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The Jacobs of Bristol, Glassmakers

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The Jacobs of Bristol, Glassmakers to King George III

By Z. JOSEPHS

ACCORDING to the College of Arms, Lazarus Jacobs arrived in Bristol from Frankfurt am Main about 1760.¹ This family was to produce glass of a very high standard and it is most probable that Lazarus brought some expertise with him from the continent. Perhaps like most of his fellow Jews, he started by peddling it around the countryside, engraving it to order.

In the early part of the century, it had been difficult for a newcomer to establish himself. Trade laws were strict in all towns against 'foreigners', that is anyone not born in the town, and particularly so in Bristol where even folk from Clifton were 'interlopers'. In 1757 the council ordered Moses Cone (Cohen), 'who keeps a shop with glass windows before same and therein sells gold and silver without being a free burgess be prosecuted for same'. But these restrictions were falling into disuse, so much so that by 1786 the weavers' guild was so small that the Jews bought their hall for a synagogue.²

In 1771 Felix Farley's *Bristol Journal* advertised 'At Mr Lazarus Jacob's glass cutter, nearly opposite Temple Church during the ensuing fair, will be sold by auction or otherwise a very large good and fine assortment of superfine best seconds, and livery, broadcloth. They will be sold at prime cost, the maker of them being about to go out of business'. In 1774 Perrot's, one of the main glass houses in Bristol went bankrupt and the property, 'two houses in Temple Street, both adjoining with fine gardens and orchards',³ were sold to Lazarus, who now set up as a flint glass-cutter and engraver with his sixteen-year-old son Isaac. The firm rapidly took its place in the front rank of glass-makers, manufacturing much of the blue glass which was becoming very fashionable.⁴ (In 1786 a German lady, Sophie von Le Roche, lunching at Richmond with the wife of the Danish ambassador remarks in her diary 'The blue glass bowls used for rinsing hands and mouth are quite delightful').⁵

About 1750 an artist, Michael Edkins, came to Bristol, probably from Birmingham, and he was at first employed as a decorator for a firm making delft plates and tiles. When about 1760 these started going out of fashion, he set up on his own and his business ledger is preserved in the City Library.⁶ This document shows him to have been a most enterprising individual, working as an interior decorator, painting theatre scenery, signboards and coats of arms on carriages. There are also many entries of glass firms including Lazarus Jacobs. In 1763 he painted a board and back shed for Lazarus; 86 gold letters and two gold decanters and glasses, and all for £1 16s. 6d. From 1785 to 1788 there follow countless entries in blue and 'enamel' glass, cream jugs, basins, bottles, jars and sugar basins, including the favourite 'setts' or garnitures for the mantelpiece.⁷

The term 'bristol blue' is thought originally to have come from Bristol being the port of entry for 'smalt', the blue colouring used in glass manufacture. The term, as we use it today, may however

1. Ex inf. W. S. Jessop, Franklin Lakes, New Jersey, U.S.A. (1971).

2. J. Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the 18th Century* (1893), 470.

3. W. J. Pountney, *Old Bristol Potters* (Bristol, 1920), 242.

4. H. Owen, *Two Centuries of Ceramic Art in Bristol* (Bristol, 1920), 242.

5. G. Wills, *English and Irish Glass* (1968), 11.

6. R. J. Charleston, 'Michael Edkins and the Problem of English Enamelled Glass', *Journal of the Society of Glass Technology*, XXXVIII (1954), 10-11.

7. Bristol City Library, Accession number B.20196, Michael Edkins's ledger.

have come from the frequent mention of blue glass in the Edkins ledger, together with the Jacob's habit of signing their pieces, for blue glass was made at many other centres besides Bristol, and Bristol made many other types of glass. The elegance of shape and depth of colour, particularly the violet shades make bristol blue highly collectable, and when signed fetch very high prices.

Edkins was in the habit of sending 'ventures' of glass abroad. Many tradespeople in seaport towns entrusted parcels of goods to captains of merchant vessels and the Jacobs no doubt did likewise. Isaac's son, Joseph, went at least on one business trip to the West Indies while his brother Lionel was reported in the *Gentleman's Magazine* to have died in 1812 in the prime of life at Spanish Town, Jamaica.

The Jacobs had certainly increased in wealth and importance since Lazarus sold off seconds at the Fair. On Friday 16 September 1786 the new synagogue in Temple Street was dedicated with great ceremonial and music.⁸ The order of service on this occasion includes a hymn in honour of Eliezer ben Jacob, in the form of an acrostic on his name, and also an acrostic on the word Bristol.⁹ This, says Cecil Roth, was unquestionably Lazarus Jacobs. When the afternoon service was over, he stood up and annulled the sanctity of the synagogue, and the whole congregation proceeded, two by two, to the new one.¹⁰

In 1787, Lazarus moved to Avon Street and later to the 'delightful retreat of Great Gardens, Florio's happy spot, fragrant with jasmine, roses and orange trees, beauteous with fantastically cut yew and holly trees'.¹¹ Here in 1796 at the age of 87, after a short illness, he died. He was buried in the grounds in the parish of St Philip.¹² His widow, Mary (born Hiscock at Templecombe in Somerset) survived him until 1816, when she died aged 81. It is an odd fact that both Lazarus and Isaac appear to have married out of their faith. Isaac's wife Mary, *née* MacCreath of Shrewsbury, died only a fortnight after her mother-in-law, aged 51.¹³ Could they have been glass-makers' daughters? Lazarus and his son Isaac fathered an immense and often distinguished body of descendants and the family tree shows until recent times none but Jewish names. Lazarus left £100 p.a. to his wife, together with his plate and main household property, which after his death were to go the two sons of his younger daughter Susannah (Suky) who had married Joseph Moses Alman. Isaac received £60 p.a. and there was provision for the two daughters of his elder girl Hannah, the wife of Hiam Emden. The residue went to the grandsons together with the 'holy utensils' of Sabbath candlesticks, wine cup and spice-box. This last phrase was written in cursive Hebrew script and had to be witnessed by Joseph Schabracq one of the few Jewish notaries of the time. Both the girls had made good marriages. The Almans were prosperous enough to subscribe to various London charities, and Hiam Emden, who came from Amsterdam, is described in the family tree as a gentleman.¹⁴

Isaac now took over the firm and his eldest son Joseph, born 1790, was apprenticed to him at the age of fourteen. (Lionel was born in 1792, John in 1795, followed by Matilda, Morris, Sarah and Fanny.) Under Isaac's direction the business attained new heights. In 1799 Great Gardens and Avon Street were purely business premises, while Isaac took a house in Somerset Square, 'a retired situation neatly built of brick'. The area is a garden, enclosed by a dwarf wall with a walk for the inhabitants. It has 'a pleasing open prospect into Somersetshire of a Verdant Valley (between which the river flows) terminating in Dundry Hill'.¹⁵ It was convenient both for work and synagogue but away from the smoke.

By 1805 the roses and orange blossom of Great Gardens must completely have disappeared for in that year Isaac launched out on a new project, The Nonsuch Glass Manufactory. 'He will continue

8. W. Barret, *History of Bristol* (1789), 556.

9. Ex inf. Rabbi D. Kaplin (1974).

10. C. Roth, *Rise of Provincial Jewry* (1950), 41 and A. Rubens 'Early Anglo-Jewish Artists', *Trans. Jewish Hist. Soc. of England*, XIV (1937), 106.

11. W. Goldwyn, *A Poetical Description of Bristol* (1712), 15.

12. A. C. Powell, 'Glass-making in Bristol', *Trans. B.G.A.S.*, XLVII (1925), 238-240.

13. Ex inf. Jessop (1971).

14. Roth, 41.

15. Matthews, *Bristol Guide* (Bristol, 1815), 124.

manufacturing every article in the glass line on the largest possible scale' runs the advertisement, 'even the common articles in that superior quality which has hitherto given him decided preference over every other glass house in the Kingdom. The neatest medical phials are to be sold, for the same price that other houses charge for the new green.' In the following year he describes himself as 'glass manufacturer to his Majesty' and announced that he had opened a new set of rooms on purpose for the retail trade, with a large and elegant assortment of cut and engraved glass both useful and ornamental at wholesale prices. Specimens of the dessert set which Isaac Jacob 'had the honour of sending to their Majesties in burnished gold upon royal purple coloured glass may be seen at his manufactory, where several dessert sets of the same kind are now completed, from fifteen guineas per set to any amount. Coats of arms, crests and cyphers done in the greatest style by some of the finest artists in the kingdom'.¹⁶

Signed pieces of Jacob's glass may be seen in London at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where there is a blue finger bowl with Greek key design and a blue port decanter ascribed to Lazarus. A similar finger bowl is in the Jewish Museum, London. In the Bristol Art Gallery there is a plate with the crest of the earl of Verulam, and a finger bowl. The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, has a plate of dark blue glass signed J. Jacobs. The Cecil Higgins Museum, Bedford, possesses a blue finger bowl with gilded fret border between gold bands round the rim, and festoons of flowers below the lip signed 'J. Jacobs/Bristol' and a decanter with pendant label (rum) in gold signed 'J. Jacobs, Bristol' 15'. Gloucester Museum has two sets of decanters which they think are probably by the Jacobs, though they are unsigned.

In 1809 Isaac built himself 'a noble and substantial house at Weston-Super-Mare, recently elevated from a fishing hamlet to a fashionable retreat for Bristol merchants'. Terminating the Beach Parade it had 'a commanding terrace in front; altogether in design and construction of greater importance than most of the preceding [houses] and if the design were carried out by the erection of other mansions on the same scale, would impart a peculiar degree of aristocratic distinctiveness to this part of the town.' It was called Belvedere.¹⁷

In the same year Isaac was admitted to the liberties of the city by order of the common council and in 1812 he was granted his coat of arms. (four cinquefoils, a canton gules, charged with an eagle displayed on the field. Crest, a wreath of colours, a lion rampant erminois, supporting a cross corselet fitchee erect and charged on the shoulder with a cinquefoil gules'.)¹⁸ His billhead of this period reads: 'glass master to his Majesty'. This is flanked on one side with a pair of squat glass houses, their tall chimneys belching flames, on the other a pair of clippers in full sail, indicating profitable ventures. Beneath in small letters—'no discount but for payment in the usual term of credit and no cullet (broken glass to be melted down for flux) allowed for till received.'¹⁹

Isaac now appeared to be at the very height of prosperity making the immense income of between £15,000 and £20,000 a year. This astonishing figure must have been his gross income. Even so, his net income must, at its peak, have reached £3,000–5,000, the equivalent of £75,000–100,000 today. In fact, however, he had over-reached himself. The Bristol glass trade was in serious difficulties, due to heavy taxation and the resulting fierce rivalry of the untaxed Irish glass. Many glass-makers had already left Bristol for the coalfields of the midlands and north. Belvedere had been a costly undertaking and he had been forced to borrow £10,000 at a high rate of interest to discharge his debts.

By 1812 Joseph was 22 and engaged to be married. His father had in the traditional way taught him the art and mystery of glass-making, besides how to keep the books. Whether Isaac with all his financial worries, was losing his grip, we do not know, but Joseph appears now to have had the principal management of the business and when the engagement was unfortunately broken off he

16. Powell, 238–40.

17. J. Whereat, *The Visitor's Companion in Rambling about Weston* (Weston-super-Mare, 1845), 53, 54.

18. A. Rubens, 'Anglo-Jewish Notabilities', *Trans. Jewish Hist. Soc. of England* (1949), 100–1.

19. City Art Gallery and Museum, Bristol.

still demanded that his father take him into partnership. Isaac refused and Joseph left his employment. Ten days later he returned, when Isaac agreed to let him have £300 a year over and above his board and lodging, as he continued to live in the family house. Although this did not amount to a one-third share Joseph agreed, and in 1814 he travelled to Madeira, the Barbadoes, Martinique and Dominica with an adventure of goods for his father.

Meanwhile Isaac's affairs sank from bad to worse. By the year 1820 he had had to borrow further large sums of money. It proved impossible to let Belvedere. At the glassworks he had had to lay off many of his best workmen. The final indignity occurred when returning from the bankruptcy court in London, he was clapped into jail for debt. This seems to have been largely due to his own generosity. Earlier in the year, in spite of his own troubles, he had lent his name to bills for a friend amounting to £2,000. This man had gone bankrupt leaving Isaac to pay. He was publicly taken into custody, left in a lock-up in Bristol for two days and nights, conveyed back to London and there released on bail. On his return Isaac was so depressed that he shut himself up in his home refusing to see anybody. Now the former royal glass-maker and pillar of the Jewish community was nothing but a 'dealer and chapman', an object of public notoriety. He was declared bankrupt and his goods were sold at a public auction. As if the affair were not already shameful enough an unpleasant scandal arose. Joseph was one of the creditors in respect of unclaimed salary and there was a strong suspicion of fraudulent collusion between father and son. In the event the lord chancellor cleared their name, and a pamphlet setting out the facts of their case was published 'for the country reader'.²⁰ But the business was in ruins. What became of the immediate family is unknown. The Jacobs are not mentioned in the *Directory* of 1825. (Matilda, Joseph's sister had married an Abraham Alexander in 1817, during the time of family trouble. The counterpart settlement in the Bristol Record Office mentions the comparatively small consideration of £100.) Extracts from the rate book of the overseers of the poor in Weston super Mare show that the last time Isaac was rated was in 1822. The great Belvedere had been divided in two by the mid century. The front became a crammers, 'an Academy where young gentlemen are prepared for the University'; in the back in the room 'designed by Mr. Jacobs for a billiard room' a dame's school was conducted.²¹ In 1925 the house was finally demolished to make room for a 'bus station.

As for the glass house in Great Gardens it was apparently next door to Carrington's glass house. It was probably absorbed into that concern, and then into the Phoenix glassworks.²² Somerset Square near St Mary Redcliffe is now covered with blocks of flats, though Isaac would remember the old fountain with grotesque masks in the centre. Nearby is the last remaining shell of a glass house now incorporated into an hotel as a feature of the dining room. Victoria Street cuts across the warren of workshops that was Temple Street, though the Temple church remains. Rose Street, where in 1811 Isaac bought a burial ground for the community and where in 1835 he himself was finally laid to rest, has been almost obliterated by Temple Meads Goods Yard.²³

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20. C. H. Walker, *In the Matter of Jacobs, a Bankrupt* (1821) in Bristol City Library, Accession number B.1259.

21. *Brown's New Guide to Weston-Super-Mare* (Weston-super-Mare, 1854), 10.

22. F. Buckley, 'Early Glasshouses of Bristol', *Trans. Soc. of Glass Technology* (1925) IX, No. 33, 43.

23. Powell, 238-40.