

SAMUEL BAKER AND GLOUCESTER *by Evelyn Christmas*

Samuel Baker's close association with Gloucester lasted barely 15 years of the three critical decades when the essential foundations for the city's mid nineteenth century economic growth were being laid particularly rapidly. He had a positive and sometimes a decisive part in the process. When he arrived in 1832 he was a successful London merchant who had the added advantage of inherited wealth which had been invested in colonial estates and shipping employed in Bristol's West Indian trade. So he was immediately seen to be a noteworthy and valued addition to the

city's business community.

Several Bristol and Birmingham merchants had begun to trade through the new Gloucester docks when Baker came from London with his partner, Thomas Phillpotts. The Phillpotts family already had ties with the city. In preparation, they re-registered their ship, *Isabella* (225 tons), to begin their local enterprise. Unfortunately, both the intended trade with the West Indies and the partnership soon foundered on the dislocation in sugar production following the emancipation of slaves in British territories. Both weathered

the setback and Baker was already preoccupied with the prospects and problems of the Gloucester-Berkeley Canal Company.

CANAL INTERESTS

In 1833 he joined the Company's managing committee which was soon to be required to defend the undertaking yet again in tough negotiations with the Exchequer Loan Commissioners, who periodically threatened to foreclose on their massive loans in the 1820s and 1830s. Baker's background and experience fitted him to be one of the principal protagonists for the Company. The stiff terms of 1840 were reached on the basis of the financial proposals he drew up. As the Commissioners' stranglehold prevented the Company from investing in necessary dock facilities, Baker, Phillpotts and other opened the way for expansion in the adjacent area of High Orchard, where they had bought land beside the canal. Baker also proposed to construct a drydock on other land he had purchased, since repair facilities were seriously deficient.

Well before the worst financial troubles were over, another danger threatened the Company from a different quarter. So from 1837 Baker was also engaged in defending its interests and those of the city and local traders, in a prolonged and bitter dispute with an interest group centred on Worcester, over its schemes to improve navigation on the Severn. He was active locally and in London, where he was one of those representing Gloucester's case to government, and he provided detailed information on how parliamentary debates on the issues were going. This conflict was, no doubt, a cogent reason for setting up the Gloucester Chamber of Commerce in 1839, as an existing society had less definite objectives. The new organisation gave the merchants and others with related interests a strong corporate voice locally and enabled them to join with other chambers of commerce in lobbying government. Baker was a founding member and the first chairman.

RAILWAY DEVELOPMENTS

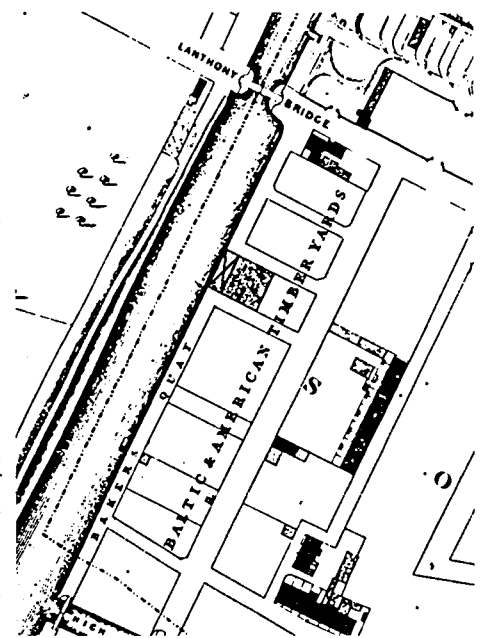
In spite of the demands of canal politics and perhaps because of the Canal Company's vulnerability, Baker was in the forefront of local railway promotion, especially of those lines which had the potential to increase trade through the docks and to benefit the city more generally. He held the chairmanship of the Gloucester Provisional Committee for the Birmingham-Gloucester line in 1835, then of the permanent management committee for the whole line, and he remained a director after that. Realising the desirability of a railway west of the Severn, he acted as treasurer collecting outstanding subscriptions for a Gloucester-South Wales project, which came to nothing. However, in 1843 Baker was promoting the Dean Forest Railway Bill, and was a very active chairman of its organisation. The line's completion owed much to his leadership. To a limited extent he involved himself in the Bristol-Gloucester scheme and about the same time in 1837, in the line from Cheltenham to Swindon. Later on Baker became a director of the G.W.R. and the South Wales Company.

BANKING AND SOCIAL LIFE

Baker made his mark equally positively in the growing business of the Gloucestershire Banking Company. Mercantile initiative and wealth had a large part in founding this, the first joint stock bank in Gloucester and in the area. It opened in 1831, at a time when additional banking facilities were sorely needed, especially for mercantile, commercial and industrial undertakings. He became a director in 1836, one of the two principal directors with overall executive responsibilities in 1840 and chairman heading the board from 1843.

With such business interests it would be very surprising not to find Baker in company with the well-to-do leaders of local society. He belonged to the Tory, True Blue Club and on occasion chaired the annual dinner. The absence of a successful cultural organisation for Gloucester polite society became ever more obvious in the 1830s when 'almost every town of importance' could boast one. Baker seems to have taken the matter in hand as he was presiding over a virtually defunct Natural History Society in 1838 when a Literary and Scientific Association took its place, and he became its first president. It established itself and some years later aspired to open a museum and a good permanent library in the city, for which he offered practical encouragement. However, in spite of members' endeavours they did not succeed.

By the mid 1840s Gloucester matters were less demanding and Baker's ties with the city weakened while the more regional and even national character of his banking and railway concerns continued. The shift was reflected in his movements: first from Enfield to Highnam Court where his family settled happily in 1833, then to Lypiatt Park and finally to Thorngrove, near Worcester. A local obituary of 1862 remembered his 'warm support of the commercial interests of the port' and 'his enterprising public spirit and his personal worth'.



Baker's Quay. From Map of the City and Borough of Gloucester, 1843, Arthur Causton. Courtesy of the Gloucestershire County Library.