

# River Avon Trail

## Interpretation Project Bulletin



Bristol's floating harbour, late 19th century photo: Memories Corn Exchange, Bristol

### The 'Floating' Harbour

The tidal river and Avon Gorge proved to be both the making and the undoing of Bristol as a major port. These natural elements protected early shipping from pirates and invaders but as the port expanded and ships grew in size the Avon became more treacherous to navigate. Something had to be done.

Eventually William Jessop's 'New Cut' was built to re-route the river. Locks, weirs, basins and a 'feeder' canal were also built so that the level of water in

the busy harbour could be kept constant – or 'floating'. Although Jessop's plan solved the problem for a while, the bed of the harbour was silting up and ships continued to get bigger. Brunel was called in to help by designing dredgers and other dock features. By the end of the 19th century, docks in other cities were better able to accommodate more, larger ships and Bristol harbour began to decline. The attractive harbour is now put to other uses, but the water level to this day is controlled by Jessop's scheme with help from Brunel's modifications.



Vauxhall Bridge on the Cut at Southville

### Bicentenary of the 'New' Cut

The excavations of the Avon Cut began 1st May 1804. It is commonly thought that French prisoners of war built it, but we have found no evidence of this. Can you help?

Local people will be celebrating the 200th anniversary of this important part of the city's heritage with a programme of environmental and arts activities coordinated by the Southville Community Development Association and Living Rivers Project. Please tel: 0117 923 1039 for details.

**The Avon Valley Partnership** was established in 1993 to address various issues relating to the management of open space, recreation and sustainable transport in the vicinity of the River Avon between Pill, near the mouth, and Bath. This broad partnership comprises local authority officers, environmental organisations and local interest groups.

*The partners* - Avon Gorge & Downs Project ● Avon Valley Railway ● Bath & North East Somerset Council ● Bristol City Council ● BTCV ● Countryside Agency ● Easton Community Centre ● Environment Agency ● EnVolve ● Forest of Avon ● National Trust ● North Somerset Council ● Saltford Reach Environment Group ● South Gloucestershire Council ● Sustrans

#### The bulletin

There will be three more bulletins, published at two-monthly intervals until the end of the project in November 2004. They will keep you up to date on progress, feature some of the stories that have been contributed and contain a diary of walks, talks and events.

**The deadline for the next bulletin will be Wednesday 23rd June.**

Bulletins are available by post, email and via the website. Please state your preference when you contact us.

#### The archive

*Have you got a story?* Besides the 15 interpretation boards and the new guide book there will also be an archive of all the information contributed by the community, a bibliography of books found in local libraries and signposts to other resources. The archive will be accessed via the website.

Contact us -

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## “Blackbirding”

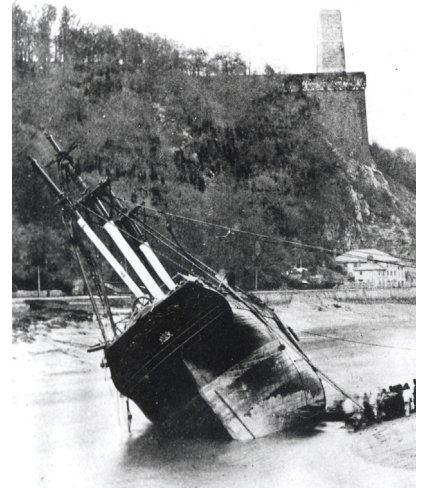
Bristol was the second biggest port in Britain by the early 18th century. This ‘Golden Age’ was largely due to its key position in the south west of England. Goods such as textiles, firearms, brass and liquor was shipped from Bristol to the west coast of Africa and exchanged mainly for slaves.

Keeping their human cargoes in the most inhumane of conditions, the ships continued to the Americas where they were sold to buy sugar, tobacco, rum and other delights. This trading triangle known as ‘blackbirding’ was very lucrative and made the fortune of many a Bristol merchant.

## “Shipshape and Bristol Fashioned”

This expression now means “of good quality and ready to use”. At one time it referred to anchored ships at the mercy of the Avon’s tides. As this picture shows, keeling over and running aground when the tide went out was not uncommon. The careful stowing of goods - making ‘shipshape’, and the building of stout, strong ‘Bristol-fashioned’ ships, became imperative.

The expression may date from as far back as the 15th century and may have been applied to larger ships in the Kings Road off Avonmouth, rather than those in Bristol harbour. Do you know? Please tell us if you do.



Ship aground in the Cumberland Basin. Note the west tower of Brunel’s incomplete Clifton Suspension Bridge in the background.

photo: Memoreis

## WALKS, TALKS & EVENTS

You can use the bulletin and the website to publicise events in your area, such as walks or talks related to the River Avon landscape. Walks are free unless stated.



### Avon Cut Bicentenary - Bristol

In May, Bristol City Council will be painting Gaolferry Bridge in the colours preferred by local people. Details: 0117 923 1039.

### Tues 18th May - Bristol

Temple Quay. 10:00am. A walk to look at the new development and wibbly wobbly bridge. Booking essential, details: 0117 923 1039/377 3460.

### Monday 17th May - Leigh Woods

Purple Trail Walk (not on the River, but great views from Gorge). Booking essential, details: 0117 923 1039/377 3460.

### Tuesday 25th May - Bristol

Merchant’s Wharf & Slave Trail Walk. 10am. Booking essential, details: 0117 923 1039/377 3460.

### Sunday 6th June - Bristol

Conham & Troopers Hill Walk 2pm - 4.30pm. Rob Acton-Campbell of the Friends of Troopers Hill will be leading a circular walk including Conham Vale, Dundridge Park, Troopers Hill and the River Avon Trail to introduce the fascinating industrial history and ecology of the area. The walk is approximately three miles and includes some steep steps from Conham Vale and up Troopers Hill where we shall take a break to admire the views before returning to the Avon. The walk will finish by



following the loop of the river around Conham River Park and there will be an opportunity to take the ferry (25p each way) to Beeses Tea Rooms for refreshments at the end the afternoon. For booking and details contact: 0117 953 2141.

### Wednesday, 9th June

Avon Cut - Clear-up day  
Join Southville’s Green Team and others to help clear away some of the rubbish on the south bank. There will be two clean-ups. One starts at 10:00am and the other at 7:00pm. Part of Bristol’s River Awareness Fortnight. Details: 0117 923 1039.

### Saturday 12th June — Pill

Pill — First Port of Bristol. 10:45am. John Rich, retired Bristol Channel Pilot, will lead a walk around the village and harbour of Pill, close to the mouth of the River Avon. John will recount the days when the people of Pill played a crucial role in the navigation of the Bristol Channel and the Avon - maintaining the trade of the Port of Bristol. Booking: 0117 953 2141. For those who wish to stay, (there are several good places to eat in the village) there is:

**PILL REGATTA** - in the afternoon. Don’t miss this annual event of great fun, frivolity and even some history about the sharks and the pilot boats. Everyone welcome.

### Monday 14th June - Bristol

Avon Gorge and Downs. 9:30am. Walk to discover the unique species of this area. Booking essential, details: 0117 923 1039/377 3460.

### Wednesday 16th June

How the Gorge was formed and other stories. 10:30am — 1:30pm  
A feast of fun with ambling story teller, Martin Maudsley. After a short walk accompanied by tales about the wildlife and folklore of the Gorge & Downs there’ll be a picnic. Aimed at 3 — 5 year olds (with accompanying adults!). Suitable for pushchairs. Please bring a picnic. £3

### Sunday, 20 June - Bristol

Crossing Vauxhall Bridge! 11:00am  
We will be seeing how many ways there are to cross this bridge safely. Have you got a donkey? Can you do it in one bound? How about a wheelbarrow or a stretcher? Or you could just walk across in fancy dress. Photos will be taken and turned into a commemorative poster. Or you could just come and watch. Part of Bristol’s River Awareness Fortnight.

### Monday 21st June — Pill

Pill Path and Nightingale Valley. 10:00am. A walk in Iron Age footsteps. Booking essential, details: 0117 923 1039/377 3460.

### Wednesday 23rd June

Beeses Tea Gardens. 10am  
Flat 2 hour walk along the River, with ferry to tea gardens, returning through Conham River Park and Netham. Booking essential, details: 0117 923 1039/377 3460.

### City Centre Health Walks - Bristol

Weekly Wednesday Walk. 12.30 pm. 20 or 30 minute walks around Bristol’s attractive harbour and green spaces. Meet at the Water Cascade Steps, on the city centre promenade.



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illustrations: Linda Clark