

Redland Past Revisited for the Redland Directory - No. 19

'Road Crossings & Patten makers' © Julian Lea-Jones. Feb 2009

You might well ask what patten makers have to do with Cairns Road in Redland. When horse drawn carts not motor vehicles were the main traffic, roads were often ankle deep in horse droppings. Well dressed people wanting to cross messy roads could wear pattens, (iron frames to strap to their shoes to raise them above the ordure). Mathews's Bristol Directory shows that the problem was lucrative for some, because in 1856 at least fourteen businesses were listed as patten makers. An alternative to wearing pattens was to tip a crossing sweeper, often very young boys or old men, to clear a path. A sentimental painting by William Powell Frith in 1893 depicts a ragged boy having cleared a path for a lady, begging her for payment. A cartoon in the January 1856 Punch magazine gave another viewpoint; showing a crowd of urchins with besoms plaguing a top-hatted man, demonstrating that in Victorian times juvenile crossing sweepers were viewed much as Traffic Light windscreen washers are today, - a nuisance. Nevertheless certain junctions had paved crossing places that were kept clear, as depicted in a print of an old crossing sweeper at the Victoria Square in Clifton. In Redland, Cairns Road still has a visual reminder of those days where by some municipal quirk one of these paved crossings has never been tarmaced over.

Now you know why so many old houses have a boot scraper by the front door!



Read about Bristol's own 'Yellow Brick (wooden) Road' in Chapter 25 of 'Bristol Curiosities', or book my illustrated talk "Curious & Curioiser", one of Twenty-six talks listed on www.history4u.info