



# Bristol and the Clifton Suspension Bridge walk

Bristol's waterfront and historic centre, Clifton's grand houses and Suspension Bridge over the dramatic Avon Gorge.




---

**Start and Finish** Bristol Temple Meads Station

---

**Length** 11.9 km (7.4 mi). Allow 3 hours plus sightseeing.

---

**Toughness** 3/10 with 250 m of ascent. All tarmac.

---

**Map** OS Explorer 155 (Bristol and Bath) or 154 (Bristol West), but Google Maps / Openstreetmap on your phone / a city map (in Visit Bristol tourist pamphlets) is better

---

**Walk Notes** This is a city walk through Bristol's historic centre to the wealthy hillside suburb of Clifton, which has a picturesque iconic suspension bridge across the dramatic River Avon gorge just off its village green.

Starting from the main station, pass St Mary Redcliffe Church (free), Queen Square (restored Georgian Square), the floating harbour (waterfront area with cafes, museums, historic ships, etc.), Spike Island (historic dockyard buildings, cranes and railway), M Shed (museum of Bristol life and history, free), The Matthew (museum ship replica, free), Arnolfini Gallery (free), Bordeaux Quay (bars and restaurants), Millennium Square, We The Curious (kids science museum, pay), Bristol Cathedral (free), College Green,

Brandon Hill (hillside park), Cabot Tower (free), Bristol Museum and Art Gallery (free), RWA (Royal West of England Academy, pay), Clifton's grand houses and crescents, Clifton Village (independent shops and cafes), Clifton Suspension Bridge (free) and visitor centre (museum, free), street murals, the old town, St Nicholas (covered) Market. St Peter's Church (ruin), Castle park (riverside park with ruins).

The destination of the walk is the iconic suspension bridge over the narrow but deep river Avon Gorge - quite spectacular by UK standards. Lots of photo opportunities of the bridge and gorge! Just over the bridge (free for pedestrians) is the recommended visitor centre / museum (free, donation). Overlooking the bridge is a tea room in an observation tower with a nice roof top terrace.

The [Clifton Suspension Bridge](#) was originally designed by [Isambard Kingdom Brunel](#), one of the greatest figures of Britain's 19th C Industrial Revolution, to cross the river Avon. Still in the age of sail, it had to be a very high bridge to allow sailing ships to pass underneath to Bristol's harbour. However, soon after construction started in 1830, the [1831 Bristol riots](#), in favour of the (voting) Reform Act, caused a lack of economic confidence, and the bridge was never finished. Thirty years later, 3 years after his death, his plans for the suspension bridge were (substantially) updated, and it was completed as a tribute to him. The bridge is still in use today.

---

### Walk Options

- This is one of 2 Bristol walks, the other is around the harbour. You could combine them.
- You could extend the walk (OS map or google maps required) north from Clifton, along the gorge rim to Clifton Downs and Seacliffs viewpoint (the gorge side is so rocky and steep, it's like a sea cliff).
- You could spend time exploring the old town

---

**Eat/Drink** Too many to choose from.

### Travel

Trains from London Paddington to Bristol Temple Meads are 2 per hour, and take 1 hour 30 mins. £63 off peak without Railcard.

Slower but cheaper trains from London Waterloo via Woking and Salisbury are hourly (a few direct, most change at Salisbury), and take 3 hours. £41 off-peak without Railcard.

Consider Advance tickets. Beware of clashing with sports events (the Advance tickets will have sold out), especially on Saturdays. There are occasional special offers.

## By Car

Bristol is in a Mon-Sat CPZ, so free parking outside the very centre on Sundays. Free parking anytime in the industrial area east of the station, or residential area (Totterdown) south of it (and the river), but on weekdays, commuters will have beaten you to it. Try Googling Bristol CPZ map. The SS Great Britain car park is good value at £5 for 5 hours (max).

Clifton is in a weekday CPZ. There are no car parks, pay and display street parking is 5 hours max, but over the suspension bridge is outside the CPZ

---

## Walks

- [Bristol via the harbour and old town to Clifton Suspension Bridge](#) 7 miles (11km) with 250m ascent
- [Short walk around Bristol Harbour](#) 5 miles (8 km), flat

---

## History

### Bristol

Bristol is situated inland, 11km (7 miles) along the Avon river from the Bristol Channel, and protected by the narrow Avon gorge. It has a [fascinating history](#) (wikipedia).

It had a major Norman Castle in the middle ages (at what is now Castle Green).

From the 13th to the 18th centuries, it was a major port, among the 3 largest towns (along with York and Norwich) outside London. In 1497, John Cabot's voyage of exploration accidentally (re)discovered America while searching for a shortcut to Asia. It took skill for sailing ships to navigate the narrow gorge, large tidal flow, and harbour, hence 'Ship shape and Bristol fashion'.

In the 1700's, during the age of sailing ships, it took part in the triangular slave trade (manufactured good to Africa, slaves to America, tobacco and cotton to Europe).

The Severn Estuary (which Bristol's river flows in to) has an enormous tidal range - 8m - the second highest in the world. To get around this, and stop ships becoming grounded on mud twice a day at low tide, the river was dammed, with large lock gates, creating a "floating harbour". However, expensive port charges to pay for it, caused trade to move to competing ports like Liverpool.

In 1838, [Brunel](#) designed the successful SS Great Western paddle steamer, which was built in Bristol. It was the first regular transatlantic steam (i.e. not sail powered) ship. The Great Western and his even larger Great Britain (see below) marked end of an era, both for the age of sail, and for Bristol as a port. The port wasn't deep enough or wide enough for the new larger

iron ships, and new docks were built downstream on the Severn Estuary itself.

In the 19thC Bristol declined relative to the industrial northern towns, and during the 20thC, Bristol suffered badly during WW2 bombing - much of the old town was lost.

Things are now looking up, Queen's Square has been restored, pedestrianised areas created, and new hi tech industries have moved in to the town. Today, the floating harbour is used for leisure - the warehouses, docks and wharfs have become apartments, art galleries, cafes and museums. See: [buildings and architecture](#) (wikipedia)

### **SS Great Britain**

In 1847, a few years later after the SS Great Western, Brunel built the revolutionary SS Great Britain, easily the world's largest ship at the time. It was the first modern large iron hulled, propeller driven vessel. It was too revolutionary for its owners. The ship's new hull and engines were costly to build. The harbour gates had to be modified to allow it to even leave port. The new technology had several flaws which made it unsuitable for transatlantic passenger service. The propellers broke in use, and the large size caused the ship to roll, even in calm weather. It eventually ran aground during its third season after a navigational error, bankrupting the company that built it. It was eventually re-floated, sold, refitted, and was used in Australia, before eventually being converted to a coal carrier, and ended up as a floating coal bunker in the Falklands. It is now a museum ship in Bristol's harbour.

Brunel later built the Great Eastern (in London), 5 times bigger than any ship then afloat. It too was not a commercial success for its builders. Although neither ship was a commercial success, they were prototypes for the move from the age of wooden sailing ships to the modern large engine powered, screw propeller driven, double iron hulled ships. Besides ships, Brunel is famous for bridges, tunnels, railways and harbours.

### **Clifton**

Clifton is a wealthy hillside suburb with many grand houses, Bristol University housing, crescents (long curved terraces of grand houses) with harbour views, a suspension bridge over a dramatic gorge, and a shopping district with independent shops and cafes.

### **Clifton Suspension Bridge**

The suspension bridge ([wikipedia](#)) is Bristol's iconic landmark, and crosses the 75m high River Avon gorge. It's a remarkable location, just off Clifton's village green is a very steep gorge with the iconic bridge.

Besides the dramatic location, the bridge has an interesting history. In the age of sail, a Bristol merchant left money in his will for a free bridge across the river. The Admiralty had stipulated that a bridge had to be 30m high so (sail powered) warships could enter the port. This meant the narrowest part of the gorge, with 75m high cliffs, was the only suitable location. It would have been the longest bridge span in the world at the time.

Some 75 years later, in 1829, still in the age of sail, a competition was held to design the bridge, and parliament was asked to alter the will to allow a toll bridge to recoup the cost of construction. Thomas Telford, who designed the Menai Straits bridge, was asked to judge a competition to design the bridge. There wasn't a winner. Telford himself produced a design but it was too expensive, so a second competition was held which Brunel won. Construction started, but stopped after the [1831 Bristol riots](#) sapped confidence in the scheme. Eventually the act of Parliament expired, and the steel for the cables was sold off.

Thirty years later, after Brunel's death, the Institute of Civil Engineers decided to complete the scheme as a memorial. Brunel's design was modernised, and the bridge opened in 1864. However, by the time the bridge opened, Bristol's time as a major port was almost over. New steam powered iron ships were larger, and couldn't navigate the tidal river to the inland port. New docks were built on the Severn Estuary at the mouth of the river. Ironically, it was the SS Great Britain, built in Bristol, which started the coal powered steamship era, crossing the Atlantic in 1838, which led to the demise of Bristol as a port. By the time the bridge opened, it was something of a white elephant.

Today, the bridge charges a £1 toll for cars, or you can walk over for free. Nowadays as there is no need for tall ship clearances, motorways and rail lines cross the Avon in the town centre.

---

## Tourism

The smaller free attractions are weekend only from December to March. Most "free" attractions suggest donations.

### Near the train station

- [St Mary Redcliffe](#) is a grade I listed 15thC church, free entry.
- Temple Church is a ruined Knights Templar church (WW2 bombing) with a leaning tower. Walls and tower, but no roof. Free.

### Queen's Square

- [Queen Square](#) is a Regency Square, now a public park, named for Queen Anne. The wealthy soon moved away from the docks up the hill to Clifton, and it went into decline after the 1831 Bristol Riots (neo

Corbynistas got massacred by the Dragoons, but enough of them, as their Lieutenant-Colonel was court marshalled for leniency), and more recently by being part of Bristol's ring road. Now restored as a pedestrian park.

- The Arnolfini is a Waterfront art gallery with cafe

## Bristol Dockyards / The Floating Harbour

The River Avon's natural 8m tidal range is controlled by lock gates, so its always 'high tide'. The working docks are long gone, and the riverfront is now used for leisure. There are many historic buildings, a dockyard railways, dock cranes, attractions including M Shed museum and The Matthew and SS Great Britain museum ships, and Underfall Yard. [Wikipedia](#)

- Spike Island. When the floating harbour was created, a bypass channel had to be created (the tidal New Cut), this created Spike Island. You can cross the New Cut on the pedestrian Gaol Ferry bridge.
- M Shed is a [Museum of Bristol \(Social\) History](#). Free. Covers a bit too much, a bit too simply. Nice cafe, trains, rooftop terrace viewpoint, heritage cranes.
- The Matthew is a [Museum ship](#), free, weekends only Dec-Mar, a replica of the ship John Cabot used to (re)discover the Americas/ [Wikipedia](#)
- The Bristol Harbour Railway is the former docks railway ([blog](#)). Short [steam trips](#) some weekends  
Even if you don't ride, there are tracks and wagons for selfies
- The SS Great Britain and Being Brunel [harbour walk only](#) is a [restored museum ship](#) of Brunel's revolutionary but unsuccessful ship , and the [Being Brunel museum](#). £17 / £9.40 child. ([wikipedia](#))
- Underfall Yard [harbour walk only](#). The pumps that managed the sluice gates that regulated the river height. Boatyard with a visitor centre. Long (10m) aerial photo table of the docks area. Cafe with terrace overlooking the harbour. Recommended. [website](#), [Wikipedia](#)

## Around Millennium Square

- Millennium Square is one of a number of linked pedestrian squares, has a large outside screen and a large reflective silver ball (part of We Are Curious museum)
- We The Curious is a [Kids science museum](#) with a planetarium (£4 extra). £15 adults. £10 kids.
- Bristol Cathedral and College Green. Free entry.

## Up the hill towards Clifton [Clifton walk only](#)

- Georgian House Museum is an 18thC [historic town house museum](#), free entry. Open Sat-Tue, Apr-Dec. On Gt George Street, north of the Cathedral. BS1 5RR.



- Brandon Hill and Cabot Tower. A hillside park with harbour views, and an 1890's Tower (free entry) that commemorates the 400th anniversary of the explorer's (re)discovery of the Americas. Its viewing gallery is 334 feet (102 m) above sea level.
- Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. "[Art, nature and history](#)." (just not Bristol's). Free entry. Pretty building. There's the University Wetherspoons opposite.
- Royal Fort Gardens. Pretty gardens, part of the University, but usually open to the public, with some interesting sculptures. No website.
- RWA - Royal West of England Academy. [Art gallery](#) with changing exhibitions.

## Clifton Clifton walk only

- Clifton. A suburb of large grand houses built for merchants during Bristol's golden era, and crescents of terraced houses overlooking the harbour. Today there's Bristol University buildings, and a village of independent shops and cafes leading to the green and the suspension bridge.
- Clifton Suspension Bridge. Iconic and picturesque bridge over a dramatic steep gorge. Across the bridge is a small visitor centre that tells the story of its building is recommended. Also recommended is the vantage point above the road on the Clifton side. Free to cross for walkers, £1 for cars.
- Downs. Just by the Observatory (a cafe and pay tunnel to a cave overlooking the gorge) there is a nice common with an outlook over the gorge and bridge. You could follow the ridge to the Downs proper.
- Red Lodge Museum [Historic house museum](#) with an "Elizabethan Knot" Garden, free entry. Open Sat-Tue, Apr-Dec. Near the Bristol Art Gallery. BS1 5LJ.

## Old Town

- The Old Town is on a "peninsular" between the river and Bordeaux Quay, north of Queen Square is what's left after WW2 bombing of the old town. Highlights include the St Nicholas market. Best just to wonder around.
- Nelson Street Murals. Look up for murals on drab 1960's concrete buildings, from a 2011 street art festival
- Castle Park. The site of the 11thC [Bristol Castle](#) (demolished 1656), and the former old town which was destroyed in WW2 bombing, it is now a riverside park, with remains (walls, no roof) of 2 churches, St Mary-le-Port and St Peters.

**Street Murals**

[Banksy is a street artist from Bristol](#) - think murals - and there are many other local graffiti artists as well.

There are many Banksy's around the city, as well as murals by others ([map of 180+ murals](#)). A good place to start is Stokes Croft, a suburb north of Castle Park. Further out is Easton.

See [Visit Bristol - Street Art](#) for festivals, guided tour, and a self guided via app Banksy tour

**Help Us!**

After the walk, please leave a [comment](#), it really helps. Thanks!

You can also upload photos to the [SWC Group on Flickr](#) ([upload your photos](#)) and [videos to Youtube](#). This walk's tags are:

**By Car**

**Start** BS1 6QF

**Help**

National Rail: 03457 48 49 50 • Traveline (bus times): 0871 200 22 33 (12p/min) • TFL (London) : 0343 222 1234

**Version**

Aug-24 [Andrew](#)

**Copyright**

© [Saturday Walkers Club](#). All Rights Reserved. No commercial use. No copying. No derivatives. Free with attribution for one time non-commercial use only. [www.walkingclub.org.uk/site/license.shtml](http://www.walkingclub.org.uk/site/license.shtml)

## Walk Directions

### The station to the bridge via the waterfront and Cabot Tower

1. Exit Bristol Temple Meads Station by the main exit, down the roadway.
2. Cross the road at a set of lights and continue a little to the right (to the right of the Holiday Inn) along Redcliffe Way.
3. Pass the large St Mary Redcliffe church (free). Continue straight on at the roundabout.
4. Cross the river to the Hole in the Wall pub
5. Continue ahead to the right of the pub along a pedestrian path to Queen Square. Walk along its (left-hand) south side.
6. At Prince Street, detour left and cross the bridge to the harbour and Spike Island, and turn right along the waterfront to M Shed (large museum free), some



disused cranes, the Dockyard Railway, The Matthew (replica museum ship, free).  
Return to the bridge and re-cross it.

7. Turn left immediately along the waterfront quay with the Arnolfini gallery (free) on the right.
8. Turn right along the waterfront to pass bars and cafes.
9. Turn left across a pedestrian bridge and continue ahead past The Aquarium into Millennium Square, with the We The Curious museum (kids science museum, free) ahead, a large glitter ball, and a big screen TV.
10. On the small square, turn right in front of We The Curious, cross a road at a set of lights, then go up a stepped path a little to the right (Trinity Street) up to College Green and Cathedral.
11. Turn left along the green, with the Cathedral on the left and at the far end veer left briefly to the interesting Abbot's Gatehouse.
12. Return to the green and turn left (ie turn right from the previous direction) along a water feature in front of the curved Town Hall.
13. Exit the green onto College Green (road) and turn left uphill, along College Green (road) which becomes Park Street.
14. Look right by the bridge over Frog Lane/Frogmore Street, there's a Banksy mural: "Well Hung Lover".
15. Turn second left along Great George Street where you pass the Georgian House museum (free) on the left.
16. Enter Brandon Park, with fine views across the city and the river, and turn second right then left up to Cabot Tower. Climb the tower for some stupendous views.
17. From the tower entrance (at the back of the tower), turn right on the level, then downhill and second left to come out on Upper Byron Road.
18. Cross Berkeley Square diagonally on a dirt path, and come out on a main road by the City Museum and Art Gallery (free), with a tower next to it (Wills Memorial Tower, part of Bristol University).
19. Go up University Road (next to the museum), then left at the end of it along Woodland Road, for the Royal Fort Gardens. Afterwards, retrace your steps.
20. Head left, up Queen's Road (but notice the Eastern Orthodox Church up on the right along University Road) to the RWA building (Royal West of England Academy), which hosts five galleries.
21. Just before it, turn left along Richmond Hill, a quiet residential road with some grand houses.
22. At the end of the road, turn left (now back on Queen's Road).

23. Veer right, now on Victoria Square (road), and cross over to the right to diagonally cross the Victoria Square on a paved path.
24. At the far end, cross a road and go down an alleyway, passing shops and the Clifton Arcade.
25. Continue down Boyce's Avenue and get to a T-junction with a shopping street (Clifton Down Road/Regent Street).
26. Turn left briefly and immediately right at a pedestrian crossing to continue down Princess Victoria Street (more shops).
27. Go second right up along The Mall (more shops), signed 'Clifton Suspension Bridge'. At the top of it, you come out on to the village green.
28. Turn left, and in 100m cross the Clifton Suspension Bridge along the left-hand pavement to its visitor centre on the far side.

## From the bridge to the station via the old town and Castle park

1. Cross over to the northerly side and walk back over the bridge. On the far side, turn first left up a tarmac path and follow it to several viewpoints by the observatory tower for photos (cafe).
2. For a longer walk, head north, along the rim, to the Downs.
3. Alternative route back to town, longer but with river and harbour views via a crescent: Follow tarmac paths back to the road and turn right across it and then across a green to continue downhill along Sion Hill (road). Where a road veers off to your right, there is a path down to the river (The Zig-Zag). Follow it (out and back) to **The Lookout Lectern**, a bridge viewpoint. Continue downhill along Sion Hill. Turn left along Royal York Crescent with harbour views. At the end, turn left uphill along Regent Street, then right on Boyce's Avenue (with the alleyway at the end), then continue as below.
4. Retrace your steps to the Bristol Museum. That's: down The Mall, left on Princess Victoria Street. Cross the road and down Boyce's Avenue (with the alleyway at the end). Diagonally across Victoria Square. Left along Queen's Road and right along Richmond Hill residential road. Continue downhill along Queen's Road to the museum.
5. Continue past the museum to the junction
6. Veer left for the Red Lodge Museum (free)
7. Veer right, downhill, along Park Street, then College Green.
8. At the bottom, with the town end of a river inlet ahead, turn left with the main road, away from the river.

9. After passing The Hippodrome, turn right across the main road at a set of lights and cross a broad pedestrianised area to the left of Baldwin Street. The upcoming area is what's left of the old town.
10. You cross Broad Quay and bear left uphill along the pedestrianised end of Clare Street. St Stephen's Church is visible down the left along St Stephen's Street.
11. Continue ahead, with the road now called Corn Street. At a bend, continue ahead along a pedestrianised stretch (still Corn Street).
12. At the junction with Broad Street, turn left along it for the Everards Printworks (tiled exterior). At the end of the road, go under an archway and turn right along Nelson Street for some murals left from the 2011 See No Evil street art festival.
13. Continue ahead along Wine Street, passing St Nicholas Market (covered market, food stalls, independent traders). Turn right across the road at a set of lights towards a park with the ruined St Peter's Church in its centre.
14. Pass just to the right of the church (i.e. ignore a dropping path towards an underpass), en route passing the former site of St Edith's Well (info panel), now at the Stourhead Estate (SWC Walk Bruton Circular via Stourhead).
15. Continue down a stepped path to the river and turn left along it through Castle Park, past an S-shaped pedestrian bridge.
16. Keep following the river until you have to cross St Phillip's Bridge onto the opposite bank.
17. Continue following the river.
18. Head inland by the next big bridge, inland, right on Temple Back, left on Temple Rose, to Temple Gardens for the ruined Knight's Templar church.
19. Follow the river, and just before another S-shaped pedestrian bridge, turn right with the path to continue to the left of Harratz Place, then The Square.
20. Across the square is the Knight's Templar pub, a Wetherspoon's.
21. Continue ahead for Temple Meads Station.

© Saturday Walkers Club. All Rights Reserved. No commercial use. No copying. No derivatives. Free with attribution for one time non-commercial use only.  
[www.walkingclub.org.uk/site/license.shtml](http://www.walkingclub.org.uk/site/license.shtml)