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King Street, Bristol

by W. Leighton, with sketch elevation by J. N. Meredith
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KING STREET, BRISTOL

by WILFRID LEIGHTON, F.S.A.

THE sketch elevation of the greater parts of the two sides of King street, Bristol, by Mr J. Nelson Meredith, F.R.I.B.A., the City Architect, shows a remarkable collection of ancient buildings of various types of architecture, which, in spite of damage and destruction by enemy action, the ravages of time, and the insertion of modern and incongruous offices and warehouses, must be almost unique in the heart of a great industrial city. In several reports the Council for the Preservation of Ancient Bristol has urged that the old buildings should be preserved at all costs, and it is very satisfactory that this course is proposed by the Planning and Reconstruction Committee of the City Council, in its recent report on the replanning of Bristol.

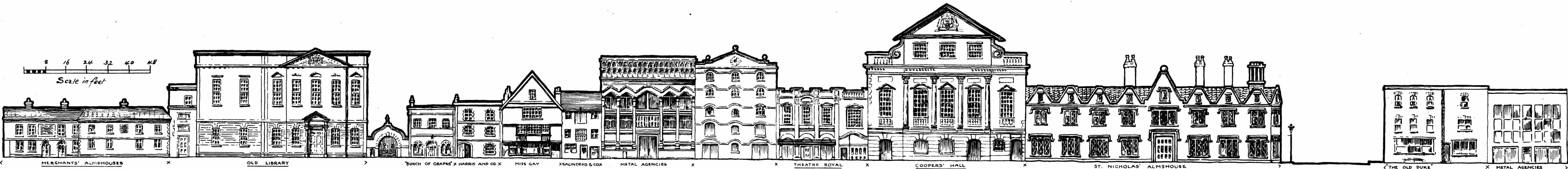
The north side of the street lay immediately without one of the old walls of the City, and in 1663, when the Corporation decided to lay out the street, from Weare's house to the Marsh Gate, a number of buildings had already been erected on that side on land leased or acquired from the Corporation at various dates. Some of these plots have not been identified, but others included those upon which the Merchants' Hall and Almshouse were built, and also St. Nicholas' Almshouse which stands at the corner formed by the intersection of Queen Charlotte street. This interesting building dates from 1652, the Corporation in June of that year having acceded to the petition of the parishioners for the land on which it was built, which is described as being under the City wall, in 'the Marsh near the Back Gate'.* An additional plot, which included a round tower on the wall, was added in

* See lease 28 September 1652, and others extracted from the City Bargain Books, pp. 160-6.

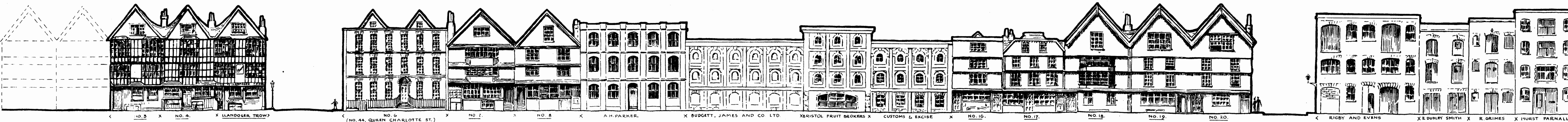
1656. Seven years later, when the street was laid out, it no doubt received its name from the Corporation as an expression of their loyalty to the recently restored Monarchy. The new building plots were let on lease for five lives, or 41 years, at an annual rental of one shilling to one and sixpence a foot frontage, and the lessees were under a covenant to erect houses 'fit and convenient for tenants to live therein, which should contain in height three storeys besides the roof'.

Of the buildings which now stand in the street beginning at the south side at its junction with the Welsh Back, numbers 1 to 5 formed a very fine half-timbered block of typical dwelling houses of prosperous citizens. Unfortunately numbers 1 and 2 were destroyed by enemy action on the 11 April 1941. Number 5 is the Llandoger Trow, an inn well known as a haunt of privateersmen during the Napoleonic wars. Its return frontage to Queen Charlotte street had originally projecting gables. Number 6 has a fine double-fronted 18th century brick elevation. The shell hood over its door is one of the finest of its type still surviving in the City. Numbers 7 and 8, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20 all date from the street's construction. With the exception of number 17 they have plastered fronts which may in some cases conceal open timber work. At numbers 16 and 17 the high-pitched gables have been set back, and 17 has a brick front and uniform elevation probably of later date than the original house. Many of the houses have projecting bays and overhanging storeys, and in some cases pent-house courses. They are roofed with pantiles. Some of the elevations are marred by the insertion of sash windows. An original door survives at number 20. The intervening numbers have been replaced with modern offices and warehouses. These also occupy the remainder of the street west of King William avenue.

On the north side of the street, the destruction by the enemy on 24 November 1940 of the fine Hall of the



ELEVATION OF KING STREET — NORTH SIDE



ELEVATION OF KING STREET — SOUTH SIDE

Merchant Venturers' Society, which stood at the junction of King street, Marsh street and Prince street, is an irreparable loss to the City. A large part of the picturesque almshouse of the Society, which adjoined the Hall to the east, was destroyed in the same way on 7 May 1941, but the north, east and part of the south sides of its quadrangle survive. The almshouse was erected in 1669. Parts of the site of the Hall and almshouse have now been included in street improvements. The next building on this side of King street is the Old Library, which was built in 1740 and is a classical building of considerable merit. The west wing was added in 1780. The adjoining gateway led to King street Hall, a large block of warehouses now demolished. Numbers 31 and 32 are small and unpretentious 19th century buildings. Number 33 is another example of the original 17th century houses similar to several on the other side of the street. It has an oriel bay. Number 34 is of little interest and the space intervening before the Theatre Royal is filled with modern warehouses entirely out of harmony with the older buildings. The front elevation of the theatre, now shorn of some of its Edwardian floridness of pressed red and glazed white brick, was built in 1903, and replaced two of the earlier houses, one of which showed considerable Dutch influence, and through the ground floor of which the public entrances to the theatre led. The auditorium and stage of the theatre retain many of their original features and were built in 1764-6 from designs by William Paty. The theatre, which is well known as the oldest building in the Kingdom with a continuous record as a theatre, was acquired through the efforts of the Council for the Preservation of Ancient Bristol in 1943, and is now held in trust as a building of National historic importance. Adjoining the theatre, the massive stone building of the Coopers' Hall, erected by the Coopers', or Hoopers' Company, as it was formerly called, from designs by William Halfpenny in 1764, dominates the street. The

next building is St. Nicholas' almshouse, which completes the street on this side as far as its intersection with Queen Charlotte street, and to which reference has already been made. A room on the first floor of the almshouse, over the entrance, has an interesting barrel vaulted and enriched plaster ceiling. The remainder of the street east of Queen Charlotte street has two houses of some interest.

King street has an irregular outline and is much wider at the middle than at the ends. It still retains a cobble paved roadway.

In the reproduction of Mr Meredith's drawing it has been necessary to omit a small portion of the east end of the north side, and of the west end of the south side.

REFERENCES

- Trans. Bristol and Gloucestershire Arch. Society*, vol. 29 ;
 Latimer, *Annals of Bristol*, 17th cent. ;
 Stone, *Bristol as it Was and as it Is* (several illustrations) ;
 Dening, *18th Century Architecture of Bristol* ;
 Latimer, *History of the Merchant Venturers' Society* ;
Theatre Royal, Bristol, Preservation Fund pamphlet.

GRANTS AND LEASES OF LANDS IN KING STREET, BRISTOL*

by MISS E. RALPH, *City Archivist*

MERCHANTS' HALL AND ALMSHOUSE

14 *March* 1493

Corpn. granted to the Society of Merchants a piece of land in the Marsh adjoining a tower in the Town Wall [site of old City Library] 203 foot in length and 60 foot in breadth together with part of Law Ditch. Paying 12 pence yearly.

4 *April* 1650

Corporation granted to Thomas Wickham, carpenter, in consideration of the sum of £10 rent paid quarterly,

* Extracted from the Bristol Corporation bargain books.