

# PCC RIVER CRUISE

As you will be moving over the ground at several miles an hour you will pass some points of interest before you have time to read about them fully, so look at the map first to see where they are and peruse the notes at leisure. It may be easier to look at some on the way up and others on the return journey.

"Pill, Pill, I love thee still

Even tho' I'm Leaving.

Oh when the rain down pours,

The thunder roars

And the lightning flashes by

You'd be better by far

In the Duke or the star

Than on the old Pill Ferry Tonight".

(Adge Cutler)

We hope that the weather will not be quite so extreme, but we do know you won't need to visit a pub to be well looked after. The Portishead Cruising Club will ensure that you have a memorable evening.

Sadly the ferry closed in 1974: a change in prosperity meant more and more people now had cars so the opening of the M5 Avon Bridge spelt the end of the river crossing that had existed since at least the 11th Century.

The PCC clubhouse was built in the ferry terminal but the upper floor extension has altered it dramatically.

Before the local authority decided to demolish all the small cottages that were vulnerable to the flooding, this part of Pill looked like a Cornish village. There had at one time been 18 pubs and the PCC HQ is on the site of one of them, there are still some locals who remember the tide reaching half way up the dart board, but now apart from those in the song only two others remain.

## 1. PILL

The village was originally called Crockham pill on account of the nearby Crockery Kiln at Ham Green, and the spelling was changed variously; the most common choice now is Crockerne Pill the full title being reserved for the creek itself. Whilst it seems that extensive mooring space was only available since the 17th century the word "pill" is Ancient Briton for creek or inlet so the settlement may have existed from that time. The ferry dates at least from the time of Domesday and was a well-established route for the Lords of Berkeley to visit their lands at Portbury.

Apart from the pilots who made the village famous there were two other important sorts of boatmen, westernmen and hobbler. Before the pilots amalgamated early in the 20th century the only certain way to ensure work was to "seek" as far west as Lundy or further, there are reports of pilot cutters waiting off Liverpool to intercept ships bound for Bristol. The westernman would board the pilot onto the ship and then sail back with the help of a boy. The Bristol Channel Pilot cutters are renowned the world over for their sea keeping ability and turn of speed. On one occasion after a pilot boarded a steamer off Land's End the 'Man and boy' on the cutter arrived back at Pill before the Steamer.

The hobbler had two jobs, to row the fleets of boats that towed the sailing boats up from King Road, beyond the mouth of the river and then to secure the mooring ropes in port. There is precious little rowing done nowadays but there are two of the boats left in the creek (ask your captain to point them out). Along the river and especially around horseshoe bend you will notice that there are some large bollards on the river banks, these were used by the hobbler to haul the ships by hand.

## 2. THE WATCHHOUSE

This imposing grey, slated customs house was built about 200 years ago, but the site may be even older. Historians disagree about the degree to which local people were involved in smuggling. Consider for yourself; for hundreds of years Bristol was second only to London in the amount of trade, all of which had to pass Pill; the customs officer's house was much larger than most local houses and local men were known as "pill sharks" - I think it quite probable that there was some smuggling! The nickname has two derivations, the first because true locals were alleged to have a double row of teeth, the second a rather more grisly one. To supplement rations the ships trading across the Atlantic

would bait a book with salt pork to catch sharks with. It seems that the bait often got forgotten by the crews but it never got past Pill.!

There are a number of pirates associated with Pill, the most notable being Bluebeard!

### 3. ADAM AND EVE

The whitewashed building set on the rocks is of dubious origin. It may be the entrance of a smuggler's tunnel or a route for slaves. I like this explanation: - a young girl had a boyfriend of whom her father disapproved, after their elopement and recapture he built the two towers and locked one in each, so that they could see each other but not touch. In these mundane times it serves as a useful base for one of the many navigational lights.

Towards the beginning of the 20th Century two nurses (from the nearby Ham Green Hospital) were swept off the rocks alongside the Adam and Eve and lost. Following that accident the doorway was blocked up and generally access was made more difficult to deter visitors. The rumour is that the doorway marks the beginning of an underground passage which may have connected with the Hospital (or a predeceasing building).

### 4. HUNG ROAD

This name derives from the "road"- a stretch of water where ship lay - the ships were hung by their ropes to stop them falling over when the tide went out- This area was the first of Bristol's ports, goods were transshipped into barges which were easier to move upriver. The mooring rings can still be seen quite easily. The overhanging trees show quite clearly the upper limit of the tide. These woods were supposed to be the haunt of the "oakum boys". These mythical people supposedly eked out a living by picking rope for caulking but were also very useful in frightening naughty children. With the quality of the river water improving over the last few years a number of pairs of herons are now nesting in the trees.

### 5. CHAPEL PILL

This next creek is also home to many PCC boats now, but was unused for a long time though there was a landing stage where materials for Ham Green Hospital were landed. St. Katherine was the patron whom the sailors asked to bless a voyage and thanked for a safe return. The actual chapel is believed to have been built where the farmhouse now stands.

### 6. THE POWDER HOUSE

When wooden ships were so tightly packed in the centre of the city that it was possible to walk from bank to bank there was a tremendous risk of fire so as a precaution all gunpowder was discharged for safekeeping, there hopefully being little need for cannons in the city.

### 7. HORSESHOE BEND

Whilst the tightness of the radius has limited the length of ships passing, it is the speed of the tide that has been the downfall of many vessels. The rise and fall of Bristol Channel tides is the second highest in the world and even at this point can be over 30 feet (just think about that). These means of course that the currents are considerable and give rise to the Severn Bore! though I hope no-one will find one on the river Avon tonight. Even the most experienced and careful sailors have encountered problems. Of all the ships that have come to grief here perhaps the saddest was the SS DEMERARA. One of Brunel's designs and with only the SS GREAT BRITAIN bigger than her to be built in Bristol she must have been a great sight as she made her maiden voyage down river. Like the TITANIC'S this was also an ill-fated trip. Having failed to negotiate the bend, DEMERARA took the ground and though she was floated off later she was so badly strained she had to be scrapped.

### 8. SEA MILLS REACH

Consider all the types of shipping that have passed this way over the centuries, going back to pre-history when the stones for the great henge on Salisbury plain are rumoured to have passed this way. The heyday of the City Docks was in the 18th Century when great wealth was made in the Slave Trade. Few slaves actually were brought to Bristol. The trade was triangular, trading goods to West Africa, slaves to the West Indies notably Jamaica - and then returning with rum, sugar and other tropical goods. After the decline of this trade Bristol slipped from importance. For pilots to maintain their license on any stretch of water they are required to undertake the pilotage of at least four vessels a year. Following the grounding of the SS Waverley on the horseshoe bend in 1998 there have not been enough vessels passing up the river to enable any of the pilots to retain their qualification for the river Avon. The traffic that has increased is the wildlife. Waterfowl from swans to little ringed plovers and including all sorts of wading birds use the river both as a feeding place and a flyway inland. Below the surface all sorts of fish swim in, sea trout have been recently seen in the upper reaches. Salmon can still be found, but they cannot survive long and you would have to be quick to get them before the 'sharks'. Dolphins have been sighted in the river but these cases are very rare.

Far away to the right as you travel up you may be able to see Leigh Court, for a long time the home of the Miles family and reputed to have been one of the hideaways for King Charles who crossed the Pill ferry. On the opposite side are the remains of ABONAE, the Roman docks now known as Sea Mills. Originally built to export Mendip lead, with a road link to Bath it could never compete with Bristol and its end was ensured when the railway bridged its entrance. The round fronted building was a signal station. Before radio, details of approaching traffic were passed by loud hailer to passing vessels. There is another down river (see if you can spot it later). Despite being closed down now the Dock master will be aware of your approach, there is a close circuit TV - so smile

## 9. MILES DOCK

Just large enough for one barge this served the Celestine mine belonging to the Leigh Court estate - hence named after the family. The product's other name is Strontium and used to be an important ingredient of pyrotechnics. There were other mines further up (you can see them on the map) where Bristol diamonds (geodes) were found. Nowadays the only blasting is that of police marksmen practising - so watch out!

## 10. THE AVON GORGE

You are now entering what has been described as "the most splendid approach to any port in the world", I am sure you will find it impressive. The gorge reaches its most spectacular where the 250 feet high cliffs are spanned by Brunel's masterpiece, the Clifton Suspension Bridge. Sadly the best view of this is from the hills to the south of the City. Lit up at night the bridge seems to be floating over the houses. Scientists will tell you that the gorge was formed by some action of the ice cap, but I find the legend of Giant GORAM and his brother Vincent much more appealing. These enormous brothers were exact opposites in temperament. Goram did as little as possible and Vincent was never still. For some reason Vincent decided to dig a new course for the river and managed to persuade Goram to help. Having only one set of tools they stood three miles apart and threw them to each other as needed! Before too long Goram lay down to sleep but Vincent just kept on. He didn't realise what had happened and threw a pickaxe which struck Goram on the head and killed him. Vincent was stricken with grief so devoted himself to good works, becoming a hermit living in a cave high in the cliffs - St. Vincent's Rocks. This cave is still visible, it now has a yellow grating platform extending out of the rock face near the suspension bridge. Although the back of the cave has been extended and is now accessible from Clifton Down (through the camera obscura building), it previously was used by penitent catholic monks and priests as a hermitage, they were lowered to it by basket.

These cliffs provide some renowned climbing for those who like that sort of thing, reputedly some of the best 'pitches' in Europe. On the opposite bank the more gentle slopes allow a wide variety of trees to grow. The passing seasons add an extra dimension to the view I am not sure whether the delicate greens of spring are not more appealing than the more strident hues of autumn. Leigh Woods are of great interest to naturalists of all sorts. Rare trees, plants and birds of many types may be found here. That most majestic of falcons, the peregrine; now breeds here regularly. Of the mammals that you might possibly see along the river the fox and the badger are the largest but you are more likely to see a fox in the City or crossing the Suspension Bridge than down in the woodland where they are much more shy. The Suspension Bridge deserves a book to itself, but let's confine ourselves to its connection with the river. An unfortunate fact is that its height makes it a favourite spot for suicides. Until recently no-one had survived a fall and the Pill ferryman had to rescue the bodies. He preferred to land them at the Somerset bank as the fee was 7s 6d as opposed to 6 shillings on the Gloucester side. There was a notable exception to this, in the last century when a demented father threw his two young daughters over. Luckily for them their billowing dresses acted as parachutes and they were rescued alive by a pill boatman. Since then two men have survived unsupported descents and several others have escaped injury by using parachutes or elastic ropes to break their fall - some stunt. Two other notable facts about the suspension bridge was that in Brunel never saw the bridge completed, construction of the bridge was halted when the massive brick buttress on the Somerset side bankrupted the project. Secondly as part of its commissioning tests the engineers determined that the heaviest load the bridge was likely to endure would be a traffic jam of carts laden with stone from the nearby quarry. The bridge was duly loaded with nose to tail carts and it stood the test, however it does not state the amount paid to the drivers of the last cart.

## 11. HOTWELLS

This spa enjoyed only a short spell of popularity. Even though it is just below the grand terraces of Clifton and Cliftonwood, built for the rich merchants, it was never really in the same class as Bath or other more fashionable spas. As a result it was to here that the terminally ill came as a final hope and it became quite literally 'the last resort'. Together with the fact that the warm spring erupts below the high tide line and was subject to pollution meant that the Hot Wells soon fell into disuse. The now defunct Clifton Cliffs funicular railway took passengers from the Portway up to the spa.

The wooden staging was the pontoon used by the paddle steamers which ran such a successful service to all the Channel ports before motor transport became widely available.

You may be able to see a statue near here it is a bust of Samuel Plimsol an eminent parliamentarian who was known as 'the sailors friend'. Amongst his campaigns for safety at sea the best known is the device painted on the side of

every ship to ensure it is never overloaded - the Plimsoll Line. Guarded by the Plimsoll swinging bridge, the docks may not be very busy with commercial shipping but the pleasure craft continue to expand so the bridge needs to be opened regularly still often to the annoyance of commuters. The very large redbrick buildings are monuments to another of the City's past successes that is now considered as anti social as slavery. With the decline of the tobacco industry there is no longer any need for the bonded warehouses and the buildings are now used just for storage. The other well known commodities - wine and sherry are no longer shipped here either, nationalisation of company policy has relocated the importers of Harvey's Bristol cream and Milk elsewhere.

It was from these docks that John Cabot set off on his voyage of discovery to America with a pilot man, James Wray to pilot him. Immigrant Methodists also crossed the Atlantic, starting from; Pill. There are monuments to both events in Pill very near the creek - ask to have them pointed out.

You won't have time tonight to visit these tonight but come to explore the village at your leisure on another occasion. An excellent opportunity will be the Pill Regatta, when a few of those old skills will be practised. Enjoy your trip.