

Clifton remembers...

What did you do during lockdowns? Well, for me, I needed something to fill the void - the tours that I led each week on the Clifton Suspension Bridge and inside the Leigh Wood abutment vaults were summarily cancelled. I worked on filming projects for the bridge's website and on Zoom presentations. At first, using Zoom was exciting: my laptop screen would populate itself with faces, like the Muppet Show intro with Kermit and his chums stacked along the balconies, or like postage stamp-sized doors opening on an advent calendar.

But rather than fill a void, I was staring into one: it was difficult to get connection with participants. Video conferencing is no match for actual face-to-face meetings. Humour is difficult to get across, especially subtleties such as irony. We derive personal warmth from non-verbal communication - facial expressions, which are hard to distinguish on a streamed image, and emphasis and tone, which are tricky to pick up with poor audio signals.

What I needed was a Big Project, which got me out of the house as well as involving me in lots of bookish and googly research. The solution: devise walks around a beautiful suburb which is adorned with commemorative plaques. I could spend warm August afternoons strolling or cycling around Clifton. Now, August is known as the silly season when not much happens, but that's not true. It was in the month of August that World War I started, Hitler ordered the invasion of Poland and Saddam Hussein marched into Kuwait. And here was I planning a sortie into CHIS-held territory. Clifton and Hotwells Improvement Society has put up green plaques each year since 1989, embracing and celebrating an eclectic spectrum of celebrities. And there are some older ones: large, handsome, rectangular bronze plaques erected by the Clifton Improvement



Above, E H Young. Her novels are set in Clifton.

Right, Sir George Oatley. His Perpendicular Gothic looms over Park Street.



Dorothy Brown. Bristol's Boudicca.

Committee in the nineteenth century. There are also unattributed plaques perhaps put up by the university since they often appear on halls of residence.

I could google deep down into each plaque subject's history. I would end up with informative walks which could attract Society members and I would be able to directly relate to them, serving up tasty ingredients: meaty historical information, crispy humour, nutty dramatic irony and a *soupeçon* of political incorrectness. That recipe had certainly worked for me on the bridge tours. . .

There are more than sixty plaques in Clifton and the slopes of Hotwells, providing a rich variety. But I saw an opportunity to celebrate another aspect of Clifton: its enterprising merchants. Leading businessmen in the second half of the nineteenth century

bought mansions in Pembroke Road - seven of them lived within a few hundred yards of All Saints' church. They were all members of the council's Docks Committee, and were involved in the long conflict of vested interests on the future of our city's port: maintain the city docks or develop new ones at Avonmouth and Portishead. And they held proud civic positions - Aldermen, Masters of the Society of Merchant Venturers, Sheriffs, JPs, and Presidents of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce.

The prosperous merchants of Pembroke Road were engaged in a wide range of trades: methylated spirit makers and drysalterers; the importation of hide and tallow from Montevideo; coachbuilding (by appointment to royalty), paint and varnish manufacture and a grocer, with a chain of stores which "revolutionised the high-class business in provisions, wines, spirits, &c., together with household requisites in general". One



Gordon Young takes a tour of Clifton's commemorative plaques.



Sayce and Percival. An Egyptologist and an educational pioneer.

of them had an impressive international reach, importing timber from Russia, Mexico and Canada.

It would be a worthy project, a fitting counterpoint in a year in which our city's history has been demonised internationally. I was determined to prove that we locals, while we might sound like Long John Silver when we talk, are not piratical, cutlass-wielding rogues. Our ancient city can boast many centuries of distinguished and enterprising endeavour. In the 1240s, Bristol men shifted a river to create St Augustine's Reach. And forty years before Cabot's voyage of discovery, Robert Sturmy's astonishingly ambitious commercial venture marks him as one of our city's greatest sons - a brave merchant venturer, who you probably have never heard of. He certainly deserves a statue and there's an empty plinth in Colston, oops, sorry! - Beacon Avenue . . .

Commemorative plaques can only bear the briefest of biographies. It was fascinating to unearth facts which didn't make an appearance. Here are some examples:

- An artist who painted herself into the background, gazing out at the observer with a wry smile just as the Italian Renaissance painter Raphael paints himself as Apelles in his acclaimed "School of Athens" fresco in the Vatican (Rolinda Sharples, Canynge Road)
- A poet who imagined corpses under his bed in childhood dreams and nearly drowned when sleep-walking into an attic rainwater tank (John Addington Symonds, Clifton Hill House)
- A formidable paediatrician, who, when on a ward round, caused even the innocent to wonder what they might have done wrong (Beryl Corner, Rodney Place)



Left, Richmond House's three plaques. A talented trio - an epidemiologist, a physical anthropologist and an author.

- A scientist who had a compost heap in the garden which provided methane gas for cooking (Dr C R Burch, Percival Road)
- Not just one, but two *ménage à trois* relationships (Sir Henry Newbolt, College Road and E H Young, Saville Place)
- A talented epidemiologist (we could do with him right now) (William Budd, Lansdown Place, and Clifton Road)
- A child, rejected by his mother, who inherited a coal-mining fortune of £80,000 annually (John Lambton, 1st Earl of Durham, Rodney Place)
- Inspirational women, ahead of their time: an architect, and a suffragist who convened one of the earliest gatherings in England to discuss votes for women (Evelyn Dew Blacker, Victoria Square; Florence Davenport Hill, West Mall)
- Television's first chef, who enjoyed a final meal of oysters, partridge and champagne (Keith Floyd, Princess Victoria Street)
- A poet/physician obsessed with death: he poisoned himself in 1849 and left a suicide note calling himself, "food for what I am good for - worms" (Thomas Beddoes, Rodney Place)
- A modernist architect who got it wrong when designing a home for penguins (Berthold Lubetkin, Princess Victoria Street)
- A fossil collector who filled a Hotwells house with thousands of specimens; it took eight days to auction them off when he died (James Johnson, Dowry Parade)
- A French princess who wrote home from our city: "*Ne pensez pas qu'il y ait des divertissements publics ici. Tout le monde reste à la maison et on ne voit jamais un homme à la mode dans la rue.*" ("Do not think there are any public amusements here. Everyone stays at home and one never sees a fashionable man in the street.") (Princess Eugenie de Montijo, Royal York Crescent)

Hmmm, young Eugenie's comments apply today, *peut être* . . . But when this particular Horseman of the Apocalypse afflicting us eventually rides off and we are rid of the plague, then, providing his fellow jockeys - Sword, Famine and War - don't visit us, the Clifton Plaques Walks can resume. See you there.