Portishead

Why Portishead exists

Portishead began as a minor farming and fishing community, sited on the west side of a roughly half-mile long inlet or creek, stretching south into the Gordano Valley from the Severn Estuary, where it narrows into a rhyne.

The location, to the east of Portishead Down, provided shelter from storms from the southwest and the alluvial and fertile soils of the valley would have made farming here comparatively easy.

This same sheltered location would have also made the creek a natural harbour.

Port's head - it was literally the settlement at the head of the port.

The greatest danger to the people of the early Portishead would have been inundations by the sea but being sited a few feet higher than the valley floor would have given reasonable protection for the relatively few inhabitants and their animals.

About the Gordano Valley

The Gordano Valley is a fairly flat-bottomed valley, about 5 miles long, stretching from the costal marshes of the Severn, east of Eastwood Hill (an east-west ridge which at its western end descends to Battery Point), to the Strawberry Hill region of north Clevedon. At Strawberry Hill the valley narrows abruptly as it runs between Strawberry Hill to the west and the Tickenham Ridge to the east.

It seems likely that at one time the Gordano Valley offered a secondary path for the Severn and its many tributaries, especially so in the post-glacial period following the last ice age.

The Severn and its tributaries carry massive amounts of sediment to and fro with each tide cycle and as the post-glacial flood subsided into the tidal ebb and flow we know today, the Gordano Valley would have gradually silted up.

The narrowing at the south end of the valley at Strawberry Hill would have eventually become choked with debris: tree trunks, branches, grasses and mud. This would have further impeded the ebb and flow in the valley with silt being deposited at each turn of the tide. As vegetation grew in the fertile silt, more and more silt became trapped amongst the growing vegetation.

This narrowing of the valley at Strawberry Hill would also have been silting up from the south as silt was being deposited amongst the growing reed-beds of what today is known as Clevedon Moor. It was therefore inevitable that the Gordano Valley would become "blind" at its southern end.

Gradually as the Gordano Valley silted up, the ebb and flow of tides into and out of the valley slowly formed the gentle, almost imperceptible, contouring that exists today. As a consequence, the land is very slightly higher on the eastern (wind-blown) side of the valley in the region of Portbury and Sheepway, and very slightly lower on the western (sheltered) side of the valley in the region of Portishead.

This has led to two main drainage flows: the first is from the southern end of the valley flowing north towards the Severn, whilst the second is from the area around Portbury in a south-westerly direction, until the two flow-lines meet. It is this combined outflow from the valley that maintained the creek at Portishead whilst all around was silting up.

The Iron Age peoples

Fast-forward ten thousand years or more, to the late Iron Age. In keeping with many of the hills and ridges in the surrounding area, the remains of an Iron Age fort can be seen on the Eastwood Ridge on the western side of the Gordano Valley at its northern end.

Similarly, on the twin hills just above Portbury, on the eastern side of the Gordano Valley at its northern end, are two Iron Age hill forts. Meanwhile. at the southern end of the Gordano Valley there are the remains of an Iron Age hill fort on the western end of the Tickenham Ridge.

This is a profoundly important arrangement of hill forts because a couple of miles east along the Tickenham Ridge lies Cadbury Camp, a massive, double-rampart hill fort which was the local headquarters of the Dobunni Tribe, linked by a trackway to the similarly large Stokeleigh Camp, above the Avon Gorge (just downstream from the Clifton Suspension Bridge).

The route of this trackway is easily seen today as it is a mixture of trackway and modern roads and along its route are the remains of two minor staging-posts or enclosures.

Tracks from the two hill forts above Portbury link into this major trackway and it seems likely that the hill fort on Eastwood did likewise, although there is no visible remains of such a route. However; without such links, not only would such an outpost have been isolated and unsustainable, but also it would have had no purpose without a transportation route.

Two possible routes from the Eastwood fort seem likely: firstly via Fore Hill and then south along Portishead Down to the narrow gap at Strawberry Hill, and secondly heading east across the marshland to the hill forts at Portbury.

In considering possible routes, the line of the modern roadway though Sheepway must be a candidate as it follows the highest part of this low-lying land. Although this route may seem unlikely, it should be borne in mind that just thirty miles to the south, some of the Lake villages around Glastonbury were connected by wooden trestle bridges or causeways, so this technology would have almost certainly been known to the Dobunni Tribe.

The first route, towards Strawberry Hill, would have passed by the possible remains of an enclosure on Fore Hill and the remains of an enclosure on Portishead Down.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the distances from the Eastwood fort to Fore Hill and from Fore Hill to the enclosure on Portishead Down, and from this enclosure to Strawberry Hill, all mimic the approximate distances between:

The fort at the end of the Tickenham ridge, and Cadbury Camp

Cadbury Camp, and the site of an enclosure at Noah's Ark Farm

The enclosure at Noah's Ark Farm, and the site of an enclosure at Wraxall wood

The enclosure at Wraxall Wood, and Stokeleigh Camp

The above list follows the current-day route, part trackway, part road, across the Dobunni Tribe's territory. The consistency of these inter-site distances needs an explanation.

Their separation distances may be coincidence but it is possible that these sites were deliberately placed.

The rationale is: it takes roughly an hour to comfortably walk from one site to the next. In other words; an Iron Age traveller or trader, part-way between two of these forts or enclosures, would have taken a maximum of half an hour (or however they measured time back then) from just before sundown to get to the nearest point of refuge. This was probably a rather important consideration in a land where wolves and bears roamed freely!

For further information on the then strategic importance of the ancient trackways, on a national scale, a copy of The Green Roads of England, by R Hippersley-Cox, makes for fascinating reading.

In conclusion:

The classical teaching of “warring tribes” seems unlikely, whereas a more open-minded consideration of the harmonic physical relationship between tribes, hill forts, enclosures, ancient trackways, and hill contours, seems to make more sense.

The classical view of “warring tribes” would have exacted a terrible decimation of the male population. This would have led to a vast reduction in animal husbandry and crop production, which in turn would have caused a poor diet, possibly starvation, consequent poor physical health and a massive amount of in-breeding resulting from a depleted adult male population, which in turn would have reduced the abilities of the remaining population.

Perhaps the theory of a more cooperative society, where peoples traded over vast distances, and made pilgrimages to their sites of religious significance could be more likely.

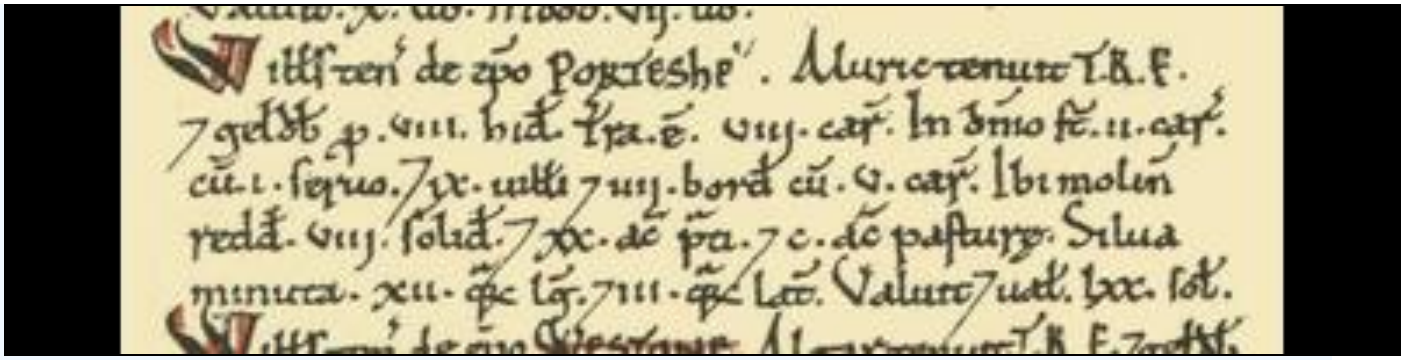
Skirmishes, yes. Even the occasional pitched battle if one tribe was deeply slighted by another, but constant warring would have vastly depleted the tribes’ abilities to grow crops, tend animals, trade, and carry out pilgrimages over vast distances, yet this is exactly what they did, in abundance.

The Portishead of Domesday

Cadbury Camp became disused around the middle of the first century AD, around the time the Romans arrived in Britain.

Fast-forward another thousand years to the time of William the Conqueror. In 1086 the Domesday Book records Portishead as follows:

- **Hundred**: Portbury
- **County**: Somerset
- **Total population**: 14 households (medium)
- **Total tax assessed**: 8 geld units (very large)



- **Taxable units**: Taxable value 8 geld units
- **Value**: Value to lord in 1086 £3.5. Value to lord c. 1070 £3.5
- **Households**: 9 villagers. 4 smallholders. 1 slave
- **Ploughland**: 8 ploughlands (land for). 2 lord's plough teams. 5 men's plough teams
- **Other resources**: 6.0 lord's lands. Meadow 20 acres. Pasture 100 acres. Woodland 12 * 3 furlongs. 1 mill, value 0.4
- **Livestock in 1086**: 8 cattle. 10 pigs. 60 goats
- **Lord in 1066**: Aelfric (the Nobel)
- **Lord in 1086**: William (of Monceaux)
- **Tenant-in-chief in 1086**: Bishop Geoffrey of Coutances

1 mill….. This would have been a tidal mill as the technology for a windmill had not yet been developed. But where was the tidal mill?

The only place that a tidal mill can work is near the head of a creek, where a large body of water can be trapped upstream of the mill at high tide, and then released through the mill on the ebb tide.

The only place in Portishead, indeed in the Gordano Valley, where this occurred was where the outflow drain of the Gordano Valley, running northwards towards the Severn, widened as it reached the tidal creek that ran half a mile or so from the Severn into the valley.

Where might the Domesday mill have been sited? Probably not too far from where the Old Mill pub/bar is today. If you look at any map of Portishead, of any era, the one thing that stands out is the drainage of the valley towards the creek.

Today, the arrow-straight valley drainage channel to the Severn estuary, cut into the levels when the dock was built, is so clearly an abrupt and artificial deviation from the original route towards the head of the creek. This at one time passed through the archway at the Old Mill pub/bar and into the creek.

About the old mill

If the flow of silt-carrying water is impeded, the process of silt deposition is speeded up as the slower-moving water drops more of its silt. Consequently, it seems likely that the mill that existed in 1086 was already making its contribution to silting up of the head-lake that powered its operation. In time, the silting would have made the mill ineffectual. Indeed, there may have been another mill built since 1086 but before the old mill that forms part of the pub/bar. Who knows?

What we do know is that whenever the old mill that forms part of the pub/bar was built, this must have been at the head of the creek.

The Old Mill is of uncertain date, but the section of it that was the actual mill was probably constructed during the 1600s or 1700s. This no doubt replaced the earlier tidal mill which was either dilapidated or worked out because of the on-going silting up of the valley.

Given that the tidal range at the point where the creek joined the Severn is typically 35 feet, the race of water in through the mill sluices on a rising tide, and out through the mill machinery on a falling tide must have been immense. There is a wall-plaque set into one of the old grind-stones, which itself is set into a slight re-build of what was once the town quay.

Note the approximate year that the mill ceased operation: 1810-1815. This is no doubt because of on-going silting problems plus, of course, on the other side of Portishead Down was the windmill which now forms part of the pub known as The Windmill, nestling just below Nore Road.

Later, after the addition of a Victorian extension, the tidal mill premises became The White Lion, a hotel. The old mill-race found use as an accessway to and from the Portishead north station of the Weston, Clevedon & Portishead Railway that arrived in Portishead in 1907, one of the Colonel Stephens' family of light railways.

The above view was probably taken after the First World War, perhaps around 1920. Part of the quay wall, seen on the left, is still there, with its walk-way above it through the mill building.

Off to the left about 100m away is the junction of Cabstand and the High Street. There is an old picture (thought to have been taken in the 1890s) of the scene at the foot of Cabstand. This shows the roadway clearly raised to its current level but it obviously sits above the nearby land alongside the remains of the creek for there is a ramp-way down onto these lands, retained by a substantial wall, heading in the direction of the GWR Portishead Station.

This construction likely stems from when Portishead Dock was built during the 1870s, or perhaps a decade earlier in the 1860s when the railway arrived.

The level of the roadway at the foot of Cabstand is very similar to that of the old quay wall by the Old Mill. Once the Old Mill no longer operated, the raised roadway and the quay wall formed the limit of the tide's reach, which of course caused the creek to continue silting up from that point towards the Severn estuary

The Railway comes to Portishead

Following the passing of an Act of Parliament in 1863, permitting the Bristol and Portishead Pier Railway Company to build of a railway from Bristol to Portishead, the railway from Parson Street on the Bristol-Exeter main line to Portishead was built, opening in 1867.

The railway crossed the creek on a curving wooden trestle bridge with wooden piles driven into the mud floor of the creek. The original course of the rails would have been across the rhyne near Sainsbury's, curving across the land where LIDL/Travel Lodge now stands and out across the creek, making landfall just before the dock wall that juts out into the water.

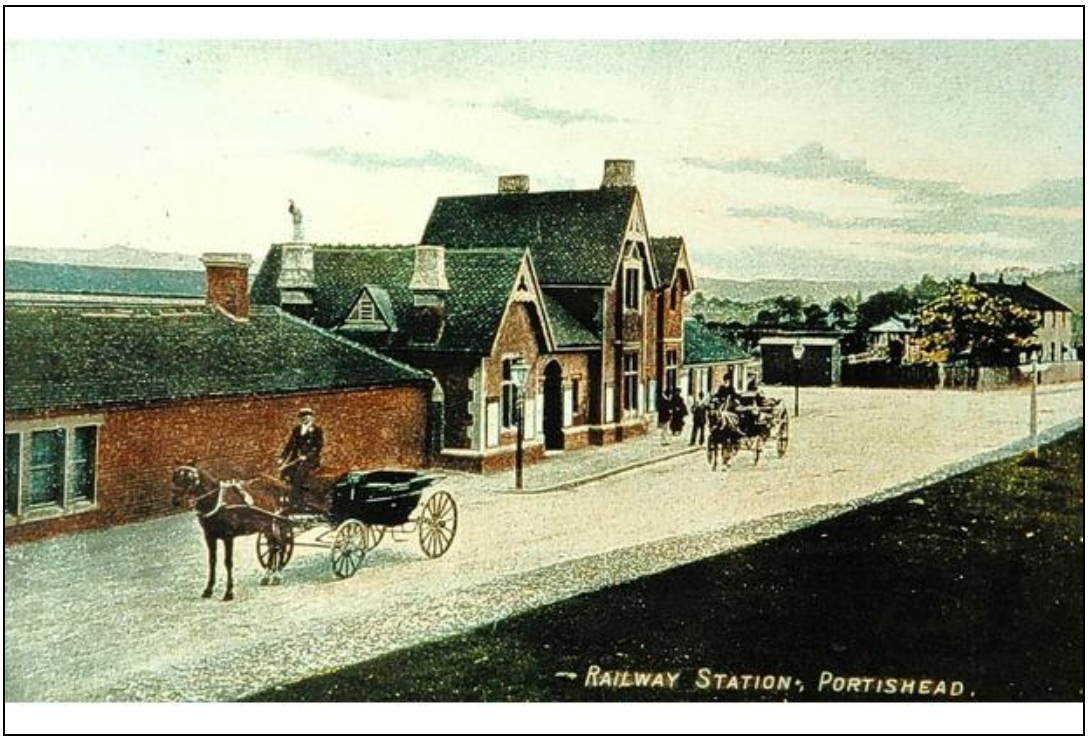
Originally a broad gauge line, it passed along the south side of the Avon Gorge to Pill. This stretch required four tunnels to be constructed and numerous bridges and viaducts. It was converted to standard gauge in 1880 and subsequently taken into the Great Western Region's network in 1884.

The original proposal was for a station in Portishead, at the bottom of where Cabstand is today, roughly where the 1950s station came to be sited. However, the original Portishead Station was built elsewhere.

In some ways, Portishead Station was oddly placed, being some half-mile to the north of the centre of Portishead which at that time was around St Peter's church. In fact, the station was built roughly midway between the centre and the pier that had been constructed on the western side of the mouth of the creek, roughly where the current-day pier is to be found.

Thus, it could serve both the town and its growing prosperity, including the inhabitants of the grander houses that were beginning to appear on the slopes of Woodhill, and the growing pier-traffic. This traffic, mostly paddle-steamers, plied its trade across the Severn estuary to and from Wales and also along the northern coast of the southwest peninsula.

Here are two views of Portishead Station, showing the opposite sides of the station.



With the arrival of the railway, commerce in the town started to increase, which no doubt influenced the owners of the Old Mill to build on the Victorian extension and name it the White Lion hotel. Similarly, Hotel Como was built on the opposite side of the hill, facing the Channel. These two hotels, along with the Royal Hotel near the pier provided a significant boost to the local economy.

Most of the Victorian buildings in the High Street and round into Cabstand were built in the 1880s/1890s. Because most of these premises were shops, this can be taken as evidence of Portishead's rapidly increasing prosperity - a direct result of the railway and the dock.

Portishead Dock

Before the dock was built, the tidal creek was allowed to ebb and flow, as it had done for millennia.

Like the docks on the north side of the Avon's estuary into the Severn, Portishead Dock was built to help alleviate the congestion in the tidal Avon and in the Bristol Docks.

Simply put; by the mid 1800s there was simply too much shipping, involving larger and larger ships, and the tidal Avon was no longer adequate or safe to cope with this traffic.

After a couple of false starts, construction of Portishead Dock commenced and was completed (not without mishap) in 1879. This included an extension of the railway line to a new Portishead Pier Station. After its use as a railway station ceased it became a Masonic Hall. This use eventually ceased too and the building remained unused for several decades. It was still there after the Portishead Marina development had transformed its surroundings, as the following picture shows.

The building was demolished in 2014 as part of the redevelopment of the area into the site for a new lifeboat station. The area in the above picture now looks very different, except part of the new RNLI building was deliberately designed to mimic the old Pier Station building.

Back in the 1880s the construction of the dock then triggered a further expansion of the town as industries sprang up in the dock vicinity. Grain and timber were principal imports but in 1908, Shell Petroleum set up a petroleum storage depot on the land to the east of the lock gates; its capacity was expanded several times and a small refinery was added.

In 1916, Mustad's, a Norwegian company, set up a nail factory roughly where Argos, Homebase and their shared car park are to be found.

Around a similar time, work commenced on building Portbury shipyard, on land that is now part of the Royal Portbury Dock complex. This shipyard formed part of a national shipyard programme, to build ships that were being lost during the First World War. A railway halt called Portbury Shipyard was built, between Pill and Portbury stations, and a branch and sidings were laid.

The national shipyard programme was not a success and after about four years it was abandoned. Its demise also saw the closure of the Portbury Shipyard halt.

In the late 1920s, work commenced on building a power station on the hillside to the west of Portishead dock. This was later fed by a flotilla of coal ships arriving from SouthWales, to discharge their cargoes and then return for more. Portishead dock was for a time very busy.

Although the fortunes of the dock fluctuated, its importance was fully realised and utilised in the Second World War. The amount of traffic through the dock increased substantially, as did the number of sidings in the vicinity. The branch to the abandoned Portbury shipyard was also brought into war service and many sidings were added. Anti-aircraft guns were placed on the headland at Battery Point, and on Portbury Marsh, from where they could defend both Portishead dock and help defend the Avonmouth docks.

In the 1950s, Albright and Wilson, phosphorous importers/processors, set up their plant on the east side of the dock. At the same time, construction of a new power station commenced on land between the dock and the 1920s/1930s power station; this became known as Portishead "A", whilst the new power station became known as Portishead "B".

This work saw a surge in use of both the dock and the railway, and Albright and Wilson's ships plied their trade to the dockside on the east of the dock. Portishead "B" was built to feed into the national grid but also to provide the vast amount of power required by Albright and Wilson's electric-arc furnaces.

The dock complex at Royal Portbury was built, just across the mouth of the Avon from the docks at Avonmouth. Both of these dock complexes provided stiff completion for Portishead dock and its days were obviously numbered as a major dock of any importance. Its use declined, most of the coal for the power stations now arrived by train from the Somerset coalfields, and when the power stations were decommissioned even this traffic ceased. Albright and Wilson were then the only major user of the dock.

As with so many former industrial and dockland areas, the imaginative regeneration of the whole area into the current-day Portishead Marina and Village Quarter developments has produced a very pleasant living environment for many thousands of people. The town is lucky to have such an asset.

The changing railways

With little maintenance other than the essentials, much of the nation's railway network was in a very poor state following the Second World War. The line from Bristol to Portishead was no exception.

With the advent of mass car ownership by the public, increasing transportation of freight by road, and a decreasing amount of industrial and dock traffic, the line's days were numbered. It was therefore inevitable that when Dr Beeching drew up his list of lines for closure, the Portishead line was on that list.

Many deride Beeching for decimating the railways but his work must be seen in the context of the time: the country was nearly bankrupt and there was a desperate need to cut the cost of the railways. A simple rule was applied: if a particular line did not make the money it cost to run then it was a candidate for closure. The larger the loss, the more likely the closure. A few exceptions were made, but no many.

Even the strategically important Somerset and Dorset route from Poole Harbour up through Bath and on to the Midlands did not escape. Nor did the strategically important Great Central route between the North, the Midlands and London. Both were closed.

Today, HS2 is being prepared to provide a much-needed additional fast-route between the North and London, but there is no viable way of getting from the Bristol/Bath area to Poole Harbour except by road and this can never change as too much of the old S&D route has been removed.

The "crime" of Beeching was not the closures; they were more or less essential at the time. The real "crime" was that successive governments failed to protect the so-called permanent ways, by Law, just in case on-going expansion of both industry and areas of housing produced a need to re-open some of them.

The line to Portishead was lucky; passenger traffic ceased in 1964 but freight lasted until 1981. This meant a minimum level of maintenance continued to be carried out, aided by the line being declared to have strategic importance. Consequently, even when the freight traffic ceased, the line itself remained in place.

At Redcliffe Bay there is an oil and fuel installation, a part of the national oil pipeline network, and storage tanks were erected on the site now largely occupied by the Gordano Gate hotel, between the Gordano Valley drainage channel and Quays Avenue. These were strategically placed beside the railway so that even if parts of the pipeline network failed or were damaged, oil and fuel could be moved by rail.

As part of the GWR150 celebrations in 1985, a "special" ran down the tracks from Bristol to Portishead, and the line remained in place thereafter.

In 2001/2002, the line was re-laid from Parson Street out to Royal Portbury Dock and to this day it carries freight traffic. The line to Portishead remains in place, derelict, and disconnected at Portbury Dock Junction, to the west of Pill.

Portishead Railway Group has been lobbying for the full re-opening of the line from Portishead to Bristol for passenger traffic. This is essential as the town's population has more than trebled since passenger service ceased, and car journeys in and out of Portishead are now measured in their thousands, daily.

The MetroWest Phase 1 scheme will bring various parts of the railway network in the wider Bristol area back into use, and it will increase the use of other parts that are already in use. Portishead Railway Group is hopeful that the line to Portishead will re-open for passenger traffic in 2020.

How the creek, dock and station area changed throughout the 20th Century

Before the dock was built in the 1870s and prior to about 1815, the tidal waters of the creek free-flowed back and forth through the archway of the Old Mill. A part of the old Quay wall remains there.

Once the Old Mill ceased operation, the ebb and flow of the tides in the creek reduced and the silting up of the Portishead end of the creek would have started from the old Quay wall.

The railway came to Portishead, curving across the wooden trestle bridge across the creek. The route the railway took across the creek played a crucial part in shaping the area in the years following the railway's arrival.

The following photograph, taken around 1919/1920 shows that the trestle bridge has already been filled in by the construction of two embankments with a central wash-through for the remaining part of the creek up towards Portishead High Street. The other bridge construction that can be seen was a light footbridge across the dock.

To get some idea of where the creek ended, even in 1920, the letters "OM" denote the rough position of the Old Mill, just off to the left of the picture.

OM

The large building that can be seen towards the bottom of the picture, just left of centre, is the same building that can be glimpsed through the archway of the Old Mill (see earlier photograph).

A similar photograph, taken in 1921 shows a lower water-level and the extent of the silting up of the creek that has taken place.

This shows a shallow central area of water just inshore of the wash-through under the railway. The shape of the flooded area that exists when the water-level is higher (see previous photograph) can be clearly seen.

Note the Shell installation to the east of the lock gates. Note also the Weston Clevedon and Portishead Railway entering the scene from the south.

The Portishead “A” power station is of course still six or seven years from being started but the spoil that resulted from the excavation of the fields on the hillside to the left of the dock was used to change this scene forever, as the next photograph, taken in 1972, shows.

To make way for the construction of Portishead “B” power station in the 1950s, the 1867 Portishead Station had to be demolished. A new station was built in 1954, roughly where the 1863 Parliamentary Act was to have it placed, almost opposite Cabstand.

This 1954 station served the town well for ten years until passenger traffic ceased following the Beeching cuts.

Ironically, the station building was converted into a garage selling Ford cars and petrol - a very tangible example of the sociological development that was sounding the death-knell for railways the length and breadth of the country.

The next photograph, taken in about 1972, shows the scene after closure of the line to passenger traffic (1964) but before freight traffic ceased (1981).

The area of the creek between the railway (still curving across the scene and into the dock area) and the town was entirely reclaimed in the 1920s/1930s by dumping the power station excavation spoil onto the area.

The Old Mill (the White lion) can be seen at the end of the High Street, right where it meets the dual carriageway. This is where the creek used to almost reach, back in the early 1920s.

The 1954 Portishead station, with its long canopied platform, can also be seen just left of centre but the photograph was taken eight years after passenger traffic ceased. The station building and its forecourt has been converted into a garage and all of the station tracks have disappeared, as have the sidings between the railway station and the dual carriageway. Some of the sidings to the north of the station survive, with their rows of goods wagons; these sidings remained until freight traffic ceased in 1981.

Careful inspection of the photograph shows all of the tracks, from the docks, from the sidings, and the scarring of the ground where the station tracks and other siding tracks used to run, all converge at a bridge across the Gordano Valley drainage channel, just to the right of the gasometer. This bridge is still in place; it provides a pedestrian walkway between Sainsbury's and the Waitrose/LIDL/ Majestic Wine retail area.

The line to the dock area, seen curving across what is now Harbour Road, crosses the road almost exactly where the LIDL/Travel Lodge building is now situated.

Mustad's factory and its chimney can be seen towards the right-hand edge of the photograph.

Note the football pitch where the Aldi supermarket is now sited.

At the top of the picture, the Albright and Wilson works can be plainly seen on the east side of the dock but there is no trace of the Shell Petroleum installation to the east of the lock.

The curve of the earthen shoreline on the left of the remains of the creek (just before the footbridge over the dock) follows much the same shoreline line today.

The following photograph, probably taken in the very early 1960s shows the array of sidings that once existed either side of the 1954 Portishead Station.

It is clear where the station was sited by inspecting the background. Immediately to the right of the goods wagon at the left of the picture can be seen the roof of the buildings that run in a curve from the High Street into Cabstand. Immediately above and to the right of the platform canopy can be seen the roof of the Congregational church, now converted into town houses and apartments.

As if to emphasis that the above scene of a station built on reclaimed land, use of the left-hand platform and its track had to be curtailed due to subsidence!

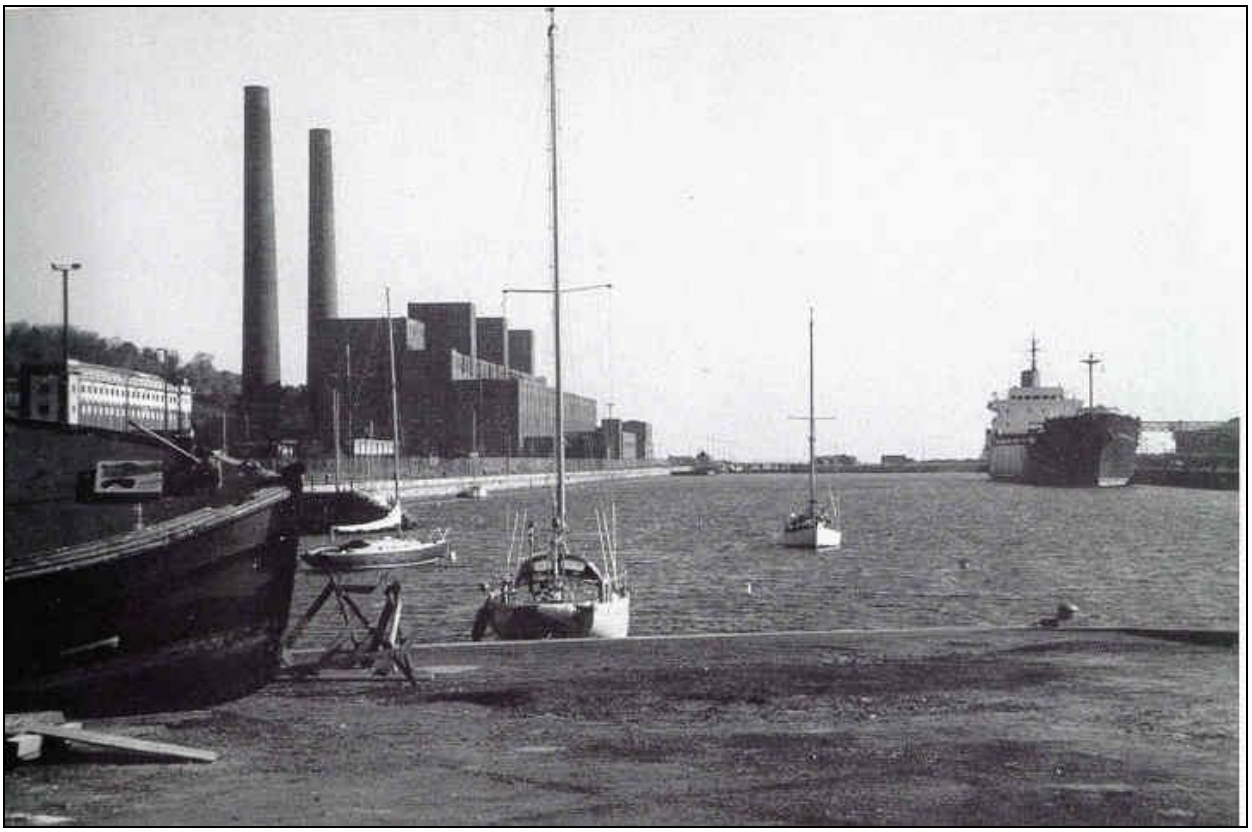
The next photograph shows the 1954 station building, after conversion to a garage.

The twin chimneys of both power stations can be clearly seen in the background.

Here is another aerial view of the dock area, taken in about 1980.

Note that the centre section of the footbridge is now absent and the whole of the reclaimed area looks very established. Mustad's factory is still there and the trading estate on Old Mill Road is starting to appear.

By the late 1980s, the picture had changed again, as the following somewhat desolate photograph shows.



Portishead Dock, “B” power station and the frontage of Portishead “A” power station are on the left of the dock, but there is no other shipping tied up on that side. There is no smoke coming from the power station chimneys because by the time this photograph was taken (c. 1988) the power station was out of commission.

On the right, the only ship to be seen is thought to be the Albright Explorer one of Albright and Wilson’s fleet of phosphorous import ships.

The footbridge has disappeared completely.

The stone steps down into the water, which still exist today, can be seen just to the right of the bow of the boat on the quayside in the foreground. Note; this foreground quayside was a relatively new addition as it wasn’t present in the previous photograph, taken around eight years earlier.

Behind and to the right of the photographer, the railway permanent way and the rails and sleepers still exist, running from Portbury Dock Junction to Portishead.

Today, the line is severed by Quays Avenue. It then continues across the redundant land between Sainsbury’s and Harbour Road, towards the Gordano Valley drainage channel but it ends just short of the old railway bridge across the Gordano Valley drainage channel. This is still in place, providing a walkway towards the Waitrose/LIDL retail area.

Where the lines stop a few metres short of the bridge, buffers and a “run around” loop were installed for the GWR150 celebration “special”.

The following and final photograph shows the current “end of the line”.

Dave Chillistone

June 2017