

William Butler & Co – Silverthorne Lane



Friends of
Troopers Hill

Butlers Tar Works at the bottom of Troopers Hill in Crews Hole is believed to have been established in 1843. The initial purpose of the works was to treat timber for use on the Great Western and other railways with creosote. Creosote was distilled from coal-tar, which was a by-product of the manufacture of town gas and Crews Hole became the site of the tar distillery that took coal-tar from gas works in Bristol and further afield, including Bath.

William Butler was appointed as manager of the works from the start of operations (or at least from very early on) though he moved to set up his own Tar Distillery in Gloucester in around 1860. In 1863 a fire broke out that nearly destroyed the Crews Hole plant and Robert & Daines then sold the works to William Butler who returned to Bristol and operated the plant under the name of William Butler & Co Ltd along with the Gloucester works.

Butlers established its 'Head Office & Stores' on Silverthorne Lane, St Philips.

The picture of the Silverthorne Lane site below is taken from 'The History of Wm. Butler & Co (Bristol) Ltd 1843 to 1943' by T Howard Butler, published in 1954. The photo was taken by Aerofilms Ltd in 1953 and can be seen on the [Britain from Above website](#).



HEAD OFFICE AND STORES, ST. PHILIPS, BRISTOL

According to the text of the book "In 1871 Roberts & Daines leased to William Butler some portion of their premises at St Philips which eventually became the rail-head at Bristol, a storage depot and Head Offices of the Company".

History of the Silverthorne Lane Site

According to [Graces Guide](#) the site was first used as an iron works from around 1829.

“The Acraman family were involved in a variety of businesses. Their first foundry was at Bathurst Basin, Bristol. In 1829 they opened the 'Bristol Iron Works' in nearby St Phillips. They had a shipyard in Bedminster, Bristol. Acramans, Morgan & Co went bankrupt in 1842. Prior to becoming Acramans, Morgan & Co., the business was called D., E. and A. Acraman, and then W. D. and W. E. Acraman”

This ‘Bristol Iron Works’ is shown on the 1828 Ashmead map of Bristol occupying land next to the Feeder Canal, which itself had been constructed between 1804 & 1809. The area shown is the western part of the area shown in the photograph of Butlers site – on the right of the photograph.

Acramans extended the original site to both the east and the west along the Feeder. Graces Guide quotes a sale notice from the Bristol Mercury - Saturday 22 October 1842:

“The Bristol Iron Works advertised for sale by order of the assignees of Acramans, Morgan & Co., with extensive works situated in the Parish of St Phillip and Jacob (forges, patternmaking, sawmills, foundries, machine shops, millwrights), at Bathurst Basin (chains, anchors, pumps, etc), and a shipyard at Bedminster, with slips and graving dock, and a large family residence in ornamental grounds, adjoining the shipyard”.

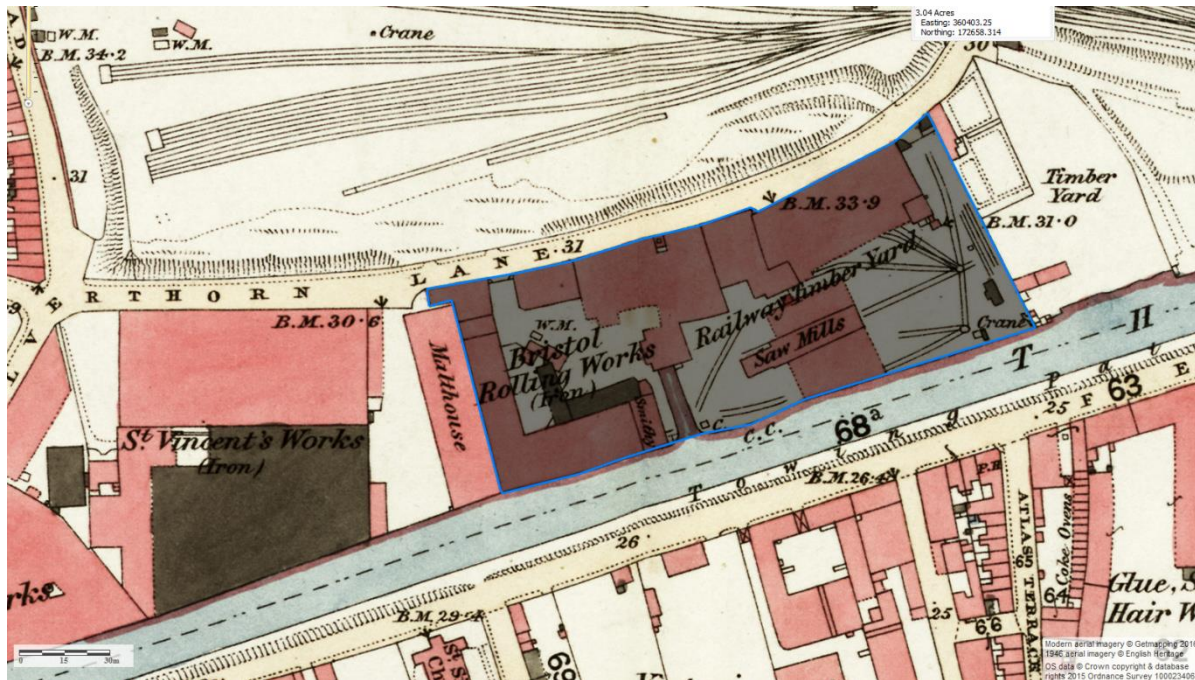
It seems that The St Philips site didn't sell, as there was a meeting of creditors reported in 1847, followed by a further advert for sale in October of that year. The site was again advertised for sale in the Bristol Times & Mirror on 13th October 1849:

THE BRISTOL IRON WORKS.
ITUATE IN THE PARISH of ST. PHILIP AND JACOB,
IN THE CITY OF BRISTOL.
Mr. EDWIN NAISH
WILL SELL BY AUCTION.
On the Premises, on MONDAY, the 22nd of October and following days (Saturdays excepted), at Eleven o'Clock, A.M., by Catalogues,
ALL THE VALUABLE MACHINERY AND STOCK, FORMING A LARGER ASSORTMENT OF MODERN ENGINEERING TOOLS,
BY THE FIRST MAKERS,
THAN ANY OTHER ESTABLISHMENT,
Consisting in part of the following:—
FOUR CONDENSING STEAM ENGINES, and FIVE HIGH-PRESSURE STEAM ENGINES, varying in power from eight horses to forty horses each.
Five LIFT, Three TILT, and Two VERTICAL FORGE HAMMERS, varying in weight from 10 Cwt. to 10 Tons.
EIGHTY-TWO SMITHS' FOUNDRY, PIER, and other CRANES, varying in their lifting power from 10 Cwt. to 30 Tons.
FORTY-FOUR ENGINE-TURNING LATHES, with Beds, varying in length from 30 feet to 4 feet 6 inches, with a capability of taking from 15 feet on the largest, down to the smallest object on the smallest respectively, on their Face Chucks.
Two Patent RIVETTING MACHINES.
NINE PUNCHING and SHEARING MACHINES, of every variety of power.
TWENTY-FOUR DRILLING MACHINES, Fixed or Portable, to Drill $\frac{1}{4}$ inch up to 14 inches.
FIFTEEN PLANING MACHINES, with a capability to Plane from 12 feet in width and 20 feet in length on the largest, down to the smallest object on the smallest in size.
THREE BORING MILLS, equal to Bore from 12 feet in diameter downwards.
SEVEN SLOTTING or GROOVING MACHINES, varying between the largest and smallest known sizes.
THREE SINGLE and ONE DOUBLE SCREWING MACHINES; Four Nut-Shaping MACHINES; besides every variety of TOOL, and upwards of 2,000 Feet of SHAFTING, and a due proportion of Cones, Drums, and Pullies.

Mr. NAISH will also offer for SALE, on MONDAY, the 12th November, at Eleven o'clock, A.M., agreeably to Plans and Conditions,
ALL THOSE UNRIVALLED
FREEHOLD ENGINEERING, FOUNDRY, FORGE,
AND
BOILER MAKERS' PREMISES,
KNOWN AS
THE BRISTOL IRON WORKS,
Erected about 8 years since, in the most substantial manner.
COVERING AN AREA OF ABOUT SIX ACRES,
WITH
FRONTAGE to the HIGH ROAD of ABOUT 1350 FEET,
AND
ANOTHER FRONTAGE of ABOUT 1,150 FEET TO
THE WATER,
By which they are approachable by the largest Severn Trows.
Orders to view the Works, with Plans, Catalogues, and Conditions of Sale, may be had on and after the 1st of October next, on application at the Offices of the Auctioneer, 7, North-street, Bristol; or of Mr. T. R. HUTTON, Official Assignee, Bristol; Messrs. OSBORNE, WARD, and Co., Solicitors, Bristol; Messrs. MAKINSON and SANDERS, Solicitors, Elm Court, Temple, London; Messrs WALTJEN and Co., Bremen, Germany; and of
JNO. KERLE HABERFIELD,
Solicitor to the Assignees.

A 'frontage of about 1,150 feet to the water' covers both the area occupied later by Butlers and by the St Vincent's Works of John Lysaght and Co. to the immediate west which was established around 1857. Lysaghts later also occupied a separate site at the end of the Feeder Canal at Netham.

The whole site is shown below – taken from the 1880s OS series on Bristol City Council's Know Your Place maps.



The area shaded with a blue border (just over 3 acres) is the area eventually occupied by Butlers. This extent is based both on the photograph from Butler's 1954 book and the annotations on the 1949 map on Know Your Place as well as the 1896 Goad Insurance maps – see below.

The eastern boundary is where is now a footpath to the footbridge over the Feeder which was built in 1901.

It is not known when Roberts & Daines purchased the site (or whether they also purchased the part later used by Lysaghts or the timber yard at the eastern end), but they were certainly in possession by 1865 when there was a 'Great Conflagration' on Wednesday 24th May (reported by the Monmouthshire Merlin on Sat 27th May).

"a fire of a very destructive character broke out in the timber yard of Messrs. Roberts and Daines railway contractors, timber merchants, and engineers of Barton Lane, St Philip's. The huge creosote tanks, machinery, and an immense quantity of creosote used in the process of pickling railway timber were destroyed. The destruction of property involved a loss of £1500 or £2000, none of the property being insured. The premises destroyed comprised a building of 150 feet long by 50 feet wide, and 45 feet high, open at both ends, having the side walls built of stone and the roof of wood".

A letter to the Western Daily Press published on Friday 24th August 1866 suggests that Roberts and Daines were using creosote at the site some time before this, perhaps as early as 1849 (the date of the last offer for sale). The letter from WR Griffiths, Horticultural Engineer, states that:

“Some eighteen years ago I was engaged to erect an apparatus for thinning creosote used for the preservation of railway timbers, for the late Mr Hennett, and afterwards re-erected the like for the Messrs Roberts and Daines, Bristol Iron Works, St Philips”.

The letter was inspired by an epidemic of cholera and was suggesting the use of creosote (sprinkled on the face & base of walls) as a preventative. Mr Griffiths claimed that ‘about two years after the first apparatus was put up, the complaint cholera broke out, and, remarkable to say, not a single case of the sort attacked any person who was engaged in the yard’ despite ‘these works adjoining the piece of ground by the Cattle Market wherein some hundreds were buried during the cholera visitation of 1832’.

The 1880 map above shows part of the site as ‘Bristol Rolling Works (Iron) and part as ‘Railway Timber Yards’ – this fits with the above description of the 1865 fire.

Railway contractor George Henet (1799–1857, the late Mr Henet referred to above) is known to have been involved in the early stages of the establishment of Butler’s main Bristol site at Crews Hole (and it was financed by Roberts & Daines). It was probably at those works that Mr Griffiths set up the first apparatus for thinning creosote.

A further connection between Henet and Roberts & Daines is recorded by Brian Murless (Murless, B.J., ‘George Henet (1799-1857)’ in Cross-Rudkin, P.S. et al (eds.), Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers in Great Britain and Ireland, Vol.2: 1830-1890 (Institution of Civil Engineers 2008) pp.399-402.) He states that after George Henet went bankrupt in 1853:

“In Bristol he continued to trade under Henet, Pritchard, Roberts & Co., engineers, timber merchants and general contractors. In 1855 together with Thomas Daines they successfully tendered with the GWR for 12,000 “loads” of timber.”

So it seems that Roberts & Daines, George Henet and later William Butler were all involved with creosoting timber for use on Brunel’s railways, and the Crews Hole & Silverthorne Lane sites were probably operated together from the late 1840s onwards. It also seems possible that Roberts & Daines used the iron rolling works for other railway related items, perhaps including the running rails to be fixed to the timbers.

Roberts & Daines involvement at Crews Hole apparently ended after an earlier [major fire in 1863](#) when William Butler purchased the works. It may be that his works continued to be linked to Silverthorne Lane, and that Butler used the Silverthorne Lane site prior to the lease being agreed in 1871.

Fires were a fact of life dealing with creosote in the 1800s, it may have been an earlier fire involving timber and creosote in April 1841 near Temple Meads that led to the Crews Hole works being established in the first place.

Butlers Use of the Silverthorne Lane Site

In 1871 Butlers leased part of the area they eventually occupied but it seems they were not using the whole of the site initially. [Sheet 53](#) of the Insurance Plan of Bristol Vol II published by Chas E Goad Limited in 1896 (available on the [British Library](#) website, as well as maps.bristol.gov.uk/kyp) shows the eastern end of the Butler site as 'vacant' as well as the adjacent timber yard.



The malthouse between Butlers and Lysaghts is shown under the occupation of 'Chandlers & Mawer'.

The building at the north-west corner of Butlers' site appears to have been their head office; it is shown here in one of two photographs in [a set of photographs in an album that seems to have belonged to the Butler family](#).

The photo was probably taken in the 1890s. The building may well have been constructed soon after Butlers took over the site.

Butlers are also shown as occupying the arches under the railway. There is a note under both Butler sites saying 'admission refused'; this was presumably to the surveyors preparing the maps, part of their task was to identify 'special fire hazards, such as chemicals, kilns, and ovens'.

As further photo in the 1890s album shows a horse standing outside the arches.



A [Britain from Above photograph taken in 1926](#) suggests that the large shed at the east of the site (and the yard between it and the canal) which was shown as vacant in 1896, was then occupied by James Crispin & Sons – Horticultural Builders & Heating Engineers who had offices in Nelson St. This building is still standing.

In his [paper for the Society of Chemical Industry \(SCI\)](#) 'A History of Tar Distillation at Crew's Hole, Bristol', Raymond Holland who worked for Butlers says that while crude tar was usually transported by barges & narrow boats from the gas works, Stapleton Road Gas works supplied it by rail tankers to Silverthorne Lane and then up river by barge to the Crew's Hole works'.

Silverthorne Lane and its access to the railway yard was therefore important for bringing tar to the works at Crews Hole as well as for transporting finished products to customers. In Butler's 1954 book it says 'Rail tanks for the transport of Crude Tar from various inland Gas Works and rail tank transport of products, both tar and petroleum, played an important part in the operations of the Company. They have centred round the rail head at St Philips Depot and the Ocean Installations at Avonmouth. The fleet starting in a small way, has increased and today there is a total of 81 rail tanks'.



Communication between Silverthorne Lane and Crews Hole was clearly important and 'Wm.

Butler & Co. early saw the advantages of a vocal communication between their main Works and Head Office at Bristol and the first installation of reciprocal telephones was carried out'.

An article from the Western Daily Press dated Tuesday 26th August 1879 (only three years after the first reciprocal conversation between Edison and Bell) is quoted in Butlers 1954 book reporting on the installation of a telephone to avoid the need to send messengers on foot or by horse over the two miles between Silverthorne Lane and Crews Hole, 'now, the orders can be immediately transmitted by means of the telephone'. 'This is the greatest distance to which the telephone has been applied in this locality, but seeing the success which has attended the venture, other business men may soon find it to their advantage to follow the example which the Messrs. Butler have shown them'.

The Silverthorne Lane site was still in use at the time Butler's book was produced in 1954 and in fact they continued to use it until 1964. The more recent history is recorded in 'The Butlers & the Coal-Tar Distillery at Crew's Hole' by Brian Vincent and Raymond Holland (ALHA Books).

By 1964 the Tar Distilling Business had been sold to the South West Gas Board. The remaining business 'Butler Chemicals Ltd' therefore transferred its head office from St Philips to Rockingham Works at Avonmouth, though the Tar Works may have continued to use the site after this time.

Newspaper reports reviewed via the British Newspaper Archive
(www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)

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