

Next time you are in Blenheim Road, just past St Alban's Church have a look at the left hand Gate pillar with large inset black stones. The house has a Blue Plaque marking it as a former home of Henry Herbert Wills, (more about him in a future article). These shiny black 'stones', amongst Bristol's earliest examples of recycling are a reuse of an already recycled product and could date back to 1749. That was the date of a Common Council's River Nuisance Report concerning continual obstructions to navigation on the River Avon at Conham East of Bristol by '*A great quantity of Cinders laid upon the banks of the said river by the Brass Wire Company being a very great nuisance and likely to choak up the said river if not removed.*'

The proprietors and William Reeve's resolution of the problem resulted in Bristol's first and certainly most enduring example of environmental recycling. William's first 'Eureka!' moment was when he realised that he could appease the council and turn a profit by casting the black slag, (the '*cinders*'), into large brick-like blocks and sell them to builders, explaining why many of the old walls in and around Bristol feature these black blocks. However although metallic inclusions give the solidified slag blocks an attractive iridescence they contain blow holes making them prone to fracture. Thus although useful as insertions in walls or as capping stones, apart from the following notable exception they were not used for complete walls or buildings. William Reeves realised that his new building material had to be publicised, but how? At that time his new mansion was being built at Arno's Court on the Bath Road, located where everyone could admire it. This gave him another brilliant idea; to use a combination of black slag blocks interspersed with bands of Bath stone to build his stable block and laundry just across the road from his house in the form of a black and white folly. Now known as Bristol's Sham Castle, Horace Walpole visiting Bristol admiringly described it as the 'Devil's Cathedral' whilst the architectural historian, Nikolaus Pevsner said it had "a sinister gaiety".

For a fuller account of this early recycling initiative, read chapter 18 of my award winning book, 'Bristol Curiosities'. From bookshops or directly:

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