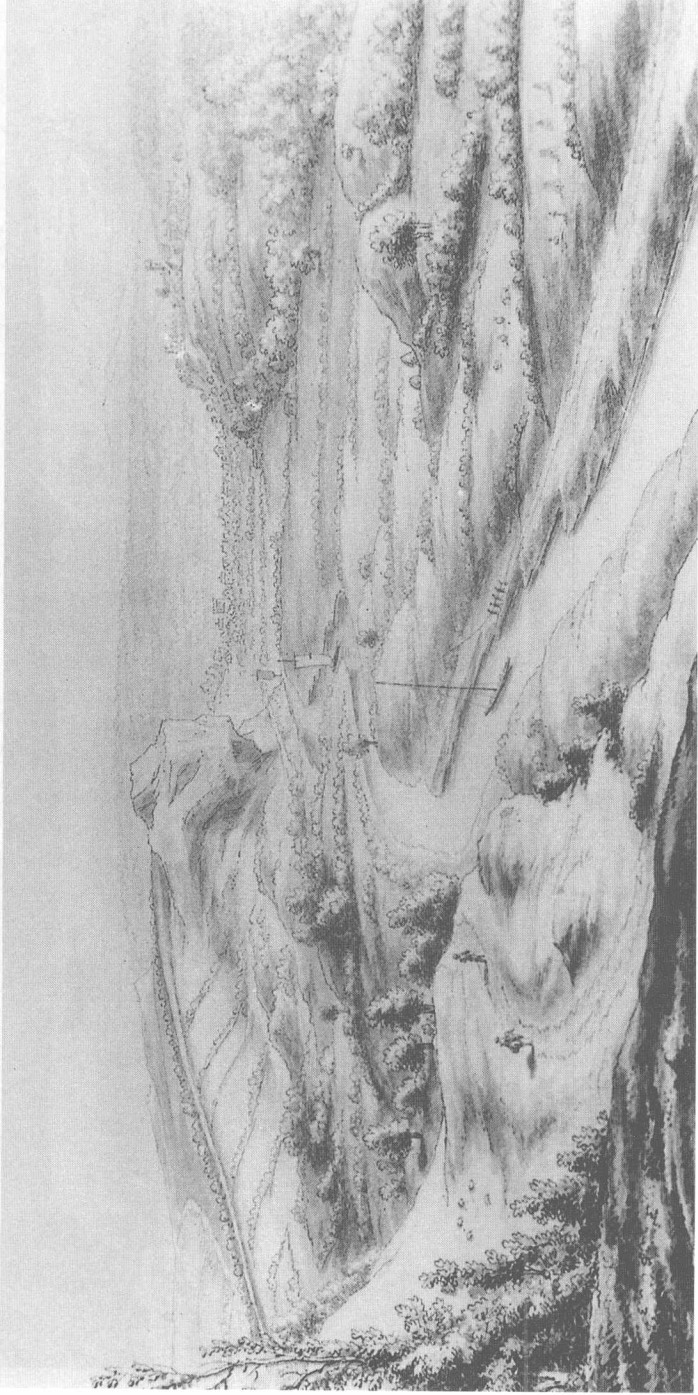
Fittler's engraving shows three Severn trows and a much smaller barge awaiting cargoes under the shadow of Lincoln Hill, Shropshire. In the eighteenth century, the area was a major exporter of iron and ironware to Bristol.



## Plate 7

A view of the river Severn at Bridgnorth, eighteenth century

Two single-masted and sailed Severn trows are shown on the upper reaches of the river Severn above Bridgnorth, whilst a solitary trow is being pulled upstream in the direction of Shrewsbury by a gang of four bowhaulers. Both towns were important centres in Bristol's regional hinterland in the early eighteenth century.





### Plate 8

The city of Worcester from the west in the 1750s, showing the central importance of the river Severn to the life of the city. At the town quay a number of trows and smaller barges are docked awaiting cargoes and unloading. On the river itself, three laden trows sail upstream, the one to the north of the city lowering its sails and rigging to pass under the medieval bridge.

