

Bristol Before the New Cut

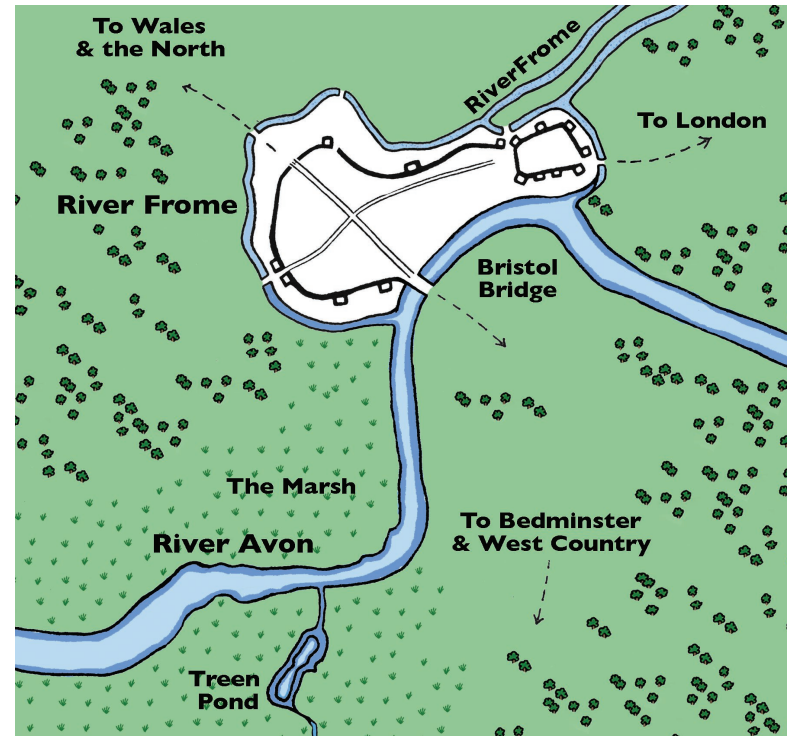
The Early Harbour

There has probably been some form of port at Bristol for over a thousand years. The area was certainly settled before 1000BC, as remains have been found of Bronze Age burial mounds and Iron Age hill forts in different parts of Bristol. Many pre-historians also believe that the blue stones of Stonehenge were rafted up the river Avon on their journey from Preseli in West Wales to the Salisbury Plain.

Around 40AD, Roman settlers built the first known harbour at a place called Abona, now Sea Mills; using it to bring in supplies for trade and war to their nearby town of Aquae Sulis, or Bath, as we know it today.

Bristol itself is first recorded in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle of 1051, its name being 'Brigstowe', meaning 'place by the bridge'. The Saxon town had grown up in the area now known as Castle Park, on the high ground close to the junction of the rivers Frome and Avon. The settlement developed close to a wooden bridge that spanned the Avon (in the spot where today's Bristol Bridge is to be found), linking the two lands of Mercia and Wessex. Here, the town was safe from the high tidal range of the Avon, which is one of the highest in the world. On the highest tides, the difference in water levels can grow to nearly 40 feet.

From early on, Bristol was a very successful trading centre, due mainly to its geographical position at the junction of three main trading routes: the Avon, the Severn and the Wye. The town also had easy access to the southwest, Wales and the Midlands. During the 11th and 12th centuries, Bristol ships were engaged in



Bristol during during the late Saxon period and late Norman period

trade with Dublin, Wales and the Somerset and Devon coastal towns, making it one of the wealthiest towns in the country.

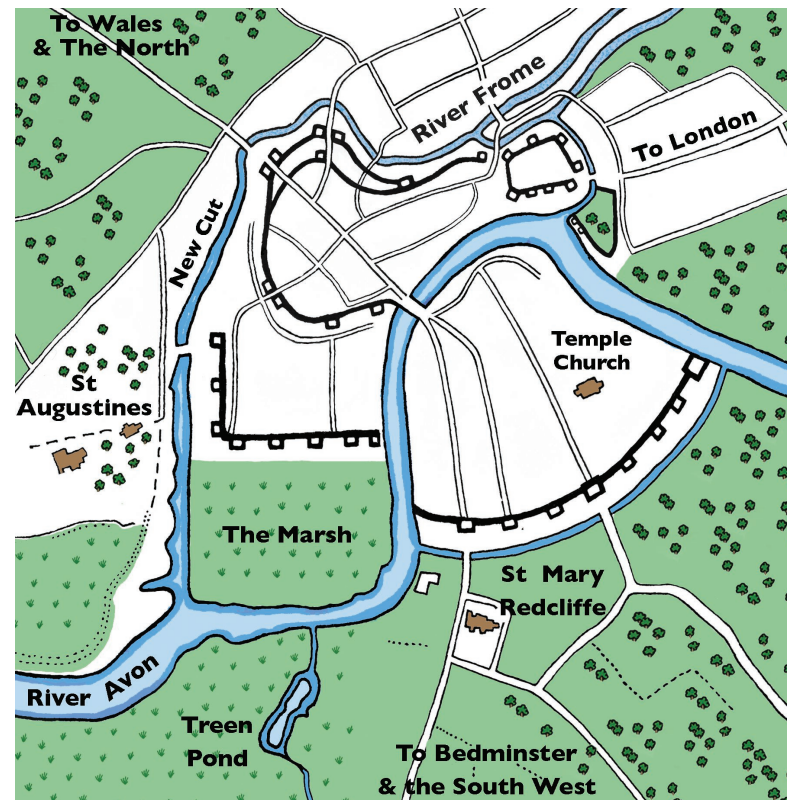
Early Civil Engineering

By the year 1200, Bristol was a thriving mercantile town with a population of nearly 2000. Boats sailed right up to Bristol Bridge and unloaded their cargo on both sides of the river. This was the earliest point in the history of Bristol's harbour when there was not enough wharf space to cope with the traffic.

In the 1240s, Bristol's first great engineering works were carried out, transforming the harbour and its use for the next five hundred years. To begin with, the river Avon was temporarily dammed and diverted around Bristol Bridge, so that the old wooden structure could be replaced with a fine new stone bridge. Then, more ambitiously and as a precursor of things to come, another scheme diverted the river Frome into a permanent new cut of about 750 yards long. While the Frome used to curve round and join the Avon close to Bristol Bridge, it now followed a new man-made route and joined the Avon further down. New Quays were formed – Narrow Quay and Broad Quay – increasing mooring space and doubling the number of ships that the port could service at any one time. (Today, only narrow Quay can still be seen, between the Watershed and the Arnolfini; Broad Quay and the rest of the Frome have been covered over by the city centre.)

The excavation of this new length of riverbed was entirely manu-

al and the work involved would have been staggering. The cost was £5000, putting the scheme in the same league as the great castles and cathedrals of the day. For the 13th century, this early



Bristol during 13th Century showing the Frome River diverted to form a new cut with additional wharves for shipping.

However, the use of Bristol harbour was still falling and the pressure to do something was immense. So Jessop's ambitious civil engineering scheme was finally approved in 1803 and the Bristol Docks Company was formed. The estimated cost was £300,000. this included the price of the land.



Overfall Dam viewed at the start of the Avon New Cut from Ashton painting by T. L. Rowbottom.

The Creation of the Avon New Cut

The first stage of changing Bristol's docks and harbour involved excavating the bed of the new channel, which was to be named 'The Avon New Cut'. The first sod was cut at five o'clock on the morning of May 1st 1804.

The excavation job was a huge one and involved, in parts, cutting deep into the solid rock to accommodate the volume of river water. As far as we know, the work was carried out entirely by 'Navvies': Irish, Scots and other itinerant labourers who travelled the land to work on the country's 'navigations' or canals. Story has



Irish navvies breaking up the rock into blocks for use in the cut masonry walls.

Wild flowers

Over 90 species of flowering plants are present between Goal Ferry Bridge and Ashton Bridge



Ivy broomrape

The rare ivy broomrape is special to the Avon New Cut and found only in a very few other habitats. It is a parasite growing from the roots of ivy plants. It has yellowish-purple stem and creamy flowers in summer; the flowers last for a short time in June but you will be able to see the fruiting stalks for several months. This plant is the emblem of the group of friends of the New Cut

The Spindle

The Spindle is a small multi-branched tree or shrub with yellowish-green flowers and fruit capsules that are bright pink, splitting open when ripe to reveal orange seeds. Its wood provides spindles for spinning or can be used for artists' charcoal.



Purple toadflax

Purple toadflax grows alongside the railway line, especially on the north bank of the Avon Cut. It is often found on waste ground and will even grow out of walls. It has small purple flowers with a spur arranged in a spikelet. It flowers from June to August.