



A walk on the wild side

Get under the surface of Bristol to explore an alternative side to this historic city

Time: 45-60 mins

Distance: 1 mile

Landscape: urban

Bristol may be famous for its balloons, bridges and boats, but look closer and colourful houses, street art and environmentalism become icons of this urban hub of the South West.

With a history of social movements and change, Bristol has a beating heart of alternative culture.

This trail leads you through some of the arteries – the city streets.

Along the way we will explore how the city's culture is so entrenched in colour, contrast and aspirational futures.

Location:

Bristol

Start:

Tesco, Cheltenham Road, Bristol BS6 5RL

Finish:

Millennium Square, Bristol Harbour Side BS1 5DB

Grid reference:

ST 59104 74179

Keep an eye out for:

Two minute hands on the Corn Exchange clock - Bristol is 10 minutes behind GMT, so one hand shows the time in Bristol and the other the time in London!

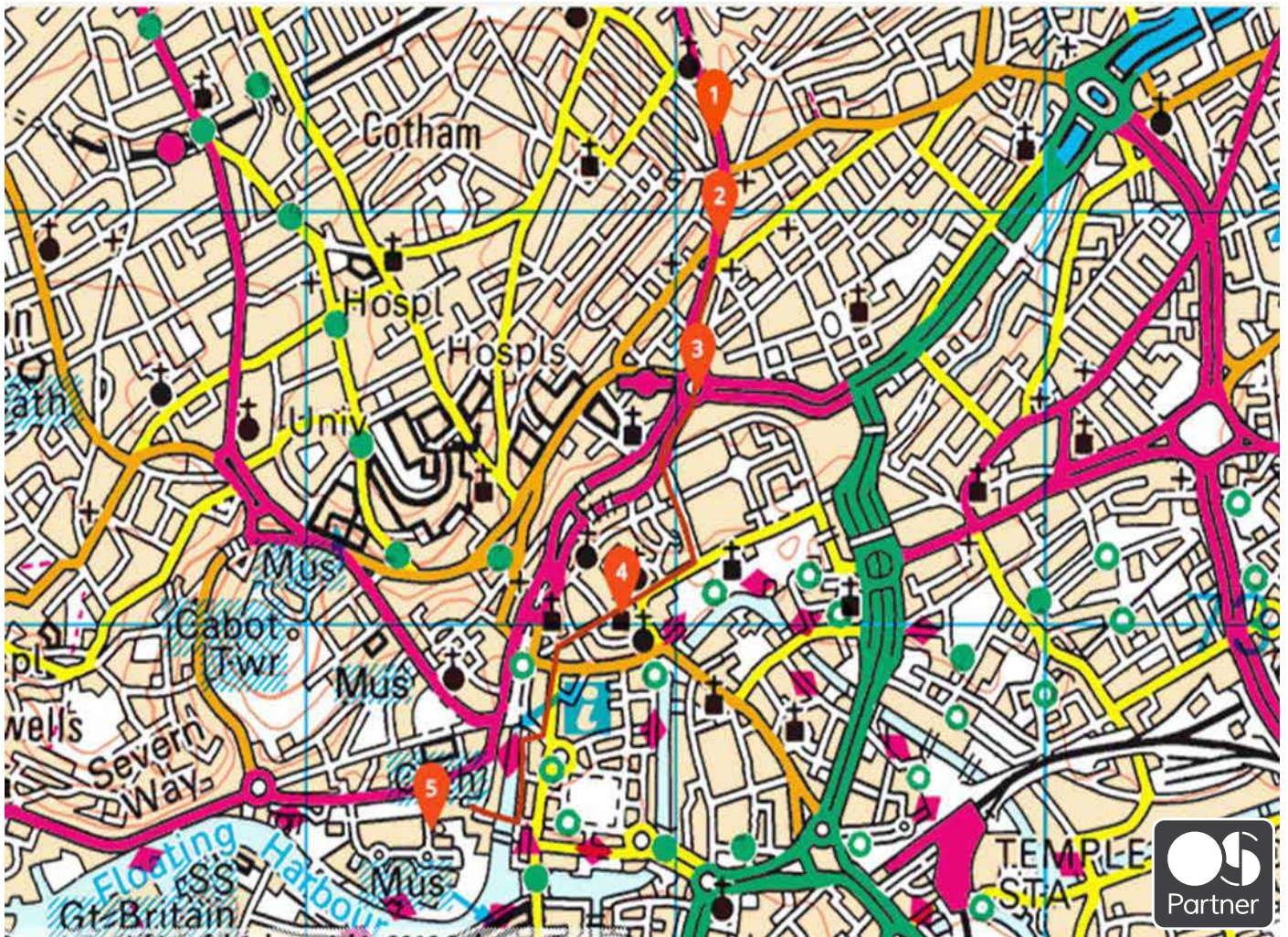
Directions



Begin on the pavement outside Tesco, looking down towards the road junction ahead of you on Cheltenham Road.



Route and stopping points



- 01 Tesco, Stokes Croft
- 02 Hamilton House
- 03 The Bearpit
- 04 The Corn Exchange
- 05 The Solar Tree, Millennium Square

01 Tesco, Stokes Croft

Traffic charging by, pedestrians busy with their day and the bright lights of a metro supermarket – you could be on any high street in any city. But this Tesco's shelves are stocked with community tensions and a past of protest.

Before you lies Stokes Croft – a borough with its own People's Republic, a thriving street art culture and a community hub with a philosophy of open hearted and active engagement.

Just a mile up the street behind you is Gloucester Road – reputedly the street with the longest unbroken line of independent shops in the UK. So consider the reaction of this community when this Tesco store was proposed in 2010. The multinational supermarket was not welcomed with open arms....

For over a year, the local community campaigned peacefully to prevent its opening – sending postcards to the council, signing petitions and completing surveys which underlined the strength of feeling of inhabitants. With these peaceful actions dismissed, the community felt cheated by the council and changing planning laws.

Tensions built and culminated in a riot on April 21st, 2011. Strong police reinforcements brought out hundreds of civilians ready to fight their cause, leaving the Tesco store badly damaged and question marks over the way the protest was handled.

Whatever the politics of that night, the level of resistance to a supermarket chain setting up shop on this street gives us our first taste of Bristol's culture of activism and strong local values.

As you walk to the next stop keep a look out for a large piece of street art entitled 'Think Local – Boycott Tesco' above the bakery to your right on the corner of Nine Tree Hill. Proclaiming that '93% of local people say no to Tesco' it is a continual reminder of the battle that took place and for many is still being fought between consumerism and localism.

Directions

Follow the main road down through Stokes Croft until you see a large 1960's block on your left called Hamilton House.

02 Hamilton House

Hamilton House is a rather uninspiring looking 1960s building. But look closer and you will see that this place is more integral to Stokes Croft's alternative culture than it would first seem. Bright artwork in every other window, painted bricks on its street-side walls, and a leafy veranda with people supping ales and ciders – this is no ordinary office block!

Originally built to replace wartime damaged buildings, Hamilton House later became neglected, run-down and renowned for squatters. But in 2008 a group of friends set about turning it into a centre for the community. This large block has gradually turned itself into "a space in which the community can grow, share, collaborate, and learn what it is to live in coexistence with each other"

What does this mean in practice? There are now over 200 community groups and locally run organisations using the building, from festival organisers, career advisors and architects to street artists, photographers and even puppeteers!

With a bar, live music events and café Hamilton House not only fosters hundreds of small start-ups but has become a hub for the whole community. Maybe Bristol's alternative approach to art and innovation inspired this project, but it is also likely that Hamilton House will continue to inspire this culture for years to come.

Look to the right of the front door and behind the ping-pong table you will see one of the most recognisable pieces by Bristolian street artist Banksy.

'Mild Mild West' depicts a huge, smiling teddy bear with a Molotov cocktail in his paw, facing three policemen holding up riot shields. As with most art, there have been several theories about the meaning of this piece – that it reflected the Bristol riots of the 1980s, the hard-line approach police took against Bristolian raves in the 1990s, or simply an anti-establishment commentary.

However, just a stone's throw from the site of the Tesco's riots in 2011, it seems like life imitated art right here on these streets.

Directions

Continue down the A38. As the road forks, keep to the left and follow the signs into the subway. Stop when you reach the central opening underneath the roadway.

03 The Bearpit

Having just passed under a roaring road, the circus-like arena of subway junctions may have you on the lookout for performing grizzlies, as its name would suggest. But rather than large and toothy mammals, this unusually titled spot instead tells a story of change and community engagement.

It has a chequered past....

After the Second World War, Bristol was left severely damaged. Its international Harbour and the Bristol Aeroplane Company made it a sitting target. Bombers were able to trace a course up the River Avon using reflected moonlight on the waters directly into the heart of the city. Bristol was the fifth most heavily bombed British city of World War II.

Rebuilding the city started almost as soon as the war was over. This area was demolished in the late 1950s and by the 1960s a new plan for the site was designed. The coming era was all about the private motor vehicle, sealing the fate of the city's pedestrians.

An interesting insight into 1960's design and the growing importance of the car, this sunken 'pit' reduced pedestrians to a lower status than those who could afford to move about the city in their vehicles. The result was an underground system of walkways, often poorly lit. Have you noticed this in other cities?

Here, fear of crime and its dank and dark ambience meant most people avoided walking through it all costs.

Over the coming decades, shopping centres and commercial districts grew to surround it in a kind of concrete jungle, whilst just a few streets away the free-thinking district of Stokes Croft started to take shape.

Today you can see how this roundabout forms a locational and cultural junction between the commercial and alternative quarters of the city.

It now feels as if the two are meeting exactly in the middle; a concrete circus bowing to the tower blocks that overlook it, alongside colourful artwork, community stalls and even green spaces growing up from its depths.

The changes came about through collaboration between institutional and radical parts of the community.

The City Council and the police met with the People's Republic of Stokes Croft and resident groups to create the Bearpit Improvement Group. Its vision? "A thriving public space that inspires significant change, innovation and social engagement shared within the community.

It will remain 'green' in its principles and was designed to be financially sustainable, so it may be a respected and treasured destination on the Bristol map for a long time to come"

Standing within these colourful walls, you can today enjoy the smells of street food stalls or talk to campaigners for social or environmental justice.

This unique partnership between assumed opposing groups has started to create a dynamic and welcoming new social space for the city.

Directions

Walk through the Bear Pit to the underpass below a grey/white department store with a line of shops at its base. This should be almost directly opposite the way you entered. Go through the underpass then turn right at street level and follow the footpath past Debenhams and Primark. After Primark take the next road on the left - Union Street. Follow this through the shopping area until it stops opposite a park. Turn right to follow Wine Street until it bends round at the junction of High Street and Broad Street. Follow Corn Street - a smaller, paved pedestrianised road. Stop outside the grand Corn Exchange on your left.

04 The Corn Exchange

This grand building is the Corn Exchange, once the site of Bristol's official exchange for its slavers and merchant traders. Between the 17th-19th centuries it would have been a pillar of capital, profit and business. You might therefore wonder why we've stopped here on our exploration of the city's more alternative cultures and enterprises?

Look closer and below the four grand pillars on the front railings you will spot an unassuming blue sign.

Along with a thriving indoor market, the Corn Exchange now houses offices for the Bristol Pound – the In 2012 Bristol followed in the footsteps of Totnes in Devon to become the first place with a city-wide alternative currency.

The theory goes that by encouraging people to use this currency, money generated in Bristol stays in Bristol. In turn this grows a localised and sustainable economy without relying on the unpredictable and often unethical goings on of the global financial market.

They explain it by saying that "Bristol Pounds stay working on the ground for us. They stick to Bristol creating stronger communities and a greener economy".

There are over 800 businesses accepting the currency, 19 exchange points, and over 1000 people with accounts. To date over £1 Million of sterling has been exchanged into Bristol pounds!

Keep an eye out for the blue signs as you explore the city. You can even exchange some of your sterling for Bristol pounds to use anywhere with a sign!

Although not necessarily an answer to world economic crises or something that everyone will embrace, it is a visual and coordinated effort by Bristol to stand out from the crowd and look for alternatives.

Directions

Continue down Corn Street as it turns into Clare Street. Carry on until it meets a main road at the very bottom. Cross the main road and then turn left down Broad Quay, a pedestrian and bus-only street.

When you see the Cascade Steps (a water feature) and the waterfront beginning, cross over the piazza to the other side of the river and follow this along, next to the waterfront bars and cafes. When you reach Pero's Bridge (a curving metal bridge with a fog-horn sculpture above it), take a right to follow the pedestrianised pathway into a large, modern piazza.

Walk past the @Bristol Science Museum on your right crossing to the far side of the piazza. You will see a metallic tree – stop here.

05 The Solar Tree, Millennium Square

Stood in the glossy, minimalist piazza of the modern Harbourside development, you couldn't feel further away from the graffiti-lined streets of Stokes Croft where we began our trail.

So how is such a contrasting environment relevant in exploring Bristol's alternative culture?

Well herein lies a new chapter in Bristol's cultural identity – Bristol the Green Capital.

In 2015 Bristol took up the European Green Capital title – an "annual award designed to promote and reward the efforts of cities to improve the environment". This meant Bristol had one year to prove its prowess as an environmental city of innovation and opportunity.

The Bristol Green Capital Partnership was set up as an independent leadership organisation whose aim was to make Bristol "a low carbon city with a high quality of life for all".

The 'tree' we are under now is a functional art installation, funded as part of the Green Capital developments. The tree allows visitors to charge their phones and access free Wi-Fi. By doing so it also sparks public engagement with the topics of energy use.

The solar panels mimic the process of leaves, nature's way of collecting and transforming solar energy throughout the day. Devised by Demand Energy Equality and designed by local sculptor John Packer, the tree's 36 solar PV panels were handmade by people recovering from addiction at the Bristol Drugs Project.

It is a great example of community cooperation and innovation, right within the heart of the glossy Millenium Square.

The European Green Capital year may now be over but this artwork has stood the test of time. It remains a reminder of Bristol's sustainability ambitions.

This trail has seen us stroll through community activism, alternative currencies and carefully orchestrated city-wide change.

Throughout we have seen how Bristol has developed as a hub for challenging the norm.

If the city continues to invest in the alternative, to find a green and community focussed future, then who knows what people's revolution it could power up next!

 **Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!**