



Initial heritage observations prepared by  
Robert Bevan for St Mary Redcliffe and the  
Redcliffe Neighbourhood Development Forum

October 2014

# **ROBERT BEVAN**

[www.robert-bevan.com](http://www.robert-bevan.com)

[rbevan@mac.com](mailto:rbevan@mac.com)

+44 7963 319352

skype: rpmbevan

## 1.0 Background

1.1 I have been asked to reflect on some of heritage aspects of the emerging neighbourhood plan for Redcliffe following a co-design workshop held earlier this summer. I have been requested to pay particular attention to the impact of the emerging proposals on the church of St Mary Redcliffe.

## 2.0 Introduction

2.1 Understandably, the Redcliffe Forum has been concentrating on Redcliffe Way – the area within the neighbourhood plan’s ambit whose future it is especially important to resolve – that is Redcliffe Way.

2.2 This area is the key to changing both perceptions and the actuality of Redcliffe and to providing a built environment that fosters rather than hinders the development of a community.

2.3 Consequently, this report also has this zone as its focus. However, it should be noted that the Redcliffe Way zone and its surrounding heritage assets should be considered within the wider context of Redcliffe and the city in order to properly assess the impact on significance. I address this point in more detail below.

2.4 Following further work by consultants after the co-design workshop, the southerly route for the new road has emerged as the most likely option with its exact course to be determined at a later stage. This report, therefore, assumes some variation on the southerly route is the one to be assessed in heritage terms.

2.5 There are many good reasons for taking the southern route, however, there are also negative aspects to this decision that needed noting. These include the fact that an enlarged Portwall Lane would concentrate pedestrian and vehicular flows in a way that would both enhance economic viability of businesses along the route and free up much more land between Portwall Lane and St Mary’s for suitable development to enhance the setting of the church. Bristol City Council’s investment in the concept of Portwall Lane as a quiet, secondary street, is understandable but by no means the only logical scenario. But shifting this conceptual investment would, it is acknowledged, be no easy task.

2.5 This report does not outline the historical development of the area again – this has been well-documented in a number of previous reports produced by various consultants and Bristol City Council.

### 3.0 Heritage Assets and their Significance

3.1 A heritage asset can be, among other things, an item of archaeology, a standing structure or a conservation area. The more valuable the asset or parts of an asset – ie the higher its ‘significance’ in terms of its historic, social, architectural or other interest – the more importance is placed on its preservation. Change is normally seen as an opportunity to enhance an asset’s setting, for example, in order to better reveal its heritage ‘significance’.

3.2 The above is, in very outline terms, the approach taken by statutory and heritage bodies when attempting to draw up an objective assessment of proposals that affect heritage assets. Under the National Planning Policy Framework (the latest over-arching planning guidance) there is a presumption against causing substantial harm to the significance of heritage assets and their setting and an expressed aim of enhancing significance.

3.3 The principal heritage assets within the Redcliffe area are:

- St Mary Redcliffe together with the graveyard to the south and curtilage structures.
- Temple Church
- St Thomas the Martyr
- Chatterton House
- Quaker Burial Ground
- Historic pubs such as the Seven Stars and others
- Georgian terraces, squares and their remnants such as along Colston Parade.
- Waterfront Redcliffe including Redcliffe Wharf, the other various wharfs and warehouses, and Redcliffe Bridge.
- Non-standing archaeology and sites such as the Port Wall and the site of the Shot Tower that can have a ‘presence’ via interpretation.

3.4 This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. But just as important as these and other more obvious or grand items is recognising that there are the less prominent background buildings that make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the area and which provide the setting for the main assets.

3.5 Redcliffe's significance also needs to be considered in relation to Bristol more widely – its role in the development of the city and its location between Temple Meads the city centre and the waterfront. Additionally, St Mary Redcliffe has enormous significance nationally for its architectural and historic interest as one of the most important medieval parish churches in the country. This importance makes it likely that proposals for change that effect it can be expected to come under more than the usual scrutiny both by heritage bodies including Bristol City Council, English Heritage and under the Church's own internal ecclesiastic measures.

3.6 There is significance too in the morphology of the area -- the scale and pattern of its network of streets that are the warp and the weft holding the area together. The topography plays a role; from high-level terraces and St Mary's elevated position to the waterfront and trees of townscape value.

3.7 In addition to these tangible assets are an area's intangible assets. These can encompass matters such as traditions, music, characteristic uses and waterfront activities.

3.8 Authenticity and integrity are important concepts to consider. A like-for-like rebuild of an historic structure does not have the same authenticity as the original. Similarly, the value of an area can be diminished if it becomes inauthentic in its character and appearance – the re-creation of an activity for the tourist market rather than a genuinely surviving craft, for example. This does not suppose a scholastic eye – most people are adept at intuiting the 'truthfulness' of an area even if it is a subconscious awareness or one that is not easily articulated. This is one reason that pastiche architecture should be used sparingly and executed only if of extremely high quality and with sound reasons – eg a gap site in a continuous Georgian terrace.

3.9 Integrity is the degree to which elements of an asset remain intact and contribute towards its coherence – in this case elements of an historic area as well as individual assets. To retain just the more obvious assets and not others within their vicinity that maybe more humble but help create an asset's context would be to diminish that asset's significance and the collective significance of the assets in the area. This collective integrity matters and where many historic elements of an area of the past have been lost those that remain can become more precious for their evidentiary value.

3.10 The interpretation of heritage assets is also a matter for consideration – how can an area's assets be more readily understood and, therefore, valued.

## 4.0 Opportunities and Threats

4.1 St Mary Redcliffe is one of England's great parish churches but its significance has been eroded by post-war redevelopment nearby – most notably by highways engineering and the roads that have resulted but also by the creation of the somewhat municipal northern lawn as its immediate setting to the north.

4.2 These create a context for the church's architecture that is at odds with its historic setting through the centuries. The lawn sets up the church as a monument to be viewed formally, in isolation. This was rarely the case historically and such stripped back, formal settings often serve to reinforce a disconnect with the past. What is more, the roads created post-war also physically disconnect the church from its social hinterland – from its parish and the city more widely.

4.3 The multiple changes over many decades to the stepped approaches to the church have, to some degree, diminished the significance of these structures in themselves and relative to the church entire.

4.4 The proposals to reorder Redcliffe Way and Redcliffe Hill presents an enormous opportunity to improve the setting of the church and to improve connections across Redcliffe more widely. An urban rather than suburban street pattern can be created which new development can then line with the triple advantage of increasing activity including housing, raising densities and creating a built rather than a grass and tarmac setting for the north and west sides of St Mary Redcliffe.

4.5 Such changes could also provide a proper urban setting for Chatterton House, the Quaker Burial Ground and the length of Portwall Lane including the Redcliffe Bridge approach. This should be achieved in a way that strengthens corners on key intersections and improves the legibility of Redcliffe as a whole.

4.6 There is also the opportunity to screen some buildings along Redcliffe Hill and Redcliffe Way that occupy their plots in a less dense or suburban manor with new structures. This would help reinforce the integrity of Redcliffe in places where it has been diminished.

4.7 There is the danger, however, that by concentrating heavily on Redcliffe Way the opportunity is lost to provide St Mary Redcliffe in particular with a sustainable hinterland. While Redcliffe Way/Redcliffe Hill is undoubtedly the single most damaging element of the church's immediate context it is very important that proposals reinforce the area's north-south routes as well. While these may be secondary in scale they should not be seen as secondary in importance from the point of view of promoting cohesion and integrity across the area.

4.8 There would be great value in creating a triangle of activity using heritage assets to animate Redcliffe more widely and to get these assets to work as a group: A triangle whose three points are defined by St Mary Redcliffe, St Thomas's/Redcliffe Street and Temple Church could be the armature on which a heritage led regeneration strategy for the neighbourhood hangs, a strategy that safeguards assets, builds community and encourages the best in contemporary architecture.

4.9 These north-south routes from south of St Mary Redcliff up towards the river should be considered at the same time and just as carefully as the replacement of Redcliffe Way. These should be activated routes. Pump Lane/Phippen Street in particular has the potential to be an enormously attractive route from Ship Lane to St Thomas's Street with its heritage assets, including the church, graveyard walls and Chatterton House essential to creating a high quality urban realm. The widest possible re-integration of the remaining historic environment together with high quality, small-plot new build will maximise the sense of place and become a powerful attractor for the area.

4.10 While it is recognised that the Forum does not have the resources to work up full policies and proposals for the wider area, it is important that it reaches out 'feelers' from the core area to improve the chances of successful regeneration and the Neighbourhood Development Plan should reflect this. Close liaison with Bristol City Council on its Site Allocations DPD is also advisable with input, if necessary, before the public inquiry into Bristol's development plans.

4.11 Similarly, relationships should be maintained with the teams leading the Temple Quay and Temple Meads proposals in order to get synergy from the heritage benefits, ensure continuity and avoid duplication.

4.12 The Forum should be already engaged in the shaping of proposals that are emerging within its area in order to safeguard its own emerging plan. One example of this need is the various proposals for the site bounded by Redcliffe Street, St Thomas Street and Three Queen's Lane. The grain of these proposals has been too coarse in terms of plot size, scale and mix of uses. A recent proposal includes using part of the site for surface parking which should be resisted as entirely unsuitable in an area that needs re-densification. Existing 'background' buildings' within the conservation area that may not be listable but do contribute positively towards its character and which could provide cheap shelter for markets, pop-ups, incubator units, start-ups and studios would all be demolished. It is almost impossible to house such 'grass roots' uses in new buildings because the cost of construction has to be recovered via higher rents or by sales. The animation of Three Queen's Lane would be a great gain for Redcliffe. It could even be used as a route for the guided bus.

4.13 The Forum should also be seeking to influence proposals adjacent to its area, particularly those along the waterfront and west of the bridge at The Grove

where the redevelopment of surface car parks as buildings could play an important role, long-term, in the re-integration of Redcliffe into central Bristol.

4.14 It should also be noted that heritage assets can also be constraints. A prime example is the remains of the Port Wall. Contemporary archaeological practice is to avoid disturbing below-ground deposits where possible. It is highly likely then that the idea of excavating the Port Wall would meet with substantial resistance within the archaeological community. At the very least, the first step in any excavation proposal would be a technical survey to determine the extent of any remaining deposits and the potential value of unearthing and displaying them. In any case, new developments and road layouts have to be designed to mitigate any potential harm to archaeological deposits. This will command resources.

4.15 Changes in planning legislation could also threaten the Forum's regeneration vision. The government has been moving the planning system rapidly towards a free-market model. Pertinent to Redcliffe, this includes loosening controls over the change of use of properties – notably from offices and retail to other uses such as residential. In London this is threatening employment space because residential is commanding higher prices. Councils no longer have the powers to control the change. If this is an issue for Redcliffe, the Forum should consider proposing an 'Article 4' direction in its area which would re-impose controls over particular changes of use – although the Secretary of State has so far been reluctant to approve such directions. Protecting the character of a conservation area (including its uses where these form parts of its character) could support such a bid.

## 5.0 Conclusions and Outline Proposals

5.1 In devising strategies for historic areas such as Redcliffe it is inevitable and right that there is a large degree of overlap between heritage and urban design considerations – the two go hand-in-hand in terms of the analysis of the issues faced and devising solutions to them. It is vital that the new development and public spaces around St Mary Redcliffe are the generators of change – this place needs to be created first with the traffic issues then handled in a way that supports the placemaking rather than visa versa.

5.2 There has been a great deal of work done on the history of the area and on the immediate environs of the church. It would not, therefore, be an efficient use of resources to commission extensive heritage reports. However, there is value in briefly reviewing the work done to date and checking that it is still accurate in order to have a recent baseline against which to test proposals. Some elements of documents such as SPD3 and BCC's conservation area appraisal are now outdated. More recent initiatives such as BCC's preparation of a local list of historic buildings need incorporating into the baseline inventory. A rapid (Level 2) Historic Area Assessment (in line with English Heritage guidance) would be useful, therefore, as part of assembling the evidence base for the neighbourhood plan. Any unidentified heritage assets should be identified.

5.3 Any assets of community value also need to be identified. This designation may help protect characteristic uses as well as built fabric. This has been particularly successful elsewhere in safeguarding pubs. It gives the community a breathing space to find sustainable uses for a valued building.

5.4 The vision for the area and the plan should include a presumption in favour of heritage-led regeneration and the retention of any elements of the area that contribute towards its significance. It should make clear that authenticity and integrity are part of the vision's organising principles.

5.5 The drafting of design policies and heritage policies within the plan should be undertaken together rather than separately. The Forum should also consider preparing design guidance or a design code for Redcliffe. The mechanisms for incorporating such a document as an appendix to a neighbourhood plan should be investigated – should it avoid being subject to the inspector's examination or be examined and consequently have more regulatory weight?

5.6 In the environs of St Mary Redcliffe in particular (though also elsewhere) it should be recognised that gothic churches were not, in general meant to be seen straight on as large set pieces in the classical manner. They were usually seen obliquely in densely built up areas and it is this layering and juxtaposition that give the verticality of the gothic its power. It was suggested at the co-design day that the townscape around English churches did not 'huddle' as it might do in an Italian hill town. I disagree: English medieval churches were part of built up clusters – it is just that most of these examples have lost their earlier context. St

Mary Redcliffe at one stage was closely flanked by other buildings most notably the now demolished Chapel of the Holy Spirit – part of the Hospital of St John the Baptist.

5.7 That said, unlike many Continental churches, English churches often had graveyards or other small-scale buffers between themselves and the street itself. Rarely, except in the most dense of inner-city areas, would a church rise from the back of a pavement.

5.8 These points should be kept in mind when devising proposals for a new Redcliffe Way and any new build elements. St Mary Redcliffe should not become a formal object in a formal or even an informal plaza. Oblique and partial views are entirely acceptable – one should not be expected to be able to take in the whole of the church in one glance. Informality rather than formality, intimacy, rather than sweeping public spaces that leak away are key. It is recognised, however, that the closer proposed new development gets to St Mary Redcliffe, the more intensely it will be scrutinised. The work would need to be of the highest quality and undoubtedly would not come cheap. Southwark Cathedral is an example of where this has been achieved successfully (if not especially adventurous in its architecture). The new-build element sits directly in front of the church.



5.9 To varying degrees, this is true of the Redcliffe area as a whole and the most important contribution that the new road layout and new development can make would be to densify the area and increase a sense of intimacy and enclosure to its streets and other public spaces. But the uses and microclimate of these spaces needs to be taken into account from the start. Creating an intimate but mostly shadowy square to the north of St Mary Redcliffe would not be a recipe for success in the English climate. Likewise, the Quaker Burial Ground, while only of local importance as a heritage asset would benefit from flanking development but not structures that would unduly shade it. I have not seen the most recent iterations of the development options for this area, however, those early drafts presented at the co-design day obviously needed substantial refining in order to optimise them and address these kind of issues.

5.10 Attempting to force too many uses on a single space can also be to create a multi-functional nowhere – it is often best to create spaces for limited uses but with conviction. St Mary Redcliffe, for example, already has its quiet, walled graveyard to the south – it does not need the same to the north where an activated and animated spaces would prove much more successful in tying the church to the rest of Redcliffe. Hard landscaping rather than soft would prove more sympathetic as a setting.

5.11 St Mary Redcliffe is not a monastery church and one would not expect a cloister but an open-sided cloister-type structure or market hall could potentially be used to enclose some public spaces while maintaining permeability and usefully screening-off traffic. This is not to invite the saccharine; below is the recently completed market hall for Ghent, Belgium, where an utterly contemporary insert helps consolidate a previously fragmented medieval townscape at the same time as negotiating difficult changes in level. Negotiating level changes will be crucial at St Mary Redcliffe and proposals should avoid creating extensive elevated public spaces on podiums.



5.11 An important issue in achieving development that is sympathetic to heritage is plot size and the neighbourhood plan should articulate what is acceptable and what the maximum plot ratio limits would be. Smaller plots, incrementally developed, would have an affinity with the historic pattern of land-use. There may be locations between St Mary Redcliffe and Portwall Lane where perimeter blocks of self-build could be encouraged. A development brief could be set or even a local development order implemented to encourage diversity and cumulative change at small-scale within parameters identified in the plan or its appendices. The Forum and church should, in any case, prepare development briefs for key sites and consider the merits of an architectural competition for the buildings sought by the church and the related public realm.

Issued: 30<sup>th</sup> October 14<sup>th</sup> 2014

**ROBERT  
BEVAN**

[www.robert-bevan.com](http://www.robert-bevan.com)

[rbevan@mac.com](mailto:rbevan@mac.com)

+44 7963 319352

skype: rpbbevan

This report is the copyright of Robert Bevan and is for the sole use of the persons/organisations to whom it is addressed. It may not be used or referred to in whole or in part by anyone else without the express agreement of Robert Bevan. Robert Bevan does not accept liability for any loss or damage arising from any unauthorised use of this report.