

Brislington Community Museum News

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Portion of the wall to the left (east) rebuilt to make it more vertical (photo 7 July 2025).

As a change...

...from our previous newsletter, which explored the wide variety of small finds from the 19th and 20th centuries from Brislington, this issue looks at the ease with which something large can exist in plain sight - even at a particularly busy and public place such as main road - and yet its nature and heritage value is consistently overlooked.

In this instance, the item revealed is a minor masterpiece of masonry - an eighteenth-century wall showcasing the beauty and functionality of a waste product of copper smelting - iridescent black blocks of copper slag (and yes, it's related to the Devil's Cathedral).

Ken Taylor, chair

Contact us

Email us - secretary@brislington.org - to enquire about any of our community museum's exhibits, to provide feedback or new information etc about them, or to contribute items for this newsletter. We aim to produce this quarterly, but our schedule is flexible so we can react quickly to urgent important events (also, during quiet times we can focus on other matters such as out-reach activities and sourcing and researching new exhibits).

Boundary wall of Mount Pleasant

These notes concern a stretch of wall that appears to have formed a boundary to the private dwelling house originally known as Mount Pleasant (currently Arnos Manor Hotel, and once the Arno's Court Roman Catholic convent), Brislington, Bristol.

The house formed part of a complex of buildings raised around 1760 by the Quaker industrialist William Reeve, who re-used the slag waste (from his copper smelting works) as building materials.

Definitions

The 'front' of the wall is the face visible from the road (this is the most decorative face, and the one seen by most people) and, conversely, the back is the face visible from inside the cemetery.

For the purpose of convenience in describing the wall, the pilasters and the panels of wall between them, have been assigned numbers starting from 1 at the left (east) end of the wall as viewed from the pavement. Pilasters and panels have separate number sequences, so pilaster 1 stands between panels 1 and 2.

Location

Like many roads in Brislington, Bristol, the south side of the Bath Road (A4) at Arnos Vale is rich with pennant stone walls. What makes the wall described here distinctive is that its grey stone is set in a pattern of black blocks of copper slag arranged in a horizontal band, vertically as pilasters, and along the top as coping stones.

Most of the wall stands at the boundary between Holy Souls Cemetery (Bath Road, Brislington, BS4 3LA, owned by Clifton Diocese) and the A4 (Bath Road). The wall's northwestern end is at Ordnance Survey grid reference ST 6091871619, and its southeastern end is at ST 6098571606.

History

Many old walls in Brislington include the occasional block of copper slag, used for simple convenience, and some are topped with a row of coping stones composed of the iridescent black metallic material, but this wall is arguably unique in having multiple features of cast slag incorporated into its design.



Looking east-southeast at the whole of the surviving wall (photo 19 June 2025).

The oldest part of this wall is currently only associated with Holy Souls Catholic Cemetery which was created in 1860 (Clifton Diocese 2025) some ten years after the convent was established in 1850-1 (Historic England 2025) on land owned by the convent.

Photographs, however, from around 1910 and published as postcards, show the distinctive pattern of this wall existed 125m further to the southeast at one of the Roman Catholic convent's main entrances.

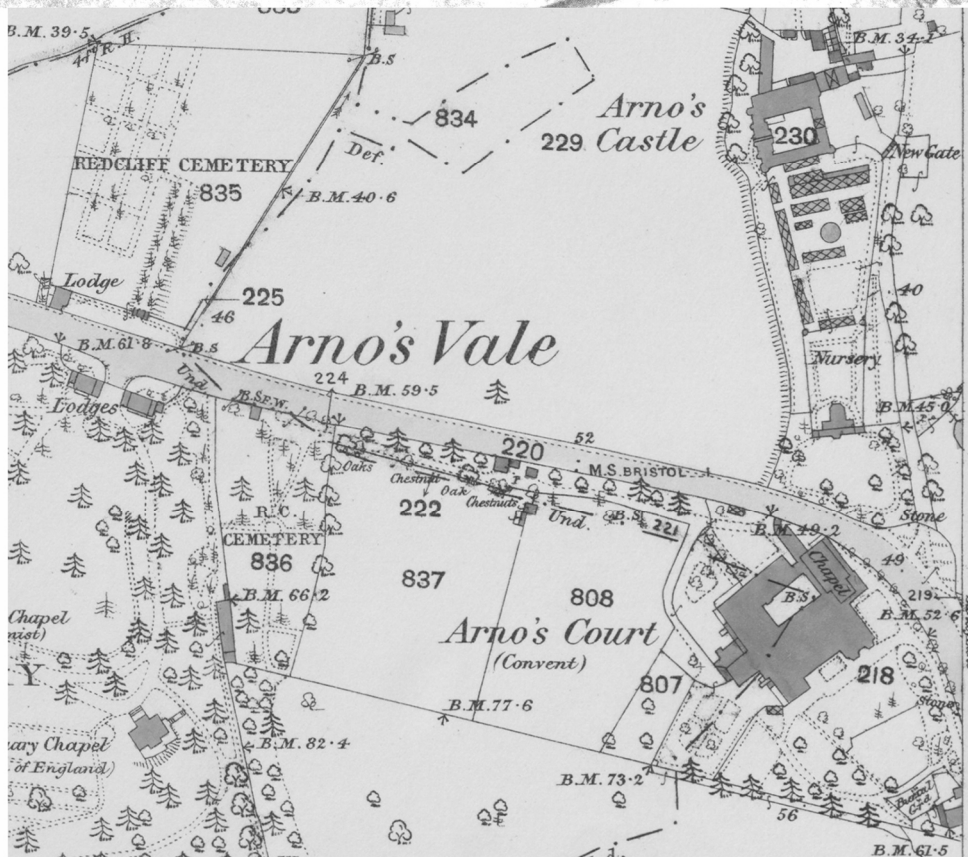
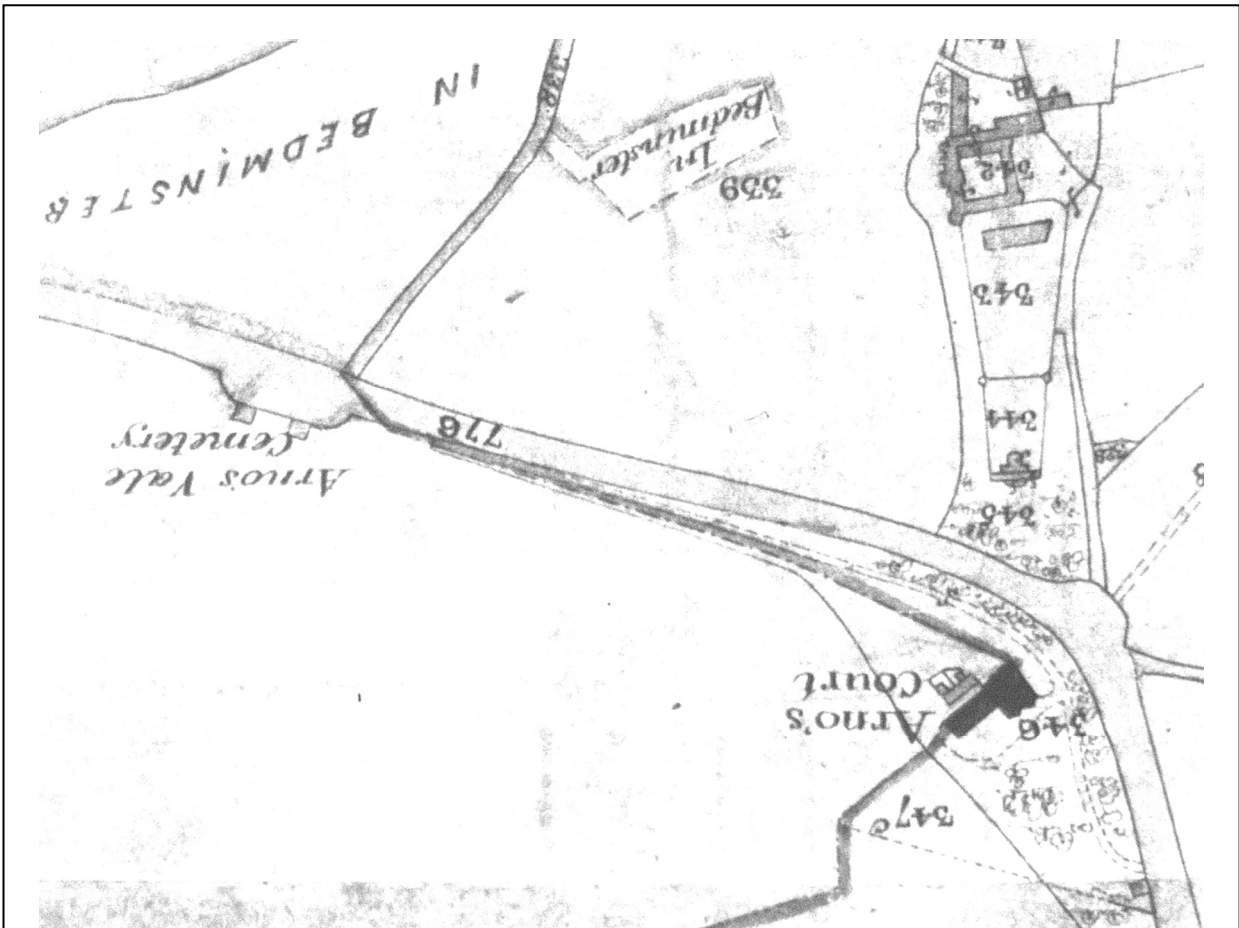
One postcard published on the website of Bristol Archives clearly shows both the double row of rectangular blocks and the sloping coping blocks on both sides of the convent's entrance (Anon c.1908). Other postcards establish there was also at least one pilaster to the east of the entrance (Westfield c.1930), and two to the west (Viner & Co c.1916) - all of the same type as those surviving in the wall today.

It's very unlikely this sort of wall was raised by the Convent of the Good Shepherd (Arno's Court Convent) as it's so unlike their other stone walls, such as that built to provide privacy from the early residential development of Kings Road c.1910, which has rubble stone walls up to 4m high, coped with pennant stone in the local tradition of the cock-and-hen pattern. Also, an additional and taller barrier was erected immediately behind this wall (visible in the c.1916 postcard), to adequately protect the privacy of the closed order of nuns.

The copious use of copper slag in the construction of this wall appears to be unique in the local area at least, and invites comparison with the Castle pub restaurant (formerly the Black Castle, and earlier Arno's Castle) which was built as stables and offices for Mount Pleasant and, in 1766, was famously dubbed the "Devil's Cathedral" by Horace Walpole (Foyle, & Pevsner 2011, 241).



Convent entrance. Detail of postcard by Fred Viner published in or around 1916 (reproduced with the kind permission of Jonathan Rowe, chairman of Brislington Conservation and History Society, from a postcard in their collection).



The 1844 Tithe map (upper) which appears to have its lettering upside down, but simply predates the convention of having north at the top, and the 1886 Ordnance Survey map (lower).

That remarkable building stands on the other side of the Bath Road from the wall, some 165m to the northeast. It's constructed almost entirely of the metallic material. It was the brainchild of William Reeve, who was showcasing the value of building blocks cast from the otherwise hard to dispose of waste from his copper smelting business on the outskirts of Bristol.

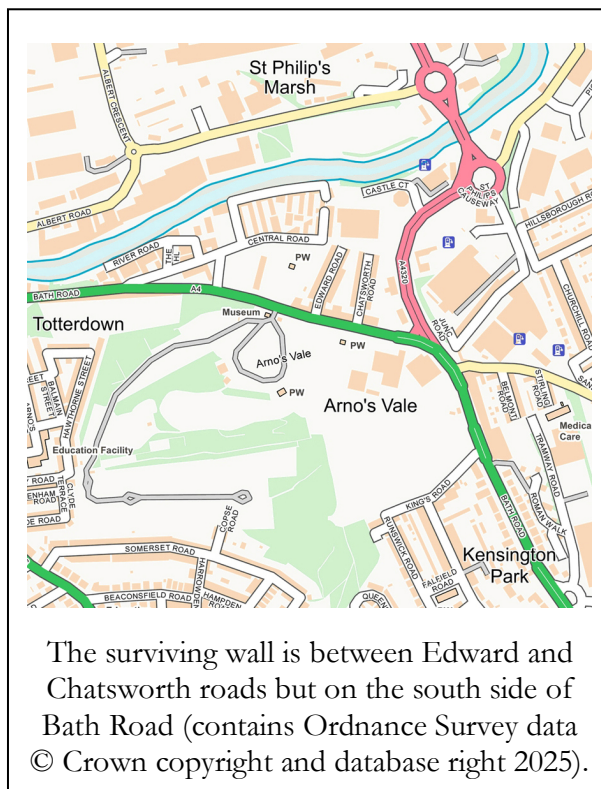
Reeve inherited land in Arno's Vale along with a building called Half-Way House, and he soon began acquiring more land locally for his building spree of the 1750s and/or 1760s. In addition to the Castle (Grade I listed) was an adjacent bath house and colonnade (the latter was moved in 1957 to Portmeirion village), a triumphal arch (Grade II*), and a tunnel under the Bath Road that connected them to his new home - Mount Pleasant - (Grade II*).

His estate included Arnos Court Park and land that became not only the Holy Souls Roman Catholic Cemetery but also the earliest part of Arnos Vale Cemetery. The use of copper slag with both a decorative and a functional role in this wall is in keeping with his propensity for using it close to home, for example at the Castle.

His bankruptcy in 1774 was precursor to the breaking up and sale of the estate - which also broke the obvious link with copper smelting and its residual blocks of slag.

The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map on the Know Your Place website is slightly misaligned to the Bristol City Council 'Basemap' (Bristol City Council 2019) at this location. When that OS map, which was surveyed in 1883 (OS 1886), is fine-tuned in relation to the Basemap, it shows the boundary between the house that William Reeve built - originally Mount Pleasant but marked on the map as "Arno's Court (Convent)" - and the Bath Road was precisely in the position of the wall of current interest.

Almost forty years earlier than that OS map, and nearly a decade before the house became a convent, a tithe map (Brown & Sturge 1844) shows that inside the grounds of Arno's Court, a driveway ran roughly parallel with the Bath Road, along the back of the wall. This drive provided rear access to the property.



Type of wall

The wall is up to 2.5m high at the front, 65m long, and runs along the boundary of the old Mount Pleasant grounds. From the front, the wall is a screen providing privacy from the main road.

Within the cemetery, the ground level reaches as close as 1m to the top of the wall, making it a retaining wall (burial monuments more than a hundred years old stand right up against it). The ground level is lower near the wall's western end, where the double course of black blocks is visible. These blocks are superficial and don't span the full thickness of the wall, so it seems unlikely this ornament would have been added to this side if most of it was intended to be hidden by soil.

A screen wall is constructed to bear only its own weight, whereas a retaining wall needs to be much stronger. The wall's tendency to bow out away from the cemetery has been addressed on at least one occasion (evidenced by the rebuilt portion illustrated on page 1).

It's tempting to assume a recent fall of stones may also be a symptom of such structural stress, but that would be mere conjecture.



The front of the surviving wall. The first photograph being of the wall's left-hand (east) end, such that panel 10 and pilaster 10 are in the last picture (photos 19 June 2025).

Description

Panel 1, pilaster 1, and almost half of panel 2 appear to be a reconstruction that has re-used the slag blocks and preserved the general appearance of the original structure (without the precision). This section is more upright than much of the rest of the wall, suggesting the rebuild may have been required to make a slumping wall safe.

For convenience of the description that follows, the wall has divided it into five components:

- 1) The lower (stone) part of the wall
- 2) The double course of slag blocks
- 3) The upper (stone) part of the wall
- 4) The course of coping stones (slag blocks)
- 5) The pilasters

1) The lower (stone) part of the wall

This consists of grey pennant type stone rubble, which rises up to 30 inches (762mm) above present ground level at the front. At the back this is entirely invisible (presumably buried).

2) The double course of slag blocks

Slightly less than half way up the wall are two courses of rectangular blocks of copper slag, one on top of the other. These courses are present on both the front and the back face of the wall.

The height of this double row, relative to the modern ground level of the pavement, has a gentle rise and fall.

Although the dimensions of these blocks differ due to imprecision in their casting, the desired measurements appear to be as follows:

	Inches	Millimetres
Length	18	457
Height	9	229
Depth	6	152

These courses are carefully aligned with the blocks stacked to form the pilasters, so they provide the visual impression of an uninterrupted band running along the wall's entire length. The blocks are arranged in a running bond, usually requiring a half-block at the end of each row



A few stones fell in January 2025, and a substantial part was then dismantled (photo 19 June 2025).

abutting one of the pilasters. There's no obvious preference for which end of the row (right or left) the half-block was placed.

On three panels, instead of the usual 13.5 blocks between each pilaster, there are 14, and in each case the lower row has 14 full blocks and the upper row has 13 full blocks and two half-blocks (these three wider panels are numbers 5, 6 and 7.

3) The upper (stone) part of the wall

This consists of grey pennant type stone rubble, around 36 inches (914mm) in height. This is mostly but not entirely visible at the back, as some of it is buried.

4) The course of coping stones (slag blocks)

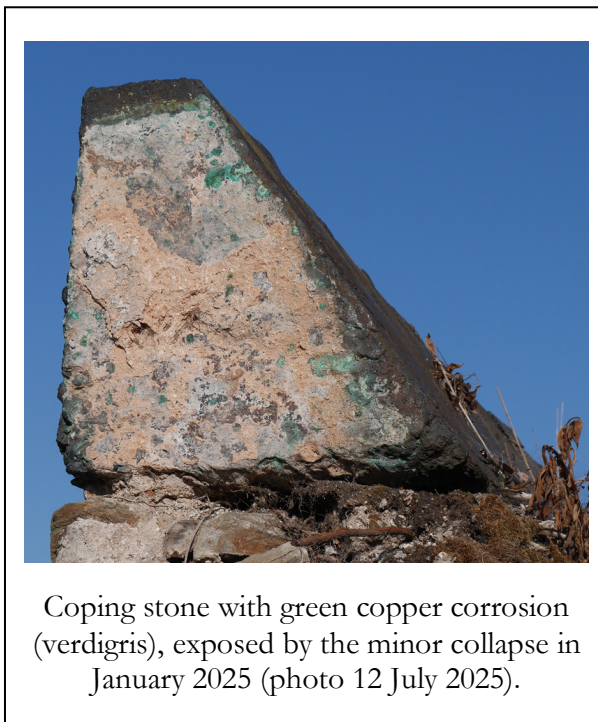
The top of the wall has coping of blocks of copper slag which are taller than they are wide. Their broad side is a trapezium, where three sides meet at right angles (base, back, and top platform), and the fourth is a slope that rises from the base of the front toward the back at an angle calculated to be approximately 56°.

The asymmetrical shape gives a very different appearance when viewed from the front and back of the wall. Although the dimensions of these blocks differ due to imprecision in their casting, the desired measurements appear to be as follows:

	Inches	Millimetres
Length	8	203
Height	15	381
Depth (base)	15	381
Depth (top)	5	127
Slope	18	457

The base of the block sits across the full thickness of the top of the wall, so the wall is 15 inches (381mm) deep at the top. The back of the block rises vertically. At the top of the back is a projection toward the front that makes a level platform parallel with the base. The fourth side is the slope connecting the platform at the top back, with the base at the front.

The mason has made the top of neighbouring blocks remarkably consistent with each other, so



Coping stone with green copper corrosion (verdigris), exposed by the minor collapse in January 2025 (photo 12 July 2025).

the top edge forms an apparently smooth line (this line gently rises and falls more or less in parallel with the double row of blocks). This was achieved not only the conventional use of thin slabs of pennant stone, but the insertion of much finer sheets of slate.

5) The pilasters

Like columns set into the wall, the ten pilasters each consist of a column of the same rectangular blocks of copper slag as the double row. They are one block wide and up to eight blocks high, and protrude about 1.5 inches (38mm) from the face of the wall. They only appear on the wall's front.

Where the double row reaches its greatest height from the modern ground level, two of the pilasters reveal their column of slag blocks are each based on a single pennant stone (the bases of the other pilasters are buried out of sight).

Three pilasters (numbers 3, 9 and 10) appear to be in their original form and complete (pilaster 3 is topped by a single block of pennant type stone, and the other two are each topped by a block of slag laid on its face to reduce its height).

The others pilasters all appear to have received repair in their upper part. Pilasters 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8 have bricks inserted under the coping to replace

one or more blocks of slag, pilaster 5 is damaged and its original composition and infill (if any) is unknown. Pilaster 1 may have been rebuilt.

Eight pilasters have, above the double row of blocks, additional blocks and broken blocks of slag, immediately to one or both sides. Many of these appear randomly or even awkwardly positioned, but several are suggestive of steps rising toward the top: the clearest example being on the righthand (west) side of pilaster 2.

Concluding thoughts

The precision workmanship of the smooth top line of the wall could not have been achieved without a budget to match its high-quality finish. It seems improbable in the extreme that anyone other than the mastermind behind the other listed buildings in this eccentric complex - the copper smelter William Reeves - would require such exquisite elegance of a roadside wall.



Mortar exposed by the demolition after the minor collapse in January 2025 (photo 12 July 2025).



The smooth top line of the wall is illustrated here with panel 10 (photo 12 July 2025).

The threshold for having a site included in the National Heritage List for England is very high, but this wall does appear to meet some of the criteria. Inevitably perhaps, some aspects of the wall's situation may weigh against the value of having it listed, but it may be worth concluding this report with a few notes that came to mind.

A case for listing this wall could comment on its architectural interest because of its unique use of the innovative building material (copper slag blocks) by a manufacturer of that material, at his own new-built home, in a wall facing a major road linking the cities of Bristol and Bath (now a UNESCO World Heritage Site celebrated for the efflorescence of Georgian architecture, much of which was contemporary with Mount Pleasant).

Group value (and perhaps historic interest) is supplied by the wall's intimate association with two existing grade I and II* buildings (the Castle 1292881 and Arnos Manor Hotel 1201988). This wall, a prestigious, public-facing part of the complex, was in the curtilage of the industrialist's home and ran alongside the driveway that gave access to the rear of his house.

The wall's age, with a construction date c.1760, provides special interest because a significant proportion of its original fabric is intact. The wall has national rarity value as, being designed (or, at least, of a design approved) by a producer of the metallic building blocks from his own foundry in the Bristol area, it will have been at the forefront of the use of this now obsolete material.



Looking west at the whole of the surviving wall (photo 19 June 2025).

Listed buildings & bibliography

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Arnos Manor Hotel	https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1201988
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