

Manson's
**BRISTOL
MISCELLANY**

Searching for the soul of the city

Michael Manson

VOLUME 1





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A word about the maze motif. This is from a roof boss in St Mary Redcliffe. It really does work as a maze. Though it does your head in if you follow it standing in the aisle, 10 metres below. A brick maze based on this design was built in Victoria Park in 1984, on the route of the twelfth century Redcliffe water pipe.

INTRODUCTION

Manson's *Bristol Miscellany* is my search for the soul of the city.

I like to get to know the place I live in, to understand what makes it tick. As I wander round Bristol I find myself looking for the footprints of previous times. Why does our city look like it does? I want to understand why that building stands over there, why that road bends in that particular spot. I've lived in Bristol for over 45 years and I'm still finding new corners, new streets, new communities even.

There are few rules. To be honest, it's whatever grabs my interest. And I hope it will interest you. The geographical boundaries are pretty flexible as well. So *Manson's Bristol Miscellany* is exactly that. It's a personal history of Bristol and in no way is it definitive.

The *Bristol Miscellany* began life as a compendium of random facts. I began by focusing on lesser known stories. I became engrossed in hidden rivers, medieval walls, markets and fairs, prisons, the shameful slave trade, the treatment of mental illness, social housing, support for the poor, extreme weather. The list goes on.

It's been a long time in the making. I started 15 years ago, writing articles for the now sadly defunct *Bristol Review of Books* and it's grown from there. The 2020 Covid-19 lockdown gave

me the opportunity to concentrate my energy and pull the strands together.

As the project grew the question was how to organise this cornucopia of information. The obvious answer was to arrange alphabetically. But then the connections get lost or obscured. The same with a chronological arrangement. In the end, I grouped topics under broad thematic headings. However, the book is still a miscellany rather than a comprehensive history,

Recently, there has been a resurgence of interest in Bristol's past. The city's story is being re-assessed and revised. After a conversation that had been going nowhere for decades, Edward Colston's Victorian statue was torn down and thrown in the docks. History lives and continues to evolve.

I'd be delighted if the *Miscellany* helps readers to see their environment just that little bit more clearly and, maybe, even embark on their own voyage of discovery. The aim is to rescue the past to give order to the present. As the Czech writer Ivan Klima (b.1931) wrote: 'To know a city is to love a city'. And to love a city hopefully means we will respect it and look after it. Bristol is a very special place. Let's keep it that way.'

Michael Manson

IN THE BEGINNING

A FEW MODEST MOUNDS

- Bristol's hill forts -

Bristol, admittedly, has no epic ancient monuments such as Maiden Castle or Silbury Hill. If you look carefully, however, there are a few modest mounds and unassuming hill-forts that point to settlement in prehistoric times.

One of the earliest remains is a Bronze Age (1800-600 BCE) barrow in Milltut Field, Badock's Wood, Southmead. It was excavated in 1873; a human skull was found in the centre of the mound, but little else.¹ The spot is marked by a stainless steel artwork that was installed in 2003 by the sculptor Michael Fairfax. The evocative prose on the obelisk was written by the sculptor's father, the poet and founder of the Arvon Foundation, John Fairfax (1930-2008). It reads:

'At Badock's wood ghostly windmill sails turn and like a rewind film spin through history to remote times when this was a burial place for a bronze age warrior. In that past landscape wolves prowled and nervy deer grazed while wild hog rooted among trees.'

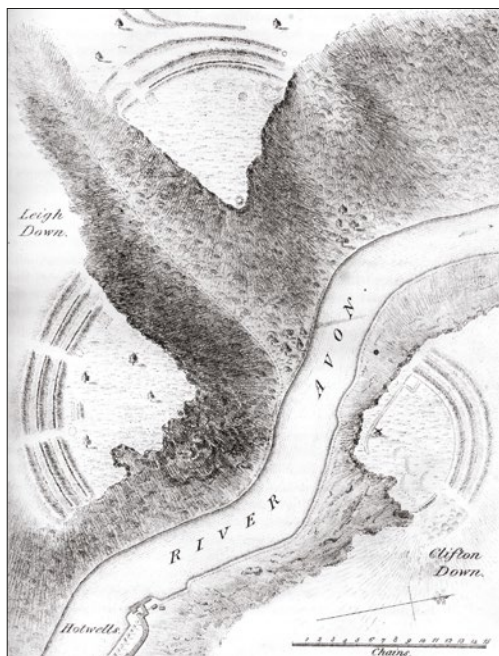
Elsewhere, there are the remains of a



Bronze Age (1800-600 B.C.E.) barrow in Milltut Field, Badock's Wood, Southmead.

megalithic long barrow, now a garden rockery, in a private front garden on Druid Hill, Stoke Bishop.²

There are at least six Iron Age (600 BCE to AD 43) forts in the immediate vicinity of Bristol. They are all on top of hills and offer panoramic views. Though, maybe, fort is too strong a word as some were little more than cattle enclosures protected by a ditch. The most noticeable, and most clearly seen, is the 4.5 acre camp on which the Clifton Observatory



Three hill-forts cling to the Avon Gorge.

stands. The earthworks, originally two ditches, on the sides not protected by the sheer drop of the gorge, are best viewed if you approach along the footpath from Clifton Down Road.

Across the Avon Gorge were another two camps. To the south was Bower Walls, later known as Burgh Walls (8 acres). Now barely visible, the ramparts were levelled when the Victorian Burwalls House (c.1880) was built. To the north of this, overlooking Nightingale Valley, and also hard to discern because of ancient woodland, was another camp, Stokeleigh (7.5 acres). A prehistoric track once ran down Nightingale Valley to a ford across the Avon. In those days, at low water, during spring tides, the river could be crossed on foot on a reef of rocks. 'Boys are wet scarcely above the knees', wrote the historian, Samuel Seyer. It is suggested that these three camps

were established to guard such a strategic river crossing.³

Further north of the city three hill-forts stood on King's Weston Hill, a ridge with some precipitous drops, overlooking the wooded Hazel Brook Valley.⁴ The largest of these was on the Blaise Castle Estate, which now has an eighteenth century gothic folly tower in the centre of its enclosure. Also, on King's Weston Hill, there were at least two small Iron Age round barrows.

Finally, it has long been speculated that the clump of trees, known as the Seven Sisters (though only three trees remain at the time of writing), on a tump on Durdham Downs, is a burial mound. Unfortunately, there is no archaeological evidence to confirm this thesis.

Prehistoric play equipment?



Below the Clifton Observatory is a short stretch of sloping rock that has been shined by the bottoms of many generations. One wonders for how long Bristol's children have skidded down this stone slide. Since time immemorial? Who knows? It is tempting to imagine that, perhaps, the Iron Age children who lived in the nearby hill-fort also partook of this pleasure?

WHAT DID THE ROMANS DO FOR BRISTOL?

- *Abonae* -

Quite frankly, not much. The name Bristol didn't exist. What was later to become Bristol was somewhere Romans mostly passed by on their way to somewhere else. It would seem that the Romans were wary of our area's steep wooded hills, fast-running river and terrifying gorge, preferring to restrict their travel to the surrounding plateau. It has been suggested that the Saxon footprint of Bristol sits on the plan of an earlier Roman fortified town⁵ but, at the present time, this is still conjecture.

Even so, the local landscape wasn't entirely empty. Adventurous Romano-British settlers established a number of extensive farms and villas in the area. Excavations have shown that the Iron Age hill-forts were utilised by the Romans. Blaise Castle hill-fort almost certainly contained a late Romano-British temple,⁶ while a villa was built in the Clifton camp. When the foundations for the Blaise Castle folly were being dug in 1766 a large number of Roman coins were found.⁷

A Roman road, the grandly named Via Julia, ran from Aqua Sulis (Bath), to Abonae (Sea Mills). The road's exact route through Bristol has been lost, though traces are to be found on the Downs. In the low slanting light of a midwinter afternoon the ghostly shadow of the road is faintly visible. From the Downs the road then disappears under the gardens of Stoke Bishop, emerging as Mariners Drive and then Roman Way, not long after terminating at Sea Mills.

It was from the small, muddy port of Abonae that travellers set sail across the



The small, muddy port of Abonae.



In the low slanting light the ghostly shadow of the Via Julia is faintly visible.

Severn to the important Roman garrison town of Isca Silurum (Caerleon) on the river Usk in South Wales.

Kingsweston Villa was discovered in the 1940s during the construction of the Lawrence Weston housing estate. Excavations uncovered traces of a large stone farmstead with mosaics, under-floor heating and plunge pools. Coins indicate that it was last inhabited at the end of the third century.

Remains from the Brislington Villa – a small mosaic, pewter pots and roof tiles –

THE AUTHOR



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Michael Manson studied sociology at Leicester University. He has an MA in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University and a Post Graduate Diploma

from Bristol Polytechnic in Local Studies.

Michael was a co-editor of the *Bristol Review of Books* (2006-13), a co-founder of the Bristol Short Story Prize (2008) and is an organiser of the Bristol Festival of Literature (2010 to present). He currently edits Bristol Civic Society's magazine *Better Bristol*.

Michael is the author of four history books on Bristol:

- *Bristol Beyond the Bridge* (Redcliffe)
- *Riot! The Bristol Bridge Massacre of 1793* (Tangent Books)
- *The Hidden History of St Andrews* (Past & Present Press)
- *Vice and Virtue. Discovering the Story of Old Market, Bristol* (with Dr Edson Burton) (Bristol Books)

Mike has also written three novels. In 2015 his Bristol-based novel *Where's My Money?* was selected by BBC TV as one of their *Books that Made Britain*. The *Jamaica Gleaner* described Mike's recent novel, *Down in Demerara*, as 'story telling at its best'.

COMING
SOON!

MANSON'S BRISTOL MISCELLANY VOLUME 2

To include:

- **Getting around**
 - roads, ferries, trams, trains and bridges.
 - **Webs of communication** – newspapers and telecommunications.
 - **Earth, wind and flood** – weather extremes and earthquakes.
 - **Realists and romantics**
 - a new poetic movement, literary connections.
 - **A roof over your head**
 - almshouses, workhouses, orphanages and social housing.
 - **Buildings of Bristol**
 - bricks and stones, grand houses, squares, windmills and post war reconstruction.
- And so much more...**