

# The Floating Harbour

## Ralph Hoyte

a poetry journey around  
Bristol's Floating Harbour

commissioned by Local Journeys  
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as part of Floating Harbour 200  
a celebration of the 200th anniversary of the opening of the Floating Harbour

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## The Floating Harbour an epic poem by Ralph Hoyte

Keep the water on your right. If you start at the Industrial Museum / Museum of Bristol (I) the works will follow each other in the right order.

You can download the mp3 / audio files for your iPod / mp3 player – as well as PDFs of the text, laid out by the poet.

*Author's note:*

*The series of inter-locked poems entitled 'THE FLOATING HARBOUR' envisage the participant following the laid-out route and stopping off at the marked 'stops' to savour the poetry written for that spot. The 'conceit' of the poem is that each section relates to 'a material/element' which has left its particular resonance at that site or been particularly associated with that site; thus, for example, iron, timber, sugar, cloth, tobacco, wine, sand; or wind, water, mud etc.*

*Ralph Hoyte*

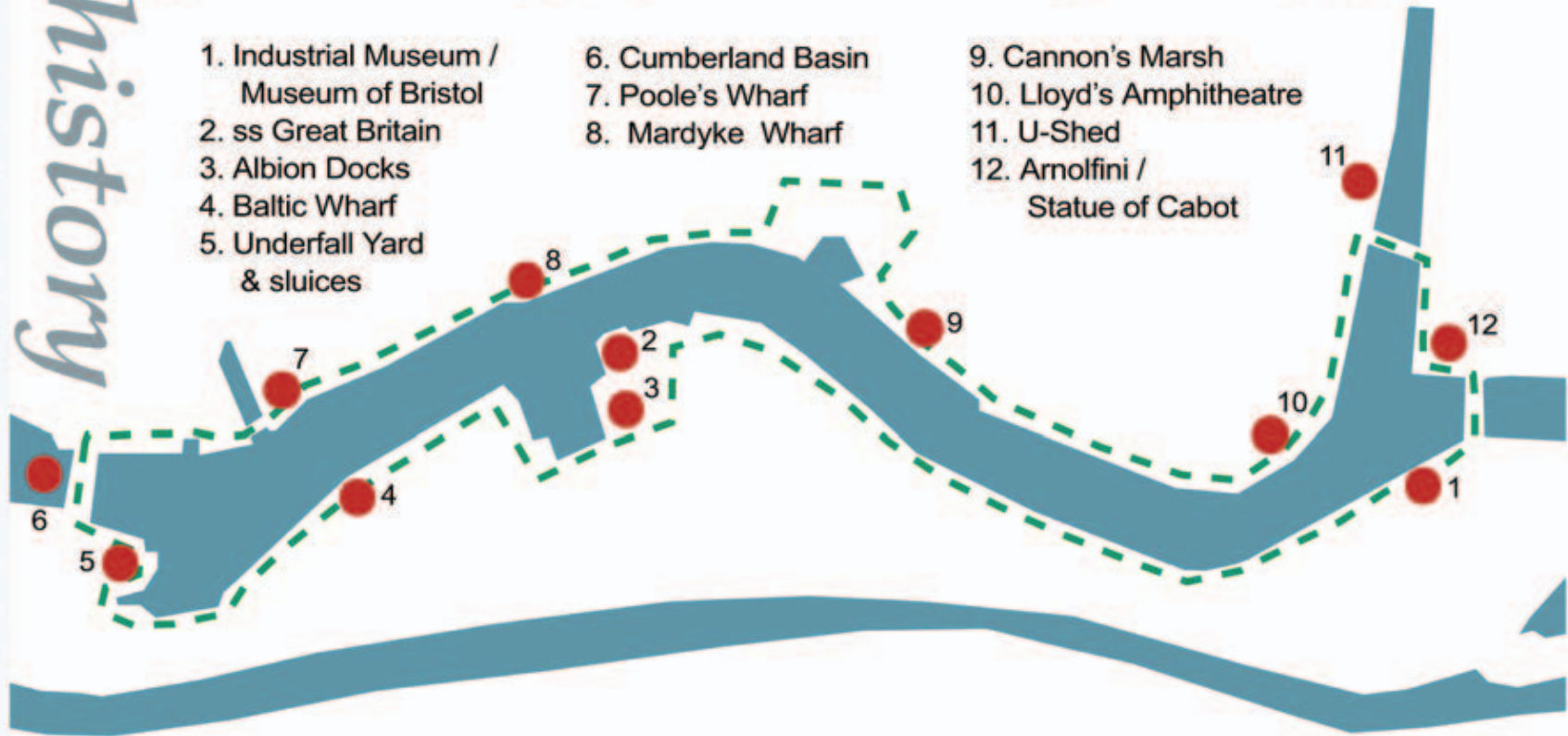
# *amidst the mumbings*

*history*

1. Industrial Museum /  
Museum of Bristol
2. ss Great Britain
3. Albion Docks
4. Baltic Wharf
5. Underfall Yard  
& sluices

6. Cumberland Basin
7. Poole's Wharf
8. Mardyke Wharf

9. Cannon's Marsh
10. Lloyd's Amphitheatre
11. U-Shed
12. Arnolfini /  
Statue of Cabot



a walk around Bristol's Floating Harbour with poetry by Ralph Hoyte

*a liquid necklace of water*

# 1 INDUSTRIAL MUSEUM BEGINNINGS

It's the monsoon in  
Bristol; a sea  
of masts  
shoots up; fore-masts in  
the Cumberland Basin, main-  
mast at Mardyke; mizzen,  
oh, somewhere up  
the Reach. They spear into  
the lobbys of  
insurance companies, banks,  
order takeaways, deposit  
doubloons at the  
Cheltenham & Gloucester. Saxons,  
Normans planted their wimples  
here, scowled over  
bodices, squeezed the  
old Frome into  
a girdle. An  
eyelash shading water  
blinked  
back at them, a  
a liquid necklace of  
water wherein  
Frome Maidens gambol  
amidst the mumblings  
of History

*I'd build me a ship of a thousand ton  
Hooraw, Santiano!  
An' load 'er up with Jamaica rum,  
All along the plains of Mexico!  
Aaaaawaaaay Rio! Oh Rio!*

# 2 SS GREAT BRITAIN IRON

Wood;  
floats on water. Iron.  
Sinks. Yes? No. Floating iron?  
Don't make me laugh. Ah, but Brunel wasn't  
Joking. Iron doesn't  
float, he said. Therefore -  
I will make it float.  
I am a man!  
Accredited to failure  
& the excoriating doubt  
of  
mud the hopeful, the outcasts  
took passage on Brunel's ss  
Great Britain. The stanchions  
to which  
they had attached their  
life-threads  
receded as they  
cast off, spake with  
albatrosses, mollymawks;  
feasted on the springing  
flesh of dolphins.  
56 days later:  
LAND AHOY! They  
hopped along there, kangaroos  
boxed them in at  
night.

Thus it is. The stanchions  
to which we shackle our  
lives; fixed,  
solid, immovable, to  
BS 5950; we  
move within  
their radius, as a boat tied  
up to a buoy,  
bobbing up  
and  
down - but fixed to  
a degree of  
freedom. What then  
if we are cast off and  
afloat on the groundswell  
of life? Pigeons bathe  
in it, sparrows chirp of it.  
Humans? Only  
ever, and  
never again.

*Mothers and sweethearts don't ye cry  
Sisters and brothers say goodbye  
A land of promise there ye'll see  
I'm bound away across the sea*



## 3

WATER  
ALBION DOCKS

Water,  
that liquid element,  
called to them, chuckling  
to them in their waking  
dreams, sea-water burped,  
gurgling with  
new life. Flailing, they struck out for  
the New World; zephyrs  
flirting out of skies  
extending out to  
a nameless infinity fill'd their fore royals,  
set their halyards  
to creakin', heeled her over to starb'd  
and set sea to scudding till  
they were puked out  
on a foreign shore.

*Heave a pawl, O heave away!  
Way ay roll an' go!  
The anchor's a board an' the cable's all stored  
Timme rollickin' randy dandy O!*

They  
found there  
only what they had taken  
within them. Trees  
are only  
trees, maize,  
maize; we are only  
what we think  
we are. Then  
sing of Reuben Ranzo, Lucy Loo,  
Hanging Johny, Eliza Lee,  
Susianna; sing of  
Sally Brown, Mother Shilling, Larry Marr; of  
Shenandoah, Rio, The Broomielaw, Mobile Bay; of  
Valparaiso,  
Essequibo, Hilo where there be  
Yaller Gals, Bulgines, Round-the-Corner Sallies;  
bow to  
Queens-in-the-Forest; seek out  
The Wild Goose Nation; these  
places  
which lie  
Within; where  
a golden  
three skys'l yarder  
takes a seaman's soul  
seeking that  
which  
shines out of dark  
seas and hangs  
around our  
necks, pointing earthwards.

*Ooooh! Jesus Christ Almighty!  
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!  
Ooooh! Jesus Christ Almighty!  
Ranzo, boys, Ranzo!*

# 4 BALTIC WHARF STONE

None of these  
conversations we have with  
water  
can take  
place without  
stone; a  
Floating Harbour floats,  
courtesy of stone; a  
wharf, a  
pier, a dock. Stone  
bears us up; stone  
weighs us  
down; stone  
marks the place where  
once flesh  
squabbled upon the earth. *'Here  
lie the mortal remains of -'*  
Stone  
holds us  
in  
place; stone  
holds  
us  
out of place. That which is  
solid and;  
immoving ...dances;  
and quays that  
replaced sloping banks.

Stone copes  
without asking  
'why?' The Back  
The Grove  
Mud Dock  
The Gibb; grazing cattle  
swishing on the Wapping  
side. Call it;  
a wharf, a jetty,  
dolphin  
landing stage  
structure for  
berthing mooring  
any  
adjacent pier bridge roadway footway  
affording  
access. Call it:  
stone.  
Yet here  
this; stone, whose  
birthing lay in  
furnaces incomprehensible to  
mind;  
(the gap)  
is piled up,  
gasping, in air; swilled  
by water; tickled  
by eels. The roots of plants  
seek out  
its secret heart, what;  
do we say  
?

Set in stone. As  
if  
stone were something  
solid. Did not Karl Marx say,  
'Everything that is solid  
melts  
into thin  
air'. The splinters  
of theoretical granite  
explode outwards  
blowing societies  
to smithereens; they are ground  
in the mortar of  
immortality

A  
faded oligarchy of crabs  
scuttles  
into the  
cracks, follows  
the  
way of all eels; and  
belts down to  
excrescences which  
saddle newts with brats. Look!  
There is scarcely a gap! But;  
There is still  
a gap; wild  
men know of it, dogs;  
pee in it. Mind.  
The gap



## 5 UNDERFALL YARD

### MUD

Mud  
Is a microcosm of world;  
It forms its own  
continents, islands, shoals,  
banks, drifts, eddies; its  
own deep sea trenches;  
Mud  
is un-  
edified, indeed, unedifiable. It doesn't care;  
it has given up  
all pretensions to  
any sort of social standing

Mud  
Rolls on, rolls off at will. It  
forms its own  
mid-Atlantic trenches, tectonic plates, it  
covers anything, brings  
anything to a halt; kingdoms arise out of mud;  
kingdoms  
slump back into mud. its  
peaks, troughs, valleys  
glower at those in a hurry,  
the swift, the  
light.

Mud  
Keeps secrets to itself in its own  
muddy little way; down there under the  
Cumberland Basin  
there is a perfect miniature Mount Everest  
of mud; underwater mountains are not  
snow-

Mud  
Welcomes you  
to the melting pot of the  
nations. Here all is mud. All  
secrets ooze in  
here, all beings come unto ...  
mud. Verily here endeth  
Man's overweening vanity.  
Underneath lie the  
Ganges, the  
Limpopo; over  
there the Amazon. Our wellies  
squelch.

Mud  
Is the defeat of all dignity; it's  
difficult to be  
glorious  
when you're stuck in -  
mud.

Mud  
What you see  
before you; that which is sucked out  
by sister moon, brother  
tide under Brunel's  
sluices is not  
'mud'; it is pieces  
of Luckington, Malmesbury, Chippenham,  
Bradford-on-Avon,  
Bath,

Bristol. Its  
particles are scuba-diving  
enzymes with mnemonic  
receptors; they carry  
the history of land, memories of  
solidity; they  
squidge

under the weight, slide out  
sideways. Atrocities  
leer out of mud; in  
and out of  
whose  
jaws minnows  
dance; they are green with  
bilgewater. Things we  
would rather not  
know  
scuttle over  
a toothy grin;  
except: toothless. In  
the mini-universe  
of mud, scroungers rule;  
seagulls flop;  
an upside-down  
dead  
rat bobs up  
and down  
with the swell; flotsam  
& jetsam. shipshape &  
Bristol  
Fashion; we  
gel again, like mud,  
to  
distant concords, are  
etched to  
fetching paradigms re-washed. In  
this necklace  
of Bristol the  
Frome Maidens  
particulate; come harken to  
their siren song:

*we'll sink him down  
with a long long roll,  
where the crabs'll have his body  
and the devil his soul ...*

# 6

## CUMBERLAND BASIN

### TIMBER

Water  
is to  
wood as  
wood  
is to:  
water. Who is to  
say where one  
ends, and the other  
begins? Trees  
are gigantic  
pumps, their essence  
partakes of  
liquidity.

It is true to say 'wood  
floats' and that there is  
therefore a  
separation; it is also true  
to say  
humans float. Sort  
of. But soon become water-  
logged. Whereas  
timber, which is  
logs,  
does not. Such is  
life.

Trees  
which were  
lost in cirrus, altostratus,  
skittered in here  
in droghers; were off-loaded from stand-offs.

The economy  
chugs along nicely, thank'ee,  
kind sir. It feeds in  
sugar  
tobacco  
rum  
coffee  
tea  
cocoa  
religion  
torture  
molasses  
slavery  
genocide  
mahogany  
colonies  
empires  
civil wars  
pressganged sailors  
estates in the country  
Ming vases ...

It feeds out:

whose  
lasting tenderness accrues  
to dogleg of river



# 7 POOLE'S WHARF PEOPLE

*"Bristol  
can only be understood  
from the water"*; do  
you not feel the truth of this from  
anywhere on this floating harbour? Houses  
scramble up  
the slopes from a  
watery birth-cauldron, burst into  
red, yellow, blue: Totterdown,  
Clifton Wood.

Dockers,  
stevedores  
shovellers  
baggers  
deal-runners  
coal trimmers  
ebbed and flowed with the tides,  
obdurate as stone  
cinched  
in the gullet of ships. They  
still spatter the landscape;  
their legacy is:  
water.

Then, as now,  
various things have  
fallen on them; squashed  
their finger,  
ricked  
their spine; they stutter off  
on Harley-Davidsons, Honda  
CB 1300s, immaculately  
maintained; a leather belt  
holds up their  
soiled jeans, their  
smock, their  
tunic;  
whose buckle boss bears a beaming  
skull,  
a pirate hat, a  
jaunty angle, a rictus; they  
braid  
their silvering hair.  
"Yuright?" The  
vowels have not  
changed in a thousand  
years, "yuright?"

This  
is a sort of human  
that  
has always existed. The  
sea surges through them,  
the longing to be free, that wide-horizon  
look. Our other excuses  
were  
extended, and  
rejected amongst  
the  
bowels of kings. Somewhere  
there's a Euclid  
on  
the block

## 8

MARDYKE

CLOTH

Pounded,  
 dipped, and  
 hung out to dry. Swift  
 Frome tumbled raw wool,  
 fullers pounded it,  
 dyers  
 dipped it. Then it was  
 exported.  
 Merchants' ships  
 braved the hydra-headed horses of  
 the sea, the viper's nests  
 of pirates spat curses at them;  
 agonised fleece-watchers held lookout from  
 their Captain's verandas:  
 Theseus? Yes, we know him. He lives down  
 Cotswold way. Our  
 Golden Boy outrigged to Ireland, down  
 the Atlantic coasts of France, Portugal and Spain;  
 the names of Castile, Gascony  
 tripped off his tongue. We  
 swoon  
 like Vidal  
 Sagoon; sleek-  
 haired  
 animal-coated buxom and  
 cottage-  
 spun amidst a wrack  
 of Empire where  
 Winter's turbulent bride  
 awaits  
 the slant of spring, and  
 the ship home  
 from the sea

## 9

CANNONS MARSH

RELIGION

OK, where's the bloody  
 nightingale  
 aboard this packet?  
 Facing upstream, Mammon's  
 on the right  
 bank; God  
 on the left; no, let's turn it round:  
 downstream, Mammon on  
 the left, God on the  
 right. Let's cut  
 the circumstances to  
 our beliefs, not our  
 beliefs to the circumstances. That's  
 what humans do.

Carmelites  
 Augustinians  
 Franciscans  
 held up their side  
 of the sky  
 on this bank,  
 merchants; and townspeople  
 wallflower  
 on the other. Ships pass  
 between, and  
 ghost down to  
 incandescence; they have  
 batwings in their  
 riggings. Their portholes  
 ogle. It

is impossible to know what  
 belief meant to the  
 believing; what 'God' meant  
 to the medieval mind. Aeons  
 of specificity  
 have led to conundrums; of mice-  
 fed starvelings nattering obliquely  
 on the matter of cheese. We  
 tread on ballbearings,  
 windmilling  
 our arms to keep our  
 balance,  
 when all of the time: IS.

*'Belay  
 all that!  
 That'll do the hands!*

# 10

LLOYDS AMPITHEATRE

SUGAR

Let us take the one word:  
sugar. Let us adduce its uses:  
sweetener, food additive,  
preservative. It  
stinks like fish.

So

let us fillet its history :

Sugar. Slavery. Slavery. Sugar.

Both start

with 's'.

So does 'hell'. Oh

really? It came

up

the river; it was exchanged

for those sold

down

the river, out across the Bristol Channel, O,  
Dahomey!

Dragons propelled  
their minds, scales  
weighed down  
their feet; even  
for the white sailors St  
Vincent Rocks  
framed  
a turned-away sky

On

The Grain Coast

The Ivory Coast

The Gold Coast

The Slave Coast

cloud boiled away from the

edges, erupted over the curve of the world;

architraves of despair

surrounded a pitiless door; thus

is a Georgian House built, a

Colston Hall,

a city, an economy. Thus

is the future

seeded. Thus

dragon sporn struggle out of

the ground, hissing.

Thus.

Let us pray:

oh being which  
is luminescent; and  
fraught with  
triangles,  
open out and  
square up to us!

Amen.



## 11

U-SHED (AT PEROS BRIDGE)

WINE/PLEASURE

Jerez de la Frontera  
 El Puerto de Santa María  
 Sanlúcar de Barrameda: a jolly  
 triangle, for  
 heaven's sake!

Oh  
 Oloroso so so hic! hic! hic!  
 Thou pungent gift of  
 the Jerezanos; oh manzanillas,  
 little salty sea apple of Sanlúcar;  
 treacle-casket'd amontillado  
 ' in the style of Montilla'; Pedro Ximénez'ed  
 cream sherry, cold, with a slice of naranja  
 shipping out from Cadiz, orange Spanish-skinned  
 silken slip intimately imbibed  
 in cool bodegas ice-cubed  
 lovemaking  
 to the sound of the lazy lace  
 swish of curtains in Jerez de la Frontera; and  
 a remote rasp of  
 flamenco...

Have a glass of Vino Nobile di  
 Montepulciano Torraccio 2004  
 on me. Too good  
 for the pickled ones  
 still rolling in the  
 gutters on a  
 Saturday  
 Binge,  
 flashing their knickers,  
 fished out of the harbour,  
 fish on  
 bicycles, spouting. Then sing:

Ronald Avery, oh! John Avery,  
 ah! Harvey, gimme another  
 glass of that there 2004 Vino Nobile  
 di Montepulciano  
 Torraccio  
 before I's, hic, kicks the bucket, let me  
 suck it; please, Louise, don't  
 be a tease, break  
 out the '95 Château Pétrus, that'll save us,  
*Pomerol, cru exceptionnel* only 14,400 dollars the casket, they'd get even  
 more if they'd ask'd it  
 we'll broach the barrel, you'll get rid of your apparel, oh darling, do  
 (anon. not found in extant drinking manuals)

## THE FLOATING HARBOUR

This  
Floating Harbour:  
a liquid necklace of  
water wherein  
From Maidens gambol  
amidst the mumblings  
of History; a  
secret harbour  
woven around Avon,  
spun  
on a distaff of land and  
stone by Saxons,  
Normans;  
whose  
threads reach out to  
Ireland, Africa, the  
Amerikees. The  
Floating Harbour chants  
harmony  
to land and water; a  
singing line in earth  
that flows forth  
in the liquid element; and renews. A  
necklace of liquid gold with  
footings in fecund  
mud, the  
downpourings of  
Luckington, Malmesbury, Chippenham,  
Bradford-on-Avon,  
Bath ...  
Bristol

*Hooray and up she rises  
Hooray and up she rises  
Hooray and up she rises  
Earl-i in the morning...*