



Durdham Down

“... for ever hereafter open and unenclosed...”

It is 150 years since The Clifton and Durdham Downs (Bristol) Act, 1861 secured the Downs as a place of recreation for us all – forever. This trail and a second trail exploring the Promenade and Observatory Hill celebrate this anniversary and explore the rich and fascinating history of the Downs.

Where to start

At the café on Stoke Road by the Water Tower in the centre of the Downs, but you can join at any point on the map.

Loos and don'ts

The nearest toilets are by the Water Tower (disabled and baby-changing) and at Sea Walls, see map. Please do not park on the grass; no barbecues.

How to get there

By bus: 1, 8, 41, 42, 54, 55, 99, 586, and 587 all run past the Downs.

By train: the nearest station is Clifton Down Station, 10 minutes walk away.

How far and how long

It is 3.6km long and takes about 90 minutes. It is all on the flat; some paths can be muddy and the grass can be wet.

Further information

Go to www.bristol.gov.uk/page/downs for further history and to download other trail leaflets on trees, birds, lichen and other subjects. For educational visits, events, guided tours, news and volunteering go to the Avon Gorge and Downs Wildlife Project's site: www.avongorge.org.uk or e-mail mleivers@bristolzoo.org.uk; for the Friends of the Downs and Avon Gorge email robinhaward@blueyonder.co.uk



The Downs Committee



A little background history

How did such a large and dramatic landscape that is so close to the centre of a great city remain open and free from development for so long?

For many centuries the tenants or commoners of the two adjoining medieval manors of Clifton and Henbury had the right to graze their animals on Clifton Down and Durdham Down. But by the mid-nineteenth century grazing was declining as the city expanded and development pushed in at the edges of the common land. Mines and quarries also scarred the Downs.

In 1856 the Society of Merchant Venturers, owners of Clifton Down, promised “to maintain the free and uninterrupted use of the Downs.” The following year Bristol City Council purchased two small properties in Stoke Bishop, together with one of the few remaining commoners’ rights to graze animals on Durdham Down. In the spring of 1858 the City of Bristol turned out sheep stamped ‘CB’, keeping alive the medieval rights of pasturage.

Then, in equal partnership, the council and the Merchant Venturers promoted The Clifton and Durdham Downs (Bristol) Act, 1861. This act allowed the council to purchase Durdham Down. It preserved the Downs for us all ‘for ever hereafter’. And it set up the method of management that continues today: the Downs Committee, made up equally of councillors and Merchant Venturers under the chairmanship of the lord mayor.

START at the café on Stoke Road

As you leave the café turn sharp right along the worn joggers’ path for a few yards to the clump of three stones.

A Mere stones: a line of these carved stones march across the Downs. They are parish boundary markers and most date from around 1800. Here, one is inscribed WP for Westbury Parish and there was once CP for Clifton Parish on the opposite side. The parish boundary was also the boundary between the two medieval manors of Henbury and Clifton and thus also between Durdham Down and Clifton Down. Earlier still the same boundary divided two Anglo-Saxon

estates. In a charter of 883 AD, the site of the three stones at your feet is called ‘Sweordes Star’ (sword stone) and the site of a surviving parish boundary stone at the top of Walcombe Slade leading down to the river is called ‘Eowcumb’, the valley of the yew.



Mere stones by Stoke Road 2011

Continue along the joggers’ path (or the tarmac path which is also a cycle route) running parallel to Stoke Road. Go past the two benches close together to the third bench facing north (B1 and B2 on the map).



Sheep sheltering off Stoke Road, Ladies Mile in the distance, c.1910; postcard by Fred Little (BRO3207.9.35.17)

B1 A hundred years ago you would have been surrounded by sheep – over fifty sheep can be seen in this postcard of about 1910. It was the sheep that had ensured the survival of the Downs. The tenants of the two medieval manors of Clifton and Henbury could pasture their animals here, a right that had been carefully managed for centuries to avoid over-grazing.

Sheep, especially, maintained the open grassland characteristics of this limestone down land. They controlled the growth of self-sown seedlings such as ash and sycamore and of other invasive species and they prevented

the growth of scrub on many of the almost inaccessible slopes along the Avon Gorge.

The extent of grazing declined in the nineteenth century and in 1925 it ceased altogether on the Downs. The University of Bristol, the only owner of commoner’s rights still possessing sheep, maintains these ancient rights by grazing sheep periodically on the Downs.

The trees on Ladies Mile in the distance are Huntingdon Elms planted around 1880. Dutch Elm disease led to their replacement in 1980 by the young Limes that you can see today.

B2 The postcard’s viewpoint you and the Seven Sisters – the three forlorn pines you can see in the distance to the north-west. They mark the site of one of the vast quarries on the Downs that were filled in around 1870.



On the far left of the postcard is the marquee of the Clifton Cricket Club beside Saville Road and there is a considerable crowd nearby. It was here in 1870 that Dr W.G. Grace played in Gloucestershire’s earliest first-class match against Surrey.

The Downs shepherd was to complain that the Clifton Cricket Club cut the grass and drove away the sheep, but ultimately it was the refusal of the Downs Committee to permit the building of a permanent pavilion, forbidden under the terms of the Downs Act, that led to the club’s move to Henbury in 1930.

Sheep also got in the way of golf balls and there were reports of injuries in 1906. Clifton College had set up a nine-hole course in the 1890s on either side of Ladies Mile, but there were complaints of near misses and the use of the course was restricted to odd hours, necessitating notices hammered into trees.



Cricket and badminton on Durdham Down, 1911; postcard (BRO 43207.9.35.367)

Cross the busy Stoke Road behind you with care and head for the right hand of the two benches by the rather haphazard circle of young ash trees.

C About ten metres before you reached the bench you will have crossed the tapering end of a low grass-covered bank running east-west for 100m. Below this slight ridge is the Roman road which ran between Portus Abonae, the Roman port at Sea Mills, and Aqua Sulis, Bath. If you visualise the continuing line of the road you will see that it skirts Bristol to the north – understandably, for Bristol did not yet exist. The road may date from around 50 AD.

Turning in the opposite direction and looking south-east towards Ladies Mile, there was once the enormous quarry that is so dramatically recorded in the

watercolour. The outline of the quarry can still be traced today for it was to be filled in with good Avon mud – rich alluvial soil that produces greener grass than the paler and thinner down land turf that surrounds it.

The filling in of the three substantial quarries on the Downs and many smaller ones was an early priority of the new Downs Committee. Great improvements to the Floating Harbour and its approaches provided the huge quantities of spoil required. A special tramway was built in 1867 to bring the spoil up the face of the Avon Gorge with a steam winding-engine at the top on the edge of the Downs.



Quarry to the west of the junction of Ladies Mile and Stoke Road; watercolour by William Arne Frank, c.1862 (BCMG K6317)

Continue south-west at right angles to the bench, crossing over the tarmac path and then passing through the avenue of trees to the bench just beyond the three ash trees.



Detail of a poster advertising the Clifton and Bristol Races on the Downs, May 1st & 2nd 1833 (private collection)

D The race course probably circled our viewpoint. But despite the reputation of the fine turf of the Downs, serious horse racing would have been complicated by the thinness of the soil above the limestone rock. However, it was probably the growth of Clifton and Redland that engineered the end of the races. The residents of Redland had complained of the “very great evils” resulting from both horse racing and boxing as early as 1792 and the last races were held in 1838.

Wrestling, cockfighting and ‘foot running’ are also all recorded as taking place on the Downs in the earlier eighteenth century. By the early twentieth century there was organised rugby, lacrosse, hockey and even mixed hockey, as we see here, as well as the most popular sport of all, football.

Football was established on the Downs in the 1880s soon after the coming of the trams to the bottom of Blackboy Hill. The Downs League was formalised in 1905 and it now has over fifty clubs in four leagues, all of which play on the thirty-two pitches on the Downs – an unrivalled statistic and, on a Saturday afternoon in the winter, a most colourful sight.



Pembroke Hockey Club, 1913-14; postcard (BRO43207.37.10.2)

Continue south-west towards Sea Walls, the cliff edge, to the bench by the next tarmac path overlooking the Plateau.

E Monsieur Tetard would have flown over our heads. We can tell that this postcard photograph is a composite image for the crowd is milling about on the take-off area, oblivious of the box kite above. The aeroplane was inserted later. But the great excitement of the event is conveyed; the deception is justified.

In November 1910 Sir George White organised these spectacular flying displays on the Downs to draw attention to his new company, The Bristol and Colonial Aeroplane Company, and its box kites built at Filton to a French design.

One local reporter tried vainly to match the occasion: “On he sped, over rugged rocks and cliffs... to the Suspension Bridge. Here a picture was presented which will live long in the memory of those who saw it – the wonderful bridge and the aeroplane as gems of modern science in a natural setting of unrivalled beauty...” You may be reminded of Concorde’s final flight over the bridge and Observatory on 26 November 2003.

Until 1847 the main cricket pitch on the Downs was in front of us and it would have been here that Bristol’s earliest recorded match was played in 1752 between a Bristol and a London XI.



M. Tetard in Flight on Durdham Downs, 1910; postcard (BRO 43207.9.35.49)

On to Sea Walls itself and the spectacular views up the Avon Gorge to the Clifton Suspension Bridge and down river to the Bristol Channel and the Welsh hills. Take a seat to the left of the information panels.



Sea Walls, c.1910; postcard (Gordon Millward)

F The wall at Sea Walls was originally built by John Wallis in 1746 for the safety of visitors to the fashionable Hotwells spa when riding on the Downs. It was capped with blocks of iridescent black slag from Bristol’s brass industries. Further to your left, you will see that the original capping blocks have often been reused.

A guide book of 1793 noted that for Hotwells visitors: “The usual morning ride is round Wallis’s wall on Durdham Downs, where horses and carriages are to be seen as in Hyde-park”. There was then no road – carriages drove straight across the down land turf. The building of Circular Road, proposed by Alderman

Proctor in 1869, was financed by private subscription in the 1870s. Its stark white surface shows that it had a crushed stone (macadamised) surface, not yet tarred.

Today, you may regret the noise from the Portway opened in 1922. But imagine instead the echoing explosions of the quarrymen, the warning canon shots from the larger merchant vessels negotiating the bends, the bellowed orders to the straining towboat men, or, a century on, the roar of paddle steamers and the chugging of tugs, and finally by the 1860s the whistling and rumbling from the trains on both sides of the Avon Gorge. It was seldom, if ever, quiet.

Please look at the information panels to your right. Then walk east, up river, along Sea Walls and continue as the path turns north-east along the edge of the Gully. 20 yards before the road bends sharply to the right, turn right just after the litter bin and go through the goat gate.



Overlooking the Gully, 1913; postcard (BRO43207.37.10.2)

The postcard view looks along the side of the Gully towards the rocky promontory on which you are now standing. Only the concrete bases of the popular benches visible in the photograph survive before the impenetrable wall of scrub along which you walked.

If you are very lucky you may spot one of the six goats that were released into this newly fenced area of the Gully in June 2011. They are wild goats descended from animals brought from northern India to France in the eighteenth century. Contrary to belief, goats are highly selective feeders, preferring brambles

and ivy and the young growth of trees and shrubs that we want to control so that they do not shade out the exceptionally rare plants of the Avon Gorge. Some clearance preceded the goats' arrival and their job is now to control re-growth.

Below you, in the middle of the valley, is a tower. It is one of two ventilation shafts for the mile-long train tunnel beneath the Downs. This branch line opened to goods traffic in 1877 and linked main line services with the earlier Bristol Port and Pier Railway, which ran from its former terminus in the Avon Gorge below the Clifton Suspension Bridge, to Avonmouth.



Retrace your steps through the gate. Continue along the path to the Peregrine Watch point – your next chance of a view across the gorge. Soon after rounding the bend, you will cross from Durdham to Clifton Down and to your left and right, you may spot the mere stones marking the boundary. Note, also, the discreet fencing that steers the joggers away from bee orchids and other rarer plants.



The Avon from Clifton Down, 1829; oil painting by James Baker Pyne (BCMAG K585)

James Baker Pyne's painting hangs in Bristol's Museum and Art Gallery. Today, the artist's viewpoint is obscured by trees and dense undergrowth. You can come closest to it at the far right of the Peregrine Watch point, just before the trees begin.

Pyne has captured the soft, warm light of a gentle summer's evening. To improve the composition, he invented a group of ivy-clad pines, for in 1829 there were no such trees – nor trees of any kind – along the cliff edges to frame his view and to link foreground, distance and sky.

This artistic licence was unwittingly anticipating the work of the Planting and Thinning Sub-Committee of the Downs Committee, which, forty years later in the 1870s, pursued a program of beautification. Many alien shrubs and trees, including Austrian Pines were planted to the annoyance of most modern ecologists. In recent years some felling and clearance has been undertaken to prevent the shading out of the gorge's many very rare plants and to retrieve some of the spectacular views. The surviving later nineteenth-century pine trees, whether native or alien species, are now regarded as part of the history of the Downs.

Please look at the Peregrine Watch information panel before heading (north-east) across the grass at right angles to the road. Cross Ladies Mile carefully to the open area, where zoo visitors are permitted to park at certain times of year, to the bench on the far left side. There is a small hawthorn behind it.



May Trees on the Downs, c.1910; postcard (BRO43207.9.35.339)

The flowering of the hawthorn trees in May was once one of the most popular features of the Downs. Numerous postcards illustrate this and for many years signs were erected in April prohibiting the picking of May blossom. It is the tree that is most commonly mentioned as a boundary marker in Anglo-Saxon charters and it is ideally suited to down land. It belongs here, although almost all those that we see were probably planted

in the 1930s. But with no sheep to maintain the level browsing line that the postcard illustrates so well, ivy, ash, elder and sycamore could grow below the hawthorn and a dense ivy-laden clump could form. The mowers are then unable to penetrate it and the autumn winds sometimes blow it over. A single tree becomes an ever-expanding copse, rich in wildlife and a vital food source, but the hawthorn, favourite of the winter visitors such as the Fieldfare and Redwing, is lost. As you walk on you will see every stage of the process with the exception of the first – the single hawthorn with browsing line.

Hawthorns have declined sharply in recent years. Sheep and the scythe were succeeded by mechanised mowing in

Continue north-east towards the water tower to the middle of the precision-planted circle of five young ash trees.

You are standing in the middle of a roughly rectangular field of Iron Age or Roman date (c.300 BC – 400 AD). You crossed the field's boundary – a low bank of turf-covered lime-stone rubble – just a few yards back. You will cross another similar bank in a moment. Your position is marked 'J' on the map on which the uneven black lines identify other ancient field boundaries.

On the map notice also the filled-in quarry to your right along whose lip you are about to walk. It was below this quarry near the top of Pembroke Road, once called Gallows Acre Lane, that a gibbet stood. It was sometimes occupied by those who had committed robberies on the Downs and was last used in 1783 to hang Shenkin Protheroe for the murder of a drover. Stories quickly spread that he descended from the gibbet at midnight every night and stalked through Clifton. Such was the alarm that his body was cut down and buried.

Turn sharp right and walk thirty metres to the joggers' path and then continue north-east again. Soon you should be able to see the railway tunnel's other ventilation tower below to your right. Stop briefly at the tarmac path.

This tarmac path follows the line of a road laid across the Downs by William Baker in 1862. Essentially, the road was for the convenience of the residents of Sneyd Park. The Downs Committee, some of whose members lived in this new and leafy suburb, unwisely contributed to the cost. The public rightly and vehemently objected and the road was re-turfed at the committee's entire expense. In 1881 the footpath was laid.

Continue north-east keeping the pitted ground of The Dumps to your right.

Lead, iron, manganese and calamine were all mined on the Downs in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, but only this area known as the Dumps remains as a reminder of this industry. Earlier still it was probably near here that two Mendip miners were "stuffed by smooke" while digging "for tynne and lead" in 1574.

Stop at the highest point by the bench backing onto The Dumps.



The Jubilee Fair, 1935; postcard (BRO 43207.22.12.29)

In 1935 the sounds of the steam carousel's fairground organ would have easily reached you here, for this traditional fair celebrating the twenty-fifth year of George V's reign took place nearby opposite the reservoir.

The Bath and West of England Agricultural Society, today known as the Royal Bath and West Show, first held a show on the Downs in 1863. The substantial profit that it made in 1874 resulted in the massive drinking fountain on Stoke Road by the water tower.

The biggest event of all was in 1973 when 450,000 people visited 'Bristol 600' celebrating the 1373 charter that

made Bristol an independent county and city. Queen Elizabeth II's visit was preceded by a catastrophic downpour. The organising company went bankrupt, unable to pay the reinstatement fees of £1500 per acre of damaged turf.

Barrage balloons, anti-aircraft guns and forty-one stone cairns to deter enemy aircraft from landing were set up on the Downs at the outbreak of World War II. There was a tank repair depot near Sea Walls and part of the Downs became a military vehicle park, which was greatly extended after Clifton College became the headquarters of the U.S First Army.

One final stop: continue north-east in the direction of the wooden bus shelter, stopping well short of it at the bench by the path.

A passionate plea for a 'Peoples' Park' was made in 1871. It declared: "You will say we have Clifton and Durdham Downs, but these are mainly for rich people who can afford to live in that neighbourhood: it would take us an hour's walking, after the hard toil of the day is over, to get to these beautiful spots, and then another to get home..."

And then the trams came. There were horse-drawn trams to the bottom of Blackboy Hill by 1875, then electric trams to the top, as we see here, by 1900.

A 'speakers' corner' developed that lasted into the 1960s. There were open-air religious and political meetings. In 1908 Annie Kenny organised a suffragettes' rally addressed by Christobel Pankhurst that is said to have attracted 10,000 people. The fascist Oswald Moseley spoke here in the late 1930s.

There were both rickshaw and pony rides available. In 1973 an elderly lady recalled being pulled round the Downs "by a smiling, fleet-footed Chinese boy". But the donkey stand was the source of repeated complaints for over fifty years – mostly on behalf of the donkeys. Both donkey boys and braying donkeys were finally banished in 1927.

Today, the problem of balancing the demands of local residents and the residents of Bristol and beyond – of sharing and preserving this remarkable amenity, remains. The Downs are also balanced, precariously perhaps, between the open down land that they once were and the municipal urban park that they should not become. The better we understand their past, the better we will manage their future.



Tram terminus on the Downs at the junction with Stoke Road, c.1905; postcard (BRO43207.9.35.133)