



Bristol Floating Harbour

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bristol_Harbour#/media/File:Small_part_of_Bristol_Harbour,_England_arp.jpg

Bristol Floating Harbour is located at the confluence of the Rivers Avon and Frome, between Somerset and Gloucestershire, but currently governed and operated by Bristol City Council. Aside from Isambard Kingdom Brunel's *SS Great Britain* (1843) the harbour contains a significant number of historic vessels listed on the National Register of Historic Vessels, including four other National Historic Fleet vessels, as well as various maritime skills providers working from original harbourside infrastructure and warehouses.

The harbour is currently experiencing regeneration projects led by both Bristol City Council (BCC) and private companies, including BCC's 'Western Harbour Regeneration Project' (2022), and projects in Baltic Wharf, Payne's Shipyard and Ashton Sidings (2021), primarily seeking to generate new homes. There is, however, a high degree of civic and heritage involvement in harbourside regeneration plans, which will encourage future developments to be sympathetic to the city's historic character. A key challenge is navigating the balance between development of tourist facilities and the stimulation of the local economy through housing developments and work provisors, and the preservation of its historic character clearly distinct from that of the wider city area.



Brief history of Bristol harbour

Bristol Floating Harbour is located at the confluence of the Rivers Avon and Frome, between Somerset and Gloucestershire, but currently governed and operated by Bristol City Council. The harbour today is primarily used by leisure craft, as the Port of Bristol relocated from the harbour to Avonmouth (1908) and Royal Portbury Docks after the latter's construction in 1972. It also has a substantial leisure complex, with Canon's Marsh and the inner harbour area developed as a multi-use cultural centre, as well as hosting the annual Bristol Harbour Festival.

Bristol appeared to have been a relatively prosperous Anglo-Saxon settlement prior to the Norman Conquest, with coins dating to the reigns of Aethelred II (978-1016) and Cnut (1016-35) minted in the city *Brycg stowe* ('place by the bridge').¹ By the time of William the Conqueror's Domesday Book, Bristol was the fourth largest city, behind London, York and Winchester. Following the construction of St Augustine's Reach (1240-47), the city had a new harbour accessible for larger ships, contributing to the expansion of the city's trade to Portugal, Spain, the Mediterranean and Iceland from 1373. The Italian navigator John Cabot (c1450-1500) departed from Bristol to Newfoundland (1497) under the commission of Henry VII, completing the earliest-known European exploration of coastal North America since Norse visits in the 11th century. A replica of Cabot's *Matthew* was built to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the voyage, and has remained based in Bristol harbour. Cabot's son Sebastian Cabot was potentially born in Bristol, but certainly led an expedition from Bristol to locate a Northwest passage through North America (1508-09), apparently turning back at Hudson's Bay.² Bristol was also closely involved in the English Civil War (1641-49), originally occupied by parliamentarian forces, it was stormed by Charles I's nephew Rupert of the Rhine in 1643, who transferred the entire royal naval force to Bristol from Cornwall, before its final occupation by General Thomas Fairfax in 1645. The HMS *Nantwich* was later built in Bristol during the Commonwealth for the English Navy, as were the HMS *Saint Patrick* (1666) and HMS *Northumberland* (1679).

While the Bristol Merchant Venturers had been founded in 1595, the city did not significantly expand until the later 17th century, seeing 6,000 tons of shipping by 1670, half of which was used for tobacco imports - by 1747, however, Bristol had become Britain's busiest slave trading port. The 18th century also saw significant industrial and harbourside development, with a number of Merchant Venturers-affiliated structures constructed before 1750, including a Merchant's Hall (1701), Colston Hospital (1710), Custom House (1712) and Exchange (1743), along with John Padmore's treadmill-powered 'Great Crane' in 1735. With the completion of Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Floating Harbour in 1809, and the constitution of the Bristol Docks Company, the city was increasingly at the forefront of industrial development at home, and imperial endeavours overseas. Further improvements were made to quayside infrastructure by Brunel along with the opening of his Clifton Suspension Bridge (1864), while the Bristol Harbour Railway was opened in 1872, while subsequent extensions continued into the early 20th century.

At the same time, Brunel's SS *Great Western* (1837) propelled Britain ahead in its competition with the United States, as the first steamship purpose-built for transatlantic crossings. It was later surpassed by the SS *Great Britain* (1843) which was closely involved in a number of imperial endeavours like the transportation of Australian emigrants during the Victorian Gold Rush (1851-60s), including the transportation of the first English cricket team to tour Australia in 1861, as well as two engagements as troopship during the Crimean War (1853-56) and the Indian Mutiny (1857-8).³ Bristol saw mobilisation during the First World War, with

¹ L.V. Grinsell, *The Bristol Mint: An historical outline* (1972), 4.

² <https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/stories/bristols-16th-century-slave-traders-the-spanish-connection/>;
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sebastian-Cabot-British-navigator> (Accessed 04/08/22)

³ <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofBritain/SS-Great-Britain/> (Accessed 04/08/22)



Ashton Gate requisitioned as a military depot, while the city suffered heavy aerial bombing during the Second World War, hosting up to 300,000 American servicemen during the course of the conflict.⁴

Associations and interested parties

Governmental and sub-governmental: Bristol, partly owing to its remarkably well-preserved historic harbour and vessels and working infrastructure, has several parties and initiatives interested in the protection of its heritage and settings from degradation, over-development and flooding. Natural England has designated the Ashton Court⁵ and Avon Gorge⁶ Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) which do not extend to the historic harbour but do incorporate the Clifton Suspension Bridge and protect the channel waters and its species from over-development and pollution. Bristol City Council (BCC) has been proactively involved in heritage conservation initiatives, appraising and designating 33 conservation areas. Most relevant to the Heritage Harbours Initiative are 'City Docks' (2011), extending from the Cumberland Piazza to the eastern reaches of the harbour, including the Bathurst Basin, and 'Redcliffe' (2008), incorporating Phoenix Wharf to Sallyport. Other conservation areas incorporate wider riverside and inland sites, with 'Clifton' (2010) including Brunel's Clifton Suspension Bridge and 'City and Queen Square' (2009). Under its directions, additional planning controls are implemented with view to:

*"...place Bristol City Council under a duty of care to recognise the significance of its built environment and positively manage change within it...and [it] is intended to ensure that features that communities value about a place, or feel are under threat, are properly considered."*⁷

BCC has also initiated an ongoing scheme creating a 'local list of valued buildings'. Proposed by Bristol City Design Group in 2013, buildings or sites are designated by an expert panel on the basis of architectural, artistic and archaeological interest; historic importance; and community value. The scheme is described as a

*"...list of buildings, structures and sites that do not already have listed status but which are valued and are considered worthy of preservation. This may be by virtue of their quality, style or historical importance. The Local List provides the opportunity to identify those features of the local scene that are particularly valued by communities as distinctive elements of the historic environment."*⁸

As the estuarine region surrounding Bristol has an exceptionally high threat of flooding, a number of sub-governmental organisations are involved in the maintenance and improvement of flood defences and strategy. These include both BCC's Bristol Avon Flood Strategy; South Gloucestershire Council, Environment Agency and BCC's Avonmouth Severnside Enterprise Area (ASEA) Ecology Mitigation and Flood Defence Project (2019) and EA's 'Bristol Avon Catchment Flood Management Plan' (2016).

Local interest groups: Local interest groups are active in Bristol harbour. The Bristol Industrial Archaeology Society annually publishes the 'BIAS' journal, hosts conferences and walking tours, including one to Underfall Yard and Bristol Docks in conjunction with the Railway and Canal Historical Society in July 2022. The Bristol Shiplovers Society are also engaged in conferences, with guest speakers and regular meetings discussing Avon vessels and waterways. The 'Matthew of Bristol' Society has a similar interest but a wider remit including the hiring of the *Matthew* for school trips and the provision of regular harbour tours. Other local groups are also active in surrounding waterways and could be connected to the harbourside infrastructure and histories,

⁴ <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/love-jealousy-riots-how-bristol-3006514> (Accessed 04/08/22)

⁵ <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/newsroom/ashton-court-estate-conservation-areas-reinstated> (Accessed 02/08/22)

⁶ <https://avongorge.org.uk/conservation/> (Accessed 02/08/22)

⁷ Bristol City Council, 'City Docks: character appraisal and management proposals' (2011), 1.

⁸ Bristol City Council and City Design Group, 'The Bristol local list: September 2020 – fifth edition' (2020), 28.



including the Avon Wildlife Trust, Transport Trust and Avon Outdoor Activities Club. Bristol is home to various museums, a number of which directly engage with its maritime history. including Bristol Museum and Gallery; 'M' Shed, staging working and rotating temporary exhibits on waterfront industry and the slave trade in a regenerated warehouse on Princes Wharf; the Arnolfini and Spike Island contemporary arts centres on the harbourside; and the Underfall Yard and SS *Great Britain*.

Maritime infrastructure and business: Bristol harbour has a base of maritime skills and service providers registered on the Shipshape Network, derived in part from its significant history of trans-Atlantic and domestic commerce. These include;

- Bristol Classic Boat co Ltd.
- Noble Masts
- Permal Gloucester
- Albion Dock Company
- Clarks Wood Company Ltd.
- Marine Electronic Services
- South West Surveys
- Rolt's Boatyard
- Star Yachts Ltd.
- Traditional rigging, Underfall yard.
- Hayes Parsons Marine
- Underfall Boat Yard
- Pinnacle Brush Company
- The Slipway Co-operative Ltd.
- Robbins Timber
- Seetru Ltd.⁹

There appears to be significant interest in the City of Bristol authorities to maintain, if not yet to significantly invest in and expand, harbourside services and infrastructure. In 2011, the 'City Docks' Conservation Area Appraisal (CAA), drafted on behalf of Bristol City Council, specifically noted the significance of the Albion Dockyard and Underfall Yard, emphasising that:

"Maritime activities remain an essential part of the Conservation Area, reflecting both the area's history and providing functions and services that are necessary and relevant in the 21st century."¹⁰

Existing protections: Bristol has 2180 listed buildings, including 53 Grade I listings and 2 Scheduled Monuments, as well as BCC's 'Local List'. Many of these sites are concentrated around the harbourside, including numerous examples of Victorian civil engineering and functional buildings relating to international imperial trade and maritime industries. Some complete docks and wharfs are Grade II listed, including Albion and Great Western Docks, and Prince's, Wapping, Welsh Back, Redcliffe and The Grove Wharfs. Much dock and quayside infrastructure, including quay walls, patent slips and hydraulic engine houses are also Grade II listed. William Fairbairn's Steam Crane (1850) has been designated a Scheduled Monument, having been restored to operational condition as part of the Bristol Industrial Museum collections. There are various historic vessels at Bristol, a number of which were originally constructed in Bristol harbour, including *Pyronaut*, *Mayflower*, *Bertha*, *Balmoral* and *SS Great Britain*, all National Historic Fleet vessels.

⁹ <https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/shipshape-network/company> (Accessed 02/08/22)

¹⁰ 'City Docks', 50.



Registered historic vessels currently at Bristol:¹¹

Registered vessel	Details
<p><i>Pyronaut</i> (National Historic Fleet)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/619/pyronaut</p>	<p>54ft fire float built in 1934 by Charles Hill and Sons of Bristol. Constructed for firefighting in City Docks until withdrawal from service in 1973. Sold to Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery in 1989.</p>
<p><i>Tower Belle</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/333/tower-belle</p>	<p>67ft pleasure cruiser built in 1920 by Armstrong Whitworth of Newcastle. Acquired by City of Newcastle for use during Second World War, later ran pleasure trips on the Thames. Repaired and launched into Bristol harbour in 1976 and continues to be used for pleasure cruises.</p>
<p><i>John Sebastian</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/142/john-sebastian</p>	<p>102ft light vessel built in 1885 by Charles Hill and Sons of Bristol.</p>
<p><i>John King</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/1003/john-king</p>	<p>68ft steel-hulled tug built in 1935 for Charles Hill and Sons of Bristol. Employed for seventeen days fighting fires at Pembroke Dock in 1940 and was attacked by German aircraft on way back to Bristol. Later employed in transporting cargo across the River Severn and Devon coast, then purchased by Bristol Industrial Museum.</p>
<p><i>Volunteer</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2097/volunteer</p>	<p>57ft harbour tug built in 1934 by Charles Hill and Son of Bristol.</p>
<p><i>Greenshank</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/1953/greenshank</p>	<p>72ft barge built in 1936 by Harland and Wolff on Woolwich. Originally built for the Grand Union Canal and Carrying Company.</p>

¹¹ <https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/the-registers/> (Accessed 03/08/22)



<p><i>Mayflower</i> (National Historic Fleet)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/45/mayflower</p>	<p>64ft steam tug built in 1861 by Stothert and Marten of Bristol. Employed towing small craft on the canal between Gloucester and Sharpness. Sank in Gloucester Docks, re-floated and sold to British Industrial Museum.</p>
<p><i>Redshank</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/332/redshank</p>	<p>72ft narrow boat built in 1936 by W.J. Yarwood and Sons of Northwich. Later converted for passenger use, and currently based in Wapping Dock.</p>
<p><i>Truant</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/1559/truant</p>	<p>47ft yacht built in 1919 by Richard Pearce of East Looe. Sailed through French canals to Mediterranean and on to Greece. Relunched after major restoration from Bristol in 2005.</p>
<p><i>Bertha</i> (National Historic Fleet)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/17/bertha</p>	<p>49ft dragboat built in 1844 by G Lunell and Co of Bristol.</p>
<p><i>Balmoral</i> (National Historic Fleet)</p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/128/balmoral</p>	<p>203ft coastal excursion ship built in 1949 by J.I. Thornycroft and co. of Woolston, Southampton. Serviced Cowes as a car and passenger ferry, later employed in excursion work in Bristol Channel area. Purchased by Paddle Steamer Preservation Society in 1985 and now managed by a Trust.</p>
<p><i>Countess</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/331/countess</p>	<p>39ft passenger vessel built in 1895 by J. Loynes and Sons of Wroxham.</p>
<p><i>Elizabeth</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/177/elizabeth</p>	<p>45ft excursion vessel built in 1922. Currently based in Bristol, running ferry service between city centre and Temple Meads station.</p>
<p><i>Britannia</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2912/britannia</p>	<p>52ft harbour launch vessel built in 1910 by Gill and Sons of Rochester. After service with Royal Navy, became a coal and fish bait cargo vessel in Bristol Channel. Later converted for use as houseboat.</p>



<p><i>MFV 140 Joseph</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2772/mfv-140-joseph</p>	<p>64ft service vessel built in 1946 by Kris Cruisers Ltd of Isleworth. Originally served with the Royal Navy Port Auxiliary Service in the Clyde and Western Isles area, later allocated to London Division of Royal Naval Reserve c1981. Currently undergoing restoration in Bristol.</p>
<p><i>White Heather</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2128/white-heather</p>	<p>40ft Looe Lugger built in 1926 by Richard Pearce of East Looe. Fished out of Mevagissey and Falmouth, later running sailing trips out of Fowey.</p>
<p><i>SS Great Britain (National Historic Fleet)</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/76/ss-great-britain</p>	<p>321ft iron passenger vessel built in 1843 by W. Patterson of Bristol. Originally conceived as logical extension of the Great Western Railway. First voyage to America in July 1845, later refitted as troopship for Crimean War and Indian Mutiny. Dismantled by hurricane of Cape Horn, later settled on seabed near Port Stanley in 1937. Refloated at Bristol in 1970 and underwent major conservation programme.</p>
<p><i>Flashing Stream</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2096/flashing-stream</p>	<p>45ft leisure yacht built in 1917 by Spinks and Ferguson of Chatham.</p>
<p><i>Leonid</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2001/leonid</p>	<p>45ft leisure yacht built in 1905 by Hart Hardsen House of Hampton Wick.</p>
<p><i>Dunleary II O.N. 814</i></p> <p>https://www.nationalhistoricships.org.uk/register/2693/dunleary-ii-814</p>	<p>46ft lifeboat built in 1938 by J. Samuel White and Co of Cowes, Isle of Wight.</p>

Successful restorations: Bristol Harbour possesses a significant volume of effectively conserved heritage assets and provisions for the conservation of others. Some harbourside structures have been conserved and effectively regenerated into heritage-led attractions, such as the 'M' Shed, *SS Great Britain* and the Watershed Cinema. Underfall Yard provides a base for maritime academies, a scout sailing section and maritime services companies, as well as being a visitor attraction via its visitor centre, café and demonstrations. The Cumberland Basin and Baltic Wharf have also been maintained for use by small vessels and provide a base for the Baltic Wharf Sailing Club. The Nova Scotia Hotel and Pump House Public House occupy Grade II listed buildings on



the harbourside. The construction of Pero's Bridge in 1999 enabled the development of the Bristol Centre (2000) on semi-derelict land on Canon's Marsh, reusing a number of Grade II listed buildings on the site. The project was funded partly by BCC and commercial partners, and £44.3m from the National Lottery and affiliates. Other harbour structures also house administrative buildings, such as the Bristol Record Office in 'B' Bond. Plans are also in development for the regeneration of Wapping Wharf, with the remains of the Old City Gail incorporated into a scheme that will include housing, office spaces, and a hotel.

Under threat or unknown: Brunel's Swing Bridge over North Entrance Lock at the Cumberland Basin is currently listed on HE's Heritage at Risk register, described as being in "very bad" condition and subject to "slow decay" as no solution agreed. Having been redundant since the construction of the 20th century Plimsoll Bridge, various surveys have been completed on the condition of the structure, and some trial repairs have been carried out. HE notes, however, that even as the bridge's rotational mechanism is still functional, it would still need "extensive repairs" for proper use. Aside from housing pressures, discussed further below, the CAA have identified a number of "negative features" in the docks area, primarily concerned with commercial development unsympathetic to the harbour's historic character, and the treatment of derelict buildings or vacant sites, listed as being "both a weakness and an opportunity".¹² There appears to be particular concern with the issue of transport, and the need for adequate and safe vehicular parking spaces and access, and the aesthetics of the waterfront environment, and the encouragement of pedestrian or public transport over car usage. The Western Harbour regeneration project emphasises the need for "significant investment...around £50m" to replace the aging 1960s Cumberland Basin Road network.¹³ But it also expresses a concern for over-development shared by the CAA, which balances the need for adequate facilities for car and coach parking on Spike Island, in particular, with the high volume of vehicular traffic around the harbour area.¹⁴ Bristol's long history of flooding also poses a threat to the harbour, with the Bristol Avon Flood Strategy noting that:

*"The city docks team could benefit from additional water level and meteorological data to improve responses during flood conditions and assist in harbour-wide emergency planning"*¹⁵

Schemes are underway for further redevelopment, primarily the Western Harbour Regeneration project, with the vision document awarded approval by the city council in July 2022 and undergoing further development with view to releasing a masterplan in 2024.¹⁶ A number of related regeneration projects are happening, by a variety of city and private interests, in Baltic Wharf, Payne's Shipyard (2021) and Ashton Sidings (2021), primarily seeking to generate new homes. The CAA expressed concerns for this particular convergence of pressures as,

*"The popularity of the City Docks as a good place to live has increased the pressure for new residential developments and a drive to maximise land values by building high-density developments. There is a genuine threat to the character and sustainability of the Conservation Area if industrial buildings and land are redeveloped to the highest possible density."*¹⁷

The report's emphasis on "maintaining balance" indicates the centrality of communication and co-ordination between local interests (including heritage) to ensure both that the city's "remarkable" historic character is

¹² 'City Docks', 51.

¹³ <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/residents/planning-and-building-regulations/regeneration/western-harbour> (Accessed 03/08/22)

¹⁴ 'City Docks', 54.

¹⁵ BCC et al, 'Local Flood Risk Management Strategy' (2018), 18.

¹⁶ <https://harbourhopes.co.uk>; <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/residents/planning-and-building-regulations/regeneration/western-harbour> (Accessed 03/08/22)

¹⁷ 'City Docks', 47.



maintained, whilst also stimulating local and tourist engagement, secure employment provision and inward revenue. The CAA considers this crucial but fragile balance of long-term heritage conservation and local economic viability of harbourside development:

“The continued growth and development of important cultural and leisure facilities is vital in securing their ongoing viability and value. The needs of the cultural institutions in maintaining and growing visitor numbers and revenue is vital, and striking the right balance between the institution in an imaginative way that meets the needs of the institutions as well as the historic environment is critical.”¹⁸

Threats and opportunities:

BCC’s reports consider development pressures to be a main issue potentially affecting Bristol, primarily owing to the scale of the City Dock’s emergence as *“part of the region’s fastest growing tourism and leisure development areas”*. As the harbour became both an effective and sympathetic heritage attraction and attractive district for both residents and tourists, it has inevitably seen a parallel rise in associated pressures toward further high-density housing, commercialisation and more extensive integration into the city’s road network. On the other hand, Bristol harbour possesses an exceptional base of maritime infrastructure and skills providers, and a number of community groups using the city’s waterways for purposes ranging from kayaking and outdoor sports to local historical and national industrial research, and preservation and usage of local historic vessels.

There appears to be a high degree of civic cohesion and communal identity invested in the historic harbour, with the well-established Bristol Industrial Archaeology Society maintaining functional waterfront industrial machines and vessels for public display, and the Matthew of Bristol Society maintaining Bristol’s global connections through a reconstruction of John Cabot’s *Matthew* seeking in particular to engage visiting children in sailing trips. The CAA displays the city authorities’ active interest in maritime infrastructure and trades at Bristol harbour, highlighting the importance of the Albion Dock and Underfall Yard which:

“...provide shipbuilding and repair facilities for small and traditional vessels. They serve as an ongoing reminder of the area’s shipbuilding past and ensure the continued use of specialist skills. Perhaps more importantly though is that through their continued use the survival of these historic sites...is ensured.”¹⁹

The city’s associations with Isambard Kingdom Brunel - which connects the harbour to the wider estuarine region, including the Clifton Suspension Bridge, and potentially the wider British coastline through the Great Western Railway, and contemporary Brunel constructions such as Briton Ferry - contribute to a more expansive narrative of Britain’s industrial revolution, representing it, more truthfully, as a narrative not of singular local industrial development, but of inter-connected supply and demand, materials and products.

Bristol can also be placed in a more dimensional narrative of the rise and fall of the British Empire. The city’s associations to early British imperial endeavours to explore and colonize North America and its central role in the transatlantic slave trade are demonstrated in the *Matthew* and a number of exhibits in the Bristol Museums. Its experience of the empire’s decline can be evidenced by the *SS Great Britain*’s involvement in the 19th and 20th century wars of empire and decolonialisation, from the Crimean War (1853-56) and Indian Mutiny (1857), to the First and Second World Wars.

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¹⁸ ‘City Dock’, 47.

¹⁹ ‘City Docks’, 50.



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