

WALLED CITY WALK



The town walls of Norman Bristol define today’s Old City. The medieval walls are no longer visible, so their route is little understood or used. This walk follows the route of these walls, returning through the busy heart of the Old City and allows you to enjoy the many fine historic buildings in this area.

The historical context outlines the social, religious and, above all, the mercantile life of the city that has greatly influenced the last 900 years of development.

Enjoy your walk! Don’t forget to look up above the shop fronts and enjoy the great variety of sculpture and other decorations in the Old City. The walk is just over 1km, lasting about 1–1.5 hours.



The Old City today

The Old City you visit today is the product of 1,000 years of building and rebuilding. Although the wall that once enclosed it cannot be seen, its memory is preserved by the way development has respected the route.

The buildings along the route, largely 18th and 19th century, display architecture of considerable style and variety, resulting in city streets of great character. The progressive removal of traffic is enhancing the setting of the buildings and adding to the attractiveness of the area for visitors and those who work or live in the Old City.

Buildings continue to be imaginatively adapted to today’s needs such as hotels, restaurants, bars, coffee shops and retail – particularly independent specialist shops. Traditional uses also remain, for example the law, with barristers’ chambers. The area is also home to some of the city’s new creative enterprises. Residential use of the upper floors is also growing.

The Church of St Johns on the Wall, incorporating the North Gate.



Old City postcards

As you explore the area why not collect a set of traditionally printed postcards from some of the businesses in the Old City. To find out where you can find them, visit bristololdcity.co.uk/old-city-heritage-trail

Information about the Old City

bristololdcity.co.uk
Twitter: @BristolOldCity

Other links

visitbristol.co.uk
bristol.gov.uk/knowyourplace
bristolcivicsociety.org.uk
centrespacegallery.com
saint-stephens.com

Walled City Walk

The project has been created by a partnership of Bristol Civic Society, Centrespace and Saint Stephens Church. It was funded by the Active Travel Initiative of Bristol City Council.

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References

Pevsner Architectural Guide by Andrew Foyle
Bristol’s 100 Best Buildings by Mike Jenner
Bristol – A People’s History by Peter Aughton.

Historical context

Anglo-Saxon period

The Bristol area has been an important settlement since Anglo-Saxon times, due largely to its access to the sea via the River Avon. The area of higher ground between the rivers Avon and Frome, now known as Old City, was the natural place to build on and to defend. The name Bristol is derived from the Saxon Brycgstow, place of the bridge, which refers to the southern approach across Bristol Bridge.

The Norman defences

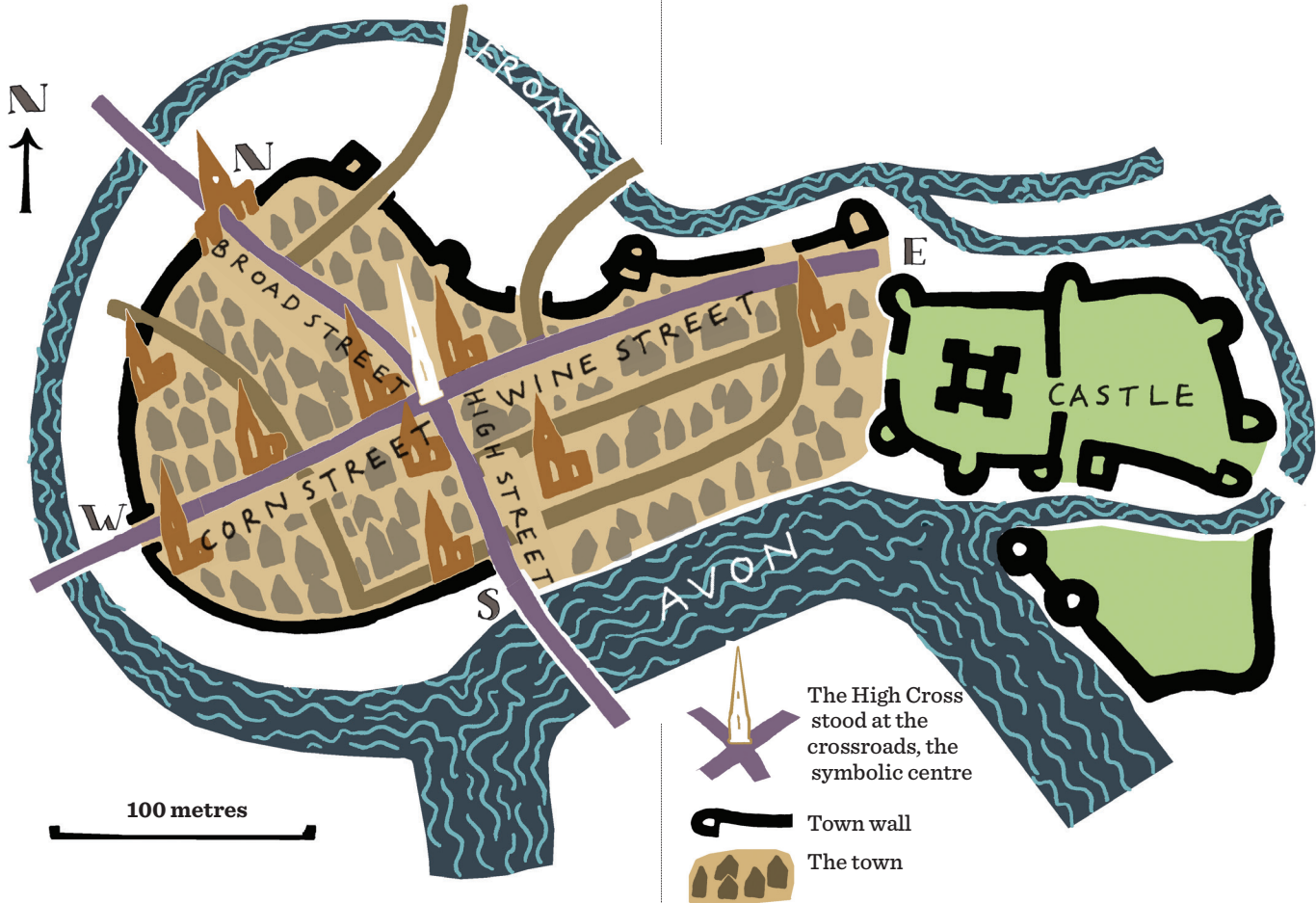
The Saxon town defences probably consisted of earthworks and wooden palisades. By 1120 they had been replaced by the Normans using stone from nearby Brandon Hill. Bristol Castle, with its impressive five-storey keep, was built to protect the eastern end of the town. There were seven gates in the town wall.

The walled town around 1480.
From a contemporary illustration.



Growth of the medieval town

Between 1240 and 1250 a new channel for the Frome and a new bridge over the Avon were constructed, along with new circuits of town walls to the north across the Frome and south across the marsh. This greatly increased the harbour’s capacity and was accompanied by a massive programme of land reclamation. These major civil engineering works were made possible by Bristol’s wealth derived from foreign trade, particularly the importation of Gascon wine, and allowed Bristol to develop as one of England’s leading ports. The new walls made the defensive role of the old wall unimportant, though the gates continued to provide security and allow control of trade.



Bristol then developed outside the original walls. Building initially took place just outside and against the walls, but development progressively absorbed the wall. It is now only visible at St Johns on the Wall. Building and rebuilding respected the line of the wall and the lanes that run inside it, so the location of the walls can still be traced.

Development has also always respected the original street pattern within the walls, particularly the important crossing of the four main roads (Corn Street, Broad Street, High Street and Wine Street (once Wynch Street)). This junction was the site of the city’s High Cross. This crossroads remains the symbolic heart of Old City.

Life in the medieval Old City

Bristol was one of the three biggest towns in 14th and 15th century England. The 1377 poll tax census suggests that the population was probably around 7–8,000. It had probably been more than 10,000 before the devastating Black Death of 1348–9.

The population lived, and often worked, in timber-framed houses built on extensive vaulted cellars. Goods were transported along the stone-paved streets on wooden sleds; a method used to prevent vibration from cart wheels damaging buildings and valuable content such as wine. Livestock and produce from the surrounding countryside supplied the town market. Craft guilds controlled the various trades.

At one time, the community within the walled town was served by eleven churches; some built on the wall and incorporating town gates. Each with a tower or spire, churches stood out among the tiled-roofed buildings, underlining the very important role of the church in medieval England. There were another seven churches outside the walls.

Section through town wall, showing the town well above harbour level.



The merchant city

Bristol was always outward looking, trading with many nations and with much of its wealth deriving from the harbour just outside the city wall. Ships were built here for Bristol merchant owners. Early trade was with Ireland and the Continent, with exports such as wool and minerals and imports such as wine from France, Spain and Portugal and fish from Iceland.

In 1497 John Cabot, a Genoese merchant, sailed across the Atlantic and is said to be the first European to set foot on the American mainland – New Found Land – since the Vikings. The aims probably included looking for new fishing grounds, new Atlantic Islands, and a route to Asia. In 1997, 500 years later, a replica of his ship The Matthew was built in Bristol and sailed to Newfoundland in celebration. The Matthew is now based in Bristol.

The many opportunities of the New World were embraced from the 17th century onwards, with Bristolians among the early settlers in the colonies. Trade in tobacco and sugar developed rapidly. This commerce was based on the African slave trade in which Bristol played a leading part, at a time when all England’s economy benefited from this deplorable practice.

Industries such as soap making, glass making and brass founding boomed. The view from the Old City was of smoking chimneys and glass cones. Within the Old City, banking, insurance and the law also flourished as evidenced by many of the buildings on the walk. By the 18th century Bristol had become the wealthiest city in Britain after London.

Old shop fronts on John Street.



The wine trade

Bristol’s medieval wine trade centred on Gascony, in south-west France, but trade with the Iberian Peninsula developed from the mid 14th century. From Tudor times, Bristol became noted as an importer of sherry and port from Spain and Portugal. The renowned Bristol Milk sherry dates from the 17th century. Wine trade connections are acknowledged today via two of Bristol’s twin cities, Bordeaux in Gascony and Porto in Portugal.

City government and the High Cross area

Despite the massive growth of Bristol outside the walls, the Old City remained the centre of civil power, justice and trade well into the 19th century. This was focused on the area around the High Cross, at the junction of the four main roads. Bristol had mayors from the 13th century and much official business and justice was conducted either in the Guildhall on Broad Street, or in the Mayor’s Court in the Tolzey; a roofed enclosure on Corn Street.

Trading in the Old City

Nearby, the city’s merchants used to conduct business in a similar Tolzey on the other side of Corn Street. This open-air dealing continued until the 18th century, when the new Exchange and coffee houses became the normal locations for business.

The Exchange on Corn Street, now the main entrance to St Nicholas Market.



The Second World War

In November 1940 a six-hour bombing raid almost obliterated the quarter of the Old City to the east. This had been the main shopping area, and included the famous Dutch House, a six-storey oak-framed building, which stood on the corner of High Street and Wine Street. The only visible historic remains are those of St Mary Le Port and St Peter’s churches; together with fragments of the Castle. Most of the lost eastern quarter of Old City is now Castle Park.

The Dutch House in High Street which was destroyed in a bombing raid in 1940.



St Nicholas Market

This adaptation of the historic market area to modern needs contributes to the lively Old City street scene. Combined with the Wednesday Farmers Market and other street trading activities and special events, Old City still deserves its reputation as the heart of Bristol.

Today, trade is still the key part of the Old City. The Exchange in Corn Street is home to the famous St Nicholas Market, lovingly called St Nicks by Bristolians. It is a vibrant, thriving market housing Bristol’s largest collection of independent traders and named as one of the ten best markets in the UK. Recently a local independent currency, The Bristol Pound, has thrived here. Its historical architecture with its glass arcade, covered market, fantastic stalls bursting with a wide variety of goods and food items and quirky ambience makes this the perfect place to shop, eat and enjoy. The streets and alleys around St Nicks hold an array of street markets and events, from a weekly farmers’ market, to book and arts markets.

The Glass Arcade, now part of St Nicholas Market.

