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The Significance of Union Street in the Unification of Plymouth's Three Towns

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Introduction

Today, geographically linking all three towns is the aptly named Union Street but its explicit reference to unity is very much taken for granted and arguably few Plymothians know or have any appreciation of the historic significance and strategic importance of this once renowned thoroughfare and its influential role on the cultural heritage of Plymouth and the Three Towns. By the mid-nineteenth century Union Street was notorious in epitomising the social problems associated with drunkenness and immoral behaviour across the three towns. However, while there were distinctive differences in the levels of concern and official responses within this tripartite community depending on religious persuasion, temperance beliefs, social conscience and police and magisterial intervention, a case can be made that because of its strategic location, Union Street unconsciously played a significant (if not formally recognized) role in paving the way for unification.

The Principal Thoroughfare

Union Street today is a far from glamorous location, often relatively deserted apart from the ferry traffic passing through to France and Spain. It is unattractive and looks run down, stuffed with cheap takeaways, shoddy looking shops, discount supermarkets, night clubs and bars. In 1991, well before I moved here, Brayshay commented that the 'once elegant Union Street is now the venue for most of the racy nightlife that the city has to offer.'¹ Despite the odd remaining glimpse of its Victorian heritage, it is a far cry from its mid-nineteenth century heyday when it was known as 'the principal thoroughfare through the three towns' (note the adverts for licensed premises).² It was *the* place to be seen where residents socialised, visiting sailors frequented the numerous public houses and brothels, commerce thrived and businesses vied to compete and establish themselves.

To enable this Acts of Parliament had permitted the construction between the two towns of Stonehouse bridge, completed in 1773, and a turnpike road in 1784. The late nineteenth century commentator, Worth, who summarised the history of the Three Towns³ notes that in the late eighteenth century 'the communication between Dock and Plymouth was of a miserable description, consisting of a road by Mill bridge, and a ferry, the boats of which

¹ Mark Brayshay, Plymouth's Past: so worthy and peerless: A Western Point in Brian Chalkley, David Dunkerely and Peter Gripaios, Plymouth: Maritime city in Transition (David & Charles Newton Abbott 1991) p.38.

² Western Daily Mercury 1 April 1874

³ R.N. Worth, in his History of the Town and Borough of Devonport, Sometime Plymouth dock (W. Brendon & Son, Plymouth, 1870)

were pulled by ropes from Stonehouse.⁴ The area was called **Sourpool because** of the surrounding marshland, shown on John Cooke's engraving of the borough of Plymouth c.1820 - ⁵ but it was also aptly named **because after sunset** it was desolate and dark making it prudent for anyone who wanted to cross over to wait until a strong enough group had assembled who could fight off any marauding thieves or attackers.⁶ The turnpike proved to be too narrow (at 16 feet wide) and in 1815 part of it was widened and adopted to more effectively connect the two towns. Initially called Union Road, a short section was constructed across the marshes and an extension added called New Road. By **1830 the** map shows the three sections of Union street running across the Three Towns and split in the middle by Union Road which ran through Stonehouse, the whole acting as a central space connecting the disparate Towns both physically and spiritually.

This extension of Union Street represented the crux of the jealous rivalries between the Three Towns as Plymouth and Plymouth Dock in particular tried to outdo each other as highlighted by Judith. As a result of Foulston's redesign 'Plymouth became dis severed from its dock' according to Jewitt's in his History of Plymouth.⁷ Devonport was now clearly the 'top town' with George IV standing atop the column gazing benignly down on Devonport and waving a dismissive hand at Plymouth. But Foulston also reinforced Devonport's superiority by the way in which he incorporated Union Street into his overall plan.

The newly named Union Street was more than just a physical bridge, as its name implies its purpose was to expressly unify the Three Towns. A few Union Streets can be found in other towns and cities including Bristol, Manchester, Cardiff, Southport, Kendal, Torquay and there is the 'Great' Union Street in London renamed from Duke and Queen street in 1813, but none were as infamous as Plymouth, nor born from such a deliberate coming together of communities. At a mile and a half it was thought to be the longest street in England. Foulston designed it as a **grand boulevard** butt-ended by his iconic Guildhall which easily outshone Plymouth's humble medieval Guildhall at the other end (later replaced with the current Gothic French style building in 1879) and with the Devonport column positioned to be aligned with its axis. At the heart of this upmarket street **was The** Octagon, intended by Foulston to be the fulcrum where all three towns met (**3 clicks**). Its heyday was the opening of **Rawle's Botanical Gardens** in August 1850 with 6,000 visitors of 'the highest respectability' and foreign ambassadors entertained by the bands of the Royal Marines and

⁴ Worth, p.32

⁵ <http://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/images/localworld/ugc-images/276351/binaries/31318561.jpg>

⁶ J C Trevin, Portrait of Plymouth, London Robert Hale 1973 p.89

⁷ Llewellyn Jewitt, History of Plymouth (wm Luke Bedford st Plymouth 1873)

Royal Welsh Fusiliers to admire its archery field, pleasure promenade, peach and pine houses, melon and cucumber pits.⁸ In another example of collaboration, the two respective mayors of Plymouth and Devonport were joint presidents and of the 8 Vice-Presidents 4 were from Stonehouse.⁹ By the 1860s it appears to have merged into the Devon and Exeter Botanical Society – and currently location of students and refugees working together project.

Unfortunately, Foulston's grandiose plans would be compromised. Plans to establish a locomotive steam carriage from Plymouth to Devonport were rejected in 1836 and by 1871 a tramline had been constructed instead.¹⁰ By 1895 H.W. Brewer asserted that 'notwithstanding, its extraordinary length..., its effect is mean and unimpressive to a degree.'¹¹ Trewin, writes acerbically that Foulston 'had little luck with Union Street which was always the family's awkward child and has never known what to do with itself; like much else, it looks better from the air.'¹² He continues 'one does not imagine Foulston round the present Derry's Cross or in the grief of Union Street.'¹³ Currently, the council plans to re-create a boulevard vista regenerating the Millbay dock area below Union Street - but it hardly has the grandeur of Foulston's vision...

'The most difficult street to manage'

It was the development of Millbay docks in the 1840s and the opening of the Millbay railway station 2 April 1849 that made Union Street, and in particular the Stonehouse section was the main commercial hub. This was the busiest part of the street 'awash with hatters, milliners' and well-heeled clothing stores.¹⁴ After the enactment of the Beerhouse Act 1830 it also became increasingly awash with beer and alcohol with a constant stream of adverts for the sale of 'free and fully licensed public houses' and beerhouses.¹⁵ Stonehouse was therefore already developing a more seedier reputation than its larger sisters and worse was to come. By the late nineteenth century there were around 100 public houses in this town

⁸ *Illustrated London News*, 3 August 1850; J C Trewin, *Portrait of Plymouth*, London Robert Hale 1973 p.89

⁹ South Devon Botanical and Horticultural Society. Established 23rd January, 1851. The rules and regulations of the Society, with the prize lists for the exhibitions of 1851

¹⁰ Jewitt, *History of Plymouth* p411 29 Nov 1836; 1873 p481

¹¹ H.W. Brewer, *Plymouth: or the Three Towns*, *The Graphic* 3 August 1895 p144

¹² J C Trewin, *Portrait of Plymouth*, London Robert Hale 1973 p.89

¹³ J C Trewin, *Portrait of Plymouth*, London Robert Hale 1973 p.92

¹⁴ Chris Robinson, *Union Street*, p.20

¹⁵ *Western Morning News* 16 July 1887.

alone, 60 of which were either on or within 100 yards of Union Street.¹⁶ While the shops attracted a respectable clientele the pubs inevitably attracted sailors, drunkenness and prostitution, and petty crime. Immorality was rife as brothel keepers would maintain the façade of legitimacy by applying for beer licences. By the 1860s there were 154 brothels, most with beerhouse licences and over 100 prostitutes in just 2 streets adjacent to the Stonehouse barracks.¹⁷ Any attempt to limit the supply of alcohol presented another dilemma as councillor Samuel Elliott informed the 1868 Select Committee Sale of Liquors on Sunday Bill. Outlining Plymouth's position on the proposed ban on sale of alcohol on Sundays he confirmed that many of the towns' 3,000 visiting sailors were housed in pubs, lodging houses and seaman's missions, but they also needed somewhere to while away the time - especially in bad weather - and they made significant contributions to 'keep up the commerce of the town.'¹⁸

The extent and consumption of alcohol along Union Street in effect delineated the incidences of criminality within the Three Towns with Stonehouse unsurprisingly being the most problematic. This caused difficulties for the respective licensing committees, watch committees, town council and three separate police forces as whilst their individual institutional jurisdictions were autonomous and geographically clear cut according to the map, drunkenness and everyday offending are no respectors of such boundaries.

Unlike the Plymouth and Devonport constabularies, from 1856 Stonehouse District was only a division (H) of the Devon County force and so was vulnerable to amalgamation and poor resourcing. At the Devon Midsummer Sessions in 1862 Councillor Mr J W Wilson challenged the county Chief Constable expressing concern that Stonehouse had become the 'resort of thieves and disreputable characters' who were able to escape the more effective policing in Devonport and Plymouth because of the greater size of their forces. The population of Stonehouse was 14,000 (half that of its sister towns) but daily some 26,000 passed along its section of Union Street and 15,000 over the bridge into Devonport. When the fleet were in town another 2,000 sailors and marines loitered, 'collected together by the peculiar evil attractions' of the area' including the 45 public houses and 60 beerhouses 'of the lowest and most wicked description imaginable.' Stonehouse had more committals than either Plymouth or Devonport but its force was considerably smaller led by one 'very effective' Superintendent, one Sergeant and 8 constables but only one man was on duty in

¹⁶ Chris Robinson, Union Street, p.62; Beerhouse act 1830 virtually allowed anyone to set to a public house or offlicence

¹⁷ *The Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 14 December 1865

¹⁸ Select Committee Sale of Liquors on Sunday Bill Pp242-245

the area at any one time.¹⁹ Two years later in 1864 (Sir John Duckworth) the Government Inspector of Police 'considered it desirable that Stonehouse, chiefly from the peculiarity of it being situated between two jurisdictions, should be made into a separate district' recommending an increase in establishment of just four constables.²⁰ In comparison Devonport District had started with 12 constables in 1839 and these rapidly increased to nearer 60 by the 1880s. Similarly Plymouth had nearer 100 by the end of the century but even its Chief Constable, Joseph Sowerby, expressed frustration about the impossibility of policing the Plymouth end of Union Street as 'The most difficult street to manage' with 18 fully licensed houses, 22 indoor beerhouses and 6 off licences. This is highlighted in the regular weekly newspaper reports of prosecutions for drunkenness and obscene language occurring on Union Street illustrated in **the Three Towns** column of the Western Weekly News. Such reports no doubt have the hand of the Chief Constable and the Plymouth Watch Committee behind them as Sowerby, unlike his predecessor Arthur Wreford, was a self-declared and active temperance supporter. He was highly influential and led the way in encouraging all Three Towns to adopt a much more vigorous approach to the regulation of licensed premises and consumption of alcohol. Policing practices along Union Street became more consistent and despite the delineation in jurisdiction officers would voluntarily and often be compelled to cross their force boundary to assist each other. For example, in 1895 the Stonehouse police came to the assistance of the Plymouth police who were trying to quell an affray involving a number of drunken sailors.²¹ The provision of such mutual aid and necessity of combining strength to deal with such incidents paved the way for the successful amalgamation of all three forces in 1914 by which time Stonehouse had increased slightly to one inspector 2 sergeants and 15 constables.

Temperance and Totality

While the police and magisterial responses largely operated along boundary lines within the Three Towns those seeking to re-educate the population about their alcoholism gradually adopted a more cooperative approach aligning themselves to make a stronger presence and reinforce their message. The responses of the Three Towns also reflected their respective religious profiles. Compared to the more Anglican Exeter, Plymouth had been long noted for its non-conformity and remembrance of the seven ministers persecuted as a result of the Act of Uniformity in 1662 generating a strong presence of General Baptists, various Methodists, Congregationalists and Unitarians. While there were non-conformist churches across all

¹⁹ Gerald de c Hamilton Chief Constable Devon, Devon Midsummer Sessions exeter flying Post 3 July 1861. County average was one constable per 1,600/1,700 – torquay was 1 to 2,000

²⁰ Devon Midsummer Sessions Exeter flying Post 1 July 1863

²¹ Western Weekly News 30 november 1895

Three Towns there was a heavier concentration in Plymouth. Many of its prominent citizens were powerfully in favour of at least temperance, but as with the Plymouth Total Abstinence Society, more often advocated absolute teetotalism. Devonport, because of its naval presence, initially adopted a more relaxed approach but Stonehouse sitting in between was highly dependent on the liquor trade with 11 of Plymouth's 16 local breweries operating in its section of Union Street.²² Stonehouse was the main target for the moral suasionists in the other two towns though was less affected by the Plymouth absolutists who sought to ban all alcohol for all classes. However, it was highly susceptible to the persistent campaigns of the temperance societies to convince the lower classes to take the pledge and dispense with beer hypocritically condoning the 'responsible' male drinkers of the upper and middle classes – women of course were only permitted the odd glass of sherry. In the 1850s adverts for the sale of 'free and fully licensed public houses' and beerhouses²³ on Union Street sat alongside hotels such as the Victorian Temperance Hotel and Pearse's Commercial and Family hotel offering only tea and coffee²⁴ while The Plymouth Dairy Company advertised special discounts on orders of milk and cream for temperance fetes.²⁵ By 1887, the Western Temperance League, formed in 1837 and now with 400 affiliations, was second only to the National Temperance League and its members clearly undermined the commercial profits of Stonehouse's many breweries, landlords and publicans.²⁶

A brief survey of public petitions give a sense of the different perspectives of the Three Towns towards alcohol control. Almost immediately after the enactment of the 1833 Beer Act all three petitioned for its repeal or alteration in significantly higher numbers than, for example, Portsmouth. The Devon towns individually returned relatively consistent figures of around 1,300 each - Portsmouth returned just 258 indicating a much more tolerant approach and Liverpool 855.²⁷ Equally, in 1836 when Portsmouth sent 2,459 petitions calling for the repeal of additional duty on spirituous liquors, Devonport sent just 353, and even when added to Plymouth's 348 and Stonehouse 352 this represents less than half the opposition of Portsmouth.²⁸ In 1850 in a further demonstration of Plymouth's harsh attitude can be seen when it overwhelmingly supported reducing the number of beerhouses 9873: against 1027 in favour 1027. No returns from Devonport or Stonehouse are recorded. Jewitt remarks that by 1873, Plymouth had become 'remarkably healthy and pleasant in every respect' implicitly

²² Chris Robinson p.72

²³ Western Morning News 16 July 1887.

²⁴ Western England Conservative and Plymouth and Devonport Advertiser 25 April 1850.

²⁵ Western Daily Mercury, 12 July 1883

²⁶ Western Weekly News 30 november 1895

²⁷ Plymouth 1387, Stonehouse 1301, Devonport 1146, General Index for the Report of Public Petitions 1833-1852, 1854-55 Cmnd 381 p34, 35

²⁸ General Index for the Report of Public Petitions 1833-1852, 1855, P.909-910

referring to its more 'respectable', less drink fuelled environment and virtual elimination of cholera.²⁹

But it was Devonport that would become more well known for its fervent temperance support led by Aggie Weston's assault on the royal navy as I outlined at last year's conference. Ironically it was Plymouth and Stonehouse that led the way in establishing the first seamans' rest in November 1820 - the Plymouth and Stonehouse Seamen's and Soldiers' Friend Society and in another reference to the conference theme and Christian unity across denominations - Bethel Union on Castle Street. Nationally, the moral campaign had only just got under way with the first temperance society established in Bradford in the 1820s so Plymouth was very much at the vanguard of this moral campaign which, according to Yeomans, grew into 'a huge and fascinating social phenomenon'.³⁰ Devonport however did not provide any equivalent missions until Aggie Weston, 'The Sailors Friend', founded the Devonport Seamans' Mission and the first Royal Sailors Rest next to the Dockyard gates in May 1876 replicating similar Christian rest homes she had set up in Portsmouth.³¹ From then she very quickly and effectively spread the temperance message through her highly judgemental Ashore and Afloat advocating restriction and teetotalism as the only saviour from degeneration.

The combined pressure from **Plymouth and Devonport upon Stonehouse** subconsciously drew the towns together. It is no coincidence that Union Street was the focal point for the public manifestation of the temperance cause with regular meetings and processions held along the street and in adjacent buildings encouraging people to sign the pledge of abstinence or teetotalism. In 1871 the British Medical Association in association with the local temperance societies held its 39th Annual Meeting at different locations in Plymouth and Devonport including a temperance breakfast on the final day in acknowledgement of their equal importance. The determination of the conjoined Plymouth and Devonport campaigners reached its climax in September 1887 with the so-termed 'Grand Monster Temperance Demonstration' where all those pledging personal abstention gathered including The Blue Ribband Army, Church of England Temperance Society, Total Abstinence society and 'other kindred organisations that operate within the Three Towns

²⁹ 1854 59 cases in Plymouth and 15 in Stonehouse; 1866 13 cases in Plymouth and 0 in Stonehouse William Farr, Report of the Cholera Epidemic 1866 in England 1867-1868 Cmnd 4072 p.9; Jewitt p.478

³⁰ Henry yeomans, Alcohol and Moral regulation 48

³¹ The first seamans' rest was established in November 1820 as the Plymouth and Stonehouse Seamen's and Soldiers' Friend Society and Bethel Union, Castle Street. PWDRO Ref:750. The Royal Sailors Rest in Portsmouth was not built until 1881

united'. In a further example of union, Aggie Weston was now President of the tripartite Plymouth, Stonehouse and Devonport Ladies Temperance Association.³² Starting in Devonport Park **the procession made** its way along Union Street to Plymouth with a rhetoric of unification that called upon 'all good citizens ... to combine their electoral influences, so as to secure to the people in their separate localities the power to banish the liquor traffic from their midst.'³³ Presenting the National Temperance League annual report later that month at Exeter hall, the Bishop of London publicly praised Miss Weston and her friends for taking 3,952 pledges and distributing 700 cards of medals and awards to sailors and soldiers that year (in Devonport and Portsmouth) who had kept the pledge for between 1 and 20 years. He also noted that all ships berthed in port at Devonport at the time had a representative of the League on board.³⁴ The temperance campaign therefore started a process of unification both expressly and implicitly, for example, by 1893 the Plymouth band of Hope Union comprised 25 bands across the Three Towns³⁵ and by 1895 Aggie Weston's Ladies Temperance Association was being referred to as the Three Towns Temperance Association.³⁶

But in terms of evidencing this link it is the list of the leading members of the Plymouth Temperance Society dated 1894 which really underlines the influence of the elite temperancers in supporting and promoting amalgamation between the three towns. These included the well-respected Chief Constable of Plymouth City Police, Joseph Sowerby, who received plaudits from all for his zero tolerance style policing targeting drunkenness and bad behaviour and regular appearance as prosecutor at the Plymouth's magistrates court – with the divisive boundaries of 3 separate forces he was clearly in favour of a combined police force. Mr Henry Whitfield, 'the smart up to date editor of the Western Independent', well known in the political, literary and social circles of Plymouth he regularly 'preached amalgamation' in his newspaper.³⁷ Joseph Arthur Bellamy, chairman of the Plymouth Chamber of Commerce and director of the lucrative Sutton Harbour Company he would later become mayor of Plymouth and lead the negotiations in 1914. The two Liberal MPs Hudson Kearley and E J C Morton then MPs for Devonport Devonport bitterly contested the amalgamation and after an eight day public inquiry in May 1914 still argued that it would be disastrous to both towns.

³² Western Morning News 7 March 1887

³³ Western Morning News 22 September 1887; *Western Weekly news* 24 September 1887

³⁴ Western Daily Mercury, 2 May 1889

³⁵ Western Morning News 20 April 1893

³⁶ Western Morning News 22 March 1895

³⁷ Western Morning News 23 September 1902

On 15 July Western Times reported that the House of Commons passed the Bill – immediately above a new item that reports of shooting between the Bulgarians and Serbians ³⁸

Conclusion

While the outbreak of war justified the legal amalgamation of the Three Towns and its institutions including the merger of the three police forces because of the need to manage men, munitions and morale, it is suggested that a de facto social and community unification had already emerged in the late nineteenth century paving the way for an easier formal Corporation in October 1914.³⁹ Centered on and around Union Street separate charitable, religious and temperance associations within the three towns gradually unified to strengthen their public message and reform agendas, amalgamating for the common good. And it was Union Street where they promoted their respective causes through joint meetings, processions and association creating as much a sense of union as any formal constitutional arrangement.

³⁸ Western Times 16 July 1914

³⁹ the population of nearly 214,000 became a single entity under the mayoralty of Sir Thomas Baker – or as Trevin concludes like Malaprop's Cerberus 'three gentleman at once' J C Trevin, Portrait of Plymouth, London Robert Hale 1973 p.95

Trevin noted that in the 1970s 60 years after union, the residents of Plymouth seem in some ways apart. The geographical accident that jammed them together on a roughly serrated peninsula between the rivers might at last have made one city of them, but they have kept their own personalities, voices and loyalties.⁴⁰ But arguably what this overview has shown is that a town's cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, can endure and in spite of unification

Plymouth was neither a clean nor pleasant city with its narrow streets, overcrowded housing, appalling sanitary conditions and inadequate drainage, but one of the worst areas was between Mill Bay and Union Street in Stonehouse where a large contingent of Irish families lived. Three cholera epidemics in 1837, 1839, 1849 wiped out thousands across all Three Towns killing 12-13% of the population.⁴¹ The cholera outbreak severely affected many of the smarter middle class houses and their inhabitants inevitably fled to the more genteel areas of Devonport and Plymouth.

⁴⁰ J C Trevin, *Portrait of Plymouth*, London Robert Hale 1973 pp.92-93

⁴¹ William Farr, *Report of the Cholera Epidemic 1866 in England 1867-1868* Cmnd 4072 p.9 in 1849 there were 830 deaths in Plymouth population 62,599 and 171 of 143,43; Jewitt, *History of Plymouth* p442 63 people comprising 9 families lived in one dwelling house were recorded in the census.