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JOHN WHITSON
AND THE MERCHANT
COMMUNITY OF
BRISTOL

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TWENTY FIVE

John Whitson and the Merchant Community of Bristol is the twenty-fifth pamphlet in a series on local history issued by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association. It is substantially the same as the Frederick Creech Jones Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Bristol in November 1969, but some additions and alterations have been made, and references are given to the sources.

As the series reaches its first quarter of a century, this seems a suitable occasion to comment briefly on its history. It was started in 1960 at the suggestion of Mr. Peter Harris. The initial capital of about £40 was raised by subscriptions from some of the members of the Branch, and in addition grants were received from the Gane Trust and the Education Department of the Corporation. During the last ten years the Branch has received help with particular pamphlets from the Publications Fund of the University, from the Docks Committee of the Corporation, from the Gane Trust, and from the Frederick Creech Jones Memorial Fund.

The pamphlets cover a wide variety of topics and they have enjoyed a considerable circulation. *The Theatre Royal : the first seventy years* is now in its third edition and *Bristol and the Slave Trade* in its second edition. Five pamphlets are at present out of print and will be reprinted as and when funds are available.

A continual rise in the cost of printing and of postal charges has made it necessary to increase from time to time the original price of two shillings, and it cannot be long before a further increase will be necessary to cover a recent substantial rise in printing costs.

The scheme is, of course, run on a non-profit basis, and the Branch is deeply grateful to the authors who have so generously given their time to producing such excellent and authoritative work.

Readers are asked to help by making the series even more widely known and by placing standing orders for future productions. A full list of publications is given on the inside back cover. The pamphlets can be obtained from most Bristol booksellers or direct from Peter Harris, 74, Bell Barn Road, Stoke Bishop, Bristol, 9. They are also on sale at the Porters' Lodge in the Wills Memorial Building.



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JOHN WHITSON AND THE MERCHANT COMMUNITY OF BRISTOL

**The Frederick Creech Jones Memorial Lecture
delivered in the University of Bristol, November 1969**

It is a pleasure as well as a privilege to deliver one of the Frederick Creech Jones Memorial Lectures on Bristol history. Bristolians have only too often treated with scant respect their legacy from the past. Mr. Creech Jones, with his tremendous energy and unbounded enthusiasm, did much to defend that legacy, to make his fellow citizens familiar with the treasures they have inherited from the past, and to inspire them with something of his own deep love and reverence for historic Bristol. Let us hope that his work and his example will encourage those who come after him to see that the city which he loved is not turned, in the name of progress and town planning, into a dreary, characterless conurbation, not only without a castle but even without a ship.

There are many hundreds of lives of sixteenth and seventeenth century politicians, soldiers and churchmen, but biographies of merchants are extremely rare. This is not surprising, for their lives, with few exceptions, do not readily lend themselves to dramatic or colourful treatment. Merchants did not generally play a major role in the great religious and political crises of the age. They did not provide many Catholic or Protestant martyrs, and there were few merchants in parliament of the same stature as country gentlemen like Eliot, or Pym, or Oliver Cromwell. Much more than the gentry or the lawyers, they minded their own businesses. Nor did

they generally indulge in eccentricity or conspicuous consumption, as did so many colourful personalities in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England. There may be romance in the story of English commerce, but its practitioners were not notably romantic.

If the biographer has tended to avoid merchants because they do not provide him with the kind of material best suited to his craft, the economic and social historian might have been expected to give them more attention. But he too has neglected them. There is no really adequate study of the merchants of Elizabethan and Early Stuart England. One of the difficulties is that so few records have survived of their business transactions, let alone of their private lives. A merchant of any consequence must have had a mass of business papers—ledgers, day books, accounts, memoranda, invoices, bills of lading, bills of exchange, contracts of insurance, and so on, as well as correspondence with customers and agents at home and abroad. Thus, Thomas White stated in his will “I have A greate Booke, A little booke, and a blottinge wherein is to be seene, what I owe and what is owinge to mee. I have alsoe A booke of my ventures at Sea, where is to be seene what I have Abroade. I have alsoe A booke of coppies of remembrances and letteres to such as are my Factores, which hath reference to my Booke of Ventures And my booke of Ventures to it. I have alsoe A booke wherein is a perticular Inventorie of all my howseholde stuff and plate, All which are in my Counter”.¹ But of the vast accumulation of business papers which existed in sixteenth and seventeenth century Bristol, only a few fragments have escaped the bonfire or the scrapheap, and thus the problem of providing a satisfactory account of how merchants ran their businesses is added to the difficulty of getting to know what kind of people they were.

The name of John Whitson is little known outside the city in which he successfully sought his fortune and to which he left a lasting memorial, part of which is familiar to Bristolians in the Red Maids School. Nevertheless, he was in his time one of the most distinguished members of the merchant oligarchy of Bristol. In the Parliament House at Westminster, he was a familiar figure, for he sat in no less than five of the Early Stuart parliaments, and he was well known to many of the officials in Whitehall as a man who mattered in Bristol and who could, on occasions, make himself extremely awkward in defence of its interests.

In the age in which Whitson lived, London dwarfed in size and importance all the provincial cities, and Bristol, with a population

1 Bristol Archives Office: *Great Orphan Books*, III. fo.45.

of between 10,000 and 15,000, did not find it easy to compete with the metropolis, which had a population of between 200,000 and a quarter of a million. Nevertheless, London was not England, even though Londoners thought it was — “as if God had no sons to whom he gave the benefit of the earth but in London”, as one indignant Bristolian put it.² Recent work in Early Stuart history has laid more and more emphasis on the importance of the local communities in shaping national history, and an examination of one of the leading merchants of an important outpost can perhaps be of general as well as of local interest.

The materials for John Whitson's life are fuller than they are for most of his fellow merchants. This is not the place to list all the sources in national and local records, although I shall refer to some of them when I deal with particular aspects of his life.³ It is, however, worthwhile drawing attention to two of the literary sources which help us to understand what kind of a man he was, one biographical and the other autobiographical. In the seventeenth century, John Aubrey compiled a sort of early version of *The Dictionary of National Biography* under the title of *Brief Lives*. It is worth quoting part of Aubrey's remarkable thumbnail sketch of Whitson. He tells us “He had a very good healthy constitution, and was an early Riser; wrote all his Letters and dispatched his businesse betime in the Morning . . . He lived nobly, kept a plentiful Table; and was the most popular magistrate in the City, alwaies chosen a Member of Parliament. He kept a noble house and did entertain and treat the Peers and great Persons that came to the City. He kept his Hawkes”.⁴ This information about the hawks is incidentally confirmed by one of the surviving business letters sent by Whitson to Sir Richard Boyle in Ireland. Richard Boyle, later Earl of Cork, was engaged in setting up an iron industry in Ireland and Whitson did business with him. In one of the letters, Whitson writes “I am now fallen into an idell humor of hawkinge: yf it please you out of your sympathy to sende mee a cast of marlins, I will at your requeste eyther pay for them or endeavour to deserve them”.⁵ Aubrey goes on to say of Whitson “He was charitable in his life in the breeding-up of poor Scholars: I remember five that had been bred-up under him, but not one of them came to good, they lived so luxuriously”.⁶

2 Records of the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol: *Book of Trade*, p.83 (1621).

3 See Note on Sources, p.23.

4 *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, edit. Oliver Lawson Dick, 1949, p.317.

5 *The Lismore Papers*, edit. A. B. Grosart, 1886-8, I.231, 23 May 1615.

6 *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, edit. Oliver Lawson Dick, p.317.

The autobiographical material was first published in 1729 under the ponderous title of *The Aged Christians Final Farewell to the World and its Vanities; A pious Meditation composed in the seventeenth century by John Whitson*.⁷ It went through at least five editions in the next hundred years. Unfortunately, the original manuscript has not survived, and we have no means of knowing whether it has undergone touching up and cutting by its eighteenth-century editor. *The Final Farewell* tells us a great deal about Whitson's personality and outlook. Some may think that his scornful dismissal of the vanities of the world, including riches, honours and carnal delights, comes a shade too smoothly from the lips of a man who had made a lot of money, married three times and held every possible honour in the city, and who was in fact still prepared to make more money by pulling strings at Whitehall to get a share in prize goods.⁸ Moreover, it seems a little unbecoming for the Aged Christian to suggest to the government that a suspected spy might give information if he were subjected to torture,⁹ but one should take into account human inconsistency and remember that old men forget.

John Whitson was to become something of a legend in Bristol. He was undoubtedly kind and generous, and it was possible to present him as Bristol's answer to London's Dick Whittington, the poor boy who trudged up from the Forest of Dean to the great city, made a fortune and gave a lot of it to the poor. If only he had been fond of cats instead of hawks and if only the bells of St. Stephen's had rung out the appropriate changes, Dick Whittington would have had nothing on him. A hundred years ago, the Bristol Librarian, John Nicholls, wrote a pamphlet about Whitson on the lines of "poor boy makes good", and in the manner of Samuel Smiles urged the young men of Bristol to emulate his industry and

virtue.¹⁰ The pious legends do not represent Whitson as he really was. He had many virtues, but he was not quite the plaster saint of John Nicholl's biography. One thinks of G. K. Chesterton's saint returning to earth, looking at his own statue and saying:

You make me perfect, public, passionless.

You make my virtues sit at ease.

You lie

and ending

By God, I was a better man than this

That stands and slanders me to all the stars.

I can in this lecture look only at certain aspects of Whitson's career and the part he played in the merchant community of Elizabethan and Early Stuart Bristol. The merchant community was small, perhaps little more than 100 in number, and very select. It had obtained a royal charter in 1552 incorporating its members as the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol with exclusive control of the foreign trade of the city. It obtained this monopoly because it was, as the Society pointed out at great length, in the best interests of Bristol. There were, however, some so misguided as to think otherwise, and the Society failed to make good its monopoly, not for the want of trying. The Merchant Venturers were always keen opponents of monopolies when held by others, but they saw their own monopoly as a special case, and Whitson himself was later to make strenuous efforts in government circles to ensure that foreign trade was handled only by the right people, that is by members of the Society of Merchant Venturers.¹¹ At the time when he first came to Bristol, the Society was in difficulties, not only because of resistance in Bristol but also because the monopoly of the lucrative Spanish and Portuguese trades had been entrusted by the government to a newly formed national Spanish Company to which any one who wanted to trade to the Iberian peninsula had to belong.¹² But in spite of its difficulties, the merchant community of Bristol was still the most important and powerful group in the City. How did you get into this exclusive set? Normally you got in by patrimony, that is by being the son of a merchant, or by apprenticeship. Now merchants did not take on as apprentices any Tom, Dick or Harry. You needed a respect-

7 References given here are to the 1829 edition: *A Pious Meditation, composed in the seventeenth century by John Whitson, Alderman of the City of Bristol, to which is subjoined some account of the author by the late Mr. George Symes Catcott, with additional memoirs collected by the present editor*, edit. the Rev. John Eden, Bristol, 1829. This reprints the 1729 text.

8 P.R.O. State Papers Domestic, S.P. 16/47, no. 20, Whitson to Edward Nicholas, secretary to the Lord Admiral, 3 January 1627. The letter is printed in full in Patrick McGrath, *Merchants and Merchandise in Seventeenth Century Bristol*, Bristol Record Society, 1955, pp.209-10.

9 Historical Manuscripts Commission: 12th Report, MSS. of Earl Cowper, 1888, I.332, John Whitson to Philip Burlamachi, 17 December 1627. Referring to a captured Spanish man-of-war, Whitson wrote: "Her English pilot is accounted to have been an arch traitor to this state . . . I am persuaded that if he is brought to the torture he will confess many great things, certainly he is a very lewd fellow."

10 J. F. Nicholls, *Alderman Whitson: His Life and Times*, Bristol, 1870.

11 For the Society of Merchant Venturers and the part played in it by John Whitson, see Patrick McGrath, *Records Relating to the Society of Merchant Venturers of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, Bristol Record Society, 1952.

12 Ibid., xiv — xv.

able background and your father had to be a man of some substance and almost certainly he had to pay a premium. How did Whitson manage to make the grade?

He was born about 1555, but very little is known about his family. We learn from the register of Bristol apprentices that his father was William Whitson who lived at Clearwell in the parish of Newland in the Forest of Dean, but we do not know what his father did for a living.¹³ John Whitson clearly acquired a good education, possibly at the excellent Grammar School in Newland to which he subsequently left £10 a year. Aubrey says Whitson went to school in Bristol where he acquired “a good proficiencie in the Latin tongue”,¹⁴ and here again it is interesting to note that Whitson left an annual income to “the Scholemaster of the free Schole at or nere Redcliffe Church in Bristol, he being an honest and learned scholler and endeavoringe to sett forward poore free-mens Children of the said Citty in the Englishe and Latin tongues”.¹⁵ It is, I suppose, just possible that Whitson went to school in Bristol, but his account in the *Final Farewell* of his arrival in the city seems to suggest that he came there to begin a business career, not to go to school. Nicholls suggests that Whitson left school early owing to the death of his parents,¹⁶ but Whitson’s father cannot have died earlier than 1575,¹⁷ five years after Whitson had started his apprenticeship. The eighteenth-century editor of the *Final Farewell* said that there was a tradition that Whitson was severely treated by the person with whom he was placed in the country and that he crossed the Severn with only a few pence in his pocket.¹⁸ A poor ill-treated orphan! What more could one ask for in a success-story? Nicholls makes the most of it: “Tying up his scanty garments in a handkerchief, with only a few pence in his pocket, he trudged down to Broadwere, there found (most likely worked his passage in) a wood-bush boat to Bristol”. He adds that

13 Bristol Archives Office: *Register of Apprentices 1566-1592*, fo.108. John Whitson, son of William Whitson of Cloverwall (*sic*), Gloucestershire, apprenticed to Nicholas Cutt, merchant, and Bridget his wife, for 8 years, 29 September 1570. He seems to have been 75 years old at the time of his death in 1629.

14 *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, edit. O. L. Dick, p.317.

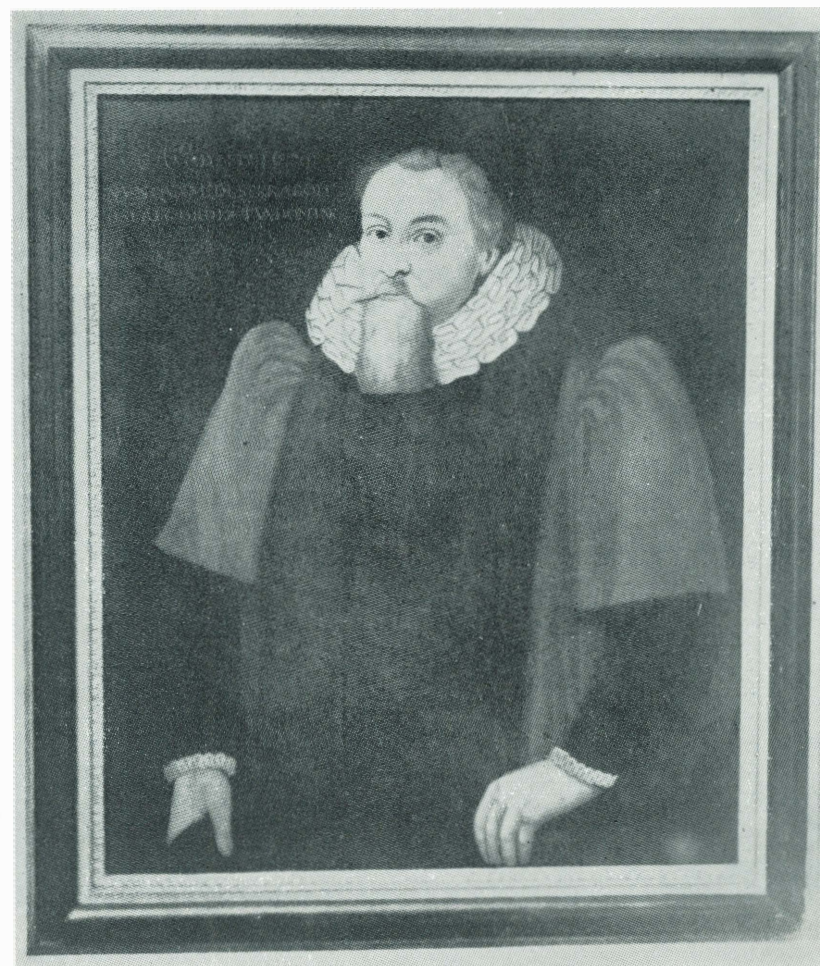
15 Bristol Archives Office: *Great Orphan Books*, III. fo.245 (r).

16 J. F. Nicholls, *Alderman Whitson*, p.5.

17 Whitson's sister Anne, wife of Abraham Willett, was aged 61 at the

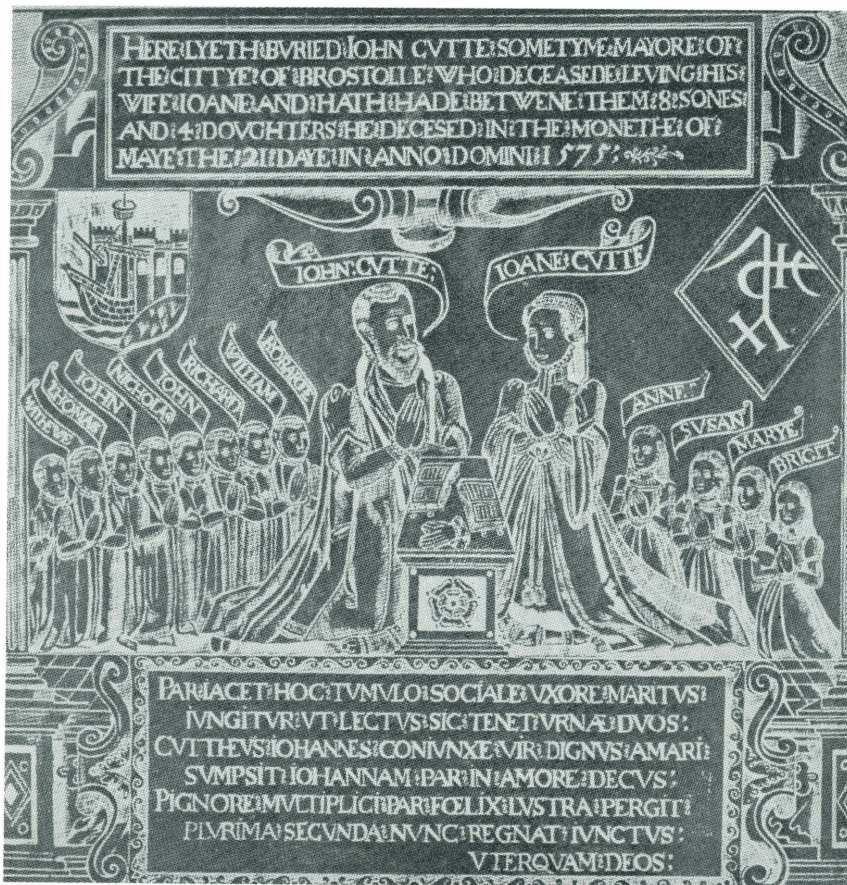
time of his death, and his sister Alice, wife of Edward Partridge, otherwise Wheeler, was aged 55. Wilfred Leighton, ‘The Manor and Parish of Burnett, Somerset’, *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, lix, 1937, p.258 and note.

18 *A Pious Meditation*, edit. J. Eden, 1829, p.31.



Portrait of John Whitson.

By courtesy of the Trustees of Bristol Municipal Charities.



The Cutt Brass, St. Michael's Church, Burnett. Nicholas Cutt to whom Whitson was apprenticed was the fifth son. Whitson later acquired the Manor of Burnett

By courtesy of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society.

as Whitson was 'diligent, obliging and assiduous, as well as cultured', he was soon removed from the drudgery of hopping round a cask to a stool in his master's counting house.¹⁹ Whitson may well have had all these qualities, but that was not the reason Nicholas Cutt gave him an opportunity of learning the secrets of the merchant's art. He did so because he had contracted with Whitson's father to do this when he took his son as an apprentice. John Whitson was bound apprentice as a merchant to Nicholas Cutt and Bridget his wife on 29 September 1570 when he was about 14 or 15 years old. Nicholas Cutt was the fifth son of a wealthy merchant and alderman John Cutt, who had a house in Corn Street and who had purchased the manor of Burnett in Somerset, which was later to be acquired by Whitson himself. Nicholas Cutt had taken up the freedom of Bristol as a merchant in 1568 and the next year he married Bridget, the daughter of another rich alderman, Robert Saxey.²⁰ The young couple thus had considerable wealth behind them, but they had been in business only for a short time, and it may be that Whitson's father had to pay only a small premium. It seems to be a perfectly normal apprenticeship and not a case of a merchant giving a job to a penniless lad who happened to turn up in Bristol looking for work. The suggestion of early poverty takes a little colour from a sentence or two in Whitson's *Final Farewell* where he thanks God for raising him from the dust of poverty to a fortune much greater than his father's,²¹ but poverty is relative, and self-made men looking back on the days of their youth are apt to overstress their humble origins.

What is possibly to the point about this alleged early poverty is that Whitson may have found it difficult to get anywhere when he had finished his apprenticeship. A young man who had learnt the merchant's business would find it hard to set up on his own unless he could get the necessary financial backing from his parents or his friends, and I suspect that this was John Whitson's problem. He was apprenticed in 1570, but after that we know nothing about him for 15 years. His apprenticeship was for 8 years and presumably came to an end in 1578, but he did not take up the freedom of Bristol, as he was entitled to do for a fee of 4/6 payable by his master and without which he could not set up on his own account. He may have found employment with Alderman Vawer to whom

19 J. F. Nicholls, *Alderman Whitson*, p.6.

20 For details of Burnett and the Cutt family, see Wilfred Leighton, 'The Manor and Parish of Burnett, Somerset', *Trans. B. & G. Arch. Soc.* lix, 1937, pp.243-285.

21 *A Pious Meditation*, p.22.

Aubrey states, mistakenly, he was apprenticed.²² He may have stayed on with the Cutts. Nicholas Cutt died in 1582,²³ but his widow carried on the business, and Whitson was certainly working for her in 1585. Historians who lack evidence are tempted to invent it. This is called using the historical imagination. Writing about this period in Whitson's life, concerning which we know nothing, Nicholls said "His foot was now well placed on the ladder, and surely and rapidly did he mount. Well selected investments bringing good returns, gave him a character for judgment; he had an old head on young shoulders, it was said; faithful and steady, honest and true, he became a great favourite, was pointed out as a rising man, and on his master's death is reported to have married his employer's widow".²⁴ There is no evidence to support this edifying story except on the last point, and having got that right, Nicholls could not believe that it was true. He considered the possibility that Whitson married the widow of his old master, remarking slyly "the wealthy widow might possibly doff her widow's weeds in favour of a hearty, honest, stalwart young fellow like Whitson, of whom every one spoke well . . . such things have been before now, and will be to the end of time," but then decided that the traditional version of the Industrious Apprentice story was more suitable, and he married off Whitson to his master's daughter: "Far more reasonable this, that he fell in love with the buxom daughter, than that he was married by a woman double his age."²⁵ Nicholls did not realise that Bridget Cutt, widow of Whitson's deceased master, had not got a daughter, buxom or otherwise, and he had no reason for assuming in any case that the widow was twice Whitson's age. She had married Nicholas Cutt in 1569,²⁶ and in 1585 she was probably not much older than Whitson himself who was then about 30. At that time she was carrying on her deceased husband's business and Whitson was in her employment. She may have found it difficult to run the business, and like most Tudor widows she was no doubt looking round for another husband. Whitson presumably wanted a business of his own. What followed is graphically described in the unexpurgated Aubrey: "He was a handsome young fellow; and his old Master (the Alderman) being dead, his Mistress one day called him into the Wine-cellar, and bade him broach the best Butt in the cellar for her;

22 *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, edit. O. L. Dick, p.317: "He was bound Apprentice to Alderman Vawr (*sic*), a Spanish Merchant of this City."

23 Wilfrid Leighton, *op.cit.*, p.251.

24 J. F. Nicholls, *Alderman Whitson*, p.6.

25 *Ibid.* p.6.

26 Wilfrid Leighton, *op.cit.* p.251.

and truly he broach't his Mistress, who after married him. This story will last perhaps as long as Bristol is a City."²⁷

The question naturally arises of how far we can trust Aubrey's tale of seduction in a cellar. Aubrey was Whitson's godson and step-grandson,²⁸ and there may have been a family tradition, but Aubrey can be shown to be wrong in some of his other scandalous stories. However, the parish register of St. Nicholas Church, Bristol, shows that the marriage took place on 12 April 1585 and that the first child, Bridget, was christened on 2 November 1585, an interval of only 204 days between the marriage and the christening.²⁹ One cannot, I suppose, entirely exclude the possibility that the child was born very prematurely, but considering the state of the sixteenth-century midwifery and the appalling infant mortality, it would have been little less than a miracle if such a child had lived. The evidence of the register combined with the account in Aubrey seems to show more or less conclusively that Whitson and the widow had anticipated their marriage. The probability is that the seduction took place in January or February 1585. They may have decided then and there that they would get married. By March they would have known that a child was on the way, and it is interesting to note that it was on 17 March that Whitson at long last took up the freedom of Bristol.³⁰ He must by then have been sure of a marriage which would make him a wealthy man and give him a business of his own. In his *Farewell* Whitson was to note how Pleasures and Carnal Delights were the quicksand on which many young men had suffered shipwreck. He thanked God for keeping him safe from these dangers, but added that while he was still on his journey he could not be altogether so sure, even in his advanced years (he was then in his seventies) as to think himself safe from their chains.³¹ He probably did not think of his own indiscretion as coming under the heading of Carnal Delights, since it led, and was presumably intended to lead, to honourable marriage. The sixteenth century would not have judged these things so harshly as the nineteenth. Fortunately for Nicholls, his Aubrey was expurgated.

This then seems to be the way in which Whitson first got his chance to become a merchant on his own account. He may have had his own early difficulties in mind when he left in his will the

27 *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, edit O. L. Dick, p.317.

28 *Ibid.* p.xxxi.

29 Bristol Archives Office: *Parish Registers of St. Nicholas*, no.2.

30 Bristol Archives Office: *Burgess Book I 1558-1599*, fo.106.

31 *A Pious Meditation*, p.14.

sum of £250 to be lent to five young men "of honest name and fame, beeinge meere merchants and free Burgesses" for 7 years at 10s. per year interest.³² They might not have the luck to come in contact with a rich widow.

Whitson's marriage was apparently a great success. His mother-in-law gave the couple a certain amount of property in Bristol.³³ A second daughter was born in 1586 and a third in 1588. Neither survived the perils of sixteenth-century childhood.³⁴ In these years, Whitson began to establish himself as a man of importance in city politics. He became sheriff in 1589, and thus made his entry into the select and self-electing group of just over 40 which enjoyed complete control of city government. Ten years later, he was an alderman, one of the small inner ring in the Council.³⁵

Two incidents in the fifteen-nineties are of interest. Whitson was one of a syndicate of Bristol merchants who fitted out two ships—the *Maryflower* and the *Seabrake* which brought home two enemy prizes. A contemporary chronicler tells us that Whitson decided that some of the prize goods belonged to poor mariners who were trying to supplement their miserable wages by doing a little trading on their own account. His conscience was troubled and he decided that he was robbing the poor, so he sold his part of the prize goods and gave the money to the almshouses of Bristol. As he feared that God would punish the owners of the ships, he also sold his share in them to Mr. Thomas James, a fellow councillor. The chronicler goes on to describe how the *Maryflower* was burnt through the carelessness of James's servants and how the *Seabrake* struck a rock in the Avon when all her crew got drunk, and he says that in future Whitson would have no more to do with prize goods.³⁶ The story as told by the chronicler was meant to do credit to Whitson, but it is perhaps a little odd that Whitson should sell to a colleague his shares in ships which he thought would come to no good. It is like selling one's car to a colleague when one suspects that the clutch is about to burn out. One won-

32 Bristol Archives Office: *Great Orphan Books*, III. fo.246 (r).

33 Bristol Archives Office: 00347 (5a). Conveyance by Anne Saxey, widow of Robert Saxey, to Bridget her daughter and John Whitson of property in High Street, Wine Street and Horse Street.

34 Bristol Archives Office: *Parish Registers of St. Nicholas*, No.2. Whitson's second child, Catherine, was baptised 12 December 1586 and buried on 18 February 1589; Anne, the third child, was baptised on 2 July 1588 and buried on 4 March 1598.

35 A. B. Beavan, *Bristol Lists*, 1899, p.313.

36 *A Pious Meditation*, p.46: John Eden's Additional Memoirs, quoting from one of the versions of Adams's Chronicle in the possession of William Tyson.

ders if he warned James. Later on James and Whitson were to have a major row over precedence in the Council House.³⁷ Perhaps James remembered the ships. Nor is it true to say that Whitson would have no more to do with prize goods. He was certainly very interested in them and tried to get a share in their disposal in the later sixteen-twenties.³⁸ The *Maryflower* and the *Seabrake* were to give their names to two of the houses of the Red Maids School.³⁹

The other story told by the chronicler relates to 1595 when corn was very dear.⁴⁰ The mayor and aldermen, under pressure from the Privy Council which was always afraid of riots if food prices got too high, decided to buy rye in London to be sold cheap to the poor. They agreed to pay Whitson's expenses if he would go to London and get hold of a consignment of rye for them. He did so, but they then went back on the arrangement, refused to pay all his expenses, and told him they would take only half the quantity of rye which he had ordered. But by the time the rye actually got to Bristol, prices had soared astronomically, and they entreated him to let them have the lot to sell to the poor, and he was so good natured that he eventually agreed. It is clear that Whitson was by now a rich man, since he was prepared to underwrite a transaction involving several thousands of pounds. Further evidence of his increasing prosperity is the fact that in 1599 he acquired from his brother-in-law the manor of Burnett in Somerset.⁴¹ A brass of the Cutt family is still to be seen in the church there.

The basis of his fortune was, of course, foreign trade. Whitson is often referred to as a Spanish merchant, largely because he had the arms of the Spanish Company on the great fireplace in his house in St. Nicholas Street, a fireplace now preserved in the Red Maids School. But his trade was by no means limited to Spain. I have no time to go into the details of his many and varied operations as a merchant of which there is a great deal of evidence in the Port Books in the Public Record Office. In the fifteen-nineties we find him trading with France and the Mediterranean, Ireland, Hamburg, Amsterdam and Danzig, and in 1598 for the first time he had dealings with Madeira and Newfoundland. In the seventeenth

37 *Adams's Chronicle of Bristol*, Bristol, 1910, pp.204-5; *Rickarts' Calendar* edit. Lucy Toulmin Smith, Camden Society, 1872, p.63.

38 See p.4, note 8.

39 *Seabrake House* may be sailing under false colours. J. Damer Powell, *Bristol Privateers and Ships of War*, p.41, refers to letters of marque issued on 10 July 1585 to the *Maryflower* and the *Seabright*.

40 *Adams's Chronicle of Bristol*, Bristol, 1910, p.149.

41 Wilfrid Leighton, 'The Manor and Parish of Burnett, Somerset', *Trans. B. & G. Arch. Soc.*, lix. 253-4.

century, he traded with numerous Spanish and Portuguese ports, as well as with Ireland, Venice, Denia, Cephalonia and Leghorn in the Mediterranean, and there was an isolated venture to Barbary in 1620-1. Of all the paper work which this produced, there are surviving only a few letters, some scraps of accounts and two mutilated pages torn from one of his letter books which were later used as end papers for binding a volume originally printed by Aldus.⁴²

The year 1603 was memorable for Whitson. It saw the marriage of his eldest and only surviving child Bridget to Sir George Trenchard, son and heir of Sir George Trenchard of Wolverston in Dorset, another example of the alliance between the merchants and the gentry which was so important in seventeenth century life, and another indication that Whitson had arrived socially. In 1603 Whitson became mayor of Bristol for the first time. 1603 was also notable because in that year there set out from Bristol a voyage of exploration which might easily have given Whitson's name a permanent place on the map of North America. The "chief furtherers" of the voyage were Robert Aldworth, whose fine house in Bristol survived until the blitz, and John Whitson. They and their associates invested about £1,000 in setting out the *Speedwell* of 50 tons and the *Discoverer* of 20 tons. The expedition crossed Massachusetts Bay and anchored for a time in a place which was called Whitson Bay in honour of one of the backers of the voyage. They planted wheat rye and various vegetables and made contact with the Indians, but they did not establish a colony. There were no long term results. The name of Whitson Bay did not endure, although the place later acquired fame as the Plymouth Harbour in which the *Mayflower* anchored in 1620.⁴³ Whitson himself seems to have taken no further interest in exploration and colonisation.

Two years later, in 1605, Whitson made another lasting contribution to Bristol by helping to re-establish the Society of Merchant Venturers. In the later sixteenth century, the Society had been pushed into the background and possibly become moribund. The national Spanish Company also became redundant owing to the war with Spain, but with the coming of peace, it got a new Charter in 1605 giving it a monopoly. 97 Bristolians joined it, and Whit-

son was one of the four Bristolians on the governing body. Then at the end of 1605, the City Council decided that all the Bristol members should resign and form a company of merchant adventurers of the City of Bristol. Whitson was one of the committee of three controlling entry to the company and one of the first two wardens of the revived society. He played a major role in launching it on its triumphant course and served it for the next twenty years with great ability.⁴⁴

The years that followed brought personal sorrow as well as public success. His only surviving child Bridget Trenchard died in childbirth in 1606. Aubrey tells us that she was "counted the Flower of Bristol" and that Whitson loved her dearly.⁴⁵ If Whitson had had a son or a grandson, he would have been less inclined to leave so much to charity. There might not have been a Red Maids School. In 1608 he buried his first wife, but in less than a year he married again. The lady was Magdalen Hynde, widow of William Hynde, citizen and salter of London, and the mother of two children.⁴⁶ The affairs of William Hynde at the time of his death seem to have been somewhat involved. He had money invested in voyages of the East India Company and to the Netherlands, but his assets seem to have been smaller than his liabilities, and it was probably not much consolation to his widow to know that there was owing to him in "doubtful debts" the sum of £1758.0s.1d. One assumes that she wanted another husband quickly, and the wealthy and respected M.P. for Bristol must have seemed very eligible. Seventeenth-century marriages were not usually arranged on the basis of love alone, but as Mrs. Hynde does not seem to have had much money, it is possible that Whitson married her for love. Aubrey tells us that she was very beautiful "as by her picture (at length) in the Dining rome, doeth appear".⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that when an inventory was made of Whitson's goods after his death, they found in the Great Parlour "the deceased's second wives

42 These include a number of letters in *The Lismore Papers*, edit. A. B. Grosart, 1886-8, and in the *State Papers Domestic*. For the fragments from one of Whitson's letter books, see my volume on *Merchants and Merchandise in Seventeenth Century Bristol*, Bristol Record Society, 1955, pp. xxxix, 175-177. I hope to print in a future Bristol Record Society volume a part of one of his account books which has now come to light.

43 C. M. MacInnes, *A Gateway of Empire*, 1939, p.66ff.

44 See Patrick McGrath, *Records Relating to the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol*, Bristol Record Society, 1952.

45 *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, p.317.

46 Guildhall Library: *Register of St. Benet Fink*: "The XXlth of September 1609 were Married John Wisston (sic) merchant of Bristol unto Magdalen Hynde by licence from the Lord Bishop of Canterbury." William Hyne's will is in the Principal Probate Registry, Somerset House (51 Dorset). Further details of his estate are found in the Guildhall Record Office, *Common Sergeant's Book*, I. fo 305 (v).

47 *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, edit. O. L. Dick, p.317. Aubrey states incorrectly that by her Whitson had a daughter who married Sir Thomas Trenchard. The daughter in question was in fact the offspring of Whitson's first marriage.

picture with a curtayne and a curtayne rodd", valued at 40s.⁴⁸ It was the only one of some forty pictures in the house which had a curtain. One wonders whether this meant that Whitson was particularly attached to the picture and wished to preserve it with special care, or was it that the third Mrs. Whitson did not want to be continually confronted with the picture of her beautiful predecessor? The marriage with Magdalen Hynde took place by licence at St. Benet Fink's Church in London on 21 September 1609. The second Mrs. Whitson died in 1615⁴⁹ and two years later Whitson married his third widow, Mrs. Rachel Aubrey, who outlived him.⁵⁰

It is convenient at this point to glance at Whitson's parliamentary career. He first came to the House in 1605 into a parliament which was not dissolved until 1611; he sat in the very stormy Addled Parliament in 1614; he was in the House again in 1621. He missed the parliament of 1624 but was back once more in 1625 and yet again in 1626 in the parliament which impeached the great Duke of Buckingham. It would be tedious to give all the known details of his work in these parliaments. He seems to have been a useful if not very prominent member. He spoke on a number of occasions and sat on a fair number of committees. These were years when great issues of principle were being raised and the tension between king and Commons was often very great, but one must not forget for many M.P.s, their job when they got to Westminster was not to fight battles for parliamentary privilege or to champion the liberties of the subject, but to further the particular, often very narrow, interests of their own locality or social group. A good deal of Whitson's work was of this nature, although occasionally in resisting taxes on trade or complaining about the bad keeping of the seas, he found himself allied with those who were attacking the government for other reasons. It is difficult to say how effective he was as a speaker, because the parliamentary diarists did not report him at great length, and the official Journal of the House often gives only brief and incoherent jottings of points in speeches. Thus, the Journal for 18 April 1614 reports as follows: An Act concerning taxes and impositions on merchants . . . Mr. Whitson: Not acquainted with the Bill till heard in the house; but if Forty

Hearts, it should have it.—A Simile: *Mary and Martha: Hoc unum est necessarium.*—Wisheth not to laugh; for he ready to weep! . . .⁵¹ It rather looks as if his simile had provoked laughter and that he rebuked those who laughed at him. I will not go on with the report, but it is clear that on this kind of evidence it is difficult for a man to build up a reputation with historians as a Demosthenes or a Cicero. It is probable that Whitson prepared good speeches, for we know from other sources that he used words with facility. One rather curious incident is worth mentioning concerning the debate on 1 May 1621 when the house, having condemned without a hearing the aged Catholic lawyer Floyd for using insulting words about the national hero and heroine, the Protestant elector and electress of the Palatinate, proceeded to consider his punishment. There seems to have been sadistic hysteria in the house with one M.P. after another suggesting ferocious punishments, from whipping to cutting out Floyd's tongue. Whitson's contribution was a punishment which he said was used in Spain, to whip the man and drop hot bacon on him at every six lashes.⁵² It seems oddly out of character, but he was in highly respectable company and only one or two members spoke for moderation. Looking back on his long parliamentary career, Whitson seems to have felt disillusioned. He writes: "I have been a Representative Member in many Parliaments, where I daily learned new lessons of the world's vanity, and augmented my grief together with my experience", but by this time he was an old man and clearly uneasy at the political crisis that was developing.⁵³

I have examined elsewhere the contents of Whitson's house in St. Nicholas Street in which, said Aubrey, was the finest dining room in the city.⁵⁴ The house, as is the custom of Bristol with so many of its historical buildings, has been pulled down. It seems to have been a two-storied house with at least five reception rooms, six bedrooms and a large number of domestic offices, as well as extensive business premises, and it was filled with the furniture and furnishings acquired in the course of three marriages. One or two points may be noted. In the Little Parlour they found "all his bookes great and small, some latten and some English and one

48 Patrick McGrath, *Merchants and Merchandise in Seventeenth Century Bristol*, Bristol Record Society, 1955, p.84.

49 Bristol Archives Office: *Parish Registers of St. Nicholas*, No. 2. "Magdalen Whitson, wife of John Whitson, alderman, he then Mayor elect, was buried on 19 September 1615."

50 Bristol Archives Office: *Parish Registers of St. Nicholas*, No. 5, 1617, "Mr. John Whitson, alderman and Mrs. Rachell Aubere Widdowe were maryed the 18th daye of maye with a Lycense."

51 *Commons' Journals*, I. 467.

52 *Commons Debates 1621*, edit. Notestein, Relf and Simpson, III. 123, VI. 120.

53 *A Pious Meditation*, p.19.

54 For a transcript of the inventory, see Patrick McGrath, *Merchants and Merchandise in Seventeenth Century Bristol*, Bristol Record Society, 1955, p.80 ff. and also "The Wills of Bristol Merchants in the Great Orphans Books", *Trans. B. & G. Arch. Soc.* lxxviii, 1949, p.107 ff.

Spanish book all valued at iiii^{li}". Probably the appraisers did not know the value of books. In the extensive cellars were cheese racks, tubs, trestles and planks, but no wine, somewhat surprisingly considering that Whitson entertained the great ones who came to Bristol and presumably did not entertain them with water.

In the room at the head of the stairs, the appraiser found a fine collection of weapons and armour including five old corselets and two new ones, a corselet for a horse, three morrice pikes, six staves, two halberts, two partizans, two bills, a pole axe, a leading staff, two darts, two swords, two daggers, a pistol, a flask (presumably for powder), a touch box, two cross bows, a musket and six calivers. It seems surprising to find all this in the home of a peaceful merchant, but Common Councillors were required to supplement the store of arms which the corporation kept for the annual muster, and in addition Whitson was an officer in the trained bands.

We are reminded that this was a pre-banking age when we learn that there was in the house £800 in cash, as well as plate worth nearly £300. The importance of credit in the commercial system of the early seventeenth century is illustrated by the fact that there was owing to Whitson over £1500 for iron, and that his good debts were estimated at £1000, his "hopeful debts" at nearly £400 and his "debts desperate by many bills" at £3000. Quite a lot of these debts may have been the result of straightforward commercial transaction, but there is the possibility that some of them were the result of money-lending. We know for instance that he had in the house £50's worth of plate left in pawn, and he certainly made some advances on the security of property. Whitson's criticism in the 1621 parliament of a bill which proposed to reduce the legal rate of interest from 10% to 8% may not be entirely due to the alleged difficulty of applying such legislation to commerce.⁵⁵ Before the invention of banks, there were of course many people, including nobility and gentry, who were willing to provide loans on good security, and Whitson may have been of their number. But he was certainly no Shylock, and he left instructions to his executors: "As for those whom necessity has indebted to me, see that ye shew mercy unto them, and exact not your due with rigour and oppression. Let my former course of life be your example; yea, rather let the memory of Him that paid all your debts upon the cross, keep you from grinding the faces of your poor brethren."⁵⁶

I want to turn now to *The Aged Christians Final Farewell*. I think we can establish on internal evidence that he wrote it be-

55 Common Debates 1621, edit. Notestein, Relf and Simpson, II 350; III. 184.

56 *A Pious Meditation*, p.25.

tween June 1626 and November 1626. It cannot be earlier than June 1626 because it contains what I take to be a reference to the parliament suddenly dissolved at that time,⁵⁷ and I think it cannot have been completed later than November 1626 because in it Whitson makes a number of references to his hope that God will allow him to die peacefully in his bed⁵⁸ and yet does not refer to the murderous assault made on him by Christopher Callowhill on 7 November 1626 when Callowhill attacked Whitson with a knife and left a lasting scar on his cheek. We know this incident made a profound impression on Whitson figuratively as well as literally, for he established an annual sermon to commemorate the occasion. I think he would have used this as an illustration of the uncertainty of human life if the assault had already taken place.⁵⁹

He begins the *Farewell* by expressing his weariness with the world in which there is for him nothing new. It has all happened before, and he has seen everything there is to see. But he quickly moves on to his main, if not exactly original, theme—that all the things men seek after and prize so highly are in fact snares and delusions. This change of approach must, I think, have seemed necessary to him, because his younger readers might well have retorted that Whitson might have seen everything by the age of 73 but they had not:

*Life to be sure is nothing much to lose
But young men think it is
And we were young.*

And so he endeavours to show that Riches, Wealth and large Endowments are "the unnecessary burthens of life and the clog of all spiritual desires."⁶⁰ As for Honour and Preferment, were not Alexander and Caesar the most wretched in the pursuit of this shadow — "being pricked like bladders in the height of their tumour"? Was he thinking also of examples nearer home of which he had had personal experience—the Lord Chancellor Bacon's ignominious fall in the parliament of 1621, the Lord Treasurer Cranfield, a merchant who became Earl of Middlesex but who was impeached for corruption in 1624, the Lord Keeper Williams dis-

57 Ibid. p.19: "More expressly at a late meeting, when both the honourable houses were unexpectedly, unfortunately, and very suddenly dissolved; much time being spent, and nothing done, to the world's wonder, and to the exceeding grief and discontent of all true-hearted subjects."

58 Ibid. p.24.

59 See his will and also J. Latimer, *Annals of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*, p.96.

60 *A Pious Meditation*, p.10.

missed abruptly in 1625, and the might Duke of Buckingham impeached in 1626 by a parliament of which Whitson was a member.

Then, as we have already mentioned, he dismissed Pleasures and Carnal Delights before proceeding to make a very interesting attack on knowledge and earthly wisdom.⁶¹ The pursuit of them led our first parents astray and deprived their posterity of content and tranquillity, for "when the insatiable thirst of science enters, the soul is lost . . . We rest not 'till we have the causes; nor in the causes, 'til we have the principles; nor in the principles, 'till we have entangled ourselves in the cobwebs of our own reason." The theme fascinated him and he pursued it: "There are many so deluded with a depraved fancy, as to make science the end of science, and out of a fond opinion heap question upon questions, never ceasing to make doubts and distinctions, to make knots and undo them, whereby they ensnare themselves, and mar others". He concludes that knowledge will be a comfort and science will be attained only after we are dead, when we shall no more see the shadow of things through a glass but face to face.

This attack on the pursuit of knowledge is of considerable interest. He was not, I think, merely attacking what are wrongly conceived to be the futile subtleties of medieval scholasticism, but the search for knowledge and the new science itself. Whitson lived at the beginning of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, but he had no sympathy with it and considered that the perpetual itch to know more and more was a vain thing leading only to unhappiness.

Then he bids farewell to strength, health and long life.⁶² On the human body, he says "How quickly is it impaired with sickness, wasted with age, broken with lust, consumed with weariness, and gone away as a puff of wind." He comments too on how transitory is human beauty, and perhaps underestimates his own good looks when he says "I think myself more happy in the want of it, than others in the enjoyment",⁶³ a rather surprising remark from one who according to Aubrey had been a handsome young man and who was, as we know from his portrait, now a dignified, active and by no means coarse old man.

Lastly, Whitson said goodbye to his dearly beloved third wife—"the joy of my heart, the stay and comfort of mine old age" and to "my beloved friends, the solace of prosperity, the comfort of adversity". He tells them "I have found your kindness and affec-

61 *Ibid.* p.16 ff.

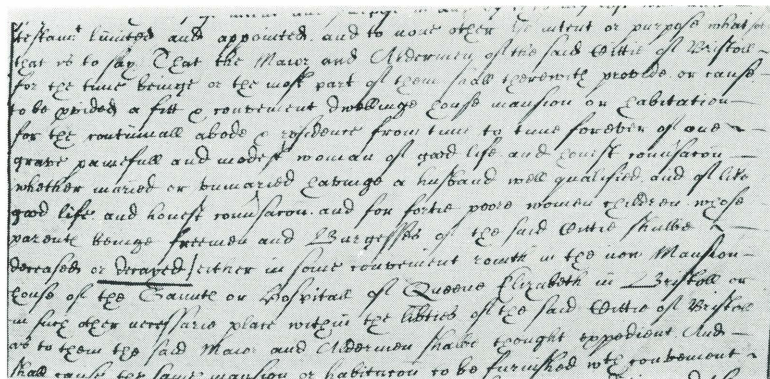
62 *Ibid.* p.20 ff.

63 *Ibid.* p.22.

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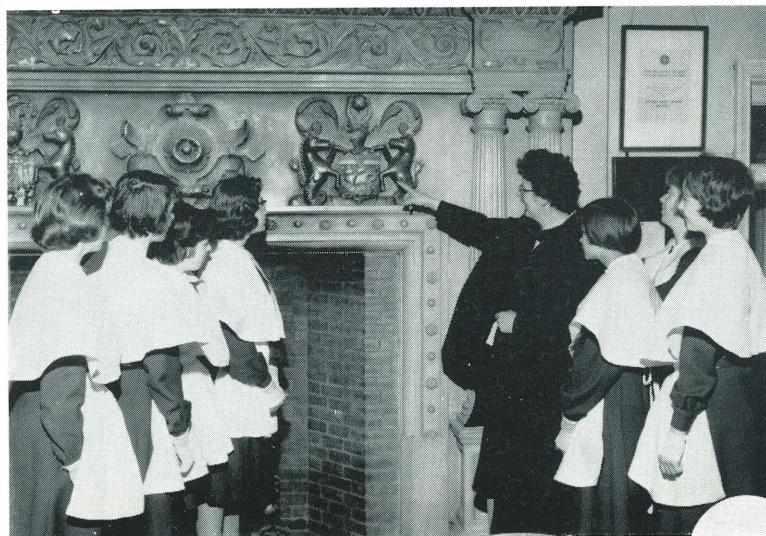
Part of the inventory of Whitson's goods and chattells.

By courtesy of Miss Elizabeth Ralph, City Archivist.



From a copy of Whitson's will in the City Archives Office making arrangements for the education of 'fortie poore women children' by a 'grave painefull and modest woman of good life and honest conversacion.'

Photograph by Photo Prints (Bristol) Ltd.



Whitson's fireplace now in the Red Maids School.

Reproduced by courtesy of the Headmistress and Photo-Reportage Ltd.

tion, in your endeavours toward my satisfaction", but there is a momentary touch of cynicism when he adds "Whether this respect sprung from the love of my fortune or myself, it is no time now to enquire."⁶⁴ He says that he is assured of salvation through his faith in Jesus Christ, but, as we have already seen, this did not mean that he must not persevere to the end. He does not seem to have held, as Cromwell, for instance held, the full Calvinist doctrine that the elect cannot fall from grace. He asks his friends to pray that he may have a quiet and peaceable death and that he may not be carried off by any lingering and pining disease or by any sudden casualty.⁶⁵ Their prayer was not apparently answered. Aubrey reports that "He dyed about the seventy-sixth yeare of his age by a fall from a horse; his head pitching on a nail that stood on its head by a Smyths shop".⁶⁶

The funeral took place on 9 March 1629, and Whitson's request that it should be simple was not granted by his executors.⁶⁷ The funeral account includes over £55 for gowns of black frize and black hats for 75 poor men who attended, in spite of the fact that Whitson had explicitly said that he had helped the poor in his lifetime and that there was no need to offer them special inducements to come to his funeral.⁶⁸ Various members of the family and friends were provided with mourning and Mrs. Whitson did herself well with an outfit costing £20. The Mayor and aldermen were there, the boys from Queen Elizabeth's Hospital, and the trained bands with pikes draped in black ribbon and drums covered with black cloth, and the musketeers gave him three volleys at his interring.⁶⁹

I can mention only briefly his famous will and the charitable bequests that insured that he is still remembered three hundred and forty years after his death. When he made the will, he had no surviving children or grandchildren, but his third wife was still alive and as well as two sisters, a number of nephews, and a step-daughter.⁷⁰ He made quite generous provision for his family who,

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p.23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p.24.

⁶⁶ *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, p.318; *Adams's Chronicle of Bristol*, Bristol, 1910, p.223.

⁶⁷ The expenses of the funeral were £418.5.9d., including £24.6s.8d. for a monument. They are printed in *A Pious Meditation*, pp.67-69.

⁶⁸ *A Pious Meditation*, pp.24-25.

⁶⁹ *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, p.318.

⁷⁰ For his will, see Bristol Archives Office: *The Great Orphan Books*, III, 244 (r) ff. For details of his surviving relatives, based on the will and the inquisition post mortem, see Wilfred Leighton, 'The Manor and Parish of Burnett, Somerset,' *Trans. B. & G. Arch. Soc.* lxx, p.258. Details of the charitable bequests are given in T. J. Manchee, *The Bristol Charities*, Bristol, 1831, vol. 1.

in addition to individual bequests, got one third of the residue of his estate after other legacies had been paid. In a codicil he cut out the individual legacy to his nephew Richard Partridge "for many good and strong reasons best known to myself". Aubrey says that Whitson's nephew, whom he mistakenly calls Richard Wheeler, was his heir, but as he proved "a Sott and capricious Coxcombe", Whitson settled all his estate upon the City of Bristol for pious uses. In fact, he did not give all his estate to charity but made quite generous provision for his relatives. Nevertheless there clearly had been a quarrel with one of the nephews, and the relatives did in fact dispute the will, unsuccessfully.⁷¹ And all this gave rise to various legends. One of them is given in the 1789 edition of the *Farewell*,⁷² and Nicholls in 1870 turned it into a splendid Victorian melodrama: "Childless, wifeless, and alone the successful merchant lay in the great house in Nicholas-Street, dying. Alone, yet not alone . . . no, his nephews, lately so full of fawning, sycophantic adulation were there . . . the joylight glistened in their eyes, exultation quickened their heart-pulses . . . The golden prize is now their own,—for old "Pray-by-night" is in "articulo mortis." "Slip away the pillow",—help him to die easy,—'twill end the poor man's struggles' . . . 'tis done, and not daring to look upon the dead, or witness the last convulsive struggles, they slip quietly into the adjoining closet to gloat over their future possessions. Alone! yet not alone; the God whom he served had good work yet for Whitson to do, and at the moment the deed was a doing, Rachel, the cook to the pious old Alderman, came up into the room to have one last glimpse of her dear old master,—to replace the pillow, moisten his lips with cordial, which he greedily swallowed, was the work of a moment; he had been sensible, though speechless, all the while, and now no more alone, pillowed on a true, loving, womanly bosom, he grew rapidly better, the Vicar of St. Nicholas came and joined their hands, as his wife."⁷³ It is only fair to Nicholls to say that after indulging in melodrama, he says this tradition is apocryphal and that there are strong reasons against its truthfulness — a

71 T. J. Manchee, *op.cit.* I, 46. It may be that in his old age Whitson became cantankerous and overbearing. His step-daughter, Sarah Hynde, was originally left jewellery, linen and 100 marks, but Whitson later crossed this out with his own hand and left her only £20 because she would not be ruled by him in marriage. There is also an indication that Whitson had his doubts about Richard Partridge "my now servant" even before he amended his will, for he left him £25 and an annuity of £10 a year which was to be varied to £30 "if he become a good husband and endeavour to gett his livinge by some honest course of trade or husbandry."

72 *A Pious Meditation*, pp. 33-34.

73 J. F. Nicholls, *Alderman Whitson: His Life and Times*, pp.34-35.

masterly understatement. I think the third Mrs. Whitson would have been surprised and indignant to find herself transformed into the old man's cook, and even John Whitson would have had difficulty in stretching charity so far as to leave legacies to nephews who had made a murderous attempt on his life.

The charitable legacies were many and varied, to the poor of Newland where he was born; the poor of Burnett where he was lord of the manor; the free school at Newland and the Free Grammar School near St. Mary Redcliffe; £250 to be lent to five young merchants; and another £250 to be lent to poor handicraftmen. Then there was £20 a year to help poor honest married women lying in childbed, but no one was to get a gift more than three times; and two thirds of the residue of the estate to be used by the corporation for charity at its discretion. At Mrs. Whitson's request, part of this was used to provide 10s. every week to be given to poor widows.

The most famous bequest was, of course, the grant of £90 a year out of the manor of Burnett to provide a convenient dwelling house for "one grave, painful, and modest woman, of good life and conversation" and for "forty poor women children" who were to be taught to read English, and to sew, and do some other laudable work towards their maintenance. They were to be bound apprentice to the mistress for 8 years, the mistress was to get the profits of their labour but was to provide food, drink and apparel. The mistress was to receive 40s. a year for each child and was "to cause every one of the said children to go appareled in red cloth." Whitson had obviously given a good deal of thought to the plan, which was an application of the apprenticeship system but which also embodied the idea, so attractive to the men of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of making the poor in some degree self-supporting. The specific instruction that the girls should be taught English and the insistence that they should wear a uniform and attend church in the same way as the boys from the Queen Elizabeth's Hospital suggest that he was not merely concerned with an apprenticeship scheme, and the plan was unique in that it provided at least a measure of education for girls at a time when most people thought female children were not worth educating. The dispute about the will was not settled until 1635,⁷⁴ but already in 1634 the city had established trustees who set up a house with a mistress and 16 poor maidens pending a final settlement. The trustees incidentally decided that any surplus funds should be used by £10 or £20 "for and towards the preferment in

74 T. Manchee, *Bristol Charities*, p.46.

marriage of so many of the said maids as the mayor and aldermen should think worthy of it." Some may regret that in the early nineteenth century the trustees reported that this practice was not observed, as it would expose the girls to the addresses of improper and designing persons, and would unsettle their minds at a time when they ought to be preparing themselves for earning a subsistence!⁷⁵

Whitson then did not live to see the establishment of the Red Maids Hospital which he was apparently planning to set up in his last years, but it was successfully launched within five years of his death, and it has had a continuous history from 1634 to the present day.

John Whitson typifies the best type of the Elizabethan and Early Stuart merchant. A stroke of luck enabled him to get his foot on the ladder, but he rose to the top because of his ability and determination. He clearly enjoyed the good things of the world and liked playing a leading part in public life, but he recognised his responsibilities to the less fortunate. In parliament and at Whitehall, his main job was to further the interests of the merchant community and of the city which they controlled, and if he did not choose to get involved in the great political controversies of the age, he was in this typical of his class. Like many Englishmen he was bewildered and frightened by the gathering storm which led to a major breakdown between king and Commons in 1629 and to Civil War in 1642.⁷⁶ As for his religious views and his charitable work, some may think they are little more than an attempt to get the best of both worlds, but as far as we can see, he did what he considered to be his duty and tried for the most part to live his life in such a way that after it was over, he might, in his own words, "exchange the dross of this world for inestimable pearls; and be no more deluded with the shadow of good things, but possess the true substance" when, as he put it "I shall have the glorified saints and angels for my companions, and be admitted fellow-citizen with them in the new Jerusalem."⁷⁷

75 T. Manchee, *Bristol Charities*, 1.61.

76 *A Pious Meditation*, p.18 ff.

77 *Ibid.* p.77.

NOTES ON THE SOURCES

- (a) *Manuscript.* Relevant material in the Bristol Archives Office includes the Registers of Apprentices, the Burgess Books, the Proceedings of Common Council, the Great Orphan Books III (containing a copy of Whitson's will) and the inventory of his goods and chattels made after his death. The Registers of St. Nicholas' Parish, in which he lived, are also deposited here.

The records of the Society of Merchant Venturers, of which he was a distinguished member, also contain a number of useful references.

The series of Port Books in the Public Record Office contain many details about his trade. I have examined all of them, but it has not been possible to use this material to any extent in this pamphlet.

Only a few fragments of his business records have survived. They include some leaves torn from a Letter Book of 1627 (see Bristol Record Society, vol. 19, p.175 ff.) and some as yet unprinted accounts in the Public Record Office relating to voyages to Bordeaux, Ireland and Newfoundland.

- (b) *Printed.* A number of Whitson's letters are to be found in the *Lis-more Papers*, edit. A. B. Grosart, 1886-8. Whitson's semi-autobiography was first published in 1729 and was reprinted on a number of occasions. The last edition in 1829 includes the bill for his funeral. (*A Pious Meditation, composed in the seventeenth century by John Whitson*, edit. the Rev. John Eden, Bristol, 1829). John Aubrey's thumbnail sketch is to be found in *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, edit. O. L. Dick, 1949.

For Whitson's parliamentary career, see *The Commons Journals* and *The Commons Debates* 1621, edit. Notestein, Relf and Simpson.

There are a number of references in the *State Papers Domestic* and in the *Acts of the Privy Council*. Further material is printed in Bristol Record Society's volumes 17 and 19; *Adams's Chronicle of Bristol*, Bristol 1910; *Ricarts' Calendar*, edit. L. Toulmin Smith, Camden Society, 1872, and J. W. Damer Powell, *Bristol Privateers and Ships of War*.

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