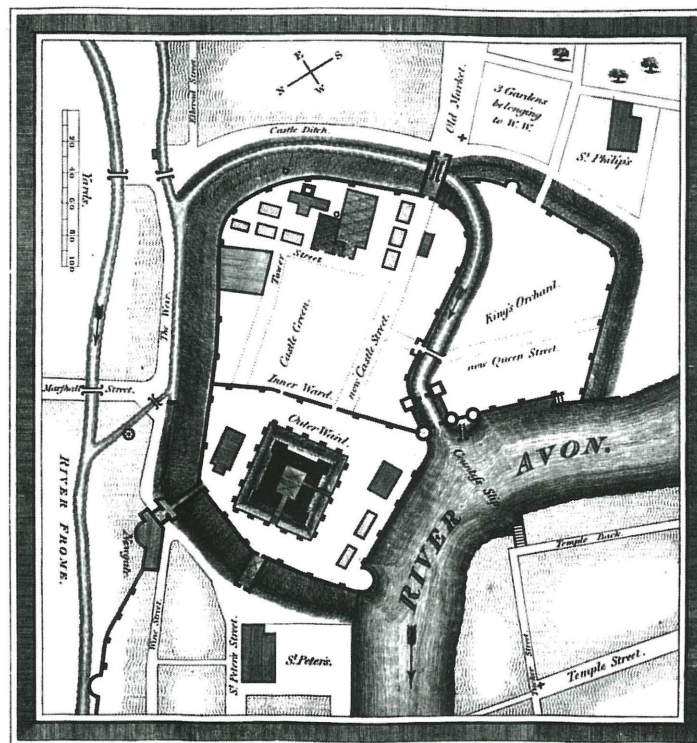


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# THE FIRST HISTORIANS OF BRISTOL: WILLIAM BARRETT AND SAMUEL SEYER



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*Cover illustration:* 'Ichnography of the ancient Castle of Bristow'  
from Samuel Seyer's *Memoirs Historical and  
Topographical of Bristol*

**THE FIRST HISTORIANS OF BRISTOL:  
WILLIAM BARRETT  
AND SAMUEL SEYER**

From the early Middle Ages successive chroniclers and antiquarians have calendared events and described incidents in the history of Bristol, but not until the eighteenth century was there any attempt to write a complete and accurate account of the history of the city, based on the documentary evidence. Writing in 1125, the monk, William of Malmesbury, described the commerce and shipping of the port of Bristol, and the struggle of St Wulstan to suppress the trade in slaves to Ireland. Robert of Lewes, bishop of Bath from 1136 to 1166, chronicled the misdeeds of Bristolians in the army assembled at Bristol by Robert, Earl of Gloucester, during the Civil War between the forces of Stephen and those of Matilda. Early in the fourteenth century an unknown monk of Malmesbury wrote an account of Bristol and traced the involvement and affairs of the Berkeley family. William Worcestre's lively description of the streets and buildings of Bristol in 1480, and the *Kalendar* produced by his contemporary, the town clerk, Robert Ricart, reveal their pride in Bristol and its long history. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries several other chronicles were produced, and many visitors to Bristol recorded their impressions of the city.<sup>1</sup>

None of these accounts, however, were histories of Bristol in the modern sense of providing a detailed account of economic, political, social and topographical development, based on a critical examination of original records. The first author to attempt to write such a full-scale history of Bristol was William Barrett (1727-1789). Sadly, his *History* which had occupied Barrett's leisure for most of his life, although based on copious documentary sources, was seriously flawed, and the harsh criticism it received led to the death of the author. A much more successful attempt to trace the history and development of Bristol was produced by Barrett's younger friend Samuel Seyer (1757-1831). Like Barrett, Seyer based his work on a detailed study of the historic records of Bristol. The following account describes the careers of both men and discusses the importance of the historical work which they produced.

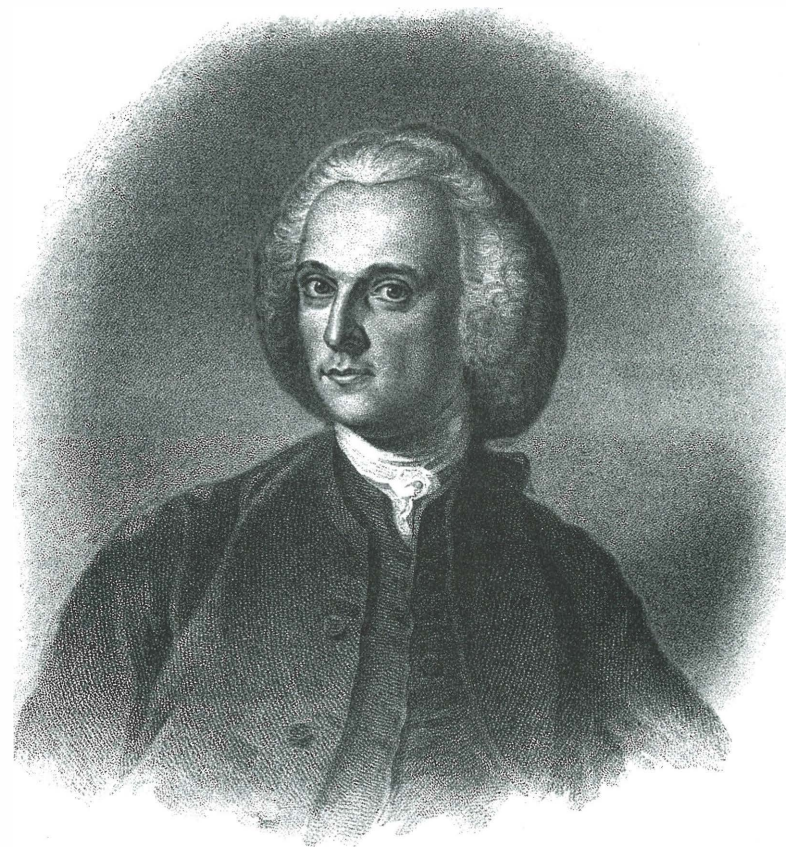


## William Barrett

William Barrett was born in 1727 at Notton in the parish of Lacock, Wiltshire, where his father, Nicholas Barrett, 'gentleman', was a prosperous landowner and farmer. William was the youngest son having four older brothers and a sister. His mother, Joan Barrett, died on 19th June 1731 when William was only four years of age. His father died two years later on 15th November 1733, having in his will made provision for trustees to administer his property on behalf of his children. The eldest son, Nicholas, was to inherit the farm at Notton, while the other children were to be educated and then apprenticed to some 'trade, business or profession'. They were to be provided with a share of their father's estate when they reached the age of twenty one.<sup>2</sup> Later, William Barrett was sent by his guardians to Winchester College. At school, Barrett formed a close friendship with a fellow pupil, John Mayo Tandy, the son of a wealthy sugar refiner who lived in St Thomas Street, Bristol. Barrett spent most of his school holidays with the Tandy family, and later was to marry his friend's sister, Maria Tandy.<sup>3</sup>

In 1744 at the age of 17, Barrett left school and was apprenticed for seven years to T. Rosewell, an apothecary and barber-surgeon, who had an extensive practice in Bristol and kept a shop in All Saints' Lane. Here Barrett acquired the skills necessary for a surgeon and man-midwife, and when his apprenticeship ended in 1751 he began his medical career in Bristol, where he remained for the rest of his life. In 1755 he passed the examinations set by the Royal College of Surgeons, and with this prestigious qualification his medical practice prospered rapidly. He was thus able to marry Maria Tandy, and the marriage produced a son, William Tandy Barrett (born 1758), and four daughters. Barrett and his family lived first in a house in Wine Street, and later moved to a large house which he purchased at 41 St Augustine's Back. Maria Barrett died on 8 May 1763, aged 32. She was buried at St Mary Redcliffe, where a memorial was erected with a long Latin verse composed by William Barrett, in praise of his wife's virtues.<sup>4</sup>

William Tandy Barrett was enrolled at Wadham College, Oxford in 1776, graduating B.A. in 1779. Soon afterwards he was ordained in the Church of England.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile his father, William Barrett, early in his career as a surgeon in Bristol, had become interested in the history of the city and had begun to collect documentary evidence concerning its past. No history of Bristol existed, and Barrett determined to remedy this defect, spending much of his time on the project. As a well-respected surgeon and man-midwife, Barrett soon began to treat many of the wealthy élite of Bristol and gained access to the houses of wealthy merchants



*William Barret at the age of 31, published as the frontispiece to his 'History and Antiquities of Bristol' in the year of his death in 1789 when he was actually 62*

and city councillors, as well as to Ashton Court, home of the Smyth family. He thus had many opportunities to collect early deeds, surveys and other records. He also corresponded with numerous other antiquarians and historians. In 1775 he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries. The idea for a full-scale history of Bristol was evidently developed in Barrett's mind at an early stage in his career. As early as 1758 at the age of 31 and not long after he had begun his medical practice in Bristol, Barrett had his portrait painted by John Rymdick. In the portrait he is described somewhat prematurely as 'William Barrett, surgeon and author of the *History and Antiquities of Bristol*'. It was to be a further 31 years before the book appeared in print.<sup>6</sup>

In 1760 he applied to the Mayor and Corporation for access to their large store of records. Setting out his intention to produce a history of the city, he wrote:

... having great materials for such a work by me and continually adding to my store, I have been induc'd to proceed in a work so large and of such difficulty from a desire of raising out of obscurity the history and antiquities of our flourishing City, ... and as I am in great want of some records out of the Chamber which wou'd throw lights upon some obscure parts of the history, I hope that favour will not be denied me.<sup>7</sup>

After some initial reluctance, his request was granted, and thereafter he spent many hours in making careful and accurate transcripts of the material. In 1772 he wrote to the antiquarian Andrew Coltée Ducarel telling him of the progress of his work and giving a plan of his proposed book. He regretted that the demands of his medical practice prevented him from making as rapid progress as he wished, although he added:

My profession indeed gains me admittance to many families, and thereby I have procured many MS records.<sup>8</sup>

He added that his collection of Latin deeds was increasing at such a rate that he was at a loss as to what to do with them.<sup>9</sup>

Barrett's thorough search for records of Bristol and his assiduous collection of material might have produced an outstanding history of the city. Unfortunately, in 1768 Barrett was introduced to the 16 year-old solicitor's clerk, Thomas Chatterton, and was completely duped by his historical fabrications. Barrett's determination that his book should be solidly based on historic records was the feature that distinguished his work from that of his predecessors, and entitles him to be regarded as

the first modern historian of Bristol. It is, therefore, ironic that Barrett's eager search for any scrap of documentary evidence that could throw light on Bristol history was to lead so disastrously to his undoing.

On the basis of a few genuine deeds, accounts and other medieval records which he had acquired from St Mary Redcliffe, Chatterton persuaded Barrett to accept a mass of totally spurious 'evidence'. This included accounts and descriptions of Bristol castle, the topography of the town, the affairs of the fifteenth-century merchant, William Canynges, and details of all the parish churches, including a totally fictitious church of St Andrew. Much of this material was supposedly based on the writings of a Saxon monk, Turgot, and a fifteenth-century priest, Thomas Rowley. Chatterton also fabricated items which he persuaded Barrett to accept as genuine medieval records, although both the calligraphy and the language were obviously bogus. There seemed to be no limit to the material which Chatterton could produce, and, in spite of some initial misgivings, Barrett was convinced that he had found an hitherto unknown source for Bristol history. It is amazing that Barrett did not demand to see some proof of the authenticity of Chatterton's productions, or ask to inspect the original documents himself. A more critical attitude would rapidly have discerned the mass of inconsistencies in Chatterton's so-called documentary evidence, and would have become suspicious at the speed in which so much apparently remarkable material could be produced. Many of Chatterton's so-called original documents are obviously fakes, with laborious mock-medieval spelling and invented names; but so pleased was Barrett to have discovered such a mine of new information that he eagerly accepted the material and incorporated it into his *History*. Barrett and his friends could not believe that the young, low-born and impoverished solicitor's clerk could have invented so much material, nor that he would have the incentive to sustain a hoax over many months.<sup>10</sup>

In his classic, detailed *Life of Thomas Chatterton*, published in 1930, E.H.W. Meyerstein gave an unflattering account of Barrett. He portrayed Barrett as cold, vain, self-satisfied and indolent; arrogant in his position as a respected surgeon, and concerned only to secure his reputation as a leading antiquary and the first true historian of Bristol. Meyerstein described Barrett's appearance based on notes made by Richard Smith, son of one of Barrett's fellow-surgeons in Bristol who was also called Richard Smith:

Barrett practised chiefly as a man-midwife, usually wore a waistcoat with large flap pockets, a coat with large open sleeves, breeches just reaching to the knee, slit in front, and small buttoned, ... he sported two lamps at his door, kept a good table, and forgot his patients when 'church-hunting'.<sup>11</sup>



Meyerstein suggested that Barrett was so delighted to think that he had tapped a rich and hitherto unknown source for Bristol history that he welcomed the material Chatterton produced without critical examination and certainly without any thought for the young man's welfare. He claimed that Barrett was 'less of a dupe than an accomplice and encourager of the poet of the production of spurious antiques'.<sup>12</sup> There is undoubtedly some justice in Meyerstein's view that Barrett could have done more to help Chatterton, that he might have provided guidance and advice but instead did nothing to arrest Chatterton's sorry progress to his tragic death in August 1770. Nonetheless, Barrett was the victim of an elaborate hoax, cynically perpetrated by Chatterton and maintained with considerable labour over several months. Chatterton knowingly and deliberately, with no other motive than his own mischievous pleasure, led Barrett down a path which was to ruin his projected *History*, and would lead eventually to Barrett's premature death. Chatterton clearly took delight in deceiving Barrett, whom he regarded as a self-important pedant, aptly describing him in a satirical poem as 'Blest with a bushy wig and solemn grace'.

Barrett was not alone in his gullible acceptance of Chatterton's fabrications. His friend, George Catcott, an eccentric Bristol pewterer, who was greatly interested in Bristol history, was a firm believer in the authenticity of Chatterton's forgeries, and encouraged Barrett to believe implicitly in the existence of the fictitious Thomas Rowley. Other antiquarians with whom Barrett corresponded were likewise duped by Chatterton, and encouraged Barrett to welcome ever more preposterous fiction from him. They included Jeremiah Milles, Dean of Exeter and President of the Society of Antiquaries, Robert Glynn, a physician and Fellow of King's College, Cambridge, Andrew Coltée Ducarel, a lawyer from Doctor's Commons, and Jacob Bryant, another prominent antiquary.<sup>13</sup> Others more detached and critical, rapidly dismissed Chatterton's claims as totally incredible. Horace Walpole quickly realized that Chatterton's alleged medieval documents were complete fiction.<sup>14</sup> Dr Samuel Johnson, who visited Bristol in 1776, immediately saw through Chatterton's deception, in spite of a visit from George Catcott, who passionately supported Chatterton. In a memorable passage, James Boswell's *Life of Johnson* recorded Johnson's response and complete dismissal of the imposture, though tinged with admiration for Chatterton's audacity. Describing Johnson's visit to Bristol in April 1776, Boswell wrote:

George Catcot, the pewterer, who was zealous for Rowley, attended us at our inn, and with a triumphant air of lively simplicity called out, 'I'll make Dr Johnson a convert' ... We saw some of the *originals*, as they were called, which were executed very artificially; but from

a careful inspection of them, and a consideration of the circumstances with which they were attended, we were quite satisfied of the imposture, which, indeed, has been clearly demonstrated from internal evidence, by several able critics. Honest Catcot seemed to pay no attention whatever to any objections, but insisted, as an end of all controversy, that we should go with him to the tower of the church of St Mary Redcliff, and *view with our own eyes* the ancient chest in which the manuscripts were found. To this Dr Johnson goodnaturedly agreed; and though troubled with a shortness of breathing, laboured up a long flight a steps, till we came to the place where the wondrous chest stood. 'There', said Catcot, with a bouncing confident credulity, 'there is the very chest itself'. After this *ocular demonstration*, there was no more to be said. Johnson said of Chatterton, 'This is the most extraordinary young man that has encountered my knowledge. It is wonderful how the whelp has written such things'.<sup>15</sup>

Few details are known about Barrett's medical practice in Bristol. It evidently prospered and he was able to purchase various properties in the city, including the fine house on St Augustine's Back with its garden stretching down to the river, and some houses in Stokes Croft. He also bought the advowson of High Ham, Somerset, where his son, William Tandy Barrett, became rector. Barrett himself recorded the fact that he treated the families of many of the gentry and merchants of Bristol. He was also surgeon to St Peter's Hospital, which was the Poor-Law institution of the city. The Hospital records show that he was appointed in February 1755. In 1767 he proposed to the guardians that he should inoculate the children from the Hospital and find them medicine without charge; a proposal which was accepted 'with approbation'. In 1770 he resigned when the guardians refused to allow surgeons to continue the practice of using the bodies of paupers who died in the Hospital for post-mortem dissection.<sup>16</sup> Evidence of Barrett's competence and reputation as a surgeon may be gathered from the fact that when Dr Samuel Cave, who had trained at Bristol Infirmary, wrote a learned thesis in Latin for the degree of Doctor of Medicine at Leyden University in 1779, he dedicated it to 'the very learned and experienced William Barrett' (*Viro erudissimo expertissimo*).<sup>17</sup> His life as a surgeon was clearly very busy, and in the Preface to his *History* he records that he had to abandon his historical research for several years before his retirement:

... the author, engaged in a business that commanded all his time and attention, and receiving little encouragement to proceed ... desisted from the undertaking, locking up his papers for several years.

In 1786 he retired to live with his three unmarried daughters in a house which he had purchased at Wraxall in north Somerset. There he continued his custom of providing medical treatment for the poor without charge. Increasingly troubled by gout, he again began to work on his *History*, but it was still not completed in September 1787 when he made his will. In it he asked his son, William Tandy Barrett, rector of High Ham, Somerset, and his son-in-law, Edmund Capper, who was also a clergyman, to complete and publish his *History*:

I desire that my son and son-in-law will jointly transcribe for the press my *History of Bristol* which will be no difficult task as the most difficult part is finished, and the parochial history easily completed, inserting therein only the principal Monumental Inscriptions and omitting all common ones, and also in the Annals omitting all frivolous and unimportant matters in each Mayoralty, which will bring the work into a reasonable size one large Quarto [book].<sup>18</sup>

They were directed either to collect the subscriptions for printing, or to sell the copy and plates to a London bookseller. Any money arising from the book was to be equally divided among his surviving children.<sup>19</sup>

During the year 1788, however, Barrett was able to complete the work on his *History* himself. In this he was encouraged by Dr Robert Glynn, who wrote urging him to remember mortality and to publish in his lifetime.<sup>20</sup> *The History and Antiquities of the City of Bristol* was finally published in quarto in April 1789; the title page states that it was 'compiled from original records and authentic manuscripts, in public offices or private hands; illustrated with copper plate prints, by William Barrett, surgeon, F.S.A., Bristol 1789.' The *History* was published with an impressive list of nearly 500 subscribers; a portrait of the author by Rymdsick appeared as a frontispiece.

The work of just over 700 quarto pages was dedicated to the Mayor of Bristol, Levi Ames, and to the Worshipful the Aldermen and Common Council of Bristol, with the wish that the book 'will celebrate the rich history of the Second City in the Kingdom, and that the industry of the city and commerce of the port from every quarter of the globe may continue to advance'. In spite of the mass of spurious information concocted by Chatterton which Barrett included in his book, it does provide useful information about churches, monuments, secular buildings and the topography of the city. The plans of the churches show the interior furnishings, position of monuments and the layout before all the changes of later restorations. Barrett is particularly good when describing

TO THE RIGHT WORSHIPFUL  
LEVI AMES, Esq; Mayor;  
The Worshipful the ALDERMEN, and COMMON  
COUNCIL of the City of *B R I S T O L*.

GENTLEMEN,

TO you is the HISTORY OF BRISTOL with propriety inscribed, to which you have a natural and peculiar Claim. By public Spirit, Virtue and Loyalty, your predecessors procuring Liberties and ample Privileges by Charters from our Kings and Queens raised this City to an high rank in the nation, and by the same their successors have exalted it to the dignity of being the Second City in the kingdom.

Reformed as it is in its POLICE, enlarged in the number and extent of its Buildings, and increased in its Trade and Opulence, may it long flourish by your vigilant and active Care, by the great Credit and Reputation of its Merchants, and the VIRTUE AND INDUSTRY of the Citizens; and by using the natural local advantages of improving its Port and Harbour to the utmost, may the Honour be yours of compleating its Grandeur, that Ships may resort hither more and more from every Quarter of the Globe, and the Commerce and Prosperity of the City continue to advance to latest posterity.

*I have the honour to be,*

*Worshipful S I R S,*

*Your most obliged and obedient*

*Humble Servant,*

WRAXALL,  
APRIL 15, 1789.

WILLIAM BARRETT.

*Dedication page of Barrett's 'History'*

the contemporary scene. He writes vividly about the multitude of shipping in the docks, the commerce of Bristol with all parts of the world, the crowded markets for fish, butter, poultry, corn, flour, fruit and wool, the cattle and sheep brought from Wales and the 'trows' or barges which supplied produce from counties along the Severn. In spite of its failings, it was the first modern history of Bristol. Barrett's friend, Samuel Seyer, who was to publish a far more scholarly work on Bristol, nonetheless paid tribute to Barrett and to the inspiration he derived from Barrett's *History*. Seyer was to call his book by the clumsy title *Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol*, expressly in order to avoid any conflict with Barrett's work. He evidently sympathised with the appalling way in which his friend had been misled by Chatterton, 'who has duped Barrett in so many ways in connection with his *History*.'<sup>21</sup>

Barrett's work will, unfortunately, be for ever associated with the fictitious nonsense supplied by Chatterton, and the odious hoax which he perpetrated on the gullible historian. Throughout the book Barrett included material based on the supposed writings of Chatterton's sham fifteenth-century cleric, Thomas Rowley, and the equally fictitious Saxon monk, Turgot. The *History* included a plan of Bristol Castle supposedly as it was in 1138, with the caption 'T. Rowleie canonicus delin. 1440'; the facsimile of a Roll attributed to the fifteenth century entitled 'England's Glorye revyved in Maystre Canynge, beynge some Accounte of hys Cabynet of Auntyaunte Monumentes', together with examples of handwriting alleged to be by Thomas Rowley. A thorough description of St Mary Redcliffe is accompanied by a long poem on *The Parlyamente of Sprytes*, said to have been written by Thomas Rowley in the form of a play supposed to have been performed before William Canynges and Bishop John Carpenter at the re-dedication of the re-built church. Barrett's account of the foundation of St Augustine's abbey, with its useful plan of the Cathedral, is interspersed with materials in both prose and verse said to have come from the pen of Thomas Rowley. Barrett's description of the topography of medieval Bristol was totally marred by his belief in Chatterton's invention of a parish church of St Andrew beside the High Cross, in addition to the three authentic churches there. The account of St Bartholomew's Hospital is accompanied by a long quotation with evidently contrived medieval spelling 'The Rolle of Seynte Bartholemeweis Priorie'. The history of the church St Mary le Port includes a text allegedly by the spurious Thomas Rowley, which would have aroused suspicion about its authenticity from any but the most gullible. It begins:

Thys chyrche was ybuyldenne in MXVI by a Saxonne manne  
cleped Eldred, botte somme thynkethe he allein dyd itte begynne  
leevynge oders to fynyshe ytte ...

Likewise a long account of Temple church is given from a manuscript of Rowley supposedly transcribed by Chatterton.

Barrett was obviously aware that many people had misgivings about Chatterton and the historical materials he claimed to have found; but having included so much material supplied by Chatterton it was hardly sufficient for Barrett to disclaim responsibility as follows:

As to the manuscripts of Rowley, now first published; whatever judgement be formed about them, they are here faithfully transcribed, that by producing all the evidence, the judicious reader may be enabled the better to form his opinion concerning the controversy.

Likewise it was inadequate to throw responsibility on the reader with sentences such as 'It is now left to the judicious and candid reader to form his own opinion concerning Rowley and Chatterton'; or by a footnote questioning 'Whether the whole was faithfully transcribed by Chatterton or altered by him, may admit of a doubt'.

During the summer of 1789, having at last published his *History*, Barrett no doubt proudly anticipated that it would be welcomed by Bristolians and fellow-antiquarians alike. It was a profound shock when in the autumn of 1789 his *History* was the subject of a long and highly-critical review in the prestigious publication *The Gentleman's Magazine*. Chapter by chapter the anonymous reviewer mercilessly attacked the inaccuracies and fabrications which the book contained. He pointed out that although Barrett claimed to base his work firmly on documentary evidence and quoted many documents at length, he gave few references to his sources of information: 'The promiscuous mode of citing authors, we had almost said concealing authorities, is unworthy of a correct or faithful writer'. The reviewer criticised the lack of an Index, the fallacious etymology and the plans 'too fanciful, not to say absurd, to be admitted'. He poured scorn on Barrett's notion that a coin of Pope Sixtus IV (died 1484), showing a bridge with four arches which was dug up near Bristol Bridge had some connection with Bristol:

... how could it enter into Mr B's head, that the coins and medals struck by popes, as temporal princes, or commemorating events of their own reign, could have any reference to Bristol Bridge; the fact is, that Sixtus IV rebuilt the bridge over the Tiber.

Above all, he demolished the edifice which Barrett had built on the 'counterfeit dramatic compositions' of Chatterton. He pointed out the inconsistencies and totally unbelievable assertions of Chatterton and of



his fictitious source, Thomas Rowley. He poured scorn on the nonsense which Barrett had accepted from Chatterton, pointing out that much of it was evidently false and 'sufficient to blast the reputation of Rowley as an original writer and the credit of Chatterton as an honest man'. Finally the reviewer, apparently desperate for something positive to say, made the grudging admission that the book was easy to read.<sup>22</sup>

Barrett was already unwell, and this virulent attack on the work which had occupied a great part of his life and to which he had devoted an immense effort was a dreadful blow. He never recovered, but died within a few weeks. He had sought refuge with his son at High Ham rectory, and died there on 13 October 1789. In accordance with the direction given in his will, he was buried at High Ham, without ostentation or expense.<sup>23</sup> Too late, *The Gentleman's Magazine* attempted to make amends for its review by a sympathetic obituary. It was admitted that Barrett's *History* was the first detailed work on Bristol history based on documentary evidence, and that 'notwithstanding the unfavourable criticism of the *History* [it] abounds with curious and authentic information, and in excuse for many of its inaccuracies, it may be necessary to remind the reader, it is the first which has been ever published on that subject'.<sup>24</sup>

The task of producing the first history of Bristol which stands comparison with any of the numerous contemporary accounts for other English counties or cities was left to Barrett's friend, Samuel Seyer. The two men had engaged in frequent discussions on Bristol history, and Seyer paid gracious tribute to the help and inspiration he had received from Barrett, with whom he had been 'in the constant habit of conversation' and many of whose notes he later acquired. In his preface Seyer wrote:

My engagement in this laborious undertaking has been of many years. The late Mr Barrett published his *History and Antiquities of Bristol* in 1789; with him I was in the constant habit of conversation, and sometimes saw what he wrote before it was printed; and it is for the purpose of avoiding any interference with his title, that I call my own book, *Memoirs of Bristol*.

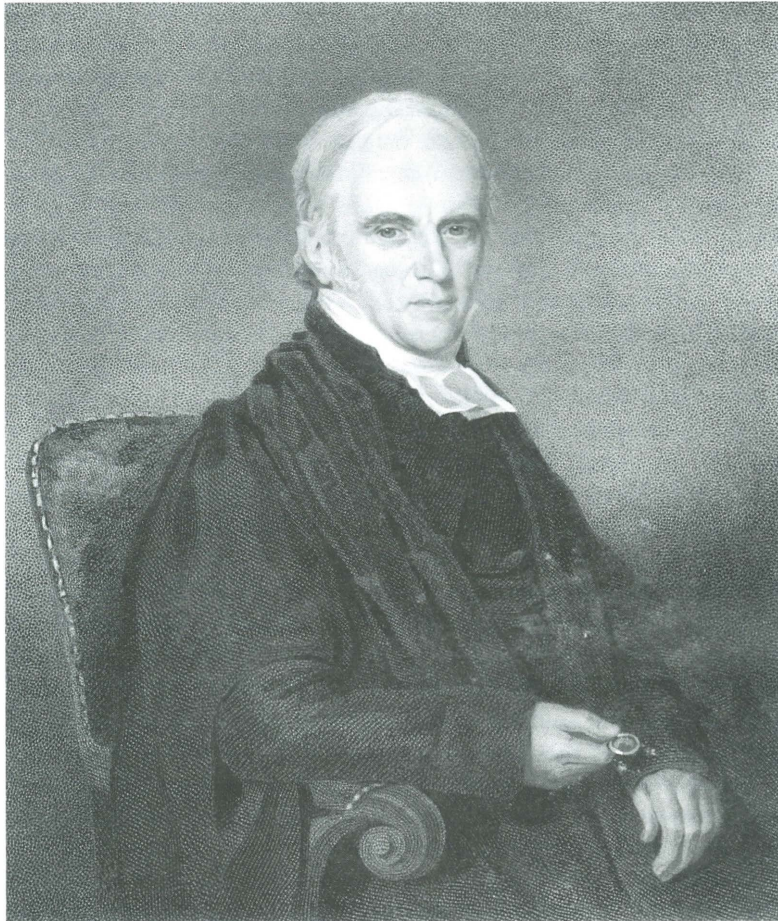
Such co-operation and mutual respect has not always been apparent between contemporary authors researching the history of the same city. Seyer's dedicated research into Bristol's rich legacy of documentary records, and the two important books which he produced as a result, were to remain as foundations for all subsequent writers on Bristol history.

## Samuel Seyer

Samuel Seyer (1757-1831) spent his whole life in and around Bristol, where his father, the Revd Samuel Seyer (died 1776), was master of Bristol Grammar School, and from 1764 rector of St Michael's, Bristol. Seyer was educated at Bristol Grammar School and Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he graduated B.A. in 1772 and M.A. in 1776. He was ordained in 1780 and became curate of Westbury-on Trym. In 1781 he married Elizabeth Turner of Wraxall, Somerset. He became master of the Royal Fort School in Bristol in 1790, and from 1790 to 1813 he lived in the gatehouse of the Royal Fort with his wife and their two daughters, Sybilla and Mary.<sup>25</sup> His school enjoyed a good reputation, and Seyer had several pupils who later achieved distinction. They included Andrew Crosse, who made important discoveries in the early use of electricity, William Broderip who became a notable naturalist, John Jenkyns later Master of Balliol and Dean of Wells and Edward John Trelawny adventurer, writer, poet and friend of Byron and Shelley. Seyer himself was a strict disciplinarian, harsh even by the austere standards of the time. Andrew Crosse later recalled Seyer's readiness with the rod: 'I myself was caned upon an average, three times a day for seven years, but never once flogged'. He described Seyer as 'an admirable classic [i.e. classicist], a good grammarian; he had some nobility of feeling, was perfectly honest, but was a narrow-minded man, and without any sense of justice'.<sup>26</sup> An even more critical picture of the school was given by Edward John Trelawny, who described it as 'more like a house of correction than an academy of learning'. He recalled the brutality of the establishment and the fact that his school-life was a constant period of suffering. He was beaten almost daily. 'Every variation of punishment was inflicted on me, without effect. As to kindness, it never entered into his [Seyer's] speculations to essay it, since he, possibly, had not heard of such a thing'.<sup>27</sup> The Bristol poet, Robert Southey, related that during the threat of invasion by the Napoleonic army in 1797 Seyer's pupils at The Royal Fort school were issued with rifles to help protect the city. The boys conceived a plan of shooting their master because of his 'fondness for excessive punishments'. Their intention was discovered and Seyer's life was saved, while publicity for the whole plot was discreetly avoided.<sup>28</sup> Andrew Crosse also referred to this incident in his *Memorials*.<sup>29</sup>

During his period as a schoolmaster, Seyer made numerous prudent investments in Bristol companies and trading ventures, acquiring thereby a modest fortune. His notebook contains references to investments in the sugar trade and in Jamaica, to shares in the Bristol Dock Company,





Samuel Seyer from the frontispiece of his  
*'Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol'*

Bristol and Clifton Oil Gas Company, and the New Crown Fire Office. Increasing wealth enabled him to buy Sheephouse Farm (80 acres) at Easton-in-Gordano, and several properties in Bristol, including an inn called *The Blue Bell* at Broad Weir; he also purchased the advowson of Loxton in north Somerset. In 1813 he purchased a large house in the recently built Berkeley Square, where he lived for the rest of his life. A note he made of his wealth in 1822 includes the house in Berkeley Square valued at £1,600 and nearly £11,000 invested 'in the 4 per cents'.<sup>30</sup>

In 1813 he became perpetual curate of Horfield and in 1824 he purchased the advowson of Filton and became the rector there, enjoying an annual income of £323 6s 6d. He did not live in either parish, but employed a succession of curates, allowing the widow of the previous rector to remain in the rectory at Filton. The parish registers of Filton show that he regularly conducted baptisms, marriages and burials there. He made notes on the history and topography of Horfield and contributed towards the rebuilding of the parsonage house in 1825. He also presented the parish with a weather vane which was placed on the tower with a suitable inscription in 1825.<sup>31</sup>

Seyer played a leading part in the affairs of the Bristol Library Society which was founded in 1773 when he was 16 years of age. He became a founder member, and later was made vice-president. He was also 'a distinguished ornament' of a Literary Club which met during the winter months at the Bush tavern.<sup>32</sup>

Seyer's wife, Elizabeth, died in 1819 and was buried at Shirehampton where their unmarried daughter, Mary, lived. The elder daughter, Sybilla, had married the Revd Abel London, who was rector of Totteridge, Hertfordshire. After his wife's death, Seyer's sister-in-law, Anne Turner, kept house for him at Berkeley Square. In addition to his historical works, Seyer also published *The Principles of Christianity* (1796), *The Syntax of Latin Verbs* (1798), *Observations on the Causes of Clerical Non-Residence* (1808), *A Treatise of the Modern Use of the Latin Language* (1808), and occasional sermons. In 1824 his portrait was painted by the Bristol artist, Nathan Branwhite.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout his life Seyer devoted much of his time to the study of Bristol history, especially to detailed research on the wealth of information contained in the city charters. In 1812 he published an edition of the charters in the original Latin with an English translation. It was his emphasis on documentary evidence which distinguished Seyer's work and which he stressed in the Preface to his *Charters* which

includes this remarkably early and eloquent justification of local history research:

Besides the local interest which is attached to these Charters, a collection of progressive records such as the present, cannot but be useful to historical antiquaries in general. In tracing the history of the English nation, he who confines his reading to the common compilations will still be very deficient in this important study; contemporary writings of all kinds must be resorted to; old chronicles must be perused and, above all, laws and records; one day thus spent will give more insight into the manners, the character and opinions, as well as the transactions of a distant age, than thrice the time employed in reading the best *History of England*.<sup>34</sup>

Seyer's study of the Bristol Charters was greatly hampered by the refusal of the Mayor and Corporation to allow him to inspect the originals in the Council House. Their attitude stemmed from growing criticism within the city at many aspects of its governance, and from fear that publication of the Charters would lead to questions being raised concerning the legality of some of the privileges claimed by the city and its councillors. They were mindful of the example of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where the Corporation had 'lost town-dues of great value' in consequence of information contained in Brand's *History of Newcastle* which had been published in 1789. In 1810 Seyer had written a polite, formal *Memorial* to the Mayor and Common Council of Bristol asking to be allowed to see the original Charters:

... your Memorialist has with great pains and some expence procured copies in the original language of almost all the Charters granted by the kings of England to your Corporation, which he is desirous of publishing with an English translation annexed to them. But whereas his copies have been transcribed not from the Originals, but from a copy in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, in consequence of which there may be in them some verbal errors, and perhaps some omissions, which in a work of this kind ought particularly to be avoided, your Memorialist therefore prays, that he may be permitted, himself and a literary friend or any competent person appointed by you, to have access to the Originals, either in the Chamberlain's office, or any other room which you may direct, for the purpose of collating his copies, and of supplying any deficiencies, which may be found in them.<sup>35</sup>

The request met with a blunt refusal. The town clerk wrote:

I have to inform you, that your Memorial praying leave to inspect the Charters of this City was taken into consideration by the Corporation in Common Council assembled, and it was ordered that your request could not be complied with.<sup>36</sup>

Seyer was, therefore, obliged to base his work on a transcript in the Bodleian Library included with Charles II's charter of confirmation of 1664.<sup>37</sup> This was not entirely accurate and did not include several of the late-medieval charters. Seyer was well aware of these deficiencies and strongly criticised Bristol Corporation in his Introduction, pointing out that his difficulties 'would have been reduced to nothing if I could have procured access to the Originals in the Council House'. His edition of *The Charters and Letters Patent granted by the Kings and Queens of England to the Town and City of Bristol* was published in 1812. The book was dedicated to the Duke of Beaufort, Lord Lieutenant of Bristol. Notwithstanding its acknowledged imperfections, this important work marks the beginning of the view of historical research as the painstaking examination of original material with conclusions based on careful references to contemporary sources. This was a new and enlightened view of the practice of both national and local history.

Seyer put these principles to use in his second major publication, *Memoirs Historical and Topographical of Bristol* published in two volumes in 1821 and 1823. The uninformative title was chosen to avoid conflict with the earlier work of Seyer's friend, William Barrett. In fact, Seyer produced the first full-scale and accurately referenced history of Bristol. By this time the rift between Seyer and the city corporation had been healed; he was given unrestricted access to the Council's archives, the volumes were dedicated to the Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council, and they contributed 200 guineas towards the cost of printing. Throughout the two volumes he based his statements firmly on original sources which he quoted accurately and at length. Seyer was clearly unhappy with the material which Barrett had derived from Chatterton, and makes it clear that he was not to be similarly misled:

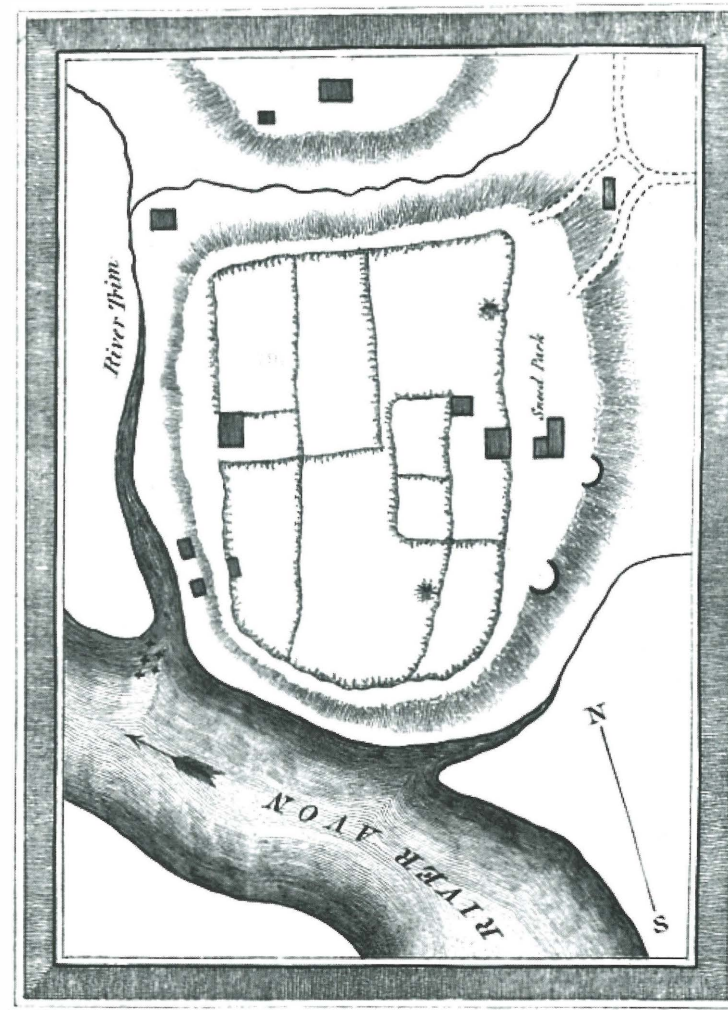
In every work of this kind, it's credibility must depend on it's authorities; but in these Memoirs it must be so particularly: because unfortunately many things have been introduced into the history of Bristol, which rest only on the information of Chatterton: which has in the public opinion thrown a shade of doubt over our general history, however questionable. Whether the



Poems and other writings published under the name of Rowley were really written by such a person; or whether they are the whole and sole forgery of Chatterton; or whether there be room for an intermediate opinion, that he found ancient MSS, which he ignorantly and faithlessly fitted up in a new dress; I will not here pretend to determine ... I can faithfully promise that no fact, however trifling, shall be introduced into these Memoirs, which rests on his foundation, without notice.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to the city charters and other records, Seyer used material from manuscripts at Berkeley Castle, especially those relating to the history of St Augustine's abbey which later became Bristol cathedral, William Worcestre's manuscripts at Corpus Christi, Cambridge, the *Kalendar* compiled in c1480 by the town clerk, Robert Ricart, and numerous maps, plans and illustrations including Millerd's remarkable map of Bristol in 1671. He was also able to use several manuscript calendars or chronicles which have not survived. Some of these were written on small pieces of parchment, often no more than three inches wide; the hazards faced by such chronicles and the uncertainties of their survival are illustrated by the fact that Seyer recounts that '... part of one was recovered after having been formed (by the Muses, I suppose) into a thread-paper; part of another was found in the case of a sky-rocket which fell into a garden near my house'.<sup>39</sup>

Seyer evidently saw as his purpose the fostering of local patriotism and pride in the long history of Bristol, declaring his intention of tracing its progress 'from an humble and oppressed situation to wealth, power and independence'. It was Seyer who first used the phrase 'the Metropolis of the West' to describe Bristol, and he included details of the local region, as well as setting the history of Bristol against the background of national events. Inevitably, there were many records, especially from the national archives, which have subsequently been made available but which could not be used by Seyer. Likewise, much archaeological evidence still awaited discovery. Nonetheless he made full use of the available sources, quoted extensively and accurately from them and gave full references. He was not afraid to confess his ignorance on some matters or to point out problems to which he could provide no answer. He found that many aspects of the early history of Bristol and the establishment of the town remained obscure, although he did correctly identify the Roman port of Sea Mills as the *Abona* which is mentioned in a third-century document. He confessed that he was baffled over the origin of the name 'Bristol'. He wondered about the inscription on the gatehouse of St Augustine's abbey, which described



'The Roman Station ABONA at SEA MILLS' from Sayer's 'Memoirs'

the founder, Robert Fitzharding, as the son of a king of Denmark ('filius regius Daciae'). Some features of the topography, and especially the development of the castle and its precinct puzzled him. He distanced himself from both Barrett and Chatterton by commenting on their plan of the castle in 1138, 'I say nothing of the plan given by Mr Barrett p51, because he does not inform us whence it came; and it seems to bear the marks of Chatterton's pen'. With total candour he ended his account of the castle with the words 'here ends the description of the Castle and its buildings; very imperfect it is true, but the best which the lapse of time has enabled us to compile'. He also admitted defeat in his attempts to understand the layout of the Civil War fortifications of the Royal Fort: 'This is all which I have been able to collect concerning the Royal Fort, although I dwelt in the gatehouse for 20 years, so completely is it demolished, and the recovery of it passed away'.<sup>40</sup>

Although many problems remained, Seyer, like Barrett before him, was overwhelmed by the quantity of ancient deeds and other records thrust upon him, once his intentions of writing a history of Bristol became known:

... when it was known, that a collection of this kind was begun, papers and information accumulated fast ... Copies of ancient papers were given in abundance, and many original Title-deeds, French and Latin, of which I received more than 250 at one time, all relating to Bristol, some of them dated as early as 1130. These presents were always accompanied with enquiries, what progress had been made in the work itself, and it was more than difficult to withstand such continual and complimentary applications'.<sup>41</sup>

Seyer's *Memoirs* end with the death of George II in 1760. He decided not to continue beyond that date, lest he give offence to persons still alive, and because 'some due distance of time should elapse between the events recorded, and the writer who records them'. He, therefore, left to others the task of continuing 'through the long and eventful reign of George III, and during the unexampled prosperity of the present Reign'.<sup>42</sup>

Seyer intended to follow the *Memoirs* by another publication on the topographical and parochial history of Bristol. The volume was to contain material on the religious houses, parish churches, schools, hospitals, almshouses and the poor, as well as biographical details of eminent Bristolians. It would also have contained an Index to all three volumes. The third volume was not completed before his death, but his extensive notes were acquired by Mr Smyth Pigott of Brockley Hall, in north Somerset. After his death many of the notes and other documents

were purchased for the Bristol library by Mr C.T. Jefferies; others were later acquired by Alderman F.F. Fox. They are now reunited as part of the Bristol Reference Library Manuscript Collection.<sup>43</sup>

Seyer's *Memoirs* provide the first really successful and detailed account of Bristol history, with references to many documentary sources. Naturally they reflect the attitudes of the time and the character of their author. As well as tracing the political, economic and social progress of Bristol, Seyer also included information about unusual weather conditions, storms, floods and frosts, eclipses, strange events, notable crimes and remarkable fish caught in the Avon. As a clergyman of the Church of England, he did not attempt to disguise his contempt for Catholics and Dissenters. Although he deplored the destruction it caused, he was favourable to the Reformation, condemned the 'excessive cruelty in burning' under Mary, and welcomed the accession of 'her sister Elizabeth of immortal memory'. The conduct of Puritans and the proliferation of sects during the Commonwealth was roundly condemned:

This enthusiastic spirit of irrational religion ... spread like an inundation over the whole island ... and whereas such extravagances are usually prevented and repressed by the advantages of good birth, company and education, ... this insanity was chiefly found in the inferior ranks of society, who yet by their numbers made amends for their want of respectability. Such was Puritanism ... it acquired such strength, that the Church of England finally sunk under its coarse attack.<sup>44</sup>

The fact that Seyer did not complete his work and publish the final volume is a loss to Bristol historiography. He was no doubt deterred by the expense and difficulties he had encountered in publishing the first two volumes. Seyer had been compelled to arrange everything himself, including obtaining subscribers, commissioning illustrations, supervising the printing and organizing sales. His correspondence shows the problems he faced. The illustrations were the work of Edward Blore in London; he gave Seyer endless worry and the letters between them became increasingly bitter. Writing to a fellow antiquary, John Britton, on 15 March 1821 Seyer complained, 'I could be ready for the press in a fortnight, but I see plainly that Engravers are men of strange manners, and I am now suffering very seriously thro' their neglect'. The printer, John Mathew Gutch, was difficult and expensive. There were lengthy negotiations with booksellers in Bristol and London. They demanded at least 20% of the purchase price as well as a proportion of free copies. It is small wonder that Seyer was reluctant to repeat the experience and produce a third volume.<sup>45</sup>



Seyer died on 25 August 1831 and was buried beside his wife at Shirehampton. He left a long and complex will, covering ten pages in his own handwriting. The will was dated 16 February 1829, and included bequests to his sister-in-law, his two daughters, his grandson 'Mr William London', and to various friends and business acquaintances in Bristol. His sister-in-law, Anne Turner was also to have his portrait by Nathan Branwhite.<sup>46</sup>

Soon after Seyer's death, a long and sympathetic obituary appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. This described him as 'a native of Bristol [who] for many years past bore a distinguished character amongst its learned and literary members'. Avoiding any mention of his reputation for ferocious discipline, it referred to his large school in the Royal Fort and the number of boys from the most respectable families of the West of England who were educated by him 'from whom in after periods of his life he received the most marked respect and testimonies of gratitude'. The obituary praised his *Charters*, the two volumes of the *Memoirs*, and the mass of material 'nearly ready for publication'.<sup>47</sup>

A memorial tablet was placed on the wall of St Mary's church, Shirehampton with the following inscription:

Sacred to the memory of the Revd Samuel Seyer AM, Distinguished scholar and sound Divine and author of *The Memoirs of Bristol*  
Died 5 August 1831 Aged 73.

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