



Bristol Harbour walk

Bristol's historic floating harbour via M-Shed, SS Great Britain, churches, galleries, museums, pubs and cafes



Start and Finish Bristol Temple Meads

Length 5 miles / 8 km

Time 2 hours

Toughness 1/10

Walk Notes This walk loops around Bristol's historic sailing-ship era "floating harbour", passing new redevelopments, industrial heritage, and many tourist attractions, museums, bars, and cafes.

Starting from the main station, the walk follows the meandering river / harbour through the town centre, past the old town to the historic era docks, which are now cafes and museums. Highlights include Queen's Square (Regency era), M-Shed (wharf turned into a museum), the Mathew (replic sailing ship), SS Great Britain (early metal hulled steam ship), Underfall Yard (lock gate engines) and harbourside bars and cafes.

Walk Options This is one of 2 Bristol walks, the other is through the town to a wealthy suburb, and the Clifton Suspension Bridge. You could combine them.

Eat/Drink Too many to choose from. Recommended is the Underfall Yard cafe, and the Pump House (pub), just across the lock gates.

Travel Trains from London Paddington to Bristol Temple Meads are 2 per hour, and take 1 hour 30 mins. £63 off peak.

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.

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

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- Walks**
- [Bristol via the harbour and old town to Clifton Suspension Bridge](#) 7 miles (11km) with 150m 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](#) . Th 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

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Walk Directions

1. Exit **Bristol Temple Meads** station by turning right (north, signed "Temple Quay & Ferries", i.e. not the main exit with the roadway)
2. Continue to a small square with a Wetherspoons pub off to your left (the meeting area for groups), with the river to your right.

3. Follow the river. Turn left to along the riverside path, passing an S shaped pedestrian bridge.
4. At the second road bridge, cross to the opposite (north) bank and continue.
5. Continue past **Castle Green** (remains of a castle and 2 WW2 bombed churches), and another S curved pedestrian bridge
6. Continue to a road bridge, Bristol Bridge.
7. Option: The old town is straight ahead / to your right. Turn right, along High Street, for the **St Nicholas Market** (covered market, food stalls, independent traders). Return to this point.
8. Continue along the river as it veers left, now Welsh Back street. You'll have to leave the riverbank for a short stretch.
9. Option: Turn right along pedestrian Kings Street for the historic 1664 **Llandoger Trow pub**.
10. Continue to the end of the road, **Queen's Square** will be to your right.
11. Rejoin the river. Follow it around the bend to a road bridge (or use the south side of Queen's Square instead, turning left at the end to rejoin the river)
12. Option: Continue past the road bridge to The **Arnolfini** (art gallery, free).
13. Cross the bridge south, over the big river towards M-Shed (museum).
14. Turn right. Pass **M-Shed** (museum, free), and the disused cranes. Pass **The Matthew** (museum ship, free), a replica of John Cabot's ship used to (re)discover America.
15. Just after M-Shed, go left, and walk out-back to see the cut (floating harbour bypass channel)
16. Continue along the waterfront, pass the rail tracks and wagons
17. Detour inland, around the [SS Great Britain museum ship](#) / Being Brunel museum. £18.
18. Option: Continue ahead (inland) on the detour for the [Spike Island Gallery](#) (Wed-Sun)
19. On the way back to the waterfront, opposite Force 4 Chandlery, on the corner of an industrial area is a white building with a clock. Down the alley to the side of it is a **Banksy mural**, "The Girl with Pearl Earrings".
20. Go through **Underfall Yard**. There's a small museum (free, pump engines) and cafe with outside tables overlooking the river
21. Continue. Turn right to cross the Avon on a road across the sluice gates of the Floating Harbour.

22. Don't continue on to the end of the harbour (and outer lock gate), its a major road junction and wasteland.
23. Head back to the centre, along the north bank.
24. The riverfront turns a corner at a pedestrian square. There are many bars. Continue to the pedestrian bridge.
25. Option: Turn left (away from the river) for **Millennium square** and the **We Are Curious museum** (kids science museum, free). By the large glitter ball is a big screen TV. Turn right at the start of the square, uphill, crossing, then up again for College Green and the **Cathedral**. Continue, and veer left for **Brandon Hill** (park) and **Cabot Tower** (free) you saw from the harbourside part of the walk.
26. Option: Continue straight on to link with the **Clifton Suspension Bridge** Walk. As the road narrows after the end of the waterway, look up, and you'll see a series of murals on the drab 60's concrete buildings
27. Cross the pedestrian bridge.
28. Continue ahead, walk through **Queen's Square** (crossing your route out)
29. Continue ahead, cross the river on a road bridge.
30. Continue ahead at a roundabout with the large **St Mary Redcliffe church** (free) on your right
31. Continue and **Bristol Temple Meads** is ahead.

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