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London Merchants on Bristol Bridge

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An Inquiry into a 17th-century Property Suit

By D. E. FITCH

ACERTAIN message and land upon Bristol Bridge were the subjects of litigation for above thirty-five years in the first half of the 17th century; actual ownership and possession of the property were questions sufficiently knotty to arouse the curiosity of a local historian, but since two of the persons involved were merchants of London, the case may have added interest for students of 17th-century domestic trade. The fate of the property is to be traced in a lengthy series of deeds among the Bristol archives and in other papers at the Public Record Office in London.¹

The extramural interest of the case commences in 1620 with the entry of the London merchants, but it is necessary to have in mind the preliminary disposition of the property. This latter is established principally from the series of early deeds; by these it appears that between 1582 and 1595 Francis Knight of Bristol, mercer, linen-draper and later alderman (member of a well-known merchant family) bought four houses on Bristol Bridge. At this time the bridge, like its counterpart in London, had houses built along each side of the road it carried, and these properties were among the most select and expensive residential homes in Bristol. Francis Knight converted two of these houses into one, situated 'on or nere the North End of the bridge of Avon in the parrishe of St Nicholas'; and this house he leased to his younger son Edward Knight on 26 March 1610.² On 16 September 1613 this son sub-leased the property to John Thomas of Bristol, mercer.³

In 1617⁴ the house was mortgaged by Francis Knight, as the owner, to its occupant John Thomas for £70; in the same year Francis sold it outright to his son Edward in consideration of various debts which Edward had paid off on his father's behalf.⁵ Indications are that the elder Knight had suffered severe financial losses which even the most strenuous efforts of the son were at this time insufficient to recover. Francis Knight was apparently unable to repay the mortgage. In a deed dated 3 June 1618, the father refers to a writ out of Chancery by which John Thomas held Francis to his undertaking and compelled

¹ For information concerning early deeds and property declarations in Bristol I am much indebted to Miss Elizabeth Ralph and her staff of the Bristol Archives Office.

² Bristol Archives. ³ *Ibid.* ⁴ *Ibid.* ⁵ *Ibid.*

him to give Thomas a sound title to the house on Bristol Bridge, in lieu of repayment of the loan; by this deed Francis Knight acknowledges John Thomas's complete ownership of the premises, thus apparently overriding his sale to his son Edward.¹

In July 1620 John Thomas sold the house to Richard Leaver of London, gentleman, and Robert South of London, fishmonger, for £140 upon condition that Edward Knight would continue to enjoy the lease which he still held upon the property.²

The entry of the London merchants increased by several times the possibilities for legal confusion. Quite evidently the Knight family considered that, in some sense, they retained title to the property which Francis Knight the father had transferred to John Thomas, and the residence of Leaver and South afar off in London did not discourage them from acting accordingly. Before long it is to be observed that both the London merchants and the Knight family sublet the property to other persons, and surviving Bills and Answers among Chancery Proceedings are full of the disorder of conflicting claims affecting actual occupation as well as legal title to the property.

Richard Leaver died in the year following the joint purchase, leaving his interest in it to his partner Robert South; it may have been at this point that some later difficulty arose because South was afterwards unable to produce a required indenture showing his title to the property. In any event South was not at once disturbed in possession of it; for some nine or ten years he rented the premises to one John Sneade and his wife Elizabeth, citizens of Bristol.

The ill-defined state of peace came to an end in 1633 apparently through some neglect on the part of the occupant Sneade, for on 10 July that year Robert South entered a bill of complaint, citing the heirs of Francis Knight and one George Gibbs of Bristol (not otherwise identified, but perhaps an attorney) for an attempt to defraud himself and Sneade in the matter of the land and messuage on Bristol Bridge.³ South's complaint summarizes the history of relationships as shown above, indicating that the Knights had consented to the sale of the property and that Thomas had then sold *his part* of it to South and Leaver; since Leaver's death South as inheritor had been renting to Sneade. Now, according to the complaint, the said Edward Knight, his wife and two others of Bristol are attempting to defraud the said orator Robert South of this inheritance 'knowing that he cannot produce the required Indenture'. Edward Knight thus has leased the

¹ Ibid. ² Ibid. ³ P.R.O., C.2/Chas I/S.9/36 (South *vs.* Gibbs *et al.*).

land to one Robert Challoner of Bristol who in turn has brought Sneade and his wife to court.

The first reply to this complaint has not been found but on 20 May 1634 Edward Knight entered a 'further and better' answer stating that Sneade had not paid last year's rent, though admitting he had paid yearly before that since 1624.¹ One does not know what to make of this, except it may show that Knight did indeed retain title to some portion of the property for which Sneade was also paying rent.

There is a considerable hiatus in available information at this point, though not in the progress of events, for when the next piece of evidence appears, a third party has entered the case in opposition both to South and to the Knight family. In an answer of 19 February 1651/2 a certain Thomas Blount responds to a later complaint by South, stating that John Thomas (since dead) and his heirs after having purchased the property of Francis Knight, sold it in turn to John Blount (now also deceased) brother of the respondent. Thomas Blount asserts that John Thomas may have remitted some portion of the messuage and land to South and Leaver upon some consideration unknown to Blount, but that this was after the agreement with John Blount was reached.²

Another event bearing upon the case at this interval was the disastrous fire on Bristol Bridge which occurred 17 February 1647; this fire which destroyed some twenty-four houses between the Chapel of the Assumption and the north end of the Bridge almost certainly burned down the property in the present dispute.³ Thomas Blount asserts that after the fire John and Edward Knight entered the property and began to erect new structures thereon. Blount ordered them to cease, they refused, and he took the matter to be tried at the next assizes held at Bristol; at this time Knight entered as evidence an indenture or mortgage for the property made to Richard Leaver (the document which South some ten years before had been unable to produce), but Blount also produced an indenture of his own. The decision of the court is not noted by Blount but it cannot have been very favourable to him; his interest in the property appears to have been small and easily satisfied, or it was denied by the court, for when at last the case was disposed of Blount was not involved. Our last note of it is a release dated 30 October 1656⁴ whereby Robert South of

¹ P.R.O., C.2/Chas I/S.34/35 (South vs. Knight *et al.*).

² *Ibid.*, C.9/239/219 (Blount vs. South), and C.6/13/172 (South vs. Knight).

³ John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the 17th Century* (Bristol, 1900), p. 216.

⁴ Bristol Archives.

London, gentleman, transferred to John Knight the younger¹ all his rights to a newly built house on the Bridge, on the site of the house which had formerly been occupied by John Thomas and later by John Sneade, and which had been destroyed by fire.

Robert South is not known to have had any personal interests in Bristol, nor was he ever made a burgess or free merchant of the city. There is little evidence that he made use of the port of Bristol in his merchandizing activities except once, in 1640, when he contracted to provide a shipload of gunpowder for the use of Strafford's army in Ireland and again possibly in 1645.² During the 1630s he was concerned in the importation of tobacco from the English colonies in America and of sugar from Portugal—both commodities of great interest to Bristol merchants, the latter a particular business of members of the Knight family. In the purchase of the Bristol property South was definitely the junior associate of Richard Leaver; at 26 he was a young man just commencing his merchant career. Leaver's death shortly thereafter left him the responsibility of seeing through the purchase for whatever purposes it was intended, and the litigation surrounding it was with him most of his life. If the venture was made solely for the purpose of subleasing, it will have brought him little satisfaction. It would be extremely interesting to find that Bristol, 'the greatest town for shipping after London',³ had drawn this young London merchant to the west of England upon a larger mission than a mere real estate venture and that, after all, he derived greater profit and satisfaction from his troublesome associations with Bristol people, both high and low, than the foregoing evidence seems to indicate.

¹ The famous Bristol sugar merchant, son of Edward and grandson of Francis Knight; cf. I. V. Hall, 'John Knight, junior . . .', *Trans. BGAS*, vol. 68 (1949), pp. 110-64.

² In 1640: cf. 'Cal. House of Lords MSS', 20 May 1641, *H.M.C. Reports*, IV: 1, Appendix, p. 64; in 1645: cf. *BM Add. MSS* 5716, fol. 13.

³ 'The greatest town': *Cal. S. P. Dom.*, Car. I, 4 Feb. 1640.