

Stained glass in Bristol Cathedral thought to be of Nell Small (detail)

The Story of Nell Small

A short self-guided walking tour
starting and finishing at Centrespace
gallery

by **John Steed**

(please return this guide when you have finished the tour)

Nell Small, daughter of a basketmaker, was born in 1172 in Leonard Lane. Fabled for her beauty and her red hair, she is remembered for her part in the mysterious disappearance of the despised son of the Norman lord.

Less well known is her later career as a merchant trader and her technical innovations that enabled Bristol glassware to become famous throughout Europe. Hear her story on this short tour.

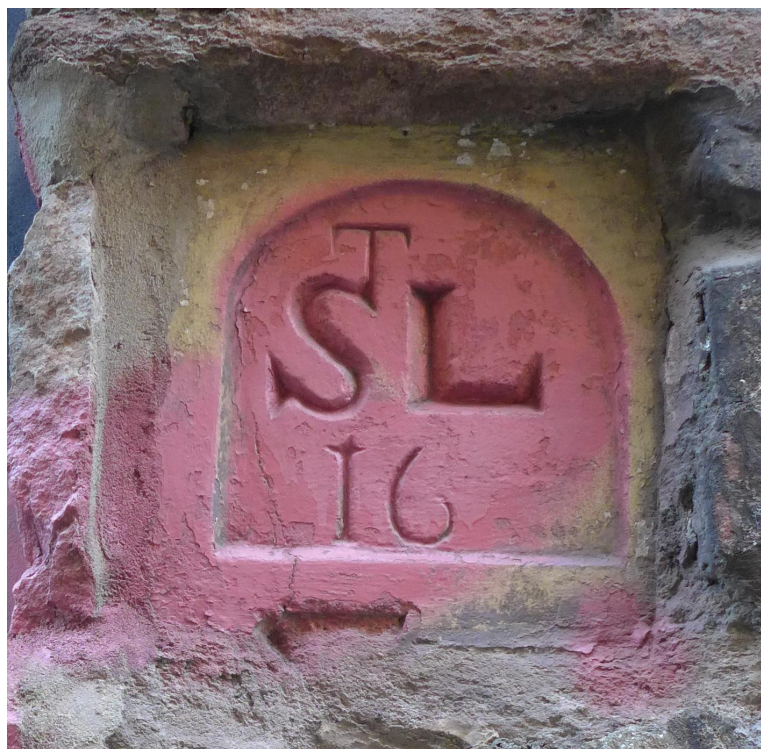


This short self-guided tour is easy walking with no steps and should take around twenty minutes. Please take care crossing the roads.

When I was at primary school we would sing folk songs in our music lessons – I remember one of those songs was Nell of the Baskets. When I had the idea of a history walk for this show I learnt of Nell Small and realized she was one and the same person as the Nell in the song. In this short walk I shall tell you her story.

1 Please start in the lane outside the Centrespace Gallery, Leonard Lane, Bristol.

Take a look at the boundary marker in the wall by the gallery – it shows we are in the medieval parish of St Leonards. [There were sixteen parishes in old Bristol. Each one was an administrative unit responsible for the people within it. Parishes dealt with matters such as relief for the poor, provision of street lighting, etc, for which rates were paid by householders.](#) The markers were numbered and the bounds were walked annually to make sure that all markers were in good repair and that the parish limits were accurately known.



[Figure 1 Parish boundary marker in Leonard Lane.](#)

The lane we are in follows the curve of the original town walls fortified since Saxon times. Houses and workshops would have lined the lane, their overhanging upper storeys almost meeting above you. So narrow were the lanes in Bristol that goods

were often dragged on sledges rather than carried in carts. Today we call this Leonard Lane – but it was named St Leonard's Lane after the parish and St Leonard's Gate that stood at the bottom of Corn Street. (The church of St Leonard used to stand upon the gateway. It was removed in 1771 for the purpose of widening the streets.)

Let's go down to the site of that gateway at the bottom of Corn Street (see map at the beginning of the guidebook).

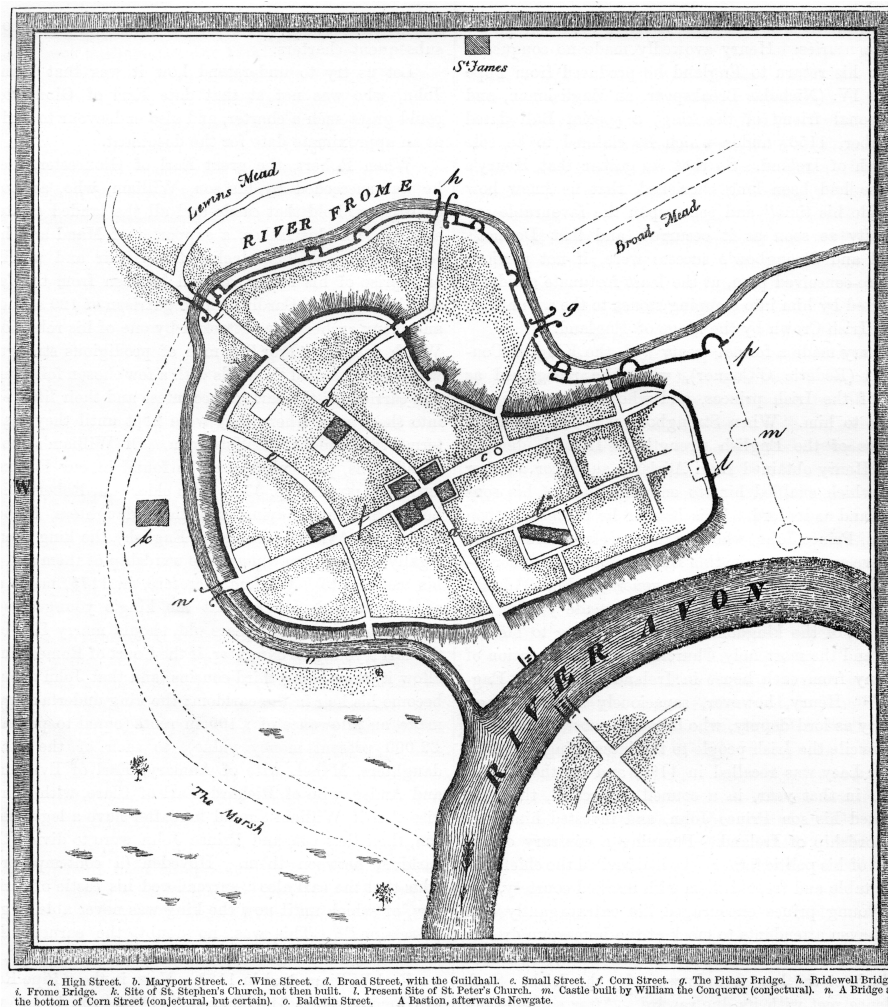


Figure 2 Map of Bristol in the late twelfth century (JF Nicholls and John Taylor, Bristol Past and Present, Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1882)

2 Here we are at the site of the gateway. Outside the gateway was a wooden bridge over the River Frome that in those days flowed around the town wall. After the Frome was diverted in 1248, the ground was made up to the level of Corn St.

St Stephen's Street now follows the original course of the River.

Let's follow the old river course (St Stephen's Street) down to the marshes (and stand by the war memorial).

3 Looking back, it is not difficult, seeing the scale and curve of the modern buildings, to imagine the medieval fortification of the town.

Where you stand, was the top of an area of marshland a wet and inhospitable place owned by the Abbey of St Augustine.

Across the marsh the land rises – it would be wooded but you would be able to see Carmelite Monastery rising above the trees and further down you would glimpse the new abbey church of the St Augustine monastery (now Bristol Cathedral).

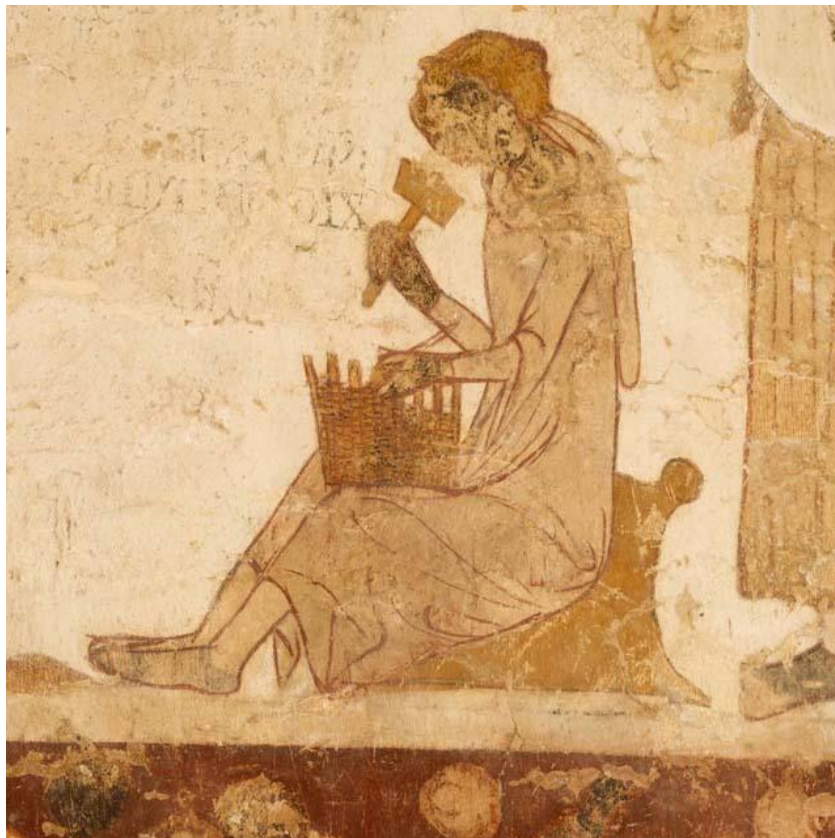


Figure 3 Fourteenth century wallpainting of a basketmaker (thought to be a representation of a female artisan). Longthorpe Tower, Cambridgeshire.

Nell Small was born in 1172, the daughter of John Small, basketmaker of St Leonard's Lane.

The marsh was a wet and inhospitable place but it was good for growing withies, and the Small were licensed by the Abbey to harvest them for their craft

Basketmaking was one of the few businesses in the 12th century that permitted female artisans. By 1189 when Nell was 17 she was already an experienced and talented craftswoman having learnt her trade at her father's knee.

Nell was also celebrated for her great beauty and her flame red hair. She was popular and gregarious.

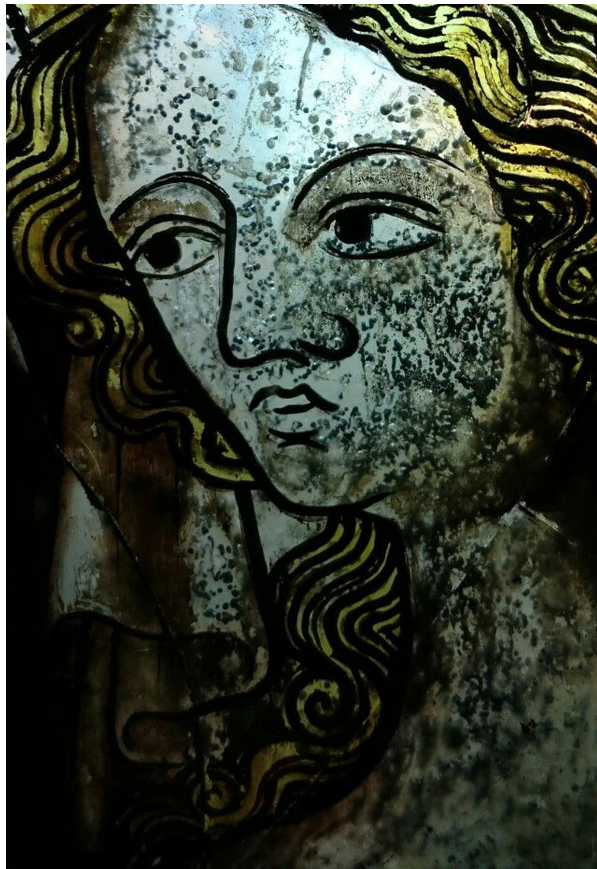


Figure 4 Detail from a thirteenth century stained glass window in the Elder Lady Chapel in Bristol Cathedral – its position within the Lady Chapel and the fact that it is a secular figure rather than a saint or angel, leads scholars to believe that it celebrates Nell and part of a memorial window to her that was damaged in the Bristol Blitz.

Unfortunately, Nell had become the subject of obsessive and unwelcome attention from Sir Guy de Poisson, the thirty-year-old second son of the Norman lord of Bristol.



Figure 5 The heraldic device of the de Poisson family. Poisson is French for fish and here you see the fish used in their coat of arms in a stained glass panel in the East Window of the Lady Chapel of Bristol Cathedral.

As the second son Guy was not destined to inherit his father's title and wealth. He was an ill-disciplined and quick-tempered man given to drinking and fighting – and like all their Norman overlords, he was much hated by the townsfolk.

In 1189, Pope Gregory VIII had proclaimed that the capture of Jerusalem after the failure of the Second Crusade was punishment for the sins of Christians across Europe and called for a new crusade to the Holy Land. Baldwin of Exeter, the archbishop of Canterbury, made a tour through the area and into Wales, convincing 3,000 men-at-arms to follow the new king Richard I of England (Richard *Cœur de Lion*) to take up the struggle. This had inspired Guy de Poisson, not for any religious zeal but for the promise of adventure, battle and pillage.

Our story begins one cold evening in January, approaching dusk. Nell was cutting withies, as Sir Guy rode by on his return from the river quayside, having been checking on the provisioning of his ship that was due to leave for the Holy Land on the morning tide.

Seeing Nell working alone, amongst the withies, he approached and grabbed her. Nell resisted but he was a strong man. She drew her knife, remember she was harvesting withies, and in the struggle, he was fatally wounded. She wrenched herself from his grasp and ran into the open marshland. The dying man attempted to follow but weakened from his injury he fell into a pool where his heavy chain mail coat dragged him under.

Let's walk up to St John's Gate to hear what happened next.

4 Nell's father, concerned that his daughter should return before the town gates were locked for the night had at that moment looked out from the wall above his house. He ran out with the gatekeeper to help poor frightened Nell back home.

Word spread quickly about the town of de Poisson's ignominious watery end – it is remembered to this day in the Bristol expression 'sink like a wet fish' meaning a poor end. Now young Nell was greatly loved and the townsfolk resolved to protect her and never to tell in a conspiracy of silence. So when the Lord found his son's horse grazing outside the castle wall, he search in vain. The body was never found – the story goes said that the captain of Flemish ship was paid to dump the body, weighted with stones, in the Bristol Channel.

Whilst we stand here at this fourteenth century church built on the medieval walls and the last remaining gateway, take a look at the south side of the gate, there are statues of the mythical founders of Bristol, Brennus and Belinus, facing up Broad Street; it is possible that they are actually older than the fabric of the gate.

From the Middle Ages chroniclers and antiquaries were anxious to push Bristol's history back to Roman times and even before. Genealogies of pre-Roman rulers were fabricated and dubious facts embellished.

The brothers, Brennus and Belinus are legendary kings of Britain from the Dark Ages and Brennus is credited with enlarging and improving Bristol. As with King Arthur, there is no evidence they existed, or even that Bristol was founded earlier than Saxon times.



Figure 6 Printed line engraving from 1816 showing the south view of the gate. The engraving shows historic buildings around the church that are no longer standing.

Return to Leonard Lane, by walking down Bell Lane, to where it meets Small Street, and hear what happened next.

5 This is far from the end of Nell's story. She goes on to have a significant role in the growth of Bristol as an important port – she invented the Bristol Tun (also known as a Tunnie) – a large double-handed basket with an internal ridge below the rim that enabled them to be stacked efficiently. Packed with straw, these baskets provided the perfect protection for the transport of Bristol glassware. The trade mushroomed particularly to Flanders and the Low Countries, and the baskets were then used to import their fine linen on the return journey back to Bristol. Small Street was named to honour Nell.

Cross Small Street and enter Leonard Lane, through the archway opposite, to return to Centrespace.

John Steed, 2018