



Viewpoint

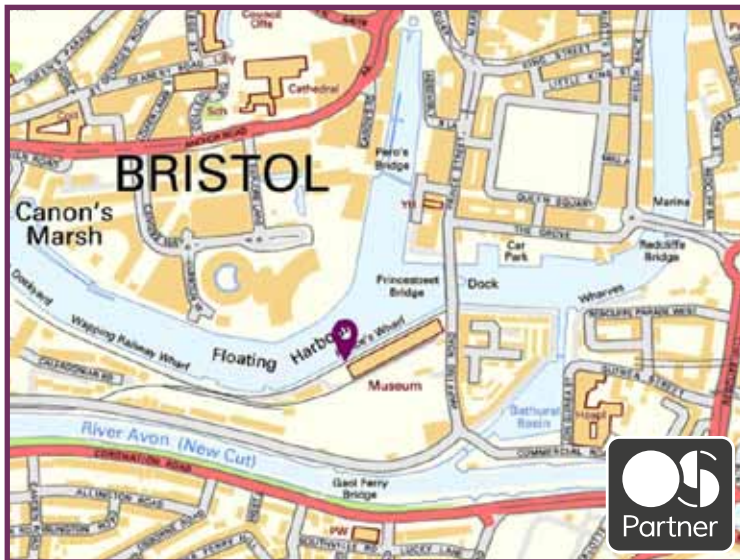
The tide is high



Time: 15 mins

Region: South West England

Landscape: urban

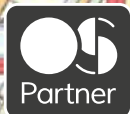


Location: Museum Street, Bristol BS1 6UQ

Grid reference: ST 58346 72185

Getting there: Stand outside the M Shed, overlooking the waterside at the feet of the 4 mighty cranes.

Keep an eye out for: The plaque at the end of the M Shed commemorating the thousands of 'African men, women and children whose enslavement and exploitation brought so much prosperity to Bristol'.



Dormant but still imposing, four mighty cranes flock towards Bristol's modern, welcoming harbourside. Seemingly quiet now, these mechanical birds hold secrets of a unique 600 year history that made Bristol one of the most successful ports in Britain.

The modern and well-manicured view ahead lives up to the well-known phrase 'ship shape and Bristol fashion'. But the story behind the harbour unearths the true origin of this saying and the prosperity that Bristol enjoyed as a result.

What is the true meaning behind the phrase 'Ship shape and Bristol fashion'?



Although busy with tourists, dog walkers and commuters, this bustle isn't a patch on the industrial fervour of this very spot 200 years ago. Bristol's location just 6 miles from the mouth of the Bristol Channel and the wide expanse of the Atlantic Ocean has meant that since the thirteenth century it has had a significant position as one of Britain's busiest ports.

Bristol developed at the point where the River Avon was easiest to cross, and importantly, ships could sail right up to the harbour. The rivers of the Bristol Channel have the highest tidal range in the UK – the second-highest in the whole world! In Bristol the water level can rise and fall by as much as twelve metres a day.

During the eighteenth century, Bristol's port was booming. Ships carried hefty cargos of, sugar, glass and even slaves en route to their plantation shackles in the Americas. The city's wealth was directly boosted by this prosperous yet horrendous trade in people and the profits it brought.

The incredible natural force of the tide enabled Bristol to grow, but it later became the city's downfall.

The benefits? Ships could sail into the port easily at high tide. The negatives? Well, the exact opposite – when the tide went out, boats were stranded in the muddy dock! In the late 1700s as boats carried more cargo from the transatlantic trade routes they became larger and it became increasingly impossible for the harbour to accommodate them all. It also meant they had to be built to withstand the elements whilst stranded in low tide.

And here lies a possible answer to our conundrum.

One notion is that the phrase refers to the strength and sea-worthy nature of Bristol's boats, given the tidal forces they had to withstand.

The other theory is that cargo had to be arranged in a meticulous and balanced way to ensure boats didn't keel over when left floundering on the mud at low tide. Others have also hinted that it could instead have harked back to a more derogatory root, referring to African slaves who were ready for sale and therefore 'ship shape' in appearance.

Whichever holds the real answer, Bristol's particular tidal predicament and the trades it lured in, meant the phrase was uniquely coined here.

Brizzle or Bristowe?

Wandering through the streets of Bristol and listening to its people, you will notice a strong and unmistakable local accent.

A linguistic quirk unique to the city and its surroundings is to add an 'el' sound on the end of words that finish with a vowel.

It may be that this local dialect shifted the city's original name of 'Bristowe' to Bristol!



Bristol Harbour from the gallery of the MShed © Nik Hughes-Roberts