

OVER and UNDER the CLIFTON SUSPENSION BRIDGE – A SELF GUIDED WALK

A circular walk which begins (and ends) on the Clifton side of the Clifton Suspension Bridge and takes about 1 hour. The route is along public highways and rights of way, mostly through National Trust woodland. The paths are steep in places and can be muddy. The Clifton Suspension Bridge is 75 metres (245 feet) above river level so the walk involves about 70 metres (200 feet) descent and ascent.

The Clifton toll booth is on the left as you face the bridge. Walk onto the bridge through the old turnstile.

Originally tolls were collected manually. Machines and automatic barriers were introduced in January 1975 to cope with a rapidly increasing number of commuter cars. They allowed 1,000 vehicles per hour to cross in each direction.

As you walk past the Clifton Tower, you will see a plaque commemorating the 150th anniversary of the laying of the 1836 foundation stone. This is a good spot to look across the river at the enormous red brick Leigh Woods Abutment.

To help workmen cross the gorge, Brunel designed the 'suspended traveller', a basket hanging from an iron bar fixed across the gorge. He made the first crossing on 27th September 1836 accompanied by the son of Captain Christopher Claxton, Secretary of the Bridge Committee.

When you reach the gold covered double nuts in the middle of the bridge look out to see the old jetties for the White Funnel steamers that used to take people for daytrips to Newport.

"I remember travelling on Campbell's paddle steamers up and down the River Avon, underneath the bridge. We would take the Rocks Railway up to Clifton so we could catch a tram home." Gladys Westlake

As you come off the bridge at the Leigh Woods abutment, look back for a good view of the gorge. On the far side of the river are the elegant Georgian houses of Sion Hill sloping gently down towards The Avon Gorge Hotel, a large cream building often with sun umbrellas on the terrace.

The Avon Gorge was formed during the last ice age. Working in the gorge in the early 1900s Arthur Vaughan used marine fossils to date the Carboniferous Limestone to 363 to 325 million years ago. His 'Avonian' limestone has been identified all over the British Isles. Today the gorge is a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It is home to many rare plants and animals because water drains easily away through the rock, leaving a dry, sheltered environment.

Just before the chains disappear into the ground, where the wall on your left rises slightly, look over the wall and to your left you will see the remains of the Leigh Woods side of the suspended traveller. You can also see the new path to the vaults inside the Leigh Woods Abutment.

The Leigh Woods abutment is a complex network of vaulted chambers which were only rediscovered in 2002. "I was lowered into a shaft. When I reached the bottom it opened into a chamber 30 to 40 feet high. Once we'd gone inside we found more tunnels leading off in a sort of honeycomb. The real sense of excitement was going somewhere that nobody had been since the Victorians." Guy Barrett, High Access

Continue walking along the pavement. Opposite the zebra crossing you will see the Visitor Centre.

The exhibitions in the Visitor Centre explore the history and engineering of the bridge, its social context and the natural history of the area. Entry is free and the Centre is open daily from 10am-5pm. The Centre has toilet facilities and shop selling books and souvenirs. You can also pick up a local map.

Walk past the parking bay and turn left down Burwalls Road. Follow the road downhill until you reach the entrance to Leigh Woods, (5 minutes*). Go in past the bench and information panel and follow the path down to the river (5 -10 minutes). The path divides at some points but all routes join up again.

The town of Bristol is first recorded in the eleventh century AD but there is evidence of human habitation on the Downs for many centuries before then. Three ancient camps at the highest points of the Avon Gorge used the steep cliffs for defence. The massive ramparts of Stokeleigh Camp in Leigh Woods and the shallower Clifton Camp, near Clifton Observatory, have recently been cleared of trees and shrubs. Burwalls Camp was largely destroyed in the 1860s by the approach road to the Clifton Suspension Bridge.

Once at river level turn left away from the road, cross the railway bridge towards the river. At the river turn left and walk towards the Clifton Suspension Bridge. You are now on Route 41 of the National Cycle Network – so look out for bikes.

Through the trees you will see glimpses of the Floating Harbour. **About 5 mins after you have passed a square of metal railings** there is a clearing in the trees where you can see the lock gates and the river heading for the new cut (far right). The modern bridge is a swing bridge to let boats into the floating harbour at high tide.

The Floating Harbour was created in 1809 by damming water flow to ensure ships remained upright when the tide went out. The end of the harbour walls mark the embarkation point for the Rownham Ferry which crossed the Avon from the twelfth century up to 1932. Before that is thought to have been a fording point (probably a rather muddy one). The ferrymen opposed the building of the bridge.

Walk for a further 5 minutes and you will see the bottom station of the Clifton Rocks Railway next to the Colonnade. This funicular railway runs through the cliff. The top station is just below the Avon Gorge Hotel.

The Clifton Rocks Railway operated for 40 years (1983- 1934). Its closure did not mark the end of its useful life as during World War II it was used as an air raid shelter and equipped as a secret transmission base for the BBC. It is open on special occasions throughout the year.

Continue along the path and when under the bridge look up to see the maintenance cradle and timbers. Look across to see the climbers' cave which holds a visitors' book dating from the 1970s. To locate this look down from the left hand side of the bridge about half way down on a seam in the rock – it resembles a belly button!

Continue along the towpath until you reach the brick arch railway bridge which is the entrance to the part of Leigh Woods know as Nightingale Valley. (From here you could continue following the Avon Trail to Pill, Avonmouth or Portishead or double back and follow it along the Chocolate Path to the city centre.)

Go through the gate into Nightingale Valley. Follow the path uphill for about 20 minutes when you will see the wooden gates and stile leading out on to North Road. Go through and turn left. Follow the road for about 10 minutes until it rejoins Bridge Road. Turn left for the Clifton Suspension Bridge and Visitor Centre.

***All times given are approximate.**