Great change for Bristol

The city suffered the misfortune of war. However, also benefited afterward through its involvement with the emerging Atlantic trade.

The Civil Wars

The civil wars of the 1640s had a huge impact on Bristol. In 1642 the city declared its support for Parliament. Defences were quickly established reusing the medieval town walls. New defences were constructed from Brandon Hill across St. Michael’s Hill to Stokes Croft.

This was to protect the north side of the city. It had the principles of trace italienne (start fort).

Royalist armies captured Bristol in July 1643 and set about strengthening the defences. The Windmill Fort at St. Michael’s Hill was rebuilt in 1644 renamed, the Royal Fort. Other defences were added.

There are descriptions of Bristol’s defences and a long section survive on Brandon Hill. Parts of The Royal Fort can also still be seen.
Recent archaeological excavation in Old Market and at Temple Quay has discovered other defence elements. Yet elsewhere their location has still to be established.

Bristol was recaptured by parliament in 1645. After this, later years of civil war and the Commonwealth let non-conformist religious groups form in the city. Baptist meetings were established in the 1640s, including at Broadmead. The Society of Friends began to meet at Quakers Friars in the 1650s. They had built a meeting house there by the early 1670s.

The Emerging Atlantic Trade

From the 1650s Bristol merchants were attracted by the profits from Britain’s new American and Caribbean colonies. Enslaved Africans were taken there to fill the gap, the colonies were short of labour. Bristol became the main port of emigration for young people working on plantations, many against their will. As well as people, ships sailed from Bristol carrying manufactured items to sell. They also brought back tobacco, sugar and other goods for the home market.

Trade and wealth resulted in building houses

Much of the wealth from trading across the Atlantic was invested in building. Existing houses along major streets were refronted or rebuilt entirely. Bristol Castle was replaced with new housing in the late 1650s. King Street, the most complete seventeenth-century street remaining, was constructed in the 1660s. The contemporary student of population William Petty counted 5307 houses in 1685. Wealthy citizens with houses in central Bristol also built garden houses - small retreats with formal gardens. They were built on hills surrounding, or along the roads leading out of, the city.
These houses are known in Kingsdown, Clifton, Easton, Baptist Mills and Stoke Bishop. Wider opportunities for trade encouraged new industries. Coal mining was reported in Brislington in the 1630s. By the 1650s there were potteries and metal working sites on the river Avon at Crew’s Hole. Bristol also became a major centre for glass-making from the 1690s.

The increase of charity

The century ended with an increase of charity. The merchant Edward Colston established an almshouse at St. Michael’s Hill in 1691. The Society of Merchant Venturers built another almshouse for merchant seamen at King Street in 1696. In the same year the Bristol Corporation of the Poor was founded. This established St. Peter’s Hospital, located south of St. Peter’s Church. In the 1620s the site had been the merchant Robert Aldworth’s House.