

Better Bristol

The Bristol Civic Society Magazine – Issue 29 Autumn/Winter 2026

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- Ashton Court Mansion
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an independent force for a **better Bristol**





Front
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Gap House,
Bell Close.

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PRINTERS

Smarts Print
Services Limited.

We welcome
contributions. If you
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article for *Better Bristol*
contact the editor.

Copy date for next
edition 1 March 2027.

All articles in *Better
Bristol* are the opinion
of the author and don't
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of Bristol Civic Society.

From the Chair

Setting out a vision for the future

A well designed and
sustainable city
means a city made
up of liveable
neighbourhoods where local
people can enjoy a good quality
of life and everyone can thrive.
In a liveable neighbourhood
everyone has access to local
shops, community facilities,
schools and work.

A confident and forward-looking city
also needs a strong policy framework
which sets out a vision for the future
and where growth and investment
can happen.

Bristol City Council is in the final stages
of adopting its Local Plan to 2040. This
will be the last plan in this old style. The
Government has now placed a greater
emphasis on strategic planning within
which new local plans must sit alongside
any saved neighbourhood plans. For
Bristol this means a new Sub-Regional
Spatial Development Strategy which

will be prepared by the West of England
Combined Authority (WECA) and a new
Bristol Local Plan 2045 to be prepared by
Bristol City Council within 30 months.
For the first time since Avon County
Council was disbanded in 1996, there
will be a plan for the greater Bristol
area, setting the big picture policies for
growth, infrastructure and sustainability.
The new Bristol Local Plan must have
regard to the growth of the city region,
the connectivity and the opportunities a
new strategic plan provides.

Growth is already
well underway
on Bristol's doorstep.

Growth is already well underway on
Bristol's doorstep. Have you visited
Brabazon, one of the government's
possible new towns? Have you seen the
great new neighbourhoods at Foxwell
and Mulberry Park, the urban extensions
to Weston super Mare and the swathe of
medium-scale housing developments to
the south of Bristol? The shape of greater
Bristol is already changing.



Merry Hill, Lockleaze.



But let's not forget, there are some
deprived and left-behind places in
Bristol. Hartcliffe and Withywood,
Lawrence Hill and Filwood are the
most deprived parts of Bristol. There
are also pockets of deprivation in Bath
and Weston super Mare. Deprivation
indicators cover unemployment, poor
housing, educational achievement and
health. Good place making focussed
local planning can set new policies to
drive long term improvements including
these disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Bristol Civic Society has made re-
visioning Bristol city centre and
developing a new approach to good
growth - densification to create medium
rise new neighbourhoods - our priorities
for this year. Watch out for workshops
in the autumn where you can share your
hopes and fears for a changing Bristol.

We are also working with partners to
work out how we can involve young
people across the city in visioning
their future Bristol. Conversations
are ongoing with Bristol Charities,
Bristol Horn, Design West, Hartcliffe
Trailblazer, and the City Council. Can
you help with this too?

As ever we are looking for volunteers
to come on board and support the
small groups that help run Bristol
Civic Society.

Sandra Fryer

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Not already a member? Why not join TODAY!

See page 27 for more details...

Bristol Civic Society Design Awards 2026

The *Bristol Civic Society Design Awards* exist, writes *Tony Berongoy*, to recognise developments that make a positive contribution to Bristol through excellence in design.

While design quality remains central to the awards, the judging panel's discussions this year extended beyond architectural merit alone. As a Society, we are interested in how Bristol develops as a city. We engage with development proposals, contribute to planning debates and advocate for high-quality place-making. It therefore felt important that the awards should recognise not simply good buildings, but projects that help us understand what good development looks like in practice.

This year's shortlist reflected the breadth of development currently taking place across Bristol. Community facilities, housing projects and major commercial schemes all featured in the final selection. The challenge for the panel was not identifying good projects – there were plenty of those – but deciding which examples best demonstrated the qualities the Bristol Civic Society seeks to encourage.

A particular strength of the awards process is the opportunity to visit projects in person. Drawings, photographs and planning submissions can tell you a great deal about a project, but they cannot fully convey how a building is used, how it is perceived by its community, or how it sits within its surroundings.

The site visits were therefore a crucial part of the process. They allowed the panel to move beyond architectural intention and assess built reality. We were able to speak



Above, Ambition Lawrence Weston - Ambition House.



Above, from left to right, Jenny Goss – GCP Architects, Katie Corbett – Judging Panel and Social Value & EDI Manager at Bray & Slaughter, Mark Pepper – Development Manager at Ambition Lawrence Weston, Mohammed Al-Bayatti – Project Manager at Bristol City Council, Tony Berongoy – Panel Chair and Associate Architect at Willmore Iles Architects.

directly with project teams, clients and users, and to understand not just what each project was trying to achieve, but how successfully those ambitions had been realised and importantly, the civic impact.

The strongest schemes this year were characterised by clarity. They had a clear purpose, a consistent vision and a finished outcome that reflected those original ambitions.

A theme that emerged was the relationship between engagement and quality. The panel found that projects involving meaningful engagement with

communities, stakeholders and future users often demonstrated stronger outcomes. This was not simply a matter of consultation for its own sake.

Rather, where project teams had genuinely listened and adapted their proposals, the resulting places tended to be more resilient, more relevant and more valued by those who used them.

For that reason, the panel recognised three projects that together represent different but equally important aspects of quality in Bristol's built environment.

Ambition Lawrence Weston – Ambition House Design Award Winner 2026

The first award was presented to Ambition House, a project that demonstrates the civic power of community-led development.

The building places local people at the centre of both the brief and the outcome. It provides flexible and adaptable space for a wide range of community uses and, more importantly, reflects years of local ambition and determination.

The panel was particularly impressed by how clearly community priorities had shaped the final result. This is not a project where engagement was added as an afterthought. It is a project that exists because the community was prepared to define a vision and see it through.

At a time when community engagement is frequently discussed but not always realised meaningfully, Ambition House offers a compelling example of what can be achieved when local people are genuinely involved in shaping their surroundings.



Above left, from left to right - Tony Berongoy – Panel Chair & Associate Architect at Willmore Iles Architects, Rula Tuffaha – Architect at BDP, Tom Jackson-Hulme - Senior Housing Development Manager Bristol City Council, Louise Brown - Bristol City Council, Martin Jones – Landscape Architect at BDP, James Wilson - Bristol City Council. Above right, Gap House.

Gap House, Bell Close Design Award Winner 2026

The second award was presented to Gap House, Bell Close.

Bristol continues to face significant housing challenges, and the panel was keen to recognise projects that respond thoughtfully to those pressures.

Gap House stood out because of its

clarity and simplicity. It demonstrates how underused land can be transformed into high-quality homes through careful design, efficient use of space and a disciplined development approach.

What impressed the panel most was not simply the quality of the individual homes, but the wider implications of the concept. This is a model with

potential application across Bristol, helping to unlock smaller sites that are often overlooked yet collectively could make a meaningful contribution to housing supply.

Modest in scale but ambitious in intent, Gap House demonstrates how innovation can emerge through practicality as much as through technology.

The Welcome Building Design Award Winner 2026

The third award was presented to The Welcome Building, recognising excellence in major commercial development.

Commercial buildings play an important role in shaping Bristol's identity, yet discussions about design quality can sometimes focus more heavily on community facilities or residential schemes. The panel felt it was important to recognise a project that demonstrates how major landmark development can make a positive contribution to the wider city.

The Welcome Building impressed through the consistency and confidence of its design approach, the quality of its internal spaces and the integration of ambitious sustainability credentials within a commercially successful scheme.

Importantly, the building also makes a meaningful contribution to the public realm around it. Rather than simply occupying a site, it engages with its surroundings and helps shape the character of this part of the city centre.

The project reflects Bristol Civic Society's wider role in influencing and supporting high-quality development across the city, including large-scale commercial projects.



Above, The Welcome Building.



Above, from left to right, Laura Podda – Architect, Darlington Associates, Jeffrey Lucas – Judging panel, Tony Berongoy – Panel Chair & Associate Architect at Willmore Iles Architects.

Looking Forward

Although the winning projects differ considerably in scale, purpose and audience, together they tell an encouraging story about Bristol.

They demonstrate that quality can be achieved in many different ways: through community leadership, through innovation in housing delivery, and through excellence in major development. What unites them is a commitment to creating places that contribute positively to the city and the people who use them.

The panel would like to thank all shortlisted projects for their openness during the judging process and for the time they invested in hosting site visits.

The Design Awards are ultimately about more than recognising individual schemes. They are an opportunity to celebrate good practice, raise expectations and encourage the conversations that help shape Bristol's future.

This year's winners provide excellent examples of the kinds of projects we should continue to champion across the city.

Major Developments in Bristol

Simon Birch and Willie Harbinson comment on a selection of important proposals.

Princess Street

The 'Land South of Princess Street' application 25/11778/F has been approved, ushering in the tallest building in south Bristol. It went through a tortuous saga of three planning committees in January, March and April 2026.

Throughout the drawn-out process senior Council officers pressed through the approval of a bad scheme, with aspects that are contrary to planning policy, despite the valid concerns of councillors on the Planning Committee. How it will look close-up from the "Bedminster Conservation Area" (within the area covered by the Whitehouse Street Regeneration Framework) has never been revealed in the submitted visualisations.

Being deeply concerned, Bristol Civic Society was vocal at all three meetings, and so were local objectors representing themselves and community groups, and at least three local ward councillors who are not on the Committee.

Since the approval, local voices have been preparing to submit a judicial review of the decisions.

248 Gloucester Road

The Society has objected strongly to the recent proposals at pre-application stage. (The Gloucester Road has recently been subjected to some shamefully bland and inappropriate buildings. In the eyes of the Editor, the recent Co-op Food building at 327



Co-op Food building at 327 Gloucester Road. Is this the ugliest new building in Bristol?

BRISTOL CIVIC SOCIETY

Right, Princess Street. Bristol Civic Society is deeply concerned about this development.



Gloucester Road must surely rate as one of the worst new buildings in Bristol. And there's plenty to choose from.)

With regards to 248 Gloucester Road, it appears to Bristol Civic Society that the developer has deliberately and systematically destroyed the fabric of this once attractive building. Previous applications for approval to demolish



Above, 248 Gloucester Road. As it was.

the building have been refused yet demolition by stealth has taken place behind the sheeting concealing the site. It is profoundly depressing that the planning system has been flagrantly treated in this manner.

In our view the current proposal for 24 flats results in a building which is too high and too bulky for its location. We would consider that a reduced scheme would be appropriate, providing around 9 flats. Simon Birch

Distillery 3 & 4 Broad Plain Planning application 25/11779/P

Bristol Civic Society previously reviewed this planning application and submitted comments to the council in August 2025. We have now reviewed



248 Gloucester Road. Demolition by stealth has taken place.

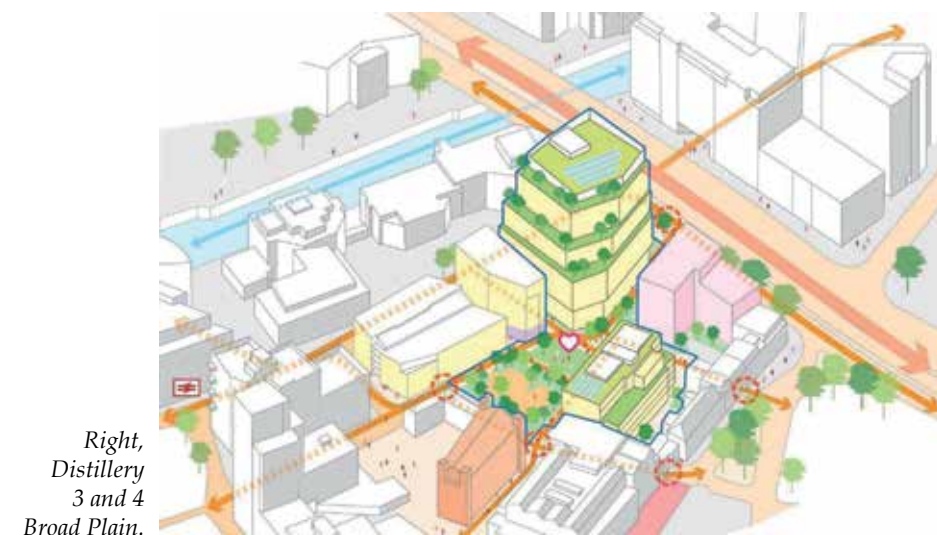
our comments, and revised them taking into account the additional information posted on Bristol City Council website in December 2025. Our August 2025 observations show that Bristol Civic Society was supportive of the application but with some reservations. We had hoped that these reservations would have been addressed in the submission of revised information. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

We welcomed the linkage through to the Soap Works and the view of the historic building but suggested that the view could be bettered by reducing the footprint of Building 4, but this has not been implemented.

The previously proposed small underground car park has been changed to surface parking, which severely reduces the amount of public open space. We suggest that the ten required spaces could be adjacent to the west side of Building 4, closer to the entrance to Building 3, accessed via the existing archway in the Goldsmiths Building.

The proposed height of Building 3 is unchanged and is higher than the Assembly building on the opposite side of Temple Way; it should be the same height or lower. No account has been taken of our suggestions regarding how the elevations could be improved to give the building a more distinctive and slenderer corner and reduce its mass as seen from Temple Way and Avon Street.

We noted concern about the height of building 4. There is no change in the parameters shown on the revised drawings; the building breaks the



Right, Distillery 3 and 4 Broad Plain.

skyline above the listed buildings on Broad Plain. The site of building 4 is the ideal location for the residential elements granted in the extant outline permission; the northern side of the

notional footprint would be further from the backs of the adjacent listed buildings on Broad Plain, and the building would be lower and so not dominate the listed buildings.



Distillery. We noted concern about the height of building 4.

Changes to national planning policy

Bristol Civic Society recently responded to a consultation on a new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Major changes are proposed to the planning system which will affect local authorities and how bodies like the Bristol Civic Society comment on plans and development proposals.

What are these changes to planning? They include:

- A permanent presumption in favour of suitably located development.
- Support for suitable proposals to develop land around rail stations.
- Urban and suburban densification.

- Supporting small and medium sites.
- Clarifying the contributions expected from developments.
- Streamlining local standards.
- Embedding a vision-led approach to transport.
- Conserving and enhancing the natural environment.
- Taking a more positive approach to the use of heritage assets.

In our response we concentrated on what is most important for making Bristol a better city; decision-making and plan-making, urban density, achieving well-designed places, the

historic environment, the natural environment and transport. We said in summary:

- We support the principle of streamlining policy ...
- ... although we have concerns about loss of local autonomy in policy-setting.
- The greater weight given to presumed development and to density are understandable but somewhat concerning.
- Some improvements are welcome; specifically on development viability, transport and design.
- We are concerned about the future of community engagement.

Peter Weeks

Controversy has been frisky, to say the least, for some years over planning applications for high rise blocks in Bristol.

We might associate tower blocks with large towns like Bath and Bristol, but perceptions vary from place to place. In the 1970s Nailsea Town Council referred to the four-storey building in Crown Glass Place as The Tower Block, presumably because few other buildings in Nailsea went above two storeys.

A history could note changes in the purposes for which high-rise has been used: in the nineteenth century for factories and warehouses; in the 1960s for municipal housing; and since then for offices. For purposes of definition, some would say that the essence of a tower block is that it consists of modules repeated and built on top of each other, as in blocks of flats and offices, so they would exclude the communications tower on Purdown because its only purpose was to house telecom equipment. Or is high rise not about purpose or height or structure but about how a building stands out in its setting?

It is often said that tower blocks originated in New York, in order to get the largest possible usable (and lettable or sellable floor space) out of the smallest area of land. The higher the price of land, the greater the incentive to build upwards. Hence there is more high rise in urban areas, especially where land prices are high.



New post-war estates on the far edges of the city included Henbury, Lawrence Weston, Stockwood, Hartcliffe and Withywood.

Getting High

Bill Evans gives a brief history of high rise public housing.

High rise was facilitated by technology. So long as buildings were of wood, stone or brick, there were limits on how high a structure could safely be built without collapsing under its own weight. In the nineteenth century steel girders made high rise possible, starting with mills and other factories, and warehouses. Bristol's earliest high rise buildings (church towers excluded by definition) were tobacco bonds, of which B Bond, where Bristol's archives are stored, and its neighbours, are surviving examples.

It was in the 1950s and 1960s that high rise next reappeared in our area: in housing, and on a vast scale. The first seems to have been Canynge House in Redcliffe, six storeys, in 1955. Subsequently, Winterstoke House and Southbow House in Ashton Gate, both 11 storeys, followed in 1961-1962. The 11-storey Hartcliffe blocks (Willow, Rowan, Redwood, Oak and Chestnut Houses) were built in 1962. Baynton House (10) and Kingsmarsh House (13) in Lawrence Hill were built in 1963, as were Patteson and Proctor houses in Redcliffe. Little Cross House (13) in Ashton Gate and Roegate House, Speedwell were built in 1964. The 11-storey Barton Hill blocks such as Ashmead House were built in 1965, as were Fremantle House, Caroline House and Armada House, Kingsdown, mostly 11 storeys; Polden House (15) and Holroyd House Bedminster (13); and Dancey House, Lockleaze (7). The last to be built were Gilton House, Brislington, 12 storeys and Northfield House, Bedminster (18) in 1969, bringing the total to 55 blocks containing over 40,000 dwellings and amounting to nearly 14% of the city's housing.

Those last two were presumably contractual commitments made before the city council announced a policy decision in 1967 that it would build no more multi-storey flats. It is sometimes said that the change of policy was the



Castle Park View. Higher than the spire of St Mary Redcliffe.



Above left, Polden House and Holroyd House, Windmill Hill. Above right, Gilton House, Brislington.

result of the partial collapse at Ronan Point in Newham in which five people were killed after a gas explosion, but that was in 1968, so it is difficult to see how that could have influenced a decision announced the year before.

What drove housing policy locally into high rise? In places like Plymouth and Coventry, where swathes of private housing had been blitzed, the imperative was to provide housing on a large scale. That would not have

applied in Bristol or Bath. The 1956 Housing Subsidies Act encouraged the construction of blocks of more than six storeys. A high rise flat received 2.3 times the basic subsidy paid on a house. One wonders whether slum clearance was also a motive, and whether tracts of inner-city housing in Bristol were removed in order to accommodate the Broadmead shopping centre.

So far as I can tell, in Bath only one high-rise block was built, Berkeley

House (11 storeys) on Snow Hill in 1958. Planning policies there have precluded other high rise developments. Where policies have prevented high rise in urban areas elsewhere, tower blocks have been erected on the periphery: in Paris, for example, at Montparnasse and La Defense.

A version of this article originally appeared in the Avon Local History Association Newsletter, April 2026. We are grateful for permission to use it here.

How tall?

Bristol's tallest structures

Cabot Tower, Brandon Hill – 32.5m (107 ft).

BRI Chimney, Kingsdown – 60m (196 ft).

Radisson Blu Hotel (former Bristol and West Tower), Colston Avenue – 61m (200 ft).

Beacon Tower, Bristol Centre – 63m (207 ft).

Premier Inn – former Avon House – 64m (210 ft). (Demolished 2025.)

One Redcliffe Street (former DRG Building) – 64m (210 ft).

Wills Memorial Building Tower, Park Street – 65m (215 ft).

Telecommunications Tower, Purdown – 70m (230 ft).

Tollgate House, Newfoundland Road – 77m (252 ft). (Demolished 2006.)

Castlemead (on edge of Cabot Circus) – 80m (262 ft).

St Mary Redcliffe Church – 89m (292 ft).

Redcliff Quarter – original plan 91.5m (300 ft).

Castle Park View – 98 m (323 ft).

Tallest building in the UK – The Shard, London, 310m (1016 ft).

Of course, some buildings, like the Wills Memorial Tower, placed on a hill, look disproportionately tall. Cabot tower is, in fact, only a stumpy 107ft tall.

And the miracle is that until 2020

Bristol's tallest structure was a building that was constructed in the fifteenth century (though rebuilt in 1872) – the spire of St Mary Redcliffe.

Council leaders formally adopted a tall building policy for Bristol in 2005 aimed at protecting important vistas and historical sites. A resolution that



Wills Memorial Building Tower, Park Street – 215 ft (65.5m).

appears to have been consistently ignored. There is always some egomaniac developer wanting to override guidelines and impose their money-grabbing vanity project on the skyline.

Mike Manson

St Philip's Marsh Masterplan explained

Alan Morris describes transformative plans for this unique part of Bristol.

A focus for regeneration

You will probably know the St Philip's Marsh area, but you may not have been there. It is close to Bristol's city centre, but it is something of an island, with limited access by road. Its past use has been mostly industrial, but with changing times and the pressure for more homes, it has become a major focus for comprehensive 'regeneration'. A formal partnership arrangement bringing together Bristol City Council, West of England Combined Authority and Network Rail, has been formed to accelerate development in the 'Temple Quay' area that includes St Philip's Marsh. That body has been developing a masterplan and Bristol Civic Society has been engaging with a series of consultations, leading to being adopted in September.

Writing a plan for such major change is not easy. The change involves moving from a predominately industrial area to a mix of uses, including 7000 homes south of the Feeder. It's a change to a much higher density of use. Mapping the path to get there over the next 20 years is difficult, especially as the partnership has limited land ownership in the area. But a formal partnership, with £100m funding from government, is able to accelerate and guide regeneration, assisted by its appointed developer, Muse.

The masterplan must take account of the area's context, constraints and opportunities. For example, its history and character, flood risk, connectivity, and the economic opportunity provided by the new university campus at the back of Temple Meads station

History and character

To quote the masterplan (edited):

From its origins as open marshland to its present form, the area reflects Bristol's evolution as a major port city and industrial centre. The Feeder Canal stimulated rapid industrial development by enabling the transportation of raw materials and finished



St Philip's Marsh. Industrial buildings drone shot.

goods. Brickyards, ironworks and oilcloth-making became established alongside a growing residential community. Streets such as Albert Road, Victoria Road and Chapel Street were laid out, and terraced houses were built with bricks made in St Philip's Marsh.

The twentieth century brought significant change. War damage, slum clearance and the designation of the Marsh as an employment area transformed its character. Houses, pubs, shops and churches were lost, and by the 1970s the place had changed beyond recognition. Today, St Philip's Marsh is characterised by low-density industrial structures.

The area's distinctive character derives from the close relationship between water and historic industrial buildings. This sense of place is particularly strong north of the Feeder Canal, where the Grade II and Grade II listed former St Vincent's Ironworks stands as a well-preserved Victorian industrial complex with Bristol*

Byzantine-style offices. Much of St Philip's Marsh, however, especially to the east and south, was either developed later or has been redeveloped, and lacks this historic character.

Flood risk

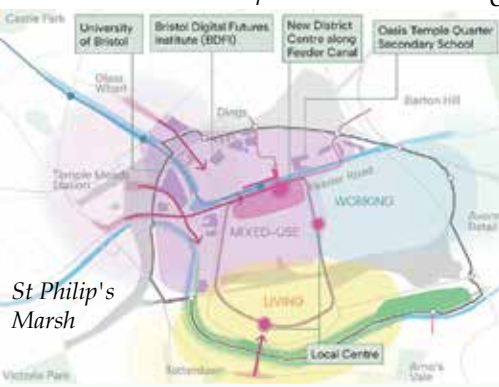
The site lies within the River Avon and Feeder Canal floodplain, with most of the site at risk of flooding, a risk that climate change is expected to increase. Development must not impede the future delivery of strategic flood defences. Some existing industrial buildings positioned close to the riverbank currently constrain the delivery of integrated flood mitigation and riverside landscape.

Connectivity constraints

St Philip's Marsh faces a number of access and movement constraints. The railway lines, the River Avon and the Feeder Canal surround and cross the site, creating severance and limiting connections to adjacent areas such as Totterdown, St Anne's and the city centre.

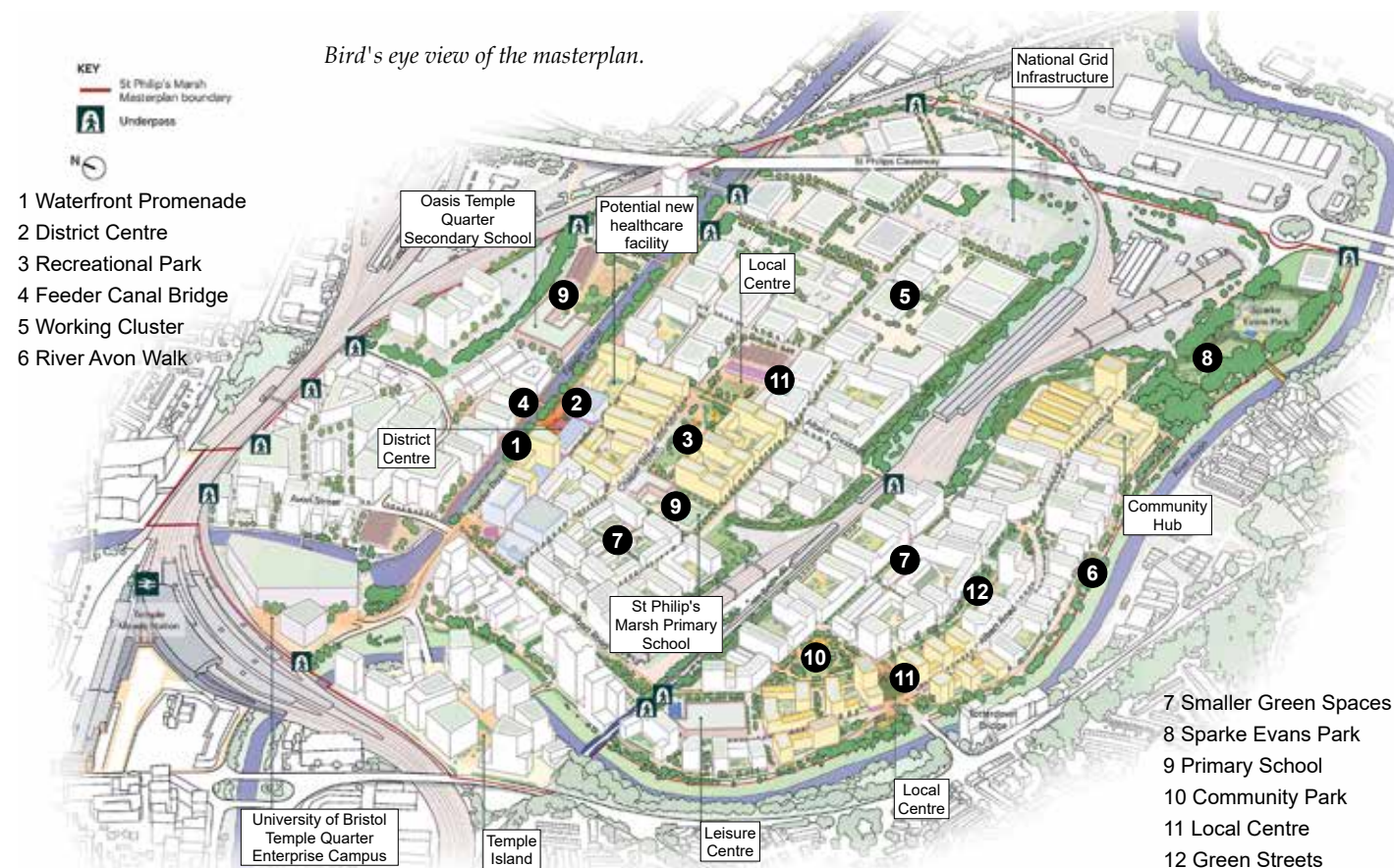
The area is accessed by a limited number of bridges and underpasses, most of which are designed primarily to accommodate vehicular traffic.

The constrained access and movement leads the plan to provide for low private vehicle use, with two 'bus gates' proposed on the



St Philip's Marsh

Bird's eye view of the masterplan.



- 1 Waterfront Promenade
- 2 District Centre
- 3 Recreational Park
- 4 Feeder Canal Bridge
- 5 Working Cluster
- 6 River Avon Walk

- 7 Smaller Green Spaces
- 8 Sparke Evans Park
- 9 Primary School
- 10 Community Park
- 11 Local Centre
- 12 Green Streets

edge of the area, and strong provision of walking and cycling routes. Heavy vehicle access is from the east only.

A new academic community

The University of Bristol's Temple Quarter Enterprise Campus, alongside other developments currently underway, will attract students and researchers to the area, creating an academic and research community that will support innovation and act as a catalyst for the wider transformation of St Philip's Marsh.

Higher density

Much of the land in Bristol is not available for development, so the aim is for high density in the pockets of land like St Philip's Marsh that are available for development. For the Bristol Civic Society, density is where the masterplan should be challenged. The logic for higher density is obvious and

is accepted; the housing crisis is real, and its impact on Bristol's economic growth is real. But what are the upper limits on density, and what form should dense development take? There are not enough parameters in the masterplan to ensure that the key ingredients of a liveable new neighbourhood will be delivered. What is proposed for the area can seem to be squeezing a quart into a pint pot, and we think the area may feel over-dense once built.

The plan sets a minimum density which is appropriate for a city centre area, but we argue that density in the southern part should be lower, being closer to the density of the city's suburbs. We think that the drive for unlimited high density will distort the housing mix. There is a risk that too much of the housing will be for single people - rented flats and student accommodation, likely to be a more transient population. What is needed is a significant proportion of accommodation for families and the elderly.

Suitable locations for tall buildings are proposed, but the plan does not assess the impact of views from outside the area, especially from the south - Totterdown and Paintworks.

Open space

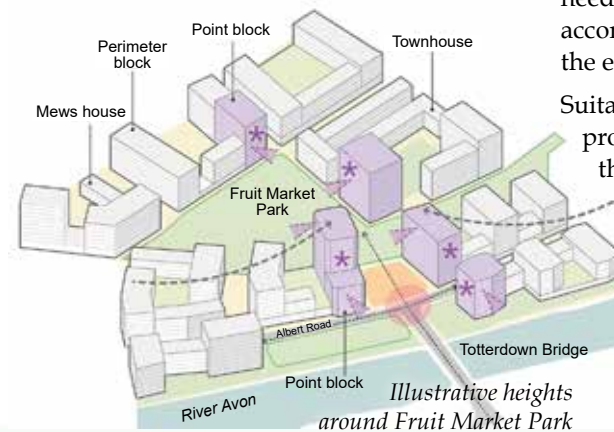
We think the planned park space is too small, and again lacks parameters. The proposed

provision of recreational open space will not be enough for the increased population in this area. The total open space will fall well below internationally accepted standards, other English cities, and other parts of Bristol.

The plan includes in its assessment of open space green streets and a walkway and cycleway in a new riverside landscape. These linear routes are great but they should be seen as part of the public realm, not recreational open space, suitable for say a family ball game, or walking a dog off-lead.

Overall

In this article, there has been space to describe only selective aspects of the masterplan. The full document and Bristol Civic Society's response can be found online - just search. The development of this unique part of Bristol needs to be planned, and the proposed masterplan is a good attempt, but Bristol Civic Society thinks there are important parts that need amending, and the guidance needs to be stronger. The issues we have with the masterplan are symptomatic of how planning policy is currently being used, or not used, in Bristol. In particular the issues of density and tall buildings need to be addressed at the level of the Local Plan. Bristol Civic Society will be trying to work with partners to apply pressure, for instance to reinstate a tall buildings policy.



Illustrative heights around Fruit Market Park

Regenerating Ashton Court Mansion



Ashton Court Mansion.

Josh Nesfield reports on exciting and well-overdue plans.

Almost everyone who lives in or near Bristol has a memory of Ashton Court: the deer, the balloons going up over the ridge, a first mountain bike descent, badly judged. The park is part of the city, like the Downs or the Gorge, but the mansion at its centre, the building those avenues and vistas were designed to bring into focus, is



The Long Gallery.

BRISTOL CIVIC SOCIETY



There are plans to restore the billiards room.

one most people in the city and region have never been inside.

Ashton Court Mansion Trust, formerly Bristol Historic Buildings Trust, has put in a bid to run and regenerate the mansion. We are currently negotiating a 125-year lease from Bristol City Council, and we are inviting the city to take a stake in the building's future through a community share offer and become members of the charity that hopes to take on the regeneration of the building.

Ashton Court Mansion is Grade I listed, a sprawl of medieval, Tudor, Georgian and Victorian building that developed over three-and-a-half centuries of occupation by the Smyth family. In 1959 they sold it to Bristol Corporation, which secured the estate for the public and left the city holding a very large house it did not need.

The mansion was used, let, mothballed

and retreated from, room by room and then wing by wing, as each use proved too costly to sustain. A council with a duty to fund adult social care does not run a capital programme for a Grade I mansion that serves no statutory purpose. The market has looked, weighed a hotel or apartments, and declined: a building this size, in a public park, with public access to preserve and repairs approaching £20 million, does not stack up as a commercial proposition.

And heritage funders do not write cheques for fabric in the abstract. They want an occupier, a programme, a business plan, and security of tenure. That is the hinge: we occupy the mansion now on a provisional footing, enough to begin but not to build, and only obtaining a long lease changes that – and we believe our model is the right approach.

As a charitable community benefit society, Ashton Court Mansion Trust is a charity owned and run by its members. Membership is open and a member is not a donor who has given and gone but someone with a vote and a right to stand for the board. Every member has one vote whatever their holding. For this readership that ought to mean something: you already give your time to this city, and here is a



75 per cent of the mansion is derelict.

building where that involvement is a structural right. What Ashton Court becomes will be shaped by the people who show up to shape it.

Behind it already is a strong board. We have restoration experience that runs from the SS Great Britain to Underfall Yard and Arnos Vale. Among the trustees is a former Leader of Bristol City Council. Others bring senior experience from Arts Council England and Historic England, Triodos Bank, the Bristol Folk House, and heritage venues including Kings Weston House, along with law, finance and fundraising. All of them are Bristolians, with their own long connection to Ashton Court.

And your own connection matters now, before the lease is signed. We are launching the offer while negotiations continue, because Bristol backing this with real money is among the strongest arguments we can make for being trusted with the building. Community investment does not wait for the lease; it is part of how we win it, and it gives us the capital to run the mansion properly. We expect to launch the offer and secure the lease during 2026.

But let us be clear, we are not restoring Ashton Court Mansion in the accepted sense. As 75 per cent of the mansion is



Potential for artists' studios.



It is time to bring Ashton Court Mansion back to life.

derelict, it would be difficult to choose a specific period to restore it to. Instead, we will take each room on its own merits and bear in mind what profile best suits the needs of today. What can be restored faithfully, such as the Billiard Room, we will do, but other spaces will be more reflective of the possible uses that can be used for public benefit but also generate the income that will be necessary to preserve the house for future generations. Our community programming, build

around food, skills, heritage, culture and nature will shape not just the building uses but our activity as a charity – and we hope to have the input and support of the people of Bristol and the West of England to help make the most exclusive house in Bristol, one of the most accessible.

It is time to bring Ashton Court Mansion back to life and, with the support of the public we believe it is possible.

www.ashtoncourtmanison.org



Ashton Court Mansion. A sprawl of medieval, Tudor, Georgian and Victorian building.

www.bristolcivicsociety.org.uk

Phew, what a scorcher!

Fifty years ago, Britain experienced a summer which has since become the measure of all subsequent heatwaves. Eugene Byrne, our man with no friends to share a bath with, looks back on how the great heat of '76 affected Bristol.

Whether you were there at the time, or have read about it – or been lectured about it by old people about how bravely they coped with a bit of sunshine – there are two things people 'know' about the summer of 1976.

The first is that it was long and hot. The longest, hottest that most could remember. The second is the drought, the exhortations not to waste water or the cheeky T-shirt slogan 'Save water – bath with a friend'.

But behind those headlines there are always things that those around at the time will have forgotten or overlooked.

Nylon shirts, for instance. Lots of men wore them in the 70s; they were cheaper than cotton and easier to wash. We slept on nylon sheets, too. There was far more static electricity in the 1970s than now.

We're all talking about air conditioning now, but in the 70s no office in the land had aircon because, well, why on earth would you? Uncomfortably hot weather was rare in Britain; if it was hot, you'd just open some windows and let the men take their jackets and ties off (but not if they were dealing with the public.)

So an aunt of mine who worked in an office in central Bristol in 1976 later recalled the awful smell in the hot weather of sweating male colleagues in nylon shirts that hadn't been washed for a day or two or more.

We've also forgotten the rain dances. In the 1970s men (and a few women) who had grown up watching Westerns in the cinema and on TV carried on playing



The beach at Weston, May 1976. Before the ladybirds came ... (Bristol Post).

Cowboys and Indians into adulthood, buying the guns and the gear.

Unlike, say, the English Civil War re-enactors of the Sealed Knot, Wild West cosplayers have now mostly disappeared, but they were big in the 70s. Now, those choosing to play Native Americans would appear at shows and outdoor events to 'do a rain dance'. A man appearing at the American Museum in Bath caused a small shower, but that was it.

Everyone had known the drought was coming. Farmers and water authorities were warning about it in January. The previous summer's rainfall had been 40% below normal, and was down by nearly 50% over the winter. Bristol would only see 35% of its usual quota of rain in summer of '76.



Above left, The Plimsoll swing bridge at Cumberland Basin being hosed down by Bristol firemen because the metal had expanded in the heat. It was one of the firefighters' less onerous tasks that summer (Bristol Post). Above middle, Chew Valley Lake. Or what was left of it (Bristol Post). Above right, Fishponds Lido in the 1970s, no longer with us as it was partly built over and the rest is a private fishing lake. We could have used it this year (Bristol Post).

Kenneth Roberts, who took over as boss of Wessex Water in September 1976 said: 'We plan for a 1 in 50 risk for drought. The mathematicians tell us the odds against the weather we've had in the last 14 months are now 900 to 1.'

The sun which came out in June didn't go in again until the end of August.

Wessex Water and the Bristol Waterworks Company had banned hosepipe use for washing cars and watering gardens by April. West Dorset and most of Somerset had hosepipe bans before the end of January. Now the local and national press delighted in stories of people grassing up their neighbours for furtive horticultural

irrigation. They also made much of bitter complaints that golf clubs were still allowed to water their courses.

By the spring there were heath fires, grass fires and forest fires all over the country, and with summer the firemen (they were all men until the 1980s) were overwhelmed.

It wasn't uncommon for them to be putting in 30- and even 40-hour shifts. In Somerset alone they were dealing with 60 calls a day across the county instead of the usual 10. A fire at Stoke Leigh Forest on the edge of Bristol in June was particularly hellish as vehicles couldn't get water to the site. The men just had to beat the flames – back-breaking work in searing heat for even the fittest.

Part of the problem was caused by the 50% of the population who smoked. The National Farmers Union noted that fires were often breaking out in beauty spots where courting couples parked their cars.

'We appeal to these couples to cool it,' said a spokesman. If people were having what he euphemistically called a 'goodnight smoke' they should not throw matches or cigarette ends out of their car windows.

The sun which came out in June didn't go in again until the end of August, though the hottest spell locally was from late June to late July when the daytime temperature never dropped below 21 degrees and often exceeded 30. The highest temperature locally was recorded at Filton – 33.8 degrees – on July 2.

(This figure has been exceeded several times in more recent years.)

For many, of course, it was brilliant. Everyone could poke fun at friends and workmates who'd booked holidays in Spain. Seaside resorts did a roaring trade, though this was interrupted

in early July by Biblical plagues of ladybirds swarming at places like Burnham-on-Sea and Weston-super-Mare. At the latter, there were a few days when no-one wanted to pay the 15p to hire a deckchair for the day because the piles of chairs were covered in an inches-thick crust of ladybirds.

Youngsters spent the school holidays trying to get a suntan (and more usually getting sunburnt) as they sat in gardens, the Downs or at the Fishponds Lido, accompanied by transistor radios playing the hits of the day.

(Things like Don't Go Breaking My Heart by Elton John and Kiki Dee, A Little Bit More by Dr. Hook and Dancing Queen by ABBA, since you ask.)

Ice cream and soft drink factories introduced night shifts and the pubs were packed – or rather they weren't as there was a curious new trend for standing outside the pub drinking on the pavement. Very un-British.

Pleasant though it was for most, Britain saw an estimated 3,000 excess deaths due to the heat. By late August the water situation was critical and Prime Minister James Callaghan appointed Denis Howell 'Minister for Drought'.

Though he was known as 'Minister of Sport', Howell was already the Environment Department minister responsible for the water industry. He was well on top of his brief, having helped pilot emergency legislation

through the Commons. He and his staff now drew up plans to divert rivers, hire Milk Marketing Board tankers to transport water and, above all, to start installing standpipes.

By then, water was being cut off altogether for all but a few hours of the day in South Wales, but standpipes would go one stage further.

In an affected area, water supplies to homes would be cut off completely and residents would collect

water from the pipes in the streets. The prospect of having to lug buckets of water even a few yards would cause everyone to think twice about how much they used.

In the end, standpipes were only used in a few places, and not in Bristol, though appeals to save water and the threat of standpipes carried on well after the school holidays

ended and after the rains started. It was going to take a hell of a lot of rain to replenish the reservoirs.

Which is what we got. In September and October Bristol had over 14 inches of rain, more than in the previous 18 months put together.

And everything returned to normal. Until a few years ago.

P.S. *Where's My Money?* by Mike Manson, who may be related to the editor of this magazine, is set in a Bristol dole office in the summer of 1976, and has widely – and rightly – been praised as one of the best novels to come out of Bristol in recent decades. Also, it's funny.



Wessex Water's "Hosepipe Patrol" van, on the prowl for suspiciously green lawns, though some people enjoyed dobbling in their neighbours (Wessex Water Archive).



Back in the eighteenth century Bristol's mild climate and clean air was used as a draw for visitors to the Hot Well. In 1793 William Matthews in his *Bristol Guide* noted that:

Bristol... stands in a most delightful and healthy Country, and is surrounded with numerous verdant hills, some of moderate, others of towering height, particularly to the north, which defend it from the cold winds and render its situation very warm and comfortable.

Matthews went on to say that Bristol's air:

...is well known and experienced to be undeniably and notably salubrious. Its soil is dry; and the damps of some moist countries and atmospheres are here unknown.

Indeed, Bristol's climate was so salubrious Matthews warned:

Some invalids of Bristol whom business or curiosity have led to London, have soon found themselves worse than before, and (been) obliged to make a hasty retreat to their native air.

But Matthews wasn't giving the whole picture with regard to the purity of the air. In 1739, the poet Alexander Pope (1677-1744) commented that his first impression of Bristol was of 'twenty odd pyramids smoking over the town'. These tall brick cones, many over sixty feet high, were used for the production of pottery and glass. The smoke from these industries, along with fumes from the sugar boilers, soap makers, tallow chandlers, foundries and many other industries meant that Bristol's air was far from wholesome. When the dilettante Horace Walpole (1717-97) visited in 1766 he said the city was 'the dirtiest great

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It is no coincidence that the wealthier classes preferred to live in Clifton.

The air that we breathe

Recent findings in London have shown that children's lungs grew bigger and stronger after the most polluting vehicles were restricted from entering the capital. Mike Manson gives a historical perspective to air pollution in Bristol.

shop I ever saw'. The editors of Daniel Defoe's *A tour through the island of Great Britain* (1779) wrote: 'on account of the trades that require large fires...there is generally a thick cloud of smoke over the city'.

It is no coincidence that the wealthier classes preferred to live in Clifton, on the western side of the city, where they could breathe the untainted air from the

prevailing westerly winds.

The air quality for those living and working near the docks was further degraded with the building of the floating harbour. By 1815, even Matthews was warning that:

'...in the summer season particularly, the water acquires a dark unpleasant surface; and where it is most subject to the reception of drains emits a rather offensive smell.'

It wasn't just the emissions from factories and workshops that polluted the atmosphere. Until the 1950s local coal was used for nearly all domestic heating. A constant stench of coal fires hung in the air and clung to buildings. One has only to look at old photographs of Bristol to see how the city was blackened by smoke. Even on sunny days visibility was poor.

Despite all this, at the beginning of the twentieth century Bristol's air was certainly cleaner than London's.

'The Climate of Bristol is mild and the hygrometric state of the atmosphere is generally high; in winter it is rarely subject to extreme colds, or in summer to extreme heats. The air in the lower parts of the city is soft and relaxing rather than bracing; but, as the city lies on so many different levels and so many soils, no general description will apply to the whole....

The air on the higher levels is very pure and bracing, and readily shows the presence of ozone on the application of the proper test. It is exceedingly well adapted for the invalid, who can here choose the climate most suitable to their constitutions. Those who require a soft mild atmosphere have for their selection the lower and sheltered slopes, and those who require highly ionised and bracing air, fresh from the Bristol Channel can get all they desire on Clifton, Durdham Down and Redland.

Dictionary of Bristol, Arrowsmith, 1906

It is worth noting the

Dictionary of Bristol didn't mention the air pollution to the east of the city. A report of 1895 on the air quality at Crew's Hole, the centre of Bristol's chemicals industries, made alarming reading. Here, twenty chimneys poured out a noxious cocktail of acid-rain-forming-vapours from the tar, alkali, ammonia and brick works.

Nationally, the turning point for air pollution was the great London smog of December 1952. The smog, a mix of smoke and fog, brought the capital to a halt for four days. It was so dense you could not see across the road. Smog was not just a nuisance, it was deadly. It is estimated that over 4,000 people died of respiratory disease directly related to this pollution. Following this, the Clean Air Act (1956) was introduced. The Clean Air Act prohibited 'dark smoke' from chimneys and did much to improve air quality. The increasing use of oil and natural gas in the 1960s also enabled a switch to cleaner fuel.

Today air pollution is more insidious. We may have stopped soot and sulphur dioxide belching out of chimneys but with an estimated 500,000 car movements (in the 2020s) in and out of the city every day, it is carbon omissions that we need to tackle. This is not a new problem. Bristol City Council declared an Air Quality Management Area in 2001.

Bristol was one of several areas in the UK with illegal levels of air pollution. A study in 2019 revealed five people died each week in Bristol as a result of high levels of air pollution.¹

Marvin Rees, the then Bristol mayor, said: 'We have a moral, ecological and legal duty to clean up the air we breathe. This research emphasises how vital it is that we act quickly to improve health and save lives in Bristol.'



Crews Hole. Twenty chimneys poured out a noxious cocktail of acid-rain-forming-vapours from the tar, alkali, ammonia and brick works.

Bristol's Clean Air Zone was launched in November 2022. The City Council checks air quality and has a network of automatic monitoring stations around the city. Despite major objections that local businesses would suffer and the daily fares would disproportionality burden vulnerable residents, after just one year the scheme, with regards to air pollution, was hailed as a success.

On average, annual nitrous oxide concentrations fell by 13.2% between 2022 and 2023. 2024 monitoring data shows that nitrous oxide concentrations

have continued to fall when compared to 2023. However, five monitoring sites were still above the legal objective for nitrogen dioxide in 2024. There were also pockets of increase where drivers had seemingly re-routed their journeys to avoid the Clean Air Zone.

Air pollution continues to be regarded as a top public health threat. Watching the weather and monitoring air quality is as important as ever as we gauge the long-term damage we are doing to ourselves and our planet.



An estimated 500,000 car movements (in the 2020s) in and out of the city every day.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/18/air-pollution-kills-bristol-health>.

Fifty years of Windmill Hill City Farm

Windmill Hill City Farm celebrates its 50th birthday this year, having taken a patch of derelict land the Council wanted to use as a lorry park and turned it into a much-valued community asset, and mostly thanks to a lot of unpaid and often back-breaking work. *Eugene Byrne* looks into the story.

It all started with a community organisation calling itself the Windmill Hill Dustbin Group, people fed up with the state of their neighbourhood in the 1970s.

The Blitz hadn't done Bedminster any favours, and the stop-start nature of post-war planning and regeneration, plus economic changes, left abandoned buildings which were quickly

vandalised and sites where houses had been demolished but were still awaiting the builders.

The 4.5-acre site of what is now the Windmill Hill City Farm was a patch of wasteland next to Whitehouse Lane with a few abandoned structures on it. In the mid-1970s the Council planners thought it would be a good place for a lorry park.

The Dustbin Group had other ideas. A public meeting at the Bristol University Settlement at Barton Hill in May 1976

looked at how it could become a city farm. Plans were made, meetings were held and in September a big community event on the site started work on what would become only the second city farm in the country.

The first had opened at Kentish Town in London in 1972, inspired by a similar scheme in the Netherlands. A major part of the idea was that urban children should learn more about where their food came from and how it was produced. Being able to get up close to goats and chickens or see how carrots were grown was soon augmented by other facilities for children – particularly playschemes – and the community. In the 70s the Londoners also made much of the way that work on the farm, paid or otherwise, was a useful way of diverting the local youth away from crime and vandalism.



A patch of wasteland in the 1970s (Windmill Hill City Farm).

The Windmill Hill scheme had a lot of local support, and by the spring of 1977 Bristol City Council approved it for an initial trial period of five years, with a warning that city planners might have other uses for the site in the future.

One of the early prime movers in the scheme was local schoolteacher Mike Primarolo (whose partner Dawn Primarolo was the project secretary for a while and would later become a local MP), who pointed out that if the Council were to use its own resources



"There could be a duck pond here" ... (Windmill Hill City Farm)

to create the farm it would cost around £1m whereas doing it with mostly volunteer work from the community the cost would be a mere £30,000.

Not, of course, that the Council had either the money or the intention of building a city farm there or anywhere else. A Tory councillor from the other end of town who didn't have to worry about the voters pointed out that this was a very valuable site which could be used for industrial development or housing.

Volunteers and youngsters on various job-creation schemes put in the work to clear the remnants of what had previously been densely populated



The famous "Rumpus Room", 1980s (Windmill Hill City Farm).

terraced streets to create a green space where fruit and veg could be grown and where children could meet animals – to begin with a pony called Willum, a donkey called Eyeore and assorted rabbits, ducks and chickens.

Naturally money was short, but the farm had some helpful supporters. Famously the local businessman and philanthropist John James made generous donations in return for an annual payment of a single cabbage, grown on the site where his own childhood home had once stood.

And the rest you kind of know if you're a longstanding Bristol resident. It might well be that aside from the animals, the one thing many will remember about visiting is the famous "rumpus room", a foam-rubber-coated space in which kids could burn off surplus energy which opened in the early 1980s.

The Council gave the farm permission to remain for good well before its five-year trial period expired, and today there's much more besides – a nursery, five-a-side pitch, café, farm shop, spaces for hire and there's even a sauna. There are performances and music, summer playschemes, art workshops...

"The farm has had a big impact on its neighbourhood and many people would see it as a key part of this area's identity – it embodies that 'sense of community' that so many local people like about the neighbourhood," says Steve Sayers, the farm's Chief Executive.

Where Windmill Hill led, others followed. St Werburghs City Farm (swcityfarm.co.uk) came along in 1980 and though it has an almost identical role to that of Windmill Hill it

followed a distinctive path of its own. And no one who ever visited its café after it opened in 1985 can forget the astonishing swirly wooden architecture which came courtesy of the Bristol Gnomes and the late, brilliant Graham Caine, a man described as "Gaudí with a chainsaw."

Hartcliffe City Farm (hartcliffecityfarm.org.uk) followed in 1982 as an initiative that was more focused on providing job opportunities and work experience for

The farm has had a big impact on its neighbourhood and many people would see it as a key part of this area's identity.

the local youth. It's probably fair to say that it experienced more problems than the others. It shut down in 2020 but is now back in business once more and aside from its food and farming role it places a lot of emphasis on promoting the mental and physical well-being of the community.

Lawrence Weston Community Farm (lwfarm.org.uk) was opened by the Lord Mayor in 1988 and since then Bristol has seen a number of other "urban farming" initiatives, such as Elm Tree Farm in Stapleton (www.facebook.com/ElmTreeFarmBristol) which is supported by learning disability charity the Brandon Trust. There's also Bramble Farm (www.facebook.com/bramblefarmbristol) in Knowle, run by a community collective. You might even include the Street Goat (streetgoat.co.uk) urban goat farming group in the mix.

"The environment and food networks, particularly in Bristol, are strong and very varied today and we play our role



"And that's how we turn sheep into clothes..." in those as well as those on other social issues,' says Steve Sayers.

'Each farm responds to its own community and so will take its own path – which I think means there's less of a sense of shared identity.'

Times change and move on. At Windmill Hill there are plans to bring the former Victoria Park park-keeper's lodge into community use, and obviously everyone's wondering about the weather. 'Climate change mitigation is a big issue. We'll keep up the work to reduce the carbon emissions of the farm and try to help people around us do the same,' says Steve.

'We can all see the difference that's happening around us. We've got about 180 trees on site, which helps keep the place cool in summer. We're changing the plants we grow to ones that cope better with drought. We're getting more solar panels installed and will probably have to hook them up to some air conditioning in the next few years. This list of changes goes on.'

For all that, he thinks the founders of the farm 50 years ago would find the place quite familiar.

"The farm came into existence as a means of bringing some countryside and greenery into a very urban world. It was about connecting people to food, farming and the environment and had a deep social heart rooted in its community and their needs.'

'All that is true of the farm today – the place feels just as needed now as it was in the 70s.'

For more on Windmill Hill City Farm, see windmillhillcityfarm.org.uk



Dave Beasant, one of the early movers behind the farm, with young volunteers, 1977 (Bristol Post).

A time capsule beneath the Old City

Amateur historian and artist Duncan McKellar, reveals an extraordinary survival of Bristol's wartime past.

In the heart of Bristol's Old Town, beneath the lively stalls of St Nicholas Market, lies one of the city's most remarkable and least-known historic spaces: a fully preserved Second World War air raid shelter. Hidden for decades beneath the 1743 Corn Exchange, the shelter has been painstakingly restored over the past four years.

The shelter, capable of holding 200 people, occupies the original eighteenth century cellars. In the late 1930s, as the threat of aerial bombardment grew, Bristol's City Engineers Department reinforced the vaults with armour brickwork, steel blast doors and



McKellar hopes to secure funding to establish the shelter as a permanent heritage asset for Bristol.

ventilation shafts. These modifications – along with original signage, coat hooks, and even pencil drawings which were produced during the Blitz – make this one of the best-preserved WW2 air raid shelters in the country.

Rediscovery and Restoration:

Although structurally intact, the shelter lay largely forgotten until McKellar began clearing debris and restoring the rooms to their wartime appearance. His work has been widely noted in local and national media, with The Times, The Independent, Bristol World, Bristol24/7 and 365Bristol all highlighting the exceptional preservation and immersive quality of the tours.

One of the most striking discoveries is a pencil portrait of Hollywood actress Myrna Loy, drawn by a member of the public during a raid – a poignant reminder of the humanity and creativity that persisted even in moments of fear.

Since opening to the public in 2022, more than 10,000 visitors – including school groups, families and history enthusiasts – have explored the shelter. McKellar and his colleagues conduct tours dressed as a wartime air raid warden, blending rigorous historical detail, local accounts and vivid storytelling to bring the Bristol Blitz to life.



Far left, One of the best-preserved WW2 air raid shelters in the country.

Left, The shelter was capable of holding 200 people.

A Growing Collection of Bristol's Wartime Artefacts:

Beyond the shelter itself, McKellar has transformed the former City Valuer's Bar into a dedicated exhibition space. This atmospheric room now houses an extensive display of wartime artefacts, many of them specific to Bristol's experience of the Blitz.

Highlights include:

- A hand-painted ARP sign directing citizens to alternative shelters
- A section of a Messerschmitt shot down over Bristol
- Civil Defence and ARP equipment, including rattles, gas masks and medical supplies
- Replica incendiary bombs illustrating the destructive power of Luftwaffe raids

These objects help contextualise the shelter within the wider story of Bristol's wartime devastation – particularly the night of 24 November 1940, when the Old City was engulfed in flames and thousands sought refuge underground.

Towards a Permanent Heritage Space

McKellar now hopes to secure funding to establish the shelter as a permanent heritage asset for Bristol. His plans include a new D-Day exhibition exploring the presence of U.S. forces in the city and the enforced segregation imposed on Bristol during the build up to the Normandy landings – a lesser-known but vital chapter in Bristol's wartime social history.

Visiting the Shelter:

The WW2 Air Raid Shelter Tour runs weekly, Wednesday to Saturday, offering an atmospheric and deeply moving journey into Bristol's wartime past.

Tickets can be booked at: www.bristolguided.com

More information on the tours can be found at: <https://bristolguided.com/tours/ww2-air-raid-shelter-tour/>

Proposed 28 storey development at Cabot Gate



Cabot Gate

Timna Lyons questions the architectural language of the proposed 28 storey Cabot Gate development.

Despite vociferous local opposition, Bristol City Council has granted outline approval for a 28-storey block of student housing at 'Cabot Gate' (currently the Enterprise rental car park between Newfoundland Road and the Cabot Circus car park). The development exemplifies the uneasy relationship between public and private sector priorities, in which citizens are sold a dream of privately funded regeneration, but often lose out through the privatisation of public space.

Hammerson unabashedly describe the Cabot Gate project as the result of its 'strategy to maximise value from strategic landholdings,' which are extensive – they own and manage Cabot Circus.

Hammerson – who have retail developments across the UK, Ireland and France – make the Cabot Gate proposal sounds practically altruistic. It will, they promise, foster community: Hammerson have 'already had really positive exploratory discussions'

with a local group about leasing 'a possible' community space. It will also be beautiful: the buildings 'rich architectural culture' will make it 'create a distinctive and memorable arrival point in the city.'

Hammerson also claim to be providing something truly profound: a welcome addition to our common project of creating people-centred cityscapes – an 'attractive and welcoming public realm with places to sit and dwell,' with 'extensive planting,' the project will 'enhance quality, connectivity and sustainability.'¹

Citizens are sold a dream of privately funded regeneration, but often lose out through the privatisation of public space.

Yet the proposal has been panned by local groups as 'lazy' and 'cynical', 'a warren for students with non-opening windows', whose architectural language is 'fictitious and wrong' and which will 'blight surrounding public spaces ... and impact negatively on the setting of historic buildings.'²

Planning permission for this kind of development is contingent on satisfying planners that the development will contribute to the improvement of the public realm. Cabot Gate's outline approval (April

2026) includes such a 'commitment to the applicant to undertake... public realm improvements.'³ Thus, one of Hammerson's offers is a 'much more pedestrian-friendly crossing' across the vehicular access to the Cabot Circus car park. To their car park. Which they originally designed.

I crossed it when I went to visit the site and I can confirm – pretty unfriendly.

It frequently seems that the dream of a humane and sparkling public realm is oversold by developers and complicit, cash-strapped planning authorities. For example, the Bristol City Council permission depressingly states that 'public art installations should be included in the landscaping'.

All this is a fig leaf for the extraction of profit from our communities, and for citizens, it comes with a loss of control and significant sacrifices in terms of the developments' fundamental priorities, which are profits, not people.

Hammerson boast that their retail spaces support nearly 4,000 jobs with an estimated annual wage bill close to £80 million. According to UK managing director Mark Bourgeois, Hammerson 'look forward to furthering our investment in the city centre to support local jobs, develop skills for the next generation and generate financial benefits for the local and national economy'.⁴ I couldn't find any evidence of training opportunities offered by Hammerson, apart from reference to the annual Cabot Circus jobs fair promoting its retail and hospitality jobs.

When Hammerson built the £520million Cabot Circus (opened in 2008), less than 10% of the attached residential units were earmarked for social housing.

The fiction of globalised industrial construction is that we are all winners: our public realm is improved by developers in exchange for the profit they extract from our communities. For all that Hammerson promise at Cabot Gate, Bristolians should stop to consider what will really be gained, and by whom.

Timna Lyons is a former Maths, Politics and Sociology teacher. She is now training to become an architect.

¹ <https://www.hammerson.com/news/press-releases/hammerson-secures-planning-green-light-600-student-units-bristol> accessed 17-06-26

² BCC Planning Committee A, Item 3, 25/14053/P, 22-04-26, from p.8;

quotes from Kingstown Conservation Group, Bristol Conservation

Advisory Panel, Bristol Civic Society, English Heritage

³ BCC Planning Committee A, Item 3, 25/14053/P, 22-04-26

⁴ <https://www.hammerson.com/news-insights/press-releases/cabot-circus-contributes-ps114m-income-tax-over-10-years> accessed 17-06-26



Left, Bert Abrams. They even named a street after him.

can accept fixing rods drilled into it upon which a plaque can be screwed.

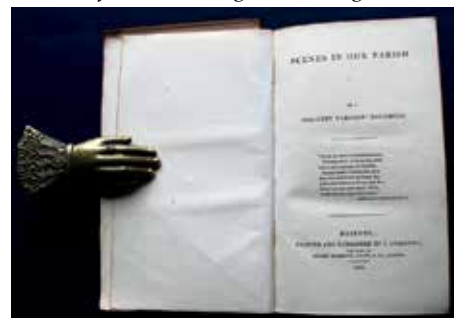
Elizabeth Holmes, née Emra was a parson's daughter who lived in the parsonage attached to St George's church in the suburb of the same name. Trouble is, the building has been replaced by a block of flats. Affixing a plaque on a modern replacement building dilutes the potency and would require a qualification in its wording –

'lived in a building which stood on this site' is weak. Solution: next to the vicarage site is a pedestrian through-route, Harveys Lane. *Know Your Place Bristol*

informed us that there was one building there in 1830 which is still here today – Elizabeth would have been familiar with it. A contemporaneous brick-built structure – that'll do, we agreed.

Elizabeth wrote about what life was like for those living in St George in 1830. She was far wealthier than her neighbours but she wrote with

Below, Elizabeth Emra wrote about what life was like for those living in St George in 1830.



The Lord Mayor, descendants Richard Emra and Geoffrey Emra, and Rob and Susan Acton Campbell of the Friends of Trooper's Hill history group.

Making a connection

Gordon Young describes how plaques link notable individuals with appropriate buildings.

Plaques are potent. They speak directly of a life lived behind a façade. There's no comparison between them and statues, because three-dimensional figures are free-standing ornaments.

Let's take that one in Queen Square as an example. William III on his horse, all toggled up in Roman tunic, the two of them looking like they're in a dressage competition. It's been called the finest equestrian statue in the country. But does it connect the king with our city? Our Bill never set foot in the place, although he did once stay the night nearby, in what was then Gloucestershire, at Kingsweston House. He and his horse are nothing more than a handsome garden ornament, that's all.

Plaques are like buses: we had no unveilings last year and then in January two came along at once. Both were well deserved but they each suffered from not having a residence linking them with their subjects. Well, if William III (and steed) can blag their way into our grand Georgian square then rest assured, gentle reader, your Panel can find something which is associated with the plaque subject. A sturdy edifice that

sensitivity about their plight. She also used a literary technique later adopted by Charlotte Brontë – the term 'gentle reader', and you'll see I've already adopted it, too. Elizabeth, Charlotte and I like to connect with our readers . . .

The other plaque was in Knowle. It's a big suburb and already has three plaques: on a block of flats which occupies the site of the Gaiety cinema and one for the etcher and painter, Robin Tanner. On the other side of Wells Road, one honours Ben Tillett, a past president of the TUC. But they're all in 'old' Knowle. This one is in Knowle West, a 1930s council estate, for those families relocated as a result of clearance of inner-city slums in Bristol.

Our plaque honours Bert Abrams, a local councillor. He described his ward: "There was no library, no park – the streets were all the kids had to play in. That's why I stood for the council in 1956, to fight for them." He founded youth clubs and ran them for an impressive 52 years. His reward was an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list 1976 and the enduring appreciation of locals, some of whom spoke passionately at the unveiling about Bert's encouragement and support for them when young.

Broad Plain House youth club was demolished and its site, together with the playing field behind, was sold to developers Curo Group. They created a street lengthways with pillars framing the entrance: the ideal place for our plaque. And for added impact, they even named the street after him!

From a Bristol boarding school to leading the world's most populous democracy

Gordon Young recounts how the reputation of Indira Gandhi continues to be argued over to this day.

In 2019 we erected a plaque to mark a famous novelist's time at Badminton School. We were delighted when they approached us again – this time for a plaque to honour a pupil who had briefly attended Badminton and went on to become a prominent political figure on the world stage. She won three elections, and her name endures. The world's largest university and India's largest airport are named after her: Mrs Indira Gandhi.

The Panel has considerable experience at evaluating applications. I regard us as combat-tested, battle-hardened

foot soldiers in the commemorative plaques arena, skilled at performing due diligence and distilling the essence of candidates' achievements. Researching a leader of the world's largest democracy was easy; accolades abound: she was voted the greatest woman of the last millennium in a BBC News Online poll. *Time* magazine called her 'charismatic and ruthless' and one of 100 influential women who defined the last century. And Somerville College, Oxford and the wider university offer scholarships in Mrs Gandhi's name



A civic celebrities' selfie.

for Indian students (she attended Badminton for a short time to prepare for the Oxford entrance exam).

We contacted the Avon Indian Community Association and were impressed by their website mission statement:

AICA is a charity organisation which endeavours to provide a platform for promoting social cohesiveness for people of Indian origins and the wider community. AICA contributes to society's well-being by creating better understanding and awareness of Indian culture, heritage and values.

They supported the commemoration and in due course attended the unveiling.

So, it's entirely appropriate for Badminton school to acknowledge her.

But before the event we received an objection.

Now, in 1984 Mrs Gandhi ordered a military assault on the Golden Temple complex in Amritsar – Sikhism's holiest shrine. Her aim was to remove armed militants, but

the operation resulted in devastating casualties, extensive damage to the complex, and ultimately led to her

assassination (by her Sikh bodyguards). It was this aspect of her premiership that prompted the criticism.

The objector claimed that Mrs Gandhi's time at the school was too brief to justify recording: "There is no evidence that she made any contribution to the school or that her later actions were shaped in any way by that association". Well, as the headmistress, Mrs Jessica Miles informed us at the unveiling: "Mrs Gandhi maintained

a long-standing personal connection with the school through her friendship with the then Headmistress, a relationship that continued for many years after her time as a pupil. This association forms part of the school's heritage and is recognised alongside many others who have contributed to its history." Our Panel considered that "her later actions" – leading her country – must have been shaped by her education and she would not have passed the Oxford exam without Badminton's preparation: the fact that she failed the first time shows that she was not admitted because of family connections.

On occasions, the Panel refers to English Heritage to consider their views. They initially rejected a plaque for Ezra Pound because of his involvement with fascism and support for Hitler and Mussolini. Then they decided that despite the "major stain on his character . . . his significance as a major poet of the last century was sufficient to justify commemoration". History – a real perspective on the past – is never simple: very few people are only good or all bad. Our plaques commemorate, they do not approve or adulate – and if we are to learn from history, we have to be reminded about it, engage in discussion, and arm ourselves against monochrome judgement.

Blue plaques? I'll take two, please . . .

A grand Georgian mansion close to Shirehampton with a long and distinguished history of providing medical facilities to our city. *Gordon Young explains . . .*

Dr Richard and Miss Sarah Anne Bright

The location: Ham Green House, Pill. The occasion: our 47th and 48th plaque unveilings, a celebration of the house, its historical functions and past residents.

First, Dr Richard Bright – a distinguished renal surgeon. He had served as Brunel's doctor and as Physician Extraordinary to Queen Victoria. And he's an eponym – he is remembered in perpetuity as he gave his surname to a discovery. I thought – he invented a kidney disease! But no, he didn't – he identified one. Chronic nephritis had always been there, he was the first person to recognise it.

Now let's consider Richard's sister, Sarah Anne Bright. Their father,



Richard Bright Snr, was an enthusiastic amateur scientist who fostered a lively culture of inquiry. While Sarah's brothers attended boarding schools, she received her early education at home, instructed in reading and writing, was taught at least one foreign language, and trained in sewing, dancing, singing and painting. Her father's scientific outlook encouraged all his children to

develop keen powers of observation, particularly his daughters. Sarah became an accomplished artist and experimented with the new science of photography. She produced the earliest surviving photograph taken by a woman.

This plaque took us beyond the city, into North Somerset. Our original intention was to replace a plaque honouring the doctor on the house in which he was born, in Queen Square. It disappeared some years ago during the building's renovation. We encountered difficulties when we tried to replace it. Richard Bright's family moved to Ham Green House when he was just one year old, so the house where he spent the rest of his childhood was a strong candidate for a new plaque.

Ham Green House and Penny Brohn

The house has continued to contribute to the health of our city. In 1894, in response to outbreaks of smallpox and typhoid, Bristol Corporation purchased the property and converted it into an isolation hospital, allowing patients to be treated outside the city. Until then, isolation facilities had been provided by the hospital ship *Margareda*, which was berthed in the harbour.

Ham Green Hospital was expanded with a sanatorium in the 1930s, providing convalescent care for people after treatment. Then it became an NHS acute hospital, eventually administered as part of the Southmead Group. During the 1970s, it provided care for chronically ill children and became the regional centre for the treatment of infectious and exotic diseases.

Today, Ham Green House, its buildings and grounds are home to Penny Brohn



UK, a charity operating a wellbeing and holistic treatment centre that has assisted thousands of people with cancer. It focuses on helping people to "live well with cancer", supporting them to develop physical and emotional resilience following diagnosis.

Penny Brohn co-founded the charity, originally established as the Bristol Cancer Help Centre in 1983. She lived with cancer for twenty years and she inspired people to overcome their fear by helping change perceptions of the disease.

As Prince of Wales, His Majesty King Charles III became Patron of Penny Brohn UK in 1980. At the unveiling, Penny Brohn UK's CEO Andrew Hufford read a letter from the King:

"His Majesty was most interested to learn of this special occasion, which will celebrate the history of your headquarters and honour the remarkable contributions of Dr Richard Bright, Ham Green Isolation Hospital and Penny Brohn

herself. The King sends his warmest good wishes for a successful and memorable event and hopes that the unveiling will serve as a fitting tribute to those whose vision, dedication and achievements continue to inspire and support so many people affected by cancer."



A magnificence of civic dignitaries The Rt Hon Lord Mayor of Bristol, Cllr Yassin Muhamud; The Lord-Lieutenant of Somerset, Mohammed Saddiq; the Lord-Lieutenant Peaches Golding.



There have been plans for Ashton Court Mansion's restoration for over fifty years.

Letter to the Editor

Ashton Court Mansion and Norman Routledge.

'An appreciation of Norman Routledge', Simon Birch's piece (*Better Bristol*, Issue 28) was most welcome, but the history of the long fight to save the mansion deserves further explanation.

In 1969, a half century ago, The Bristol Society of Architects decided that Ashton Court mansion needed saving and proposed a Ball to publicise its plight – which was cancelled due to the building's poor condition. The ensuing public outcry led Bristol City Council (BCC) to hold an architectural competition, won by local architects Whicheloe Macfarlane, who restored the roof and part of the mansion, but which BCC never found the money to complete.

Meanwhile the architect's Ball was successfully swapped to Kings Weston House, also empty and at serious risk of loss, but saved through architectural contacts to become a Police training college for a while and eventually privately restored by the amazing Norman Routledge. I say amazing, since for a private citizen to take on

a Grade I listed mansion by Sir John Vanbrugh, a nationally important architect, is so rare as to be almost impossible!

Meanwhile Bristol Civic Society continued to try and encourage the restoration of Ashton Court and a joint committee with Bristol City Council was established and pursued, in often negative circumstances, for

"There are few people as amazingly successful as Norman Routledge but without Bristol Civic Society determination and continuous pressure, over 50 years, the mansion might already have been lost."

the next 50 years. When *Simon Birch* became chairman of Bristol Civic Society he took on the Ashton Court joint committee, organising publicity, attracting Norman Routledge, with whom he had worked successfully on saving of the church of St Michael on the Mount Without.

Bristol City Council had commissioned several studies of the building, its potential uses and cost to restore over

many years, at great expense, but with no money or political pressure, had absolutely no results. Norman Routledge could show BCC two very important Bristol buildings that he had privately and successfully restored and that he had now established a Trust capable of restoring Ashton Court, which seems to have done the trick and an agreement had been signed.

I have much information about the 50 year history of Bristol City Council's and Bristol Civic Society's fruitless negotiations and Norman arranged to meet me, but was too ill – he died the next day. Sadly, I never met him, but the agreement with Bristol City Council was already made, his team was ready and, again astonishingly, work began on site at once. By the time you read this it must be well forward and I hope we shall hear more (See pages 12 and 13).

There are few people as amazingly successful as Norman Routledge but without Bristol Civic Society determination and continuous pressure, over 50 years, the mansion might already have been lost.

Peter Floyd

Book Reviews

Mike Manson reads some Bristol Books.

Banksy – Archive 01 The School of Bristol 1983 - 2005

Edited by Stefano Antonelli and Gianluca Marziani

ISBN 978-88-3340-601-5

This massive 336 page tome is the catalogue for an exhibition currently being held in Bologna, Italy. The exhibition gives a social context to the arts scene that quietly exploded in Bristol 1983 - 2003. Of course, it's not just Banksy. They may have started-out as graffiti rebels but a number of Banksy's fellow Bristol artists are now also internationally known.

Many familiar local faces have contributed to the catalogue: Felix Braun, Chris Chalkley, Paul Gough, Richard Jones, John Nation and Steve Wright. It has even been authorised by Banksy's quality control people, Pest Control.



Whether you like it or not, street art and related activities have put Bristol on the map. As I was driving through Stokes Croft the other day I spotted at least three groups of school children on Street Art Tours. Curated properly street art can be a wondrous thing. Check-out Bedminster during Upfest, and after. It's surprising (or maybe not!) that it's taken two Italian

academics to contextualise what has become an internationally known phenomenon. I know we had the Banksy exhibition at City Museum and Art Gallery in 2009, but that was 17 years ago. Time for another one? Otherwise I hear the historic city of Bologna is worth a visit. But hurry, exhibition closes 18 October 2026.



Bristol Green Walks Sue Cullimore

Bristol Books

£14.00

Another attractive publication from Bristol Books. Did you know that according to a report by the Ordnance Survey, Bristol ranks 3rd of all British cities by percentage of green space, at about 24% of its land area? Gloriously illustrated, Bristol Green Walks describes 12 walks that have been deliberately designed to be relatively easy to undertake.

Keen walkers will be familiar with most of these perambulations –

though Stockwood Open Space and Whitchurch Way Walk were new to me.

Each walk has an introductory section giving practical information such as length, walking surface, parking and public transport. Most people want a refreshment and loo stop; families with kids appreciate a playground, and lots of us like a rest on a bench or to sit at a picnic table. Where possible, these are noted in the walk description. Each walk has a simplified route map with numbered location points linking up with the text. Sue Cullimore says you don't need to travel deep into the countryside to experience green walks; Bristol has plenty of good walking opportunities right here in the city.

Bristol Civic Society membership

Your Civic Society needs YOU!

Bristol Civic Society is more than 100 years old. It is a non-party-political body which campaigns for what is best for our city. Joining the Society is inexpensive and it is open to all. The bigger and more diverse our membership, the stronger we can be.

As a Society member you're also on the invitation list to a range of events and benefits, from serious campaigning through to expert talks and social evenings and outings.

Bristol Civic Society is:

- * Saving the best of Bristol's past
- * A powerful voice in Bristol's future
- * Campaigning on issues that affect us all - and the generations to come
- * A great way to make new friends (and maybe re-connect with old ones!)

Find out more about the Society and its work at bristolcivicsociety.org.uk



Joining is easy

There are three ways to apply. You can do it via the website: bristolcivicsociety.org.uk/get-involved/join-the-society where you can join using PayPal, or download an application form. Or fill out, cut out or photocopy, and return the form below.

Have you considered leaving something to the Bristol Civic Society in your will?

Membership application to join Bristol Civic Society

Membership (Annual)	Rate	✓
Individual	£20	
Joint living at the same address	£30	
Student	£10	

Please return to: Membership Secretary, Bristol Civic Society, 17 Bathurst Parade, Bristol, BS1 6UB.
Cheques, if not made by standing order, made payable to Bristol Civic Society.
Enquiries: Tel: 0117 927 6991.
Email: membership@bristolcivicsociety.org.uk

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Events

Autumn / Winter 2026



Above, Autumn in St Andrews Park.

Reflecting Bristol's history and heritage. We will be adding a mixture of events and visits Also talks and discussions confronting the difficult social and economic issues facing the city.



SEPT
Tues 22 Sept, 6.30pm:
Old Fire Station, Silver St.
A workshop/discussion session for members on the future of the City Centre.

Thurs 24 Sept, 10.30am: The St George Bowls and Social Club. A visit to find out more about this community-led regeneration of the old bowls club as a social hub.

Tues 29 Sept, 7.30pm: Apostle Room (Clifton Cathedral). 'The TV and Film Industry in Bristol'. A talk by *Katherine Nash*, Head of the Bristol Film Office and the Bottle Yard studios.



OCT
Sun 4 Oct, 10.00am: 'Pirates and Prejudice'; a walk led by *Mark Steeds*. Starts at M Shed.

Tues 13 Oct, 7.30pm: Apostle Room, Clifton Cathedral. '20th/21st century architecture in Bristol'. A talk by *Andrew Eberlin*, of the Modernist Society.



NOV
Mon 16 Nov, 7.30 pm:
Apostle Room, Clifton Cathedral. 'All Things Allotments'. A talk by *Ruth Hecht* of the Bristol Allotments Forum.



FEB
Weds 24 Feb, 7.30 pm: venue to be arranged: AGM.

Also in planning for the autumn: a follow-up event to the 22 September workshop on the City Centre, involving invited speakers; an event, probably on Zoom, on developments at Ashton Court Mansion; and a further Zoom discussion on tall buildings and densification. The New Year will kick off as usual with our Winter Social in late January, and in February we are planning a major event on "Our Growing City Region" and a zoom discussion on "Adapt - Don't Demolish".

And, as usual, we will be adding other events as ideas crop up, so check the website and be sure you're on the mailing list.

In the last few seasons, we've had relatively few of the "live" (ie not Zoom) talks in church halls, but we know they are popular and there are several lined up in the autumn. As ever, do get in touch if you have any ideas or feedback - things you'd like to have more of (or indeed less of).

Booking

Most events need to be booked; zooms are free. There is (usually) a modest charge of up to £5 for others. Further information and booking is via the emails we send out about a month before, so do be sure that you are signed up to the mailing list (you don't even have to be a member)

<https://www.bristolcivicsociety.org.uk/get-involved/keep-in-touch/>

CAN YOU HELP?

We are a small team, soon to get smaller, and we really need more people - partly to come up with ideas, but mainly to do the admin follow up - emailing, phoning, booking rooms, sending out adverts - to turn them into reality. We meet briefly every 6-8 weeks, but most of the work is the admin, which we do from home. If you want to know more, please email events@bristolcivicsociety.org.uk or button-hole one of us at an event.