



◀ Business  
West

# 200 Years of Future Thinking

Bristol Chamber of Commerce



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Bristol Chamber of Commerce

Historic Productions  
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## Introduction

**The phrase '200 years of future thinking' celebrates the two centuries that** have passed since the Bristol Chamber of Commerce was founded in 1823. Then, Bristol was suffering, despite a major reconstruction and upgrading of Bristol docks which had been completed in 1809, from a diminution of overseas and local trade resulting from the harsh dues levied by the city authorities on the shipping using the docks. Now, in the 21st century, Bristol is basking in the rejuvenation and reinvigoration of the city centre, and particularly the docks, brought about in recent decades through the energetic involvement of today's Chamber of Commerce, along with The Bristol Initiative – a venture established in 1988 which merged with the Chamber of Commerce in 1992 – now part of Business West. Those initiatives were themselves spurred on, at least in part, by local challenges. In the 1980s and early 1990s, riots in the more deprived parts of the city highlighted the urgent need for regeneration and renewal, and triggered a response from a number of enlightened local business leaders and professionals aimed at tackling those challenges and improving the lives of all of the city's residents. It became increasingly clear that, for Bristol overall to grow and flourish, there needed to be major enrichment for all in areas such as housing, education, recreational facilities, employment opportunities, transport and general quality of life.

Two hundred years ago the newly-formed Bristol Chamber of Commerce set out, on behalf of its members and the wider city, both to challenge the extortionate levies that were crippling their industries and to establish a more sustainable platform for future growth and prosperity. Now, in 2023, Business West – the active voice of business not just in Bristol itself but across the South West – is celebrating the anniversary both by building on the achievements of the city's history, both recent and more distant, and by formulating a coherent and imaginative programme of innovation, change and development which will fuel yet more prosperity and well-being.

There is a wider context. In 1373, 650 years ago, a charter of King Edward III granted that Bristol shall 'be for ever in future alike separated and in



Brunel's SS Great Britain.

**BRUNEL'S SS GREAT BRITAIN**





Magic hour  
on the docks.  
© Jim Cossey

all respects exempted from the said counties of Gloucester and Somerset both by land and by water and that it be a county by itself.' Bristol was the first provincial town to be awarded this status. The city is therefore also celebrating a major anniversary this year, and Bristol Ideas is putting on an array of activities to mark not just that occasion but other anniversaries too, such as 200 years of the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, 180 years since the launch by Prince Albert in 1843 of Brunel's SS *Great Britain* and 60 years since the Bristol Bus Boycott, which drew national attention to racial discrimination in Britain.

Under the banner 'Business West 200', the programme is centred on Bristol but also involves the relationship with the wider Business West region, incorporating Bath and North East Somerset, parts of Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, and Great Western Enterprise in Swindon, established to support the town after the railways moved away. There are four main foci:

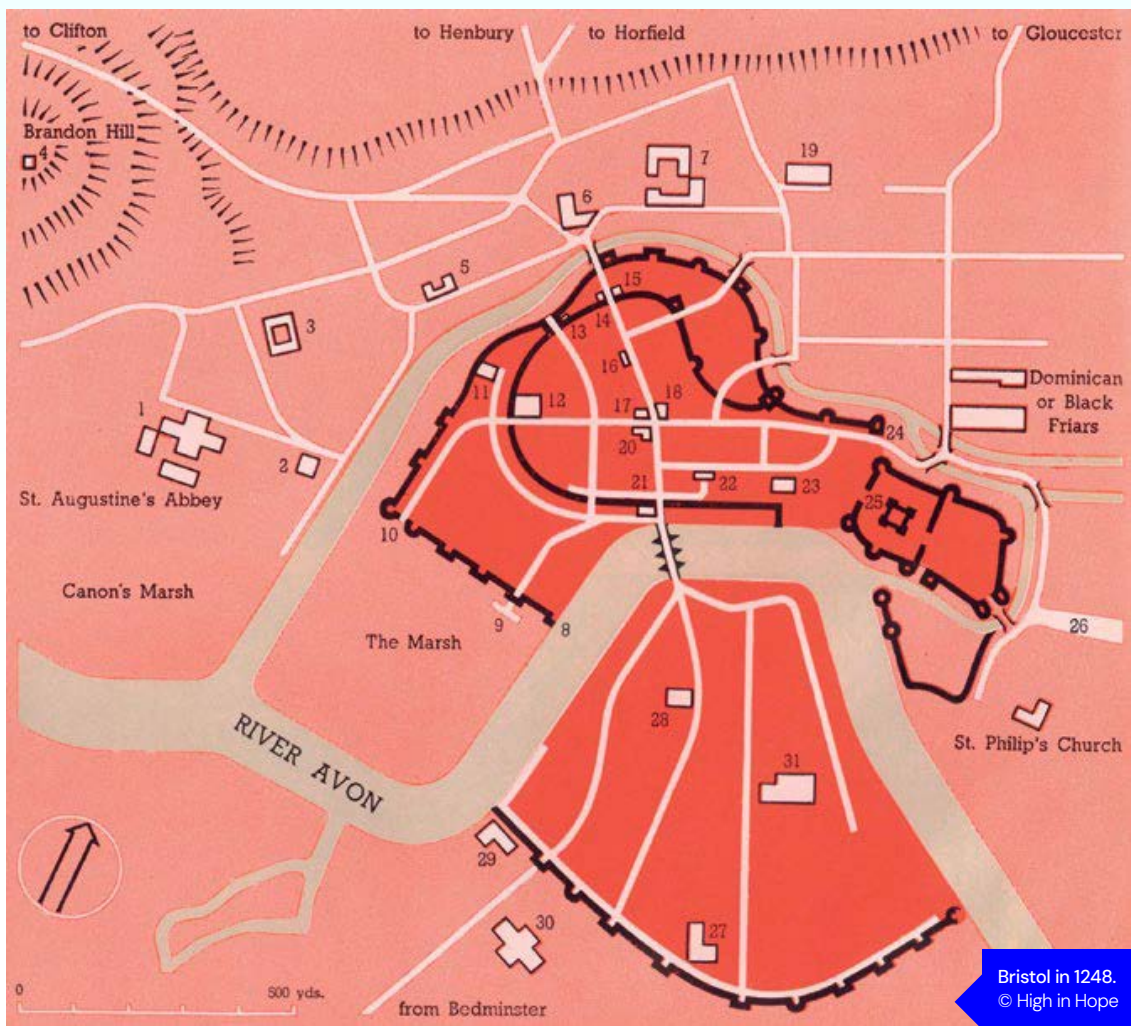
- ▶ **International trade**
- ▶ **Productivity and skills**
- ▶ **Innovation**
- ▶ **Corporate citizenship and sustainability**

These are the 'golden threads' of the programme, identifying the themes that have run through the Chamber of Commerce's aims and ambitions from the beginning and are still so relevant today.

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## Bristol as a major commercial centre

In the 13th century Bristol was already a busy port, and 100 years later it was ranked as England's third-largest town, after London and York. It exported woollen cloth and imported French wine, as well as trading widely with Portugal, southern Ireland and Iceland, from where it imported stockfish, a freeze-dried cod. And it was Bristol's wealthy ship-owning merchants who backed and funded John Cabot's successful expedition to north America in 1497.





## Mary Martin

External Communications Director, Business West

'For 200 years we've nurtured entrepreneurship, innovation and radical thinking to make this area the best place to live, learn, work and succeed in business, because when business succeeds the result is a better future for everyone.

We support the business ecosystem by delivering business services and fantastic networking opportunities, but what really sets us apart is that we fight short-termism. We work with public and private sectors; partnership working is in our DNA. Two examples are Cabot Circus and the regeneration of Bristol Harbourside, where we were instrumental, working with partners, in getting both off the ground. Business West has really come into its own in the last few years. In times of crisis, businesses need their local Chamber of Commerce, and that has really been proved with Brexit and with Covid. Businesses have had an awful lot thrown at them and we've been able to help.

For instance, with Brexit, people didn't know what kind of export documentation they would need, or what they were to do about customs declarations. We were able to help them either by doing it for them or by showing them how to do it. And then with Covid, it seemed like the government were coming out on a daily basis with new, sometimes quite complex information. So we digested it and put it into layman's language. And the feedback was that many businesses couldn't have survived without the help and support that we gave them at that time.

The difference between us and anybody else in this region is that we've been around for 200 years and we've been doing future thinking for 200 years. For 200 years we've been supporting business and we intend to carry on. We are not short term. We're not going anywhere.

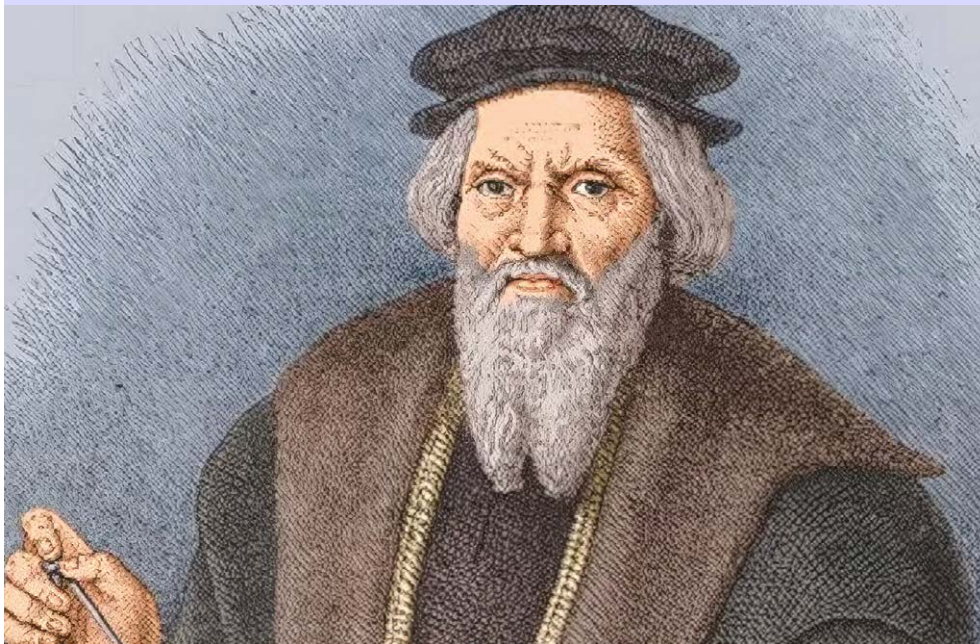
And we're all about the future. We want to be at the cutting edge and we are at the cutting edge of key sectors. We can help. If we can't, we know somebody who can.'

*For 200 years  
we've been  
supporting  
business and  
we intend to  
carry on.*

## Bristol and John Cabot

In the late 15th century Bristol's merchants, in the belief that there were lands to be discovered to the west across the ocean and that there might also be a quicker alternative route to the riches of the Orient, sent out a number of exploratory expeditions. The first to be successful was that of John Cabot in 1497. His ship, *The Matthew*, was a caravel, usually employed in local trading missions and much smaller than the ships used for voyages to European ports. It belonged to John Shipman, Bristol's richest ship-owner, and was made available to Cabot after he had received letters patent to sail west from King Henry VII. Cabot was granted the right to hold any lands he found in the name of the king, and it was also stipulated that any trade resulting from his discoveries would have to pass through the port of Bristol.

Cabot set sail on May 2 1497, landed in Newfoundland on June 24 and returned to Bristol on August 6. Among his discoveries were the teeming, lucrative cod fisheries off the north American coast, which European fishermen were later to access and exploit. Bristol's merchants quickly gained permission to send follow-up expeditions, using much larger ships and under royal licence. But they soon discovered that there was no quick and easy route to the Orient, and that the Americas were not likely to be the source of rich trade pickings, so the explorations ceased. John Cabot himself set out again from Bristol in 1498, but nothing more was heard of him or his expedition.





Bristol held its own, along with London, York, Norwich, Exeter, Ipswich, Newcastle and Hull, as one of England's major commercial hubs of the medieval period. The city's Corporation sought to regulate trade by passing measures designed to protect its own merchants from competition, imposing fines and other sanctions on those who flouted the rules. In 1467 the Fellowship of Merchants was established, and in 1500 the organisation drew up a new charter designed to extend even more protection to its own members and prevent non-members from competing. To quote from John Latimer's *History of the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol* (1903), the charter enacted that '...when any ship laden with foreign merchandise, the property of a non-burgess or foreigner, shall arrive at the Quay, the Fellowship shall assemble and determine what shall be done on behalf of the entire body' – in plain words, would fix the prices to be offered. Other clauses prohibited any burgess of the town from purchasing, handling or taking charge of goods without the agreement of the Fellowship on pain of forfeiting one-sixth of the value; and no-one was to purchase foreign goods except in Spicer's Hall, the place designated for depositing them.

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## **Caroline Duckworth**

### **Treasurer of the Society of Merchant Venturers**

In modern terms, I am the Chief Executive. But my position has been called the Treasurer from time immemorial. We go back much further than the Chamber of Commerce, but we were linked with them from their beginning 200 years ago.

Our membership is unofficially capped at 80 Merchants, and today we have 74. Initially, they would all have been men who were controlling goods in and out of the port or themselves trading; and in the early days, we were a lobbying organisation and also, even back then, had an association with education. Later on, as we evolved and changed, we probably became a bit more of a glorified dining club. But then in the last 30 years or so, you can see the next transformation of the Society into what it looks like today. Women were admitted in 2003 for the first time, and then in the last six years we've had our first non-white members – not a policy decision, just how it evolved. And so now we are a much more diverse group, still largely drawn from the private sector although we do have some public sector members – a couple of doctors, for example, and a lot of people who are heavily involved in the voluntary sector. We've still got a long way to go in terms of parity and equality – out of 74 members there are 16 women, and five men and women who are people of colour. We're on the proverbial journey.

We talk about five pillars to our work. The first one is education. The Venturers Trust has eight state academy schools and one independent. The second pillar is our work in care homes. We have one we run ourselves as well as an alms house, and we are involved in managing the endowment for the St Monica Trust, an independent and separate charity set up in the 1920s by Henry Herbert Wills to look after what he and his wife, Monica, called retired gentlefolk. He invested £1 million and asked the Merchants to look after that money on behalf of St Monica's. That £1 million is today worth somewhere in the region of £320 million, and that produces £6 million a year, which we pay across to St Monica's for them to use for charitable purposes. And then we have the Downs, of which we own half and the City Council owns half, both parties being there to protect the Downs and make sure that it can never be built on and that there is open space for everybody. The fourth pillar is our involvement in social enterprise, still quite a fledgling piece of work, though our most substantial involvement was in the development of Bristol and Bath Regional Capital (BBRC) of which we were one of nine founding members. And then the final pillar is our



charitable giving. We have a small endowment of some £7 million, which produces about £250,000 a year which we use to give out small grants to local organisations that are doing good.

And then there's the issue of the slave trade. Our membership has had to tackle the radical new approaches to what has become the toxic brand around Edward Colston, with institutions changing their names and the toppling of the statue. We're becoming more aware of our history. There has been a lot of debate within the Society about how much time, energy and money we want to spend delving into the past, and how much we want to focus on what we're doing today; it's about us looking at everything we do. We took on board a lot of the criticism about who we were, and being unaccountable and unelected, when actually we have had a lot of information about us and our past on our website for several years. We are open about our past involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. And equally we are open about what we do now, and to whom we are accountable.

Our members recognise the tension between business and social responsibility. Yes, business makes money, it creates wealth, it provides employment, but actually it's something more than that. And that's why lots of Merchants want to give something back. Most people will say 'I want to get involved. I want Bristol to be a better place for everybody.' And that benefits everybody.

We are members of Business West, of course. They have done a remarkable job, and they were ahead of the game in recognising the role that charities played. They brought you in, they gave you opportunities, they recognised the importance of bringing together the public, the private and the voluntary sector. And they recognise that there are still some intractable problems from years ago that need new thinking to tackle now.

***Business West  
... have done a  
remarkable job.***



The first half of the 16th century, full of political and religious upheaval, caused major turmoil in the mercantile and commercial worlds. The merchants of Bristol therefore appealed to King Edward VI, who in 1552 granted them a new charter whereby the Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers was to be a body corporate with perpetual succession and with substantial regulatory powers. These powers were reinforced in 1566 by letters patent issued by Queen Elizabeth I confirming her brother's dispositions, and then by an Act of Parliament ordaining in broad terms that no citizen except a member of the Society should traffic in merchandise beyond the seas upon pain of forfeiture of all the goods thus acquired.

## Mimi Avery

### Brand Ambassador for Averys Wine Merchants

I'm a fifth generation Avery of Averys Wine Merchants based in Bristol, and we claim to be 230 years old this year. We are based in a shop at the bottom of Park Street, underneath the viaduct, where there has been a merchant since the 1700s, and in 1793 was listed as the premises of a wine merchant. My grandfather therefore dated our presence there to 1793 (which would make us three years older than Harvey's). I have been working in the business now for 23 years.

We are an international business. We do have some English wines, but 99.9 percent of all the wine we bring in is from abroad. My grandfather was the first person to bring in wines from the regions of Pomerol and Bordeaux, in the 1950s. Then my father pioneered fine wines from California, and was also among the first to import wines from Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

Business West has always been a great help to us, whether as a centre for networking, or finding out what's going on, or for help with aspects of business, like post-Brexit paperwork. And if they don't know the answer to a question, they will find out for you. It's a place where you meet people from all sorts of businesses, large and small, and where you can find all sorts of contacts. BW makes it easy to form mutually helpful groups so that you're not working on your own but as part of a larger group that can provide help, for example, with web design and IT generally, marketing, PR, even catering.

We're currently looking a lot at sustainability, and BW has a lot of information sources that we can use to help with this, particularly as our suppliers are mostly from abroad. We've already made all our deliveries outside Bristol carbon neutral, at present through payment offsetting; we have just started investing in a sequoia wood forest in Abergavenny because we wanted the carbon payments to be more local and British-based.

The 17th and 18th centuries were boom times for Bristol, with population growing, manufacturing and trading flourishing and new industries, often based on expertise imported from Europe, being established. Unfortunately slave trade flourished in the city, and added considerably to the wealth of the merchants who pursued it. Along with the already well-established industries, the second half of the 18th century saw the opening of Fry's chocolate factory and Harvey's and Avery's wine businesses. But the new industrial cities of Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham were growing fast and beginning to threaten Bristol's prosperity and position.

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Aldwick Estate near Bristol  
© Visit Bristol

In response, at the beginning of the 19th century, the city embarked on an ambitious and effective programme to upgrade Bristol docks. This resulted in the construction of the Floating Harbour, which was completed in 1809. A bypass of the tidal River Avon called The Cut was dug, allowing water levels in the harbour to remain constant and unaffected by tidal variations in the river itself. This new facility conferred major benefits on the city's commercial potential; but the cost of the project resulted in huge dues being levied on shipping and imports by the docks' owners which, supplemented by the town dues imposed by the Corporation, crippled the development of the port and caused trade to be diverted to other cities where charges were considerably lower.

Bristol harbour, etching, c.1850  
© Bristol Record Office





## Samir Savant

Chief Executive of St George's

St George's is 200 years old as a building this year. The church was consecrated in 1823 and functioned as a church right up until the 1970s; but with dwindling congregations, the Diocese of Bristol needed a new use for it. We'd already discovered that the acoustics at St George's were perfect for music and the spoken word, so the charity that is St George's today was born. We do around 300 events a year, and we very much reflect changing tastes in music, and try to cover as many musical genres as possible – classical, jazz, folk music, contemporary music and also digital technologies. We book a huge variety of artists, and the music they make now can be very different from when we started in the 1970s.

During lockdown we were filming a lot and then streaming it, so we are very conscious that the ways in which people access music has changed and will go on changing. The magic of a live experience, with that connection between artist and the audience, will always be there. But more and more people want to experience music, the spoken word and other cultural events at home. And we are also conscious all the time that we need to be more accessible, to reach out to communities that have not traditionally seen St George's as a place they would visit.

We have been involved with Business West for quite a short time, but we really appreciate the networking opportunities we find there. They are a



© St George's  
Bristol / Evan  
Dawson

great convenor of people from all sectors, but it is also clear that they really want to do the best for Bristol. I have only been in Bristol for 18 months, after 30 years in London, and I find that Bristol is a much more collaborative city than anywhere else I have lived. People really want to work together to achieve the best for Bristol, the people who live here, the people who study here, the people who commute in to work here; and in my view Business West at the heart of that collaborative spirit.

Although St George's is a charity, we're also a successful business. Only about 40 percent of our costs are covered by ticket sales; the rest of our income comes from our cafe bar and venue hire, for events like product launches, parties, AGMs and so on. We are celebrating both our 200th anniversary and Business West's by hosting a party and networking event this year, showcasing us as an independent venue that is available for commercial hire. We've got a lovely new extension that was opened in 2018, which complements the Georgian and early Victorian building and offers a beautiful modern venue with state-of-the-art video and digital equipment. This is definitely a growth area for us.

Business is increasingly about connectivity, about the way businesses interact with each other and share good ideas and best practice. It's really important that we just keep getting people in a room together, constantly talking to each other, constantly talking about innovation, the latest product developments, the latest audience. Business West is hugely important in facilitating that approach.

A direct result of these problems was the establishment in 1823 of the Bristol Chamber of Commerce, set up by a large number of influential local companies and individuals. Chambers of Commerce have been for centuries – and still are – established all over the world in industrialised countries which operate within a market economy and free enterprise system. They are voluntary organisations of business and commercial firms, professional people, public officials and public-spirited citizens, whose primary interests are promoting, developing, protecting and publicising commercial and industrial opportunities in their areas. They also increasingly work within their communities to improve and support public works, schools, housing, the environment, recreational facilities and tourism. The first chamber in its modern sense was established in 1599 in Marseilles, and the first use of the name – *chambre de commerce* – was recorded in Paris in 1801 in association with a temporary commission set up to examine industrial and commercial problems. The first British chamber was founded in Jersey in 1768, adopting the French name for the organisation because of its proximity to France. There followed, among others, Belfast and

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Glasgow in 1783, Edinburgh and Leeds in 1785, Manchester in 1794, Birmingham in 1813, Bristol in 1823 and Liverpool in 1850. The Great Exhibition of 1851 stimulated the foundation of 13 new chambers in the subsequent decade.

Research into the history of Chambers of Commerce undertaken by the University of Cambridge has used a variety of sources to gather data about members, their occupations and their markets – often amid difficulty in interpreting the names and data because of legibility problems and the paucity of early records. The members were – unsurprisingly – overwhelmingly male, though the list for the Plymouth chamber, founded in 1813, includes ‘the widow of Symons & Sons’, which makes her one of only two known women to have had any involvement with early chambers. There were 185 founding members of the Bristol chamber in 1823 – a larger number than in many of the other nascent organisations – and they included timber merchants, shipping agents, bankers, sugar refiners, accountants, ironmongers, tailors, druggists, corn factors, manufacturers of bottles, bricks and tiles, hats, carriages... and what may have been a chocolate maker. The first President was Joseph Reynolds, and his successor in 1826 was Thomas Stock, who held the office for a second time in 1830. One Charles Vining, merchant and grocer, was a founder member, and John Vining, presumably a relative, was President from 1842–44. Among the founders were two (presumed) brothers, Samuel and William Browne, partners in Bristol Bullion Bank, and others included John Clift and Sons, importers of Russian, Saxon, German and Irish linen, John Fergus, an auctioneer, Frigram & Gooklen, lawyers, Samuel Hall & Co, Spanish wool merchants, J R Phillips & Co, wine and brandy merchants, John N Smart, a barge owner.... Those are just some of the range of occupations represented in that new chamber, which makes it all too clear that Bristol at the time was a heaving, prosperous, hardworking and industrious hub for all manner of professionals, industrialists, traders and entrepreneurs.

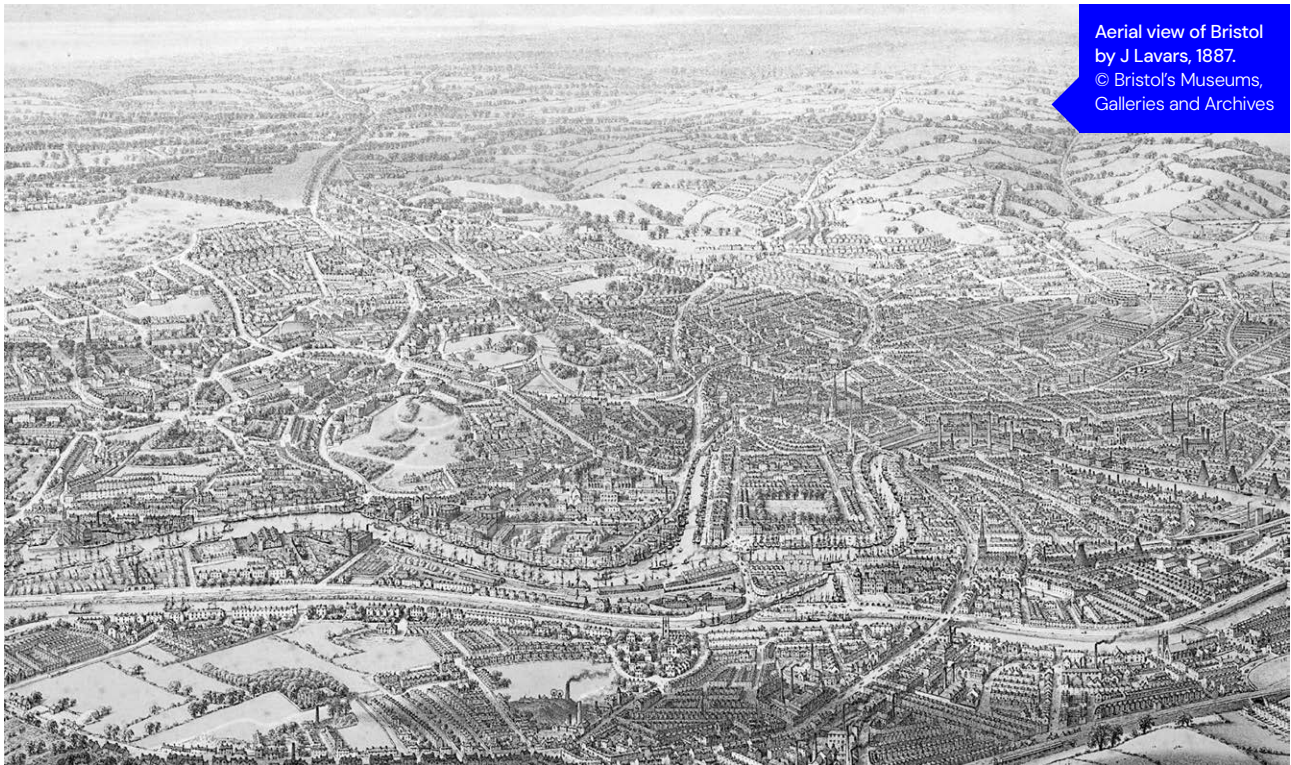
## Jonathan O'Shea

### Managing Director of The Alternative Board

Bristol has been a great place for TAB, because there are so many people looking to start up their businesses in Bristol; and it doesn't do any harm having a well-respected BBC department based here, and of course Aardman Animations as well. They have both acted as magnets to draw people with that sort of expertise into the area. There has been significant expansion, not necessarily in terms of really big companies, but just lots of small companies, maybe contractors who are working as individuals for different companies within Bristol. Here it feels as if we are ahead of the game in the tech area; Bristol seems to have that digital edge, and is also tapping into the environmental zeitgeist.

The immediate priority, for both the Chamber of Commerce and the Merchant Venturers, was to tackle the question of the dues and levies at the port. Their joint first initiative was the publication of an elaborate paper showing the comparative port charges at London, Liverpool, Hull and Bristol. A table showed that the annual dues at Bristol on the import of a range of merchandise would amount to double the charges at Liverpool and London and over three times those at Hull, while the Bristol charges for an average year's import of six important goods – tobacco, wine, sugar, wool, coffee and currants – would be nearly twice those at those other cities. On some other imports the difference between other ports and Bristol was massive: £3 as against £52 on indigo and £16 as against £345 on silk, for example. It was clear that, despite the huge advantages that Bristol's new, efficient docks offered to their users, the imposts were a major deterrent and that those wishing to import and trade via Bristol could profitably take their business elsewhere.

The reaction of the Corporation to this paper was indignant, and the attitude of the Chamber of Commerce was condemned as hasty, premature and hostile. There followed a flurry of actions and counter-actions, culminating in petitions to Parliament which eventually resulted in an act passed into law in 1826, as a result of which the civic dues were considerably reduced. The partnership between the Merchant Venturers and the Chamber of Commerce had achieved its objectives, and the way was open for business at the new docks to grow and flourish.



Aerial view of Bristol  
by J Lavars, 1887.  
© Bristol's Museums,  
Galleries and Archives

## The slave trade and its abolition

It is an undeniable fact that Bristol made a lot of money from the slave trade from the early 18th century until its abolition in 1807. The city was one of the biggest centres of the trade in England between 1725 and 1740, and several of its most prominent merchants participated in it. The infamous so-called 'triangular trade' saw Bristol ships laden with goods like cloth, rum, gunpowder and metal artefacts sailing to West Africa to exchange their cargoes for men and women sold into slavery by their rulers, who were then transported to the West Indies and the southern states of America. The ships then returned to Bristol with goods such as tobacco, sugar, cotton, indigo and cocoa.

The parliamentary and religious moves to abolish the slave trade grew in momentum from the 1780s on, but several attempts to get an act through Parliament failed. However, by 1806 there were enough members of both houses in favour of abolition to ensure that an act would be successful. On February 23 1807, after a debate lasting ten hours, the Slave Trade Act was passed by 283 votes to 16, received royal assent on March 25 and took effect on May 1. From then on no British ships or merchants could legally take part in the slave trade. Illegal trading continued of course, despite potential fines of £100 per slave found aboard a British ship; but the all-powerful Royal Navy declared that slave ships would be regarded as pirates and did a great deal to disrupt it. Treaties were also signed with African countries to dissuade their rulers from selling their



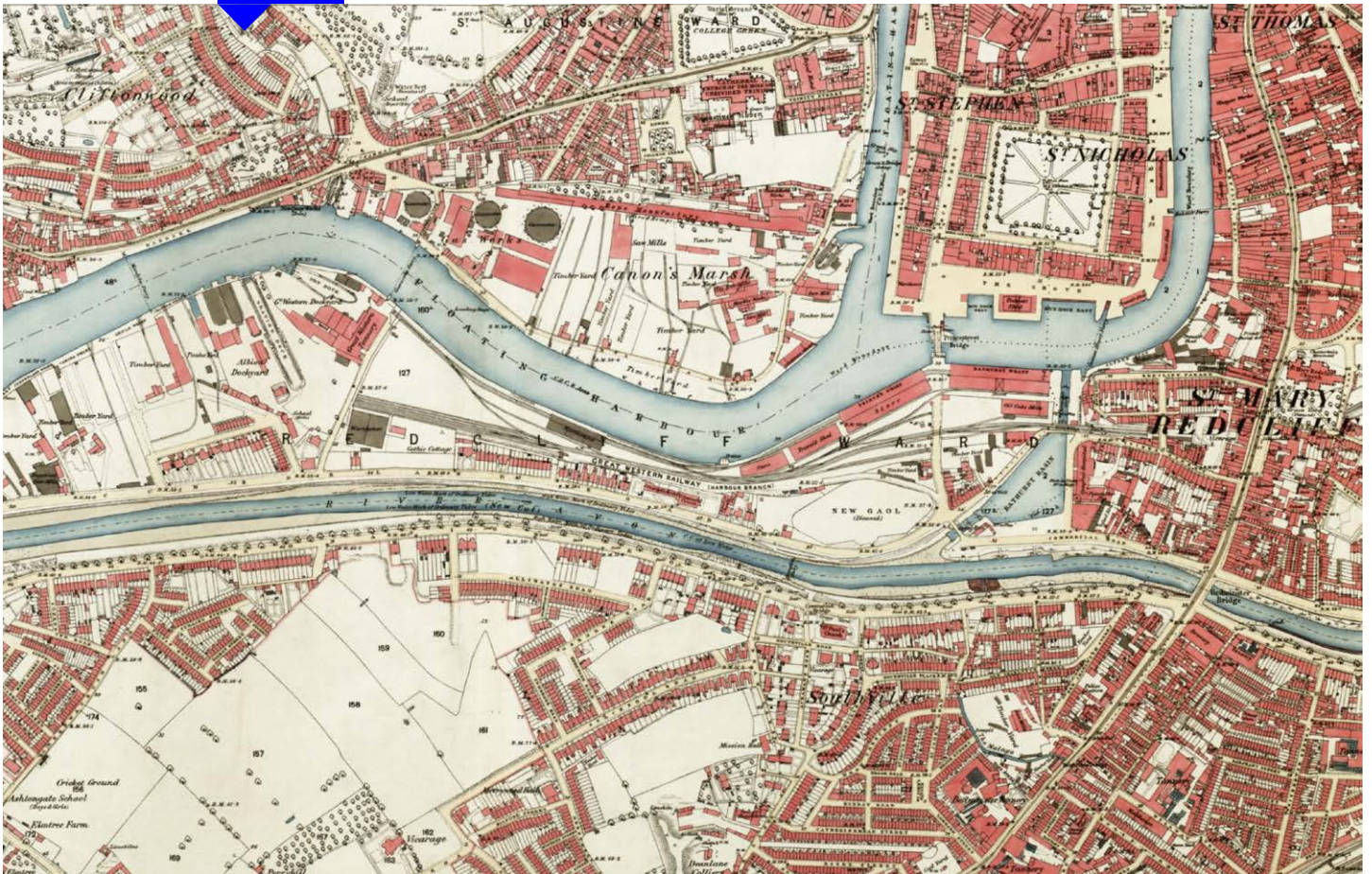
New glass panels at St Mary Redcliffe Church depicting Bristol's multicultural past.  
© St Mary Redcliffe Church / Ealish Swift

people into slavery. The 1807 act was enhanced in 1833 by the Slavery Abolition Act which made the purchase or ownership of slaves illegal in almost the whole of the British Empire.

The legacy of Bristol's involvement in the slave trade resonates to this day. Edward Colston (1636–1721) was an early and prominent trader in slaves as well as merchandise, and was also a major benefactor to the city of his birth. He endowed schools, hospitals, alms houses and churches, many of which were named after him. However, in recent years, increasingly strong feelings in the city about the source of much of its wealth have led to buildings being renamed and, in June 2020, Colston's statue being toppled and pushed into the harbour. It was retrieved and placed in the M Shed museum, lying prone and covered with graffiti.

Another legacy was the overt discrimination suffered by black and Asian immigrants to the UK, particularly after the Second World War and the influx of the 'Windrush generation'. Many companies operated a 'colour bar', and immigrants were often forced into the slum areas of cities and towns. In Bristol, 60 years ago, resentment about the refusal of the Bristol Omnibus Company to allow black or Asian workers to be employed on their buses resulted in the Bristol Bus Boycott, when a wide-ranging campaign led to many Bristolians refusing to use the buses. Such was the support and the countrywide publicity for the boycott that the company had to capitulate, and the action led to widespread condemnation of racism as well as legislation against it. Racism was not, of course, defeated. In Bristol the St Paul's riots of the 1980s arose from the deprived conditions in which many members of ethnic minorities still found themselves. Slave trading casts a long shadow.

Bristol, 1886.



The great engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel was a hugely important part of Bristol's development during the 19th century. His SS *Great Western* was built in Bristol and set off on her maiden voyage from Bristol to New York in April 1838; she was a wooden paddle-steamer, and for a year was the largest steamship to work the transatlantic route. His Great Western Railway connected Bristol first to Bath and then to London, with his Bristol Temple Meads station, opened in 1840, as the western terminus. His work on the Clifton Suspension Bridge, spanning the Avon Gorge and connecting Clifton to Leigh Woods, was bedevilled by riots and lack of funds, and it was not until after his death in 1859 that it was completed; it opened in 1864. He had taken on the project aged just 24, and described the bridge as 'my first child, my darling'. And his magnificent SS *Great Britain* is still one of the city's great tourist attractions in the dry dock where she was built. Hugely advanced for her time, she was launched by Prince Albert in 1843, was the first iron steamer to cross the Atlantic and was for many years the largest passenger ship in the world.

Clifton Suspension Bridge.  
© Jim Cossey





## Dr Matthew Tanner MBE

Board member of Business West, The Initiative and Visit West,  
CEO SS Great Britain Trust

'My role as a member of those boards is to help with the current move towards establishing a single corporate structure with a clear public interest purpose. The Initiative has always been seen as the socially conscience arm of business, but now its core values are being embraced by the whole. Effectively it's business as a force for good. It's the part of the business sector that genuinely believes that by reinvesting and seeking wide public value you get better business. It's that perfect circle, the sense that growth on a sustainable basis is good for everybody.

I'm also Chief Executive of the SS Great Britain Trust. I've been on a long journey trying to establish the idea that the Trust is an important business in its own right, a commercial entity that contributes several million pounds a year to the local economy and has created getting on for 200 jobs, in a world where a charity can be seen as being very second hand and jumble sale, and not regarded as a serious business. My involvement with Visit West and Business West has been very helpful in establishing that we're a player, we deliver stuff and we're not just some lightweight tourist attraction. I want to

establish a presence to show value and longevity and actual impact. It's about taking a longer-term view, whether we're looking forward ten years or 20 years. Our strategic plan for the Great Britain is what it is going to look like in 100 years' time, to ensure that we focus on our conservation goals with a genuinely long-term view.'

Brunel's SS  
Great Britain.





The Grove from Redcliffe, late 19th century.

A university college founded in 1876, the Venturer's School (the oldest college in Bristol which eventually became UWE), the establishment of the Wills tobacco factory, which by the end of the 19th century was one of Bristol's biggest employers, new and continued work on the docks at Avonmouth and Portishead, which were becoming the focus of burgeoning industrial centres... all contributed to the city's rapid development by the end of the century. And in the early 20th century, aviation became a central part of the story, when Sir George White, owner of Bristol Tramways, founded the Bristol Aeroplane Company in 1910. During the First World War the company established its reputation by building the Bristol Scout and the Bristol F2 fighter aircraft. The company's base at Filton was where the British Concorde was built and from where it took its maiden flight in 1969; it was also to Filton that the last UK-built Concorde returned in 2003 on its final flight, and where it remains on permanent display at Aerospace Bristol. Filton was bought by Rolls-Royce in 1966, and some of its operations are still based there.

The main impact of the First World War on Bristol, like everywhere else in the country, was the loss of several thousand of its young men. After that war, the City Council undertook a major slum clearance operation, establishing several new estates on the edges of the city, particularly at the north and south where the boundaries were extended to accommodate the growth, while a new road along the Avon Gorge linked the Floating Harbour to the rapidly expanding docks at Avonmouth.

The Second World War had a far greater impact. As both an important port and a centre of aircraft manufacture, Bristol was a major target; it was the fifth-most heavily bombed British city of the war. The bombing raids between November 1940 and April 1941, known as the Bristol Blitz, unleashed tons of high-explosive bombs and incendiaries, killing and injuring over 2,500 people and destroying or damaging nearly 90,000 buildings. There were targeted raids on the port and the Filton area, but the city centre was also badly hit, with Broadmead flattened and the area around the castle severely damaged. Fragments of the castle and the remains of two bombed-out churches still remain as features of the park that now covers that area.

As with much of British post-war planning, the decisions taken in Bristol about how best to rebuild and regenerate were disastrous. A series of unimaginative, brutalist and frankly noxious schemes imposed so-called modernisation on the city centre at the expense of its previous character. Ugly, uncompromising office blocks and car parks, intrusive road systems and hideous residential estates replaced the medieval beauty of what had been a fine mercantile city. To quote from *Bristol: Partnership in Governance. Ten Years of the Bristol Initiative*, 'The city's disregard of its heritage [at that time] was symptomatic of a deeper malaise... It was a city which had lost its way.' Deprivation and stagnation were a countrywide problem, increasingly affecting the prosperity and well-being particularly of the major cities, and Bristol was no exception.



Evacuees from Bristol to Kingsbridge, Devon.

## Bristol at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st: a new vision

There was a welcome influx of new blood to the city in the 1980s in the form of the financial services sector and new technology companies such as IBM and Hewlett Packard, and creative and media enterprises also became significant employers in the wake of the declining manufacturing industries. But beneath it all, Bristol in the 1980s and early 1990s was in truth a city in crisis.

The riots in the St Paul's and Hartcliffe areas in 1980 and 1992 highlighted the severe deprivation suffered by large swathes of Bristolians. Bristol suffered the highest homelessness problem outside London, one of the highest incidences of crime and, outside the private sector, appalling educational achievement. Several previously major players in the business sector were relocating



Banksy's 'Mild Mild West'.  
© Morgane Bigault

elsewhere to cities like Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Cardiff which offered better facilities. From being the UK's second city, Bristol was now eighth in terms of wealth and development. And businesses which moved elsewhere left behind them acres of urban dereliction to add to the still-remaining bombed-out areas, particularly in the docklands. Not just in Bristol but elsewhere too, 'inner city' was becoming a byword for 'urban ruin', as was demonstrated also by the major riots in Brixton, London, and Toxteth, Liverpool. To quote from a *Times* article in 1990, Bristol had become 'one of the most ugly, depressing places in Britain'. 'Bristol: what's gone wrong?' lamented a series of articles in the *Bristol Evening Post*. And Tony Shepherd, who was to become the first Chairman of The Bristol Initiative, declared 'I don't think any city had declined more rapidly than Bristol. It was a nadir.'

## The Bristol riots

The St Paul's riot started on April 2 1980 when the police raided a cafe in the centre of the area. There had long been an atmosphere of deepening racial tension in St Paul's, fuelled by the almost complete alienation of black youth. The development of the M32 motorway had particularly blighted St Paul's by dividing it from a neighbouring more prosperous area, which only highlighted the poor state of the housing and the inadequacy of local education services for both ethnic minorities and working-class white communities. Racial harassment on local housing estates was largely ignored, and the increasingly common use of 'sus laws' by the police against predominantly Afro-Caribbean young men inflamed the mood.

The riot went on for several hours and caused a great deal of local damage, as well as injury to rioters, press and police. Several people were charged but none were convicted, and it was accepted both locally and by central government that at the riot's root lay the deprived conditions of those who lived in the area and had a toxic relationship with the police. Commentators at the time, locally and nationally, took note and, rather than condemning the rioters, tended to recognise the reality of their grievances.

Twelve years later, in July 1992, three nights of disturbance in the Hartcliffe area of Bristol – a predominantly working-class white area – followed the deaths of two local young men who were riding a stolen police motorcycle and were killed when they were hit by a police car. In contrast to the reaction to the St Paul's riots, there was harsh comment in the local and national press, and Hartcliffe's relationship with the police was severely damaged.

It is therefore greatly to their credit that, at the end of the 1980s, many of the leading members of Bristol's business fraternity recognised those facts and saw that there was an urgent need for a new look at how they and other local decision makers could, and should, work together on renewal and regeneration plans for the whole community. This recognition was spurred by a campaign run by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) to encourage business to get more deeply involved in the community, 'as failure to do so would have a direct financial impact on their business through the obvious effects of urban degeneration'. The Toxteth riots in particular – the biggest episode of civil unrest in England since the Bristol Corn Law riots in the 1830s – led the CBI to engage itself, unprecedentedly, in social and community affairs in the fear that cities could become no-go areas for businesses. In Bristol's case specifically, such a move was seen as a potentially powerful tool to help heal the deep social divisions in the city, to deal urgently with the malaise of the city centre and to highlight the critical importance of both keeping and encouraging enterprise and initiative.

That word – initiative – was key; and the focus of this new momentum was the forward-looking, reforming and dynamic vision that partnership across the board had to be at the centre of future strategic thinking. In 1988 therefore, a group of local decision makers from the university, big business, local government and the church launched The Bristol Initiative, one of 19 such organisations set up as a result of the campaign. The other 18 have long since disappeared; but The Bristol Initiative (TBI) remains at the core of what is now Business West.



The original mission statement set out the purpose of the organisation as 'to provide strategic channels whereby business organisations, together with other partners, are inspired to play a significant role in influencing governance... without usurping the position of elected authorities and with the belief that its activities will result in benefit and prosperity for business as well as the community at large.' It saw its strengths as: a global awareness and clear understanding of current issues



facing business and local authorities both locally and nationally; a clear public agenda for the betterment of Bristol without hidden sub-texts; a sensitive core team of facilitators to maintain a steady flow of communication; and a highly influential membership, strongly committed to its principles. There was also early recognition that education needed to be a key focus, though it was also clear that this was a national challenge rather than one that Bristol could tackle locally. But at the root of TBI's thinking was the understanding that the acquisition, particularly of course for young people, of knowledge, skills, training and overall enlightenment was the only way to open up opportunities for all and the development to the full of employment prospects and life enhancement.

TBI started with a group of about a dozen leading business people and quickly became about 70-strong, with every major mover and shaker in Bristol's business sector joining in. Partnership, from the first, was the watchword as the founder members saw that it was essential to work in collaboration with elected local government, rather than regarding them as the enemy. Indeed, at that time 'public' and 'private', not just in Bristol but in most urban centres, were quite separate entities, unused to, and indeed rather hostile to, the idea of working together for the common good. This attitude was underpinned in Bristol by the fact that the local authority was Labour-controlled: the business sector, on the one hand, traditionally believed that the council would be likely to follow a left-wing political agenda, prioritising 'blue collar' over 'white collar'; while on the other hand the council was vehemently against the city being ruled by big business. The members of TBI, by contrast, with their commitment to the longer view and their conviction that partnership was the inescapable way forward, were able to begin the process of persuading both sectors of the value of such a pioneering approach.

## **Nicky Rylance**

**founding Deputy Chief Executive of The Bristol Initiative**

'I was involved in the very early days of The Bristol Initiative – I can't believe it's 35 years ago. We started with only a few members, but they included the Bishop of Bristol and the Vice-Chancellor of the university, so we were just starting to engage with the larger businesses to find out whether they'd be interested in participating in more strategic thinking within the city. And we saw that there was the opportunity for business to sit alongside the council, albeit tentatively at first. But gradually we could bring in different perspectives to that whole concept. What is a city for? What kind of city do we want Bristol to be in the future? How do you tackle some of the issues?

There was a trip to Newcastle, which was looking hard as a city at issues like out-of-town business and shopping centres and how they were killing off the city centre. People were beginning to think about how a city worked and functioned as a city, rather than just as a collection of buildings. Broadmead was a big issue at the time, as well as homelessness; and cultural development was one of our early foci, because we understood that culture is synonymous with a successful city.

We were motivated by a willingness to debate and reflect and listen, we were very interested in cities and the built environment, and we were feeding all that knowledge into a big pot; and from a business point of view, for the bigger businesses like BT, it mattered how cities function, because if it was working well, it made their business function better and it was good for their employees.

For us it was basically about trust and the glue that holds society together, and I think that the work that the Initiative did all those years ago was hugely influential in this. It brought people from different sectors together. It gave them what nowadays would be called a safe space to discuss things, and it gave them the essential backing for projects, providing the framework and the context and the enthusiasm. There was the whole concept of partnership; everybody could do more if they did it together.'

TBI's first Chairman was Tony Shepherd, who had been one of the CBI team who put forward the original proposal for Initiatives around the country, and whose own engineering company was a major international player. The first Chief Executive was John Savage, who had had many years of management experience, including running an international distribution company, and had been a specialist consultant for the Associated Newspaper Group and



Managing Director of six wide-ranging Associated Newspaper businesses. He declared it his priority to tackle deprivation in Bristol through business and social initiatives, on both large and small scales. But his far wider, longer-term vision was to expand the new organisation into a Western 'core' body which would not only promote business but would also use business and society links to support and foster the whole community. The initial project had been planned to last three years; but it quickly became clear that practical solutions to all the major problems Bristol faced could not be achieved within such a small time-frame, and that a long-term strategy had to be formulated.

A major step in achieving that aim came in 1993 when TBI merged with the Bristol Chamber of Commerce – one of the largest chambers in England, with some 2,500 members – establishing Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative (BCCI), a formidable partnership representing the wide ranges of business in the region. The merger created a body that represented both the largest and the smallest companies in Bristol and its wider hinterland, which gave it a truly influential voice – a voice that acquired the potential to become even louder when, in advance of the creation of the government's regional development agency, BCCI facilitated the establishment of a new organisation, the West and South West Chamber of Commerce, to coordinate all the chambers in the wider region.

The cooperative and partnership vision was further strengthened when, together with Westec (Western Training and Enterprise Council), BCCI set up Business Link West. 'Business Links' was an initiative by Michael Heseltine, then President of the Board of Trade, who wanted to establish 'one stop shops' to provide advice and support for small and medium businesses who often lacked the infrastructure to allow them to invest in growth and forward planning. In its first year Business Link West dealt with 15,000 inquiries, offered advice to several hundred small companies and helped 60 companies to participate in trade missions to Slovakia, the Caribbean and the Middle East. Two years later, it had achieved Investors in People recognition and had become the first point of contact for all business information, advice and support services in the wider Bristol region, with its head office in Bristol and four outlets in Weston-super-Mare, Bath, Midsomer Norton and Winterbourne.

Yet another important partnership initiative set up in 1993 with substantial funding from BCCI and other agencies committed to local development was the Western Development Partnership (WDP). Its aim was to promote businesses in the sub-region designated as 'Bristol, Bath, West of England', with the

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overarching purpose of helping local businesses to thrive, and ultimately to develop the region into one of the most prosperous and technically advanced in Europe. By 1996 WDP had established itself as a formidable force in delivering the creation

and sustainability of local jobs, and helping to attract swathes of new businesses to the area. And it had also begun to build strategic alliances with a wide variety of partners all over the USA, as well as in Europe. In 1997 WDP played a major role in setting up a trade mission to Boston, Massachusetts, built around the visit to the city of *The Matthew* as part of the commemoration of John Cabot's 1497 voyage to north America. BCCI's then President, Douglas Claisse, who led the mission, felt that 'we have built a very worthwhile business relationship with really great potential for growth and wealth creation'.

There were clearly powerful winds of change blowing through Bristol and the West, and a strong sense of recognition that the whole community needed to galvanise, at every level, to pull the city out of the doldrums. That spirit can perhaps be best summed up through a new monthly supplement launched in September 1993 by the Western Daily Press and BCCI. *Enterprise and Business West* was specifically aimed at focusing on the major challenges facing the region's business community; the main headline read 'How the West will be won'. Under a photograph of John Savage and two of his deputies standing in front of the magnificent Greek Revival facade of their new offices at Leigh Court, the piece declared 'The voice of business in the West is being harnessed by a powerful new-look organisation, unique in Britain. Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative is reviving the merchant venturing spirit on which the city's fortunes were made to help pull the region out of recession.... Our purpose is to establish ourselves as a credible and acceptable influential body for local government and see what problems we can address in partnership through flagship projects.' The doubts of the Labour-led Bristol City Council were being overcome, and it had begun to welcome the new partnership approach. And the city's business community had not only joined in the spirit of the campaign but had also raised a significant amount of funding. All those involved rallied behind the understanding that a great deal of work was needed to get the region moving through partnership between the public and private sectors. Savage again: 'We are best placed to help stop the irreparable damage being caused to the economic fabric of the region. Come and join us.'

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## Leigh Court

The Manor of Leigh – known in the Domesday Book as ‘Legā’ – came into the possession in the early 12th century of Robert Fitzharding, the first Lord Berkeley, who became mayor of Bristol and founded the Augustinian Abbey there in around 1140. In 1148 the manor was granted to the abbey and remained in its possession until Henry VIII’s Dissolution in 1539. The buildings of the abbey were saved from ruin in 1542 when the abbey church became one of Henry’s new cathedrals, very likely after successful lobbying by Bristol’s citizens. It remains an important structure: Pevsner describes its east end as ‘superior to anything else built in England and indeed in Europe at the same time’ – one of the finest examples in the world of a medieval ‘hall church’ with the vaulted ceilings in the nave, choir and aisles all at the same height.

A Tudor building on the manor was reputed to have hosted Charles II who in 1651, after defeat at the Battle of Worcester, travelled as a manservant to Jane Lane who was visiting her friend Mrs Norton at Leigh Court. He stayed there for a few days – surviving being recognised by one of the staff – until he went on his way and eventually found a ship to take him to exile in France. The Leigh estate then passed through various hands until it was sold in 1811 to Sir Philip Miles, who three years later commissioned Thomas Hopper to build the present-day structure, replacing the Tudor building. The style is Greek Revival and the house stands in 25 acres of parkland, originally landscaped by Humphrey Repton.

Leigh Court remained in the Miles family until 1915 when it was sold to pay death duties. It became a hospital and remained as such until 1988 when it was redeveloped as offices and a conference centre. It was in a dilapidated state and had to undergo substantial renovation. The public rooms are available for conferences, seminars, exhibitions and other functions, and it is now the headquarters of Business West. The offices and facilities are furnished and equipped to a high standard and are situated in the original family rooms around the central Great Hall with its cantilevered twin staircases, marble pillars and domed glass ceiling. It is also a popular filming location and wedding venue, with its beautiful rooms and its splendid grounds with lovely views of the surrounding countryside.



Leigh Court



Bristol Balloon Fiesta,  
morning launch.  
© Gary Newman

Partnerships involving so many sectors of urban life were rare and innovative at the time – indeed, almost unique. Looking back from 30 years later in 2023, it is clear that the strong interrelationships between business, community and civic interests in Bristol in the early 1990s demonstrated a remarkably fresh and unusual approach to what at that time was an urgent and immediate need to repair the city’s fortunes and to invest heavily in its future. Those partnerships demonstrated an almost total reversal of the former stance within the city’s public and private sectors. Once almost notoriously uncooperative, Bristol is now regarded both nationally and internationally as an exemplar of mutual collaboration and partnership working.

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## ◀ BCCI's achievements in its first ten years

The Bristol Initiative, and what later became BCCI, had originally set out a wide-ranging list of specific priorities, including: transforming derelict city centre sites into modern arts centres and the focus of a wide range of cultural facilities; the development of Bristol's famous waterfront; using training to revitalise the city's economic and employment potential; the development of expertise in technology; improving regional and national transport links; and major housing developments. The fundamental approach was to work as a catalyst rather than through direct involvement: persuading potential investors and developers that Bristol would be a suitable and profitable place for their businesses, and facilitating developments by setting up not-for-profit limited companies created for specific purposes with a mix of private and public bodies on board.



Progress was slow at the beginning. Despite the early focus on partnership between the public and private sectors, Bristol failed to win any funding from the government's City Challenge programme in 1992 because central authorities did not believe that the two sectors were really working effectively together.

Three years later, the picture was very different. In early 1996, when the Defence Secretary Michael Portillo opened the Ministry of Defence's new £254 million procurement headquarters in north Bristol, he acknowledged that there had been a remarkable change and that the city had become 'a model... for regeneration', and an exemplar of the benefits of partnership working. A spokesman for English Partnerships, then the national regeneration agency supporting high-level and sustainable growth in England, announced that 'Bristol is going to have more to shout about than it has had for a long time. There is now a tremendous opportunity for the city to become very upbeat.' It could already boast, by that time, 16 active partnership schemes, ranging from housing for the disadvantaged to the development of the waterfront area, now rebranded as Harbourside.

Later in 1996 *The Times* carried a long piece with the heading 'Shipshape and back in fashion' to mark the visit of Deputy Prime Minister Michael Heseltine to announce grants triggering investment in Bristol's city centre worth more than £400 million. At that point the two key strategic sites were Harbourside and Temple Quay near the main railway station, Bristol Temple Meads, which were set to transform the city centre.



## Jaya Chakrabarti

President of Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative

'I am also linked and working with the Bristol and West of England Initiative on matters of social and environmental justice because I believe that business should be a force for good. And if it isn't, we need to change things in order that it is. My day job is about that, too. I run a tiny social enterprise called TISCreport, a transparency in supply chains report platform, which is about holding companies to account through their buying power, whom they're buying from, whom they're selling to, and being transparent about the whole thing. So corporate transparency, corporate activism. That's my bag.

Back in the day, when I tried networking for the first time, it was a massive failure. But I did meet someone who said 'We can help'; and that led to me being part-funded for a programme called Common Purpose. We ran a company that employed just five people, which made me understand that you didn't have to be huge to make a difference. I got involved with the city in ways I could not even imagine were possible. It was so enjoyable, I forgot to make money, I became so wrapped up in doing everything else. What emerged was my desire to make a social impact, using the vehicles that have ordinarily been about maximising shareholder value – minimising risk, driving profit, those sorts of things – and understanding that none of those things happen in isolation. We should be talking about the whole ecosystem thriving, and us growing into that society that we all want our kids to grow up in and that we all want to grow old in. It's a lifelong thing. It's no longer about the political cycle. It is about a lifelong mission.

I invented a job to stay here. A lot of us make that sacrifice willingly because it's worth fighting for. I'm non-native, and I use the term Brist-alien (someone else made it up, I didn't). I want to be from Bristol, and I've made it mine as much as I am able to.

Those of us who have been here long enough understand that there are massive disparities, huge pockets of deprivation – not even pockets, proper buckets, potholes of deprivation across the city. Some of us have been able to navigate around those potholes. But actually what we should be doing is working to fill them in and making sure that they don't affect those who end up stuck in them. And that is why business is so important, because as business leaders we lead entities that have longevity; we see political regimes come and go, but we have to deal with making sure that living in Bristol is good for everyone.

A proper partnership is everyone knowing what they're bringing to the table, transparently, understanding what the wins are and finding a way forward that gets everyone at least some of the wins and understanding where they're able to compromise. For me it's about connectedness. When I see a disconnect, I am compelled to try and fix it. When I look at my own small business and how it interacts with other businesses, I see us not as a subservient, tiny thing. We have a duty to influence that relationship so that something better comes out of it. There has to be that bigger impact. So as a woman, as a mother, I do a lot of pro-bono work in terms of boards, and I try to connect in worlds and sectors and my personal social mission. But I do think that we need to have some frank conversations about true diversity, what the real barriers are and how much is being done to make it truly accessible. And then we've got some hope of actually introducing some real diverse thinking into the solutions to the issues that we're facing in society. You need to look at those things that you really care about. And you need to pick just one thing, do one thing. You don't have to do it all. Keep it nice and simple and get it done. And you do more in a sustainable, manageable way, rather than taking it all on.'

### Harbourside and Temple Quay

For many years, what had been Bristol's mercantile centre, the docks, had been languishing. As commercial shipping in the Floating Harbour declined, the city increasingly ignored its seafaring heritage and allowed the area to deteriorate. Impressive warehouse buildings stood empty and ruinous, and the part of the docks known as Canon's Marsh was largely derelict. The first positive attempt to regenerate parts of the area came in 1973 when a former warehouse was acquired as the home of the Arnolfini art gallery; and in the late 1980s Lloyd's Bank built a national headquarters on the site, in the hope that it would encourage other development. There was also Watershed, established in 1982 as the first media centre in the UK, combining a multi-screen independent cinema with conference and events spaces, a media research studio and cafes and bars, all housed in the former E and W sheds on St Augustine's Reach. But despite the splendid setting, the listed warehouses, the quaysides, the views of the cathedral and St Mary's Redcliffe and the backdrops of Georgian and Victorian housing, the area remained largely abandoned and desolate.

Then a consortium of local architectural practices became involved. Having visited several cities in the USA to look at inner-city regeneration, particularly

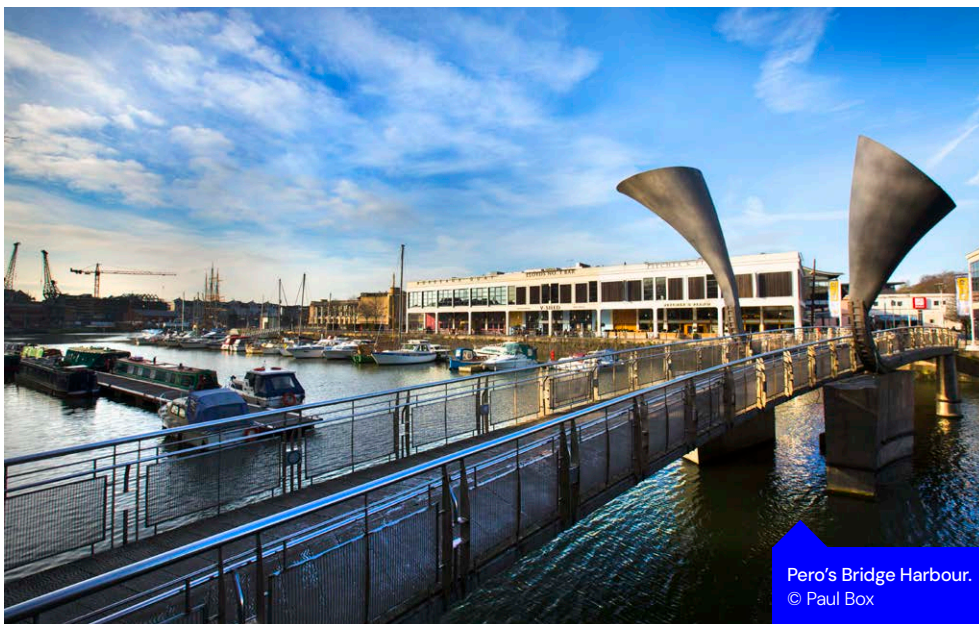
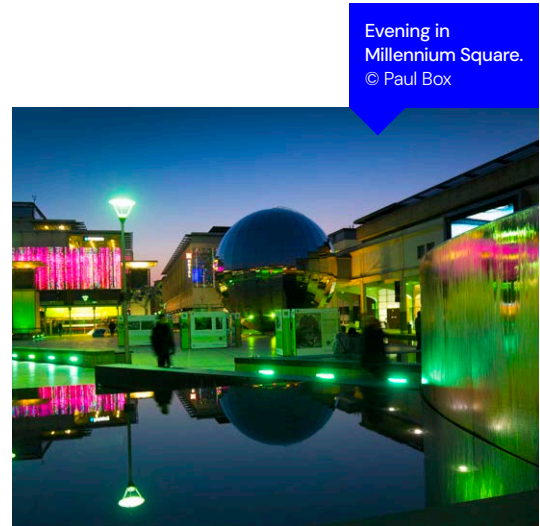
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in waterside areas, the consortium drew up plans for the 66-acre site at Canon's Marsh and the docks. A particular spur was the success of the American initiatives in countering the 'doughnut' effect, where wealth and development became concentrated in the outer areas of a city and the life of the inner city was sucked out of it. They believed strongly that their planned regeneration should be leisure- and arts-led, an approach which BCCI fully backed, as did the city council which was the principal landowner of the docklands area.

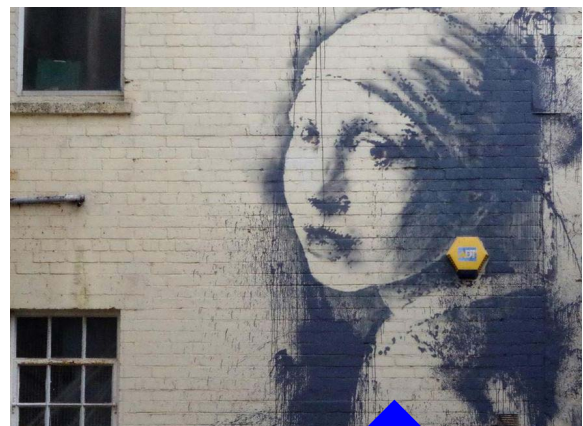
Various partnerships were established to draw up detailed schemes and to raise the huge amounts of money that would be needed. It was recognised that The Exploratory, the first hands-on science centre in the country, was outgrowing its



premises in the Brunel building at Temple Meads, and so an early focus was on what became Wildscreen World and Science World, both to be rehoused in new buildings at Harbourside with funding from the National Lottery.

There were also ambitious plans for a new performing arts centre in Harbourside, intended as a world-class venue including a concert hall, a dance theatre and two auditoria linked to a major programme of community education. In September 1997 a government minister acclaimed it as a 'magnificent and imaginative project [which] will breathe new energy into the region's arts and cultural scene'. But despite orchestral and dance residencies being secured, and major funding from the Arts Council apparently firmly in place, new management at the Arts Council changed its priorities in early 1998 and withdrew the funding offer. There was widespread outrage in the city.

But the other elements of the plans for Harbourside remained in place, and work began in early 1997; it was then one of Europe's largest regeneration and urban renewal projects. The transformation of the area initially focused on the infrastructure, including roads, landscaping, drainage and the central public spaces. At the same time, work began on the huge £200 million commercial, leisure and residential



Banksy's 'Girl With The Pierced Eardrum'  
© Destination Bristol



Travelwest metrobus.  
© WestofEnglandCA



Cycling near the Clifton Suspension Bridge.  
© Destination Bristol

programme for the north side of the harbour. A central aim was to open up Harbourside to the rest of the city by minimising the impact of the car and forming a hub for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport. It was to become the new beating heart of the city, with cultural, educational and leisure attractions, public spaces and promenades as the core of a regenerated district of shops, restaurants, offices and housing.

Meanwhile, Temple Quay, the area around Bristol Temple Meads, was set to become Bristol's headquarter office sector, linking the railway station with the Broadmead shopping area. It was the main project undertaken by the Bristol Development Corporation, which eventually decided on a mixed-use approach with both office and residential buildings. It was initially bedevilled by difficulties in securing developers for the site, but by the early 21st century several new, modern, architecturally significant buildings and bridges enhanced the area.

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## Broadmead

The shopping centre which had long been the retail heart of the city had, by the 1990s, become down-at-heel and drab. Wartime bombs had wreaked havoc on the area, and typically charmless post-war redevelopment now meant that it was not a pleasurable destination for what was rapidly becoming an important leisure activity. It was now also under threat from plans for a new out-of-town shopping centre at Cribbs Causeway on the M4/M5 corridor, which would offer wide retail choice and free parking. John Lewis's decision to relocate to Cribbs Causeway was seen as a major blow to Broadmead, and its management immediately sat up and took notice. Its revitalisation was seen as crucial for the city centre.

The result was the establishment of the Broadmead Board in 1995 to oversee the redevelopment; this was the first example of a solid working partnership between BCCI and the landowners, Bristol City Council. Improvements included a new gateway feature and the revamping of the Podium, an attractive central meeting space. CCTV and mobile radios enhanced security and reduced theft, while signposting and transport links were improved. A new department store opened in John Lewis's former building. And a massive boost resulted from the relaxation in 1996 of the Sunday trading laws, which led to increased turnover, the employment of more staff and a high proportion of retail floor space opening seven days a week. On the Sunday in May 1996 when the law first came into force, 130 shops in Broadmead opened their doors – the biggest launch of the new dispensation in Britain – and takings increased hugely. Buses into the complex were packed, and it seemed that people were not just shopping but were also enjoying a family day out. Other city centres recognised Bristol's high profile as a regional shopping hub and asked for advice. By the end of the decade, it was clear that Broadmead had bucked the national trend for central city shopping complexes and was consistently posting strong growth figures. A city councillor who co-chaired the board later said, 'I think Broadmead Board is one of the most successful town centre partnerships in the country... Our biggest problem now is we cannot accommodate demand.'

## Community support

Throughout the 1990s, strategies aimed at improving the lives of the whole community were being put in place. In 1996, the city bid for tranches of government money to improve local housing estates, cut crime, enhance road safety and tackle unemployment problems throughout the city and in parts of south Gloucestershire. And in 1997 Bristol became the first authority outside

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London to bid for money to help rough sleepers and the homeless. The money granted, £7.5 million, was used mainly to open new hostels, provide food vouchers and increase the number of outreach and settlement workers, with the specific aim of providing support for those with mental health issues or drink and drugs problems.

## **Nicky Rylance**

**founding Deputy Chief Executive of The Bristol Initiative**

One of the really positive projects that I was involved in was the Hub for the homeless that we set up. It was a wonderful example of how people came together: the architects, Shelter, social services, probation, all these people around the table. We started by saying that we wanted to have one building to house all the different services that homeless people need, and there were seemingly all sorts of quite valid reasons why we couldn't. But we persisted because we didn't want people to have to go to several different centres. We kept asking for solutions and insisting that there had to be a way around the challenges. And slowly solutions started to be found. Everybody was sharing information about what the staff and the clients needed, and how the building had to function. It was a really good example of getting people receptive to thinking, OK, let's find a way forward. And they did – and then everyone became excited about it because they realised that it hadn't been done anywhere else in the country. Those sorts of things were so positive, so encouraging. It's easier to say no because you don't have to do anything, rather than saying yes and finding a way. The Hub was very much a Bristol-generated, solution-led project. It was very much the germ of an idea here that became copied elsewhere around the country.



Architect's drawing  
of the new arena.  
© Grimshaw Architects

## Andrew Billingham Chief Executive Officer, YTL Arena

YTL is a Malaysian company which entered the UK market over 20 years ago when they purchased Wessex Water. They clearly saw huge potential in the region, and then had the opportunity in 2015 to buy Filton Airfield – 380 acres including the Brabazon Hangars which were where all the UK Concorde were built. We identified the opportunity to repurpose them as Bristol's first major indoor music area, as well as an exhibition and entertainment complex. Since 2018 we have been through the journey of getting planning consent and finalising the design, and we are now about to engage contractors to start the building work. The aim is to open in late 2025 or early 2026.

YTL saw the potential of the region when they first came here, and they are here for the long term. Over the next 20 years the plan is to transform the airfield and hangars into a whole, exciting, new neighbourhood within Bristol, which will be called Brabazon. The business community in north Bristol and south Gloucestershire is already a strong powerhouse with major employers, rapidly growing leisure businesses and significant retail businesses. Business West has been a key partner during our planning and development stages, and we see this relationship continue to grow as we move into operating the new entertainment complex.

*Business West has been a key partner during our planning and development stages.*

The city also set up a Foyer, a concept aimed at providing high quality job-search and study facilities, training and accommodation for young people aged 16–25 as a stepping stone towards employment and permanent housing. And Hartcliffe Leisure was established to utilise the facilities of schools in the area in the holidays and after school hours in order to provide opportunities for local youngsters to take part in cultural and sporting activities. As an important school-based community project in an area of Bristol that was recognised as needing extra support, the success of the scheme had a considerable knock-on effect on the area as a whole.

### **Development outside the city centre**

It wasn't just the city centre that was seeing development and regeneration. In the north of the city, the new Procurement Executive complex established by the Ministry of Defence was the biggest office scheme in Britain at the time, and had a major impact on the area, attracting compatible businesses and boosting the local housing market. The M4/M5 corridor became a focus for office and retail development, with the Cribbs Causeway shopping centre and several new business parks in the area. Large companies such as Sun Life were being lured back to the wider Bristol conurbation by the massively improved facilities now available to them. And Severnside, on the Bristol side of the new second Severn crossing, was a huge success, with a 2,000-acre tract of land being developed and the privatisation of the docks at Portbury attracting more than £100 million in investment.

A major achievement for Business Link West came when it turned its attention in late 1997 to promoting the aerospace industry in the region. Despite the West boasting a bigger concentration of aerospace companies than any other European region, with around 36,000 people working in the sector, the small companies had found it difficult to make contact with the major players abroad. That changed in February 1998 when the two leading players in the sector, Boeing and Lockheed Martin, flew in from the USA to talk business at SWAP 98 (South West Aerospace Procurement), a forum set up to encourage such contact. This procurement event was the first deliverable of the West of England Aerospace Forum (WEAF), a creation of Business Link West. The event attracted such a lot of interest that it was extended from two days' duration to three.

## International Festival of the Sea and *The Matthew*, 1996 and 1997

Bristol was the founding city of this festival in 1996; at the time it was the UK's largest-ever maritime event. It was centred on the replica of John Cabot's ship, *The Matthew*, which was built on Redcliffe Quay between 1994 and 1996 with the aim of commemorating, in 1997, the 500th anniversary of Cabot's voyage to north America in 1497. The festival was highly successful, attracting nearly 400,000 visitors over its four days and showcasing ships from all over the world. The festival culminated with the replica *Matthew* sailing away to begin her maiden voyage as one of an armada of over 80 vessels taking part in the Bristol–Brest regatta. Subsequent festivals were held in Portsmouth and Leith, Edinburgh, the final one returning to Portsmouth in 2005.

Building a replica of Cabot's ship posed obvious problems; it could only be based on contemporary illustrations and documentation, along with archaeological evidence of ships and shipbuilding at the time. The same woods could not be used, not least because in modern Britain there were





no oaks tall enough to provide the wood for the keel, which had to be made from a single piece of hardwood. The project's patron, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, laid the keel and also donated the mainmast, which by tradition had a medieval gold coin placed beneath it when it was raised. The ship was completed in early 1996 and underwent sea trials, including a visit to the Thames in London when the bascules of Tower Bridge were opened to allow it to pass beneath.

*The Matthew* was formally launched in September 1996 by Lady Wills, who smashed a bottle of Harvey's Bristol Cream sherry on the bow rather than champagne. The climax of the whole enterprise was to be the departure of the ship to Newfoundland in May 1997, exactly 500 years after Cabot's voyage began.

It was a great success. Captained by David Alan-Williams and accompanied by a celebratory flotilla including a Canadian destroyer which would accompany her across the Atlantic, *The Matthew* set sail on schedule on May 2 1997. The departure was marked in Bristol by the Goram Fayre, a fireworks display and a ball, and there was widespread television coverage of the departure, the voyage and the arrival in Bonavista, Newfoundland, on June 24. She was greeted by Queen Elizabeth II, the Duke of Edinburgh, the Prime Minister of Canada and the Premier of Newfoundland, along with thousands of well-wishers. The ship then circumnavigated Newfoundland, visited Nova Scotia and Bath, Maine, and arrived in Boston in September. She then sailed on to Bristol, Rhode Island, and then Toronto via the St Lawrence to winter there before touring the Great Lakes in spring 1998 and returning to Bristol later that year. She is now a hugely popular tourist attraction in the city.

## ◀ The 1990s in summary

In December 1998, to mark ten years since The Bristol Initiative was first envisaged in 1988, Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative published *Bristol: Partnership in Governance. Ten Years of the Bristol Initiative*. Bill Cockburn of British Telecom wrote in his Foreword 'It is easy to forget that a decade ago, public-private partnerships – almost universally acclaimed today – were still viewed with suspicion... so the success of The Bristol Initiative is a tribute to the vision, courage and persistence of its members.' And Douglas Claisse, then BCCI's President, acclaimed the organisation's successes: 'In little more than ten years, the ideals which drove the original founders... have been put into practice in Bristol in a way which is unmatched elsewhere, and the consequences have been hugely beneficial to the whole community.'

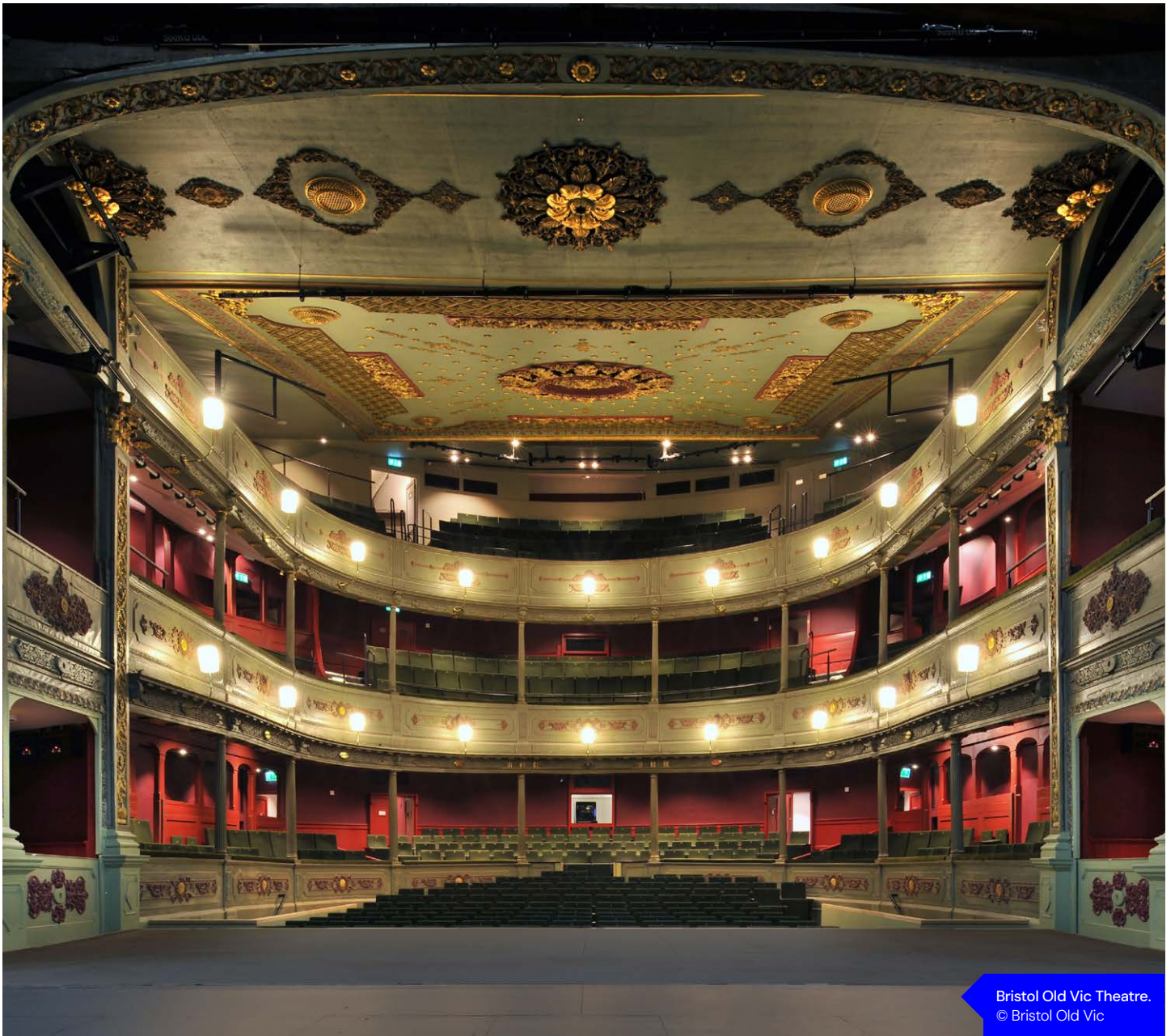
The success of Bristol's revitalisation in only a decade – and a decade moreover that was bedevilled by recession and facing a mountain to climb after previous years of deprivation and neglect – was



WWT Slimbridge Wetland Centre.



Enjoying the Bristol nightlife.



Bristol Old Vic Theatre.  
© Bristol Old Vic

remarkable. Bristol, as well as its neighbours Bath, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, had become a hive of activity and a focus in the West for business, education, culture, tourism, shopping and entertainment. Three universities ensured a vibrant student population. The Bristol Old Vic was flourishing in its iconic building, the oldest continually working theatre in the English-speaking world. Bath, with its Roman baths and Pump Room, had been designated a World Heritage Site. And the Chamber of Commerce and The Bristol Initiative had been a major catalyst in all this success and prime movers in its achievement. But perhaps the most important achievement was the recognition that partnership was the key. Douglas Claisse again: 'In commending this book to you, may I make the point that it is not an epilogue for the past ten years, but rather a prologue for the future.'

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## Taking the vision forward: the 21st century

*It ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things, because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from the fear of the opponents... and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them.*

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*

John Savage used that quotation in the introduction to his book *2050: High in Hope*, published in 2011 by The Initiative, Business West. It is a masterly summary of Bristol's commercial history, the challenges it faced both in past centuries and in more recent decades, its achievements in tackling many of them in innovative and ground-breaking ways, and its vision for the next 40



Bristol Pride.  
© Bhagesh  
Sachania

years. The book uses the term 'city region' for not just Bristol and Bath but for the wider areas around the two cities, which it sees as full of potential as a united entity to build on its existing importance as a hub of successful enterprise and resourcefulness, and to imagine and shape a master plan and a vision for its sustainable, long-term future.

The initiatives of the 1990s – whether in the longer term successful or not – had shown that far-sighted and community-minded people and organisations could make a real difference. The aim now was to build on that approach. BCCI and its collaborators in Bristol, both public and private, had established beyond challenge that partnership was the only way forward; that working together for the whole of the community was the inescapable basis of achieving change and improvement for every part of society; that if the imbalances and inequalities of typical city life were to be addressed, initiatives both large and small were needed, and an overarching strategy had to be given. It was now (specifically, in 2004) that Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative was rebranded as Business West (BW).

Savage knew that much of the post-war regeneration in the UK had been short-sighted and damaging; it had sought not just to rebuild but to change, often destroying the good that was left and replacing it with ill-judged and short-term bad. He now took inspiration from the impressive work in 1909 of Daniel Burnham, who developed a vision for the future of Chicago in the USA that laid the foundations of the successful and prosperous city it became, and remains. He used a Burnham quote: 'Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's blood. Make big plans, aim high in hope and work, remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die.'

The early years of the 21st century saw yet more evidence of the ways in which Bristol, Bath and the wider region had rallied as an area full of commercial vitality and hope. In 2000, Bristol's airport was rebranded with the word International and opened a new terminal, a development that was followed in 2010 by further expansion. The city made a bid to become 2008's Capital of Culture, and was shortlisted, though it failed at the final hurdle. Bath Spa University College was given university status, giving the city two flourishing universities and increasing the number in the region to four. In 2006 the region celebrated the 200th anniversary of Brunel's birth with a year of events and commemorations. Cabot Circus in the centre of Bristol opened in 2008 after extensive renovations; it was the largest regeneration scheme there since the post-war reconstruction programmes.

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## Poku Osei, board member of Business West

### Chief Executive of Babbasa

Babbasa started towards the tail end of the credit crunch when unemployment was really high in Bristol. The question was, what could the city do about it? And what could I do about it? The result was Babbasa, which is a social enterprise specifically set up to support young people from low-income and minority backgrounds with professional ambitions. And we do that by brokering opportunities from potential employers.

Fifteen years ago, the world of work was a different place. In just those few years, the way we work has changed radically. The generation we're supporting now are digital natives, and they find and use information, and communicate, in significantly different ways. Now you could be working from anywhere in the world; and at the same time world events, the war in Ukraine for example, impact much more quickly and suddenly than they did then. And Brexit and Covid have had a massive effect. So in many ways you need to have a sense of those changes to even begin to understand the potential employment opportunities that may exist.

Babbasa is an example of what I call social mobility organisations: neither mainstream recruitment agencies nor typical youth centres. They are specifically there to prepare young people for the

world of work. Post-Brexit, most businesses need to look inland to find their talent, which makes it a challenge if they don't have access to sometimes unorthodox channels to find that talent. This is where organisations like Business West increasingly become relevant, helping to close those knowledge and access gaps by introducing and raising awareness of organisations such as Babbasa. They do this by spreading the word to the wide range of their stakeholders about the role of social mobility organisations in relation to businesses, which can be informed that they have an alternative option in terms of attracting talent; and also by listening to the intelligence coming from consumers and communities so that they can shape their products and services accordingly.





Our mission is all about education, skills and employment. We believe that while talent is evenly distributed, opportunities are not. In a capitalist economy, some people will inevitably be left behind. But if you have the right voices at the right table, such as Business West, who take a broad view of the city overall, decisions that are being made and policies that are being shaped are well informed, and what results will be fairer and more equitable in terms of how businesses go about delivering goods and services and engaging the right people.

My big scheme of things, as we are facing it now, means having organisations like Business West making it known to businesses that yes, you can attract talent from the University of Bristol or people who live up the hill at Clifton, but yes, there is also a means of attracting equal talent from the inner-city areas like St Paul's and that here is an organisation that can help you achieve that balance and fairness. As humans and creatures of association, we tend to gravitate to our small tribes. But through education we can break the mould and help the different tribes to recognise that actually there is no fear here, that there is rather value in these other tribes. And then there is the high probability that, particularly with support, people will feel psychologically safe to engage with other groups.

So here is an organisation that is saying that we've not got it right, but we want to get it right because we are leading other organisations; and to do that we need diversity of thought at the highest level, which will allow us to hear the voices of different communities and different tribes, and to make sure that the decisions, the policies that we are coming out with or

are promoting are as inclusive as possible. I invested in this region because I saw talent everywhere, but also the waste of talent. I also recognise that that same problem is true in other cities across the South West, and that there is now an opportunity, because we know how our model works, to scale up and support other cities.

Business West, crucially, has the ability to reimagine the worlds that we are about to enter because they understand where business is and where technology is going to take us. They are an influential, powerful collaborator. We need that voice to be strengthened, unconstrained by politics; and then we can begin to see the wider picture of where our economy can go and how that will impact on the society we all live in. I am filled with excitement at knowing that Business West recognises that two decades from now will look totally different from the last two decades, and beginning to articulate that foresight so that businesses will be able to see where the world is heading and to adjust their businesses to meet it. What lies ahead is very different from the world that we've come from.





## Great Western Enterprise, Swindon

Great Western Enterprise, led resolutely by Nicky Alberry, has been – since the first decade of the 21st century – a significant player within the Business West family. Its origins lie in the major challenges that faced Swindon in the mid-1980s with the closure of Swindon Railway Works, the largest employer in the town. This was a catastrophe for the hundreds of British Rail employees who would be made redundant and caused a spike in Swindon's already high unemployment rate. The immediate result was the establishment of two complementary agencies, the Swindon Enterprise Trust (SET) and the Swindon Development Agency (SDA), whose aim was both to find alternative employment for the redundant workers and to boost the fortunes of the whole town through business counselling, supporting start-ups and the provision of grants. They also set up a centre called 'The Lounge' where people could go to meet others and participate in activities and events, and which also hosted women's groups and a hobbies centre – all intended to support the community and provide help for those who needed it. Within three years of the closure of the rail works, the agencies and their partners had helped to find new employment for 75 percent of the former British Rail workers, had set up a comprehensive retraining programme and had provided over 250 grants and loans to create jobs.

In 1989 SET and SDA merged to form a new single enterprise agency for Swindon under the name Great Western Enterprise (GWE), a body that benefited from the different and complementary strengths of its predecessors, and gained even more traction from being a Local Enterprise Agency and part of the National Local Enterprises Agencies Network. It brought together local Borough Councils, Swindon businesses, the Swindon Chamber of Commerce and the trades unions, with the overarching aim of providing information, advice and technological support to local enterprises. In April 1989 the Great Western Business Centre was formally opened by the Princess of Wales.

GWE flourished throughout the 1990s and into the new century, continuing to respond to the requirements of its stakeholders and providing advice, information, funding and overall support to new and existing businesses. In 2000 it demerged from the Swindon Chamber of Commerce, and then in 2008 it merged with Business West, forming GWE Business West, a larger and stronger organisation which could exert its influence over a much more significant part of the whole region. In 2010 yet another link was forged when GWE became GWE The Initiative, committed to developing effective links between the public and private sectors and ensuring that the interests of commerce were taken

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into account when key decisions were made at local, regional and national levels. It has gone through other branding changes since then, notably in 2011 on its 25th anniversary when the decision was made once again to keep the GWE appellation in the foreground. It continues to be a local powerhouse, an important and effective part of the overall Business West operation.

Also in 2008, Gloucestershire Chamber of Commerce was merged into Bristol Chamber of Commerce and thereafter into GWE Business West. BW was now an enormously important and effective voice for business in the region, incorporating as it did – and does – Bristol Chamber of Commerce, Bath Chamber of Commerce, which also covers North East Somerset, Gloucestershire Chamber of Commerce and Wiltshire Chamber of Commerce. Within the overall organisation are also three Initiatives, those for the West of England, Swindon and Wiltshire, and Bath and North East Somerset.

## **Darren Marks**

**Managing Director of Swindon and Wiltshire Institute of Technology**

About five years ago we saw the need in our area to bridge various gaps in higher and technical education, so we applied to become an Institute of Technology. We were successful, and so we are now one of 21 Institutes of Technology in the country. It's an ever evolving and changing business; that's part of the market offer, that it's agile and it's there to suit the skills and needs of the employers in the local area, which in our case is not just Swindon, but also Wiltshire as well as further afield into Dorset, across to Berkshire and up to Gloucestershire. It's there for all employers and it's very much an employer-led product.

Being a member of Business West has been fantastic for us. It identifies businesses new to the area as well as long-standing businesses in the area

that have come to Business West, maybe with a skills gap and the need for advice on how to fill it. I see BW as a piece of glue. Being part of it has been really good for our business, particularly over the last 18 months when we started to come out as an IoT with a specific product and



Creative Media Studio



now a physical business as well. BW will be crucial for our future agility in response to the needs of existing and new businesses.

Our investment includes trying to keep in the area the skills lost when people leave Swindon and head out for Reading, London, Bristol or north towards Birmingham, as well as regenerating those technical skills that have been centred in Swindon for centuries even before the railways. It's a bit different now – more finance and business driven – so for us it's about adapting to meet all of those skills too. If we don't reinvest in our area those skills will continue to dwindle and the area will fall behind.

The college itself is around 150 years old, so we're nearly toe to toe with Business West in terms of age. I keep referring to them as 'glue'. They bring people together and keep them together. They are the driver: keeping connections fresh, bringing in new ones, revisiting old ones, making sure that everyone is still getting out of that process what they really need and want. They are persistent, they are confident and they really do support and spur us on.



## Cultural activities

Cultural activities have always been at the heart of Business West's strategy. It and its predecessor organisations have long recognised that the health and vitality of a city and a region rely not just on their business, financial and commercial prosperity but on entertainment, enjoyment and intellectual pursuits at all levels.

Strongly indicative of the broad vision of the founders of The Bristol Initiative in the early 1990s was the establishment in 1992 of the Cultural Development Partnership. Those early visionaries saw that though the city could already boast a wide variety of cultural and entertainment outlets, they were fragmented. They came to believe that a piecemeal approach towards the growth of the sector would be counterproductive, and that an overarching strategy was preferable, indeed essential. They recognised that, for example, the longevity of the Bristol Old Vic was not proof against its struggles and difficulties at a time of recession, and embarked on ambitious plans to develop the city's varied cultural heritage in a holistic way.

The approach towards the redevelopment of Harbourside was the immediate result of that thinking, though the withdrawal of Arts Council funding for the performing arts centre on Harbourside in the later 1990s was a huge blow. But Business West and the city council reacted not by losing heart but by galvanising in different directions. The result, over the following several years, was the rapid, coordinated development of Harbourside as a centre of culture, entertainment and fun. It became the new heart of the city, the lifeblood flowing through the veins of everything that was beginning to happen, whether in cultural or business terms.



## **Andrew Kelly**

**former director of “Bristol Ideas” Cultural Development Partnership**

I was involved in the Cultural Development Partnership from the early days. We had a blank canvas in a way, which was both daunting and exciting. I found huge willingness, but not necessarily a sense of direction. People knew they wanted a concert hall, but they had no notion that we could establish something like We The Curious, the science centre and educational charity on Harbourside. We were very fortunate that the Lottery came along and was able to pay for some of that work. And the Capital of Culture bid in the early 2000s, though it failed to get over the line, was crucial to providing a coherent framework for all those plans. Those years saw a profound shift in the attitude of the council, a fundamental recognition that culture is serious, significant and vital for the health of the city, that it makes a massive contribution. It's not just financial, it's about how a city feels.

Nor need it be confined to what might be regarded as the usual audience for cultural activities. The Initiative was hugely supportive of bringing culture to young people, especially those from the less privileged parts of the city who might not normally have thought that such things were for them. Concerts were arranged for children in the Hartcliffe area involving bands and orchestras like Red or Dead and the Welsh National Opera, and the kids were taken to Covent Garden and the ballet. It was all part of the recognition that the growth of the cultural and entertainment sectors was vital for the growth of the city itself.

In the early years of the 21st century, the Cultural Development Partnership instigated and led festivals, arts agencies, initiatives such as annual Great Reading Adventure, the annual Festival of Ideas, and BAC 100, marking the centenary of the establishment of the aviation industry in the region. More recently the Imax cinema has been brought back into use, showing less mainstream films and hosting niche festivals like the Slapstick Festival and the Forbidden Worlds Festival. All this sits alongside the myriad offerings of Harbourside where activities for individuals, families, Bristolians and visitors to the city alike buzz with vibrancy.

In 2021 the partnership was rebranded as Bristol Ideas. Jointly owned by Bristol City Council, Business West and the Universities of Bristol and the West of England, it focuses on public learning and debate, and bringing together the arts and sciences to explore and celebrate our culture and the key issues of today.

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The wider region is also a hub of cultural activity. The presence of creative businesses like Aardman Animations and BBC Bristol, home of such BBC stalwarts as the natural history programmes, Countryfile and Gardener's World, invigorates the local offer. The region boasts four universities, two in Bristol and two in Bath, the latter a World Heritage city with its wonderful architecture and its Roman Baths. South Gloucestershire has the aerospace industry, both a flourishing series of businesses and a celebration of its heritage. A former lido in Weston-super-Mare has been redeveloped into the Tropicana, a multi-use indoor and outdoor space for events including exhibitions and music. Perhaps most importantly, there are plans to bring the whole regional cultural offer together, to tell a coherent story and to build a strong regional narrative.

## M Shed

Opened in 2011 in a waterside transit shed, the purpose of the M Shed museum is to tell the story of Bristol and its history. It stands on Princes Wharf, on a site occupied by a granary store until it was destroyed by a bomb in 1941.

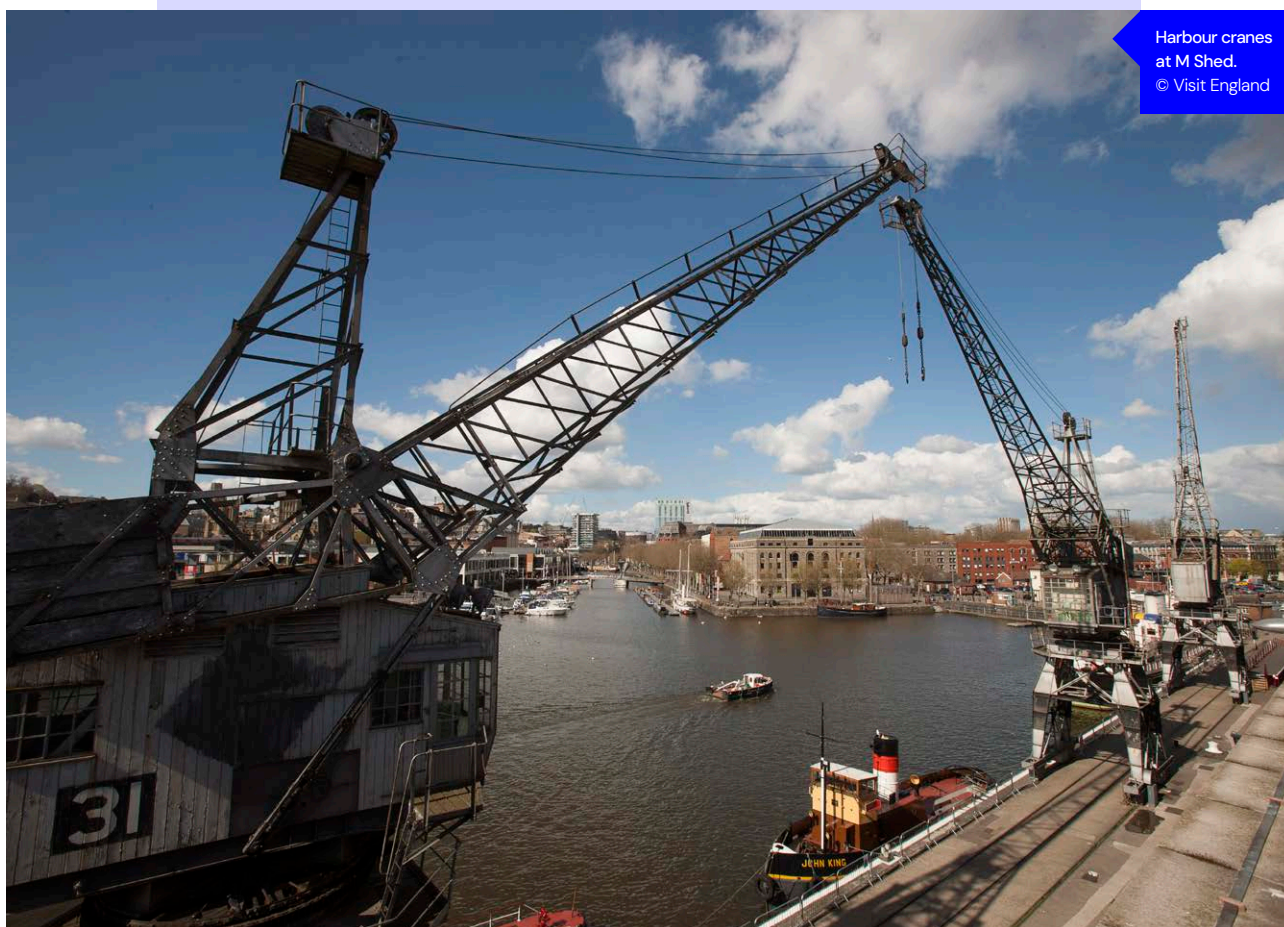
In the 1950s, two general cargo sheds – designated L and M, hence the museum's name – were built to cope with post-war trade, in M's case mostly to Ireland. But the gradual decline of the docks culminated with their



Statue of Edward Colston at M Shed.

closure in 1975, and the sheds stood empty for some years, until both L and M Sheds became the base for the new Bristol Industrial Museum and a museum collections store. L Shed was for a while the home of the National Lifeboat Museum, and still houses thousands of the museum's collections which can be visited at behind-the-scenes tours. It also now holds the statue of Edward Colston, pulled down in June 2020 and toppled into the harbour before being retrieved a few days later and temporarily displayed in M Shed. A survey of Bristolians asking what should ultimately happen to it resulted in the majority wanting it to be displayed in a museum, which is what will eventually happen.

Moored outside the museum are several historic vessels, including the replica of John Cabot's *Matthew*. There are also four working cranes, the last survivors of over 40 cranes which operated in the docks in the 1950s, and Bristol Harbour Railway which offers rides along the quayside on selected weekends; visitors can both drive the train and operate the cranes.





## **Kathryn Davies** Managing Director of Visit West

Visit West has several functions. One deals specifically with the visitor economy, and in that area we, somewhat unusually, deliver a couple of strong consumer brands, Visit Bath and Visit Bristol. Then we have Meet Bristol and Bath, our trade activity, and Visit West as a corporate entity. The other main part of the business focuses on the three Business Improvement Districts which come under our umbrella: Bristol City Centre BID, Redcliffe and Temple BID and Broadmead BID. We originated in 1999 when Bristol City Council and Business West, in partnership, set up the Bristol Tourism Conference Bureau. Our overarching objective is to make the region an attractive place to visit, and to promote it as a destination both for visitors and for businesses.

Pre-pandemic, the visitor economy was worth well over £1 billion to Bristol alone. In 2021 that dropped to about £600 million, still a critical part of Bristol's infrastructure, so we see our role as crucial to the city's prosperity. We also know that Bristol has changed hugely since we were established nearly 25 years ago. Then, there were half as many hotels as we have now, the city looked very different, the cultural output was very different. We've seen new museums open, we've seen Bristol emerge as one of the UK's leading food and drink destinations, we've seen the city emerge as a key visitor destination in the UK. There has been phenomenal investment, and we've seen the city change and become more international, leading the way in sustainability, leading the way in tackling challenging issues like climate change and biodiversity. We've seen the region become a place where people want to live, do business, study and visit.



Sustainability is key to the region's development, in terms of having a responsibility not just to ourselves and the place where we live and work, but to the wider world and the future. It seems to be in the DNA of the region now, and was celebrated in 2015 when Bristol was awarded the EU accolade of being named Green Capital. And it's not just about environmental sustainability, it's about financial and social sustainability as well: all those elements that go into ensuring that the place is for everybody and accessible to everybody. Corporate citizenship as a concept is crucial to that whole approach.

Business West has played a huge part in our organisation, from having the vision to create the company in the first place to retaining an active and vital part of the operation at board level, at strategic level, as a critical

friend, as a collaborator.

Business West has helped us to understand how the wider regional economy is playing out and how what is happening outside our visitor economy world can influence what we are doing and how we can interrelate. We have a shared ambition – to continue to ensure that the region is the best place to live, work, study and visit.

There are challenges around for the visitor economy, not just funding

and the cost of living, but how we can bounce back after Brexit and Covid. We need to be confident in what makes us different as a region, as a place where visitors can get something they can't get elsewhere, with the right mix of businesses and attractions; we don't want to end up being a homogenised place that could be anywhere.

It's not just Bristol, of course. We have a phenomenal advantage in Bath as part of our offer in the region. Bath was designated a World Heritage site in 1987, and then in 2021 received a second inscription as one of the Great Spa Towns of Europe. There are only a handful of places in the world that have two such prestigious designations. With the Roman Baths, the landscape setting, the town and social planning, Bath is incredibly special.



Squirrel Monkeys at  
Bristol Zoo Gardens.  
© Andre Pattenden

It is very compact, it's very walkable, but it's also very connected to other places. And while it has its phenomenal 2,000 years of heritage, it's not about looking backwards, it's about looking forwards and making sure that it's a sustainable destination for the future. We always say that Bath's like the grown-up sister and Bristol is a bit of a baby in comparison, only being about 1,000 years old with a very different landscape and a very different outlook. But I think the two of them complement each other, and with them being so close – only 12 minutes apart by train – the whole region becomes a visitor experience, and the best bit is you haven't got to choose one or the other, you can easily have both.

***The whole region becomes a visitor experience.***



## ◀ Now and the future

Thirty-five years after the establishment of The Bristol Initiative, the South West looks very different. Many of the frightening challenges facing Bristol in 1988 have been tackled, and the city is a much more vibrant, successful entity. The wider region is a success story too, with Bath, Swindon, Wiltshire and Gloucester all enjoying their own prosperity both in business terms and as the focus of culture, tourism and entertainment. Business West, now and in its previous incarnations, played a significant role in that growth and development, and continues to do so. It also, in 2021, became a certified B Corp, in recognition of its values as a business that meets the highest standards of social and environmental performance, public transparency and legal accountability, in balance with business purpose and profit.

It has, however, changed – perforce. The world of business and commerce now in 2023 has a very different face. The rise of the internet and social media has been explosive, and has had a fundamental effect on how we now operate. While some of the initiatives of the early years continue to flourish and grow, others have been less fortunate. Harbourside was a massive achievement and remains a massive success, and Bristol is a buzzing hive of cultural activities. But Broadmead has once again fallen on hard times, a victim of the expansion of out-of-town ‘destination’ shopping centres and the even more rapid growth of online shopping.

The focus has perhaps shifted. Two hundred years ago, the Bristol Chamber of Commerce was set up to counter the decline of the docks, the centre at that time of Bristol’s prosperity. In the early 1990s Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative faced up to the decline of the city as a whole, and was highly successful in achieving major improvements in a variety of areas. Business in Bristol and the wider region today is able to build on those achievements, as can be seen through the successful establishment of new, entrepreneurial enterprises, many of them specifically building into their operative goals the betterment of society, the continuing need to confront the ongoing issues of deprivation and educational failure, and the urgency of facing up to the dangers of climate change. As a founder of both Nuclear South West and Hydrogen South West, Business West is in the vanguard of the South West region’s shift to green energy.

The undeniable fact is that many of the challenges that bedevilled the South West at the end of the 20th century persist. Homelessness, transport difficulties, sub-standard education and the lack of the skills newly necessary in new industries... all still demand practical and achievable solutions. But they are not easily tackled at local level, even within such a prosperous area as Bristol, Bath and their hinterland. They require involvement from government nationally, and need complex intervention and management.

For Business West, partnership across the board, particularly with the local authorities, is still, as it always has been, at the heart of its approach. As an organisation it remains an effective service-provider for companies, large and small, who value and benefit from the practical help it can offer and the networking opportunities it provides. It also has direct involvement in many local amenities and facilities. Business West is heavily involved in Visit West, and plays a strong role in three Business Improvement Districts set up with Bristol City Council to work on how to revitalise Broadmead, the city centre and the Redcliffe and Temple area. And as so many of its stakeholders demonstrate, fundamental to its ethos remains the belief that business always has a responsibility to address concerns around inequality, homelessness, poverty, housing shortages, inadequate education and everything that impinges on quality of life. That this is not simply, or at all, a philanthropic, selfless attitude is self-evident; it is greatly to any employer's benefit that a vibrant environment and ready access to talent from all sectors of society are crucial to its success and profitability.

Business West's aim, now and for the future, is to support businesses to work with partners, public and private, to achieve their ambitions while strengthening governance and maximising the potential of the places where they work, the people among whom they exist, and the environment in which they all operate. Business West and the enterprises that make up its wide-ranging membership are there to influence government – national, regional and local – to offer strategic responses to challenges, to maximise human potential and to change society for the better. Two hundred years after it was established, it remains as relevant and necessary as ever.

## Phil Smith

### Managing Director, Business West

Business West is an organisation that has been around for 200 years trying to look after the future; and now we've got the next 200 years coming, and we're trying to decide what the future challenges will be for Bristol and the Greater Bristol area, and therefore the approach Business West should take.

We are an organisation that does three things effectively. We create a wide-ranging membership base, getting companies together to discuss and fight and argue and lobby for the things that affect them. We provide services to companies that help them go further and faster. And we also spend a lot of time working with the stakeholders to make the environment of Wiltshire, Bristol, Bath and Gloucestershire as favourable as possible for business success, whether it's about broadband, skills, roads, access to people... Our priorities are to make sure that we focus on the right things and work with the right stakeholders to get as good a governance in this part of the world as possible, while also keeping our focus on the individual businesses, be they start-ups or Rolls-Royce, making sure that we're addressing their specific needs.

I've been involved in business for the best part of 30 years. The downside of being around so long is that you sometimes don't bring the fresh thought that's needed, but I have a fantastic team who always challenge me – around 175 staff at the moment, fantastic people. They like working here. We're not doctors and nurses, we don't save people's lives, but we do help to create environments within which people flourish. Running a business has changed. It used to be that you looked after your customers, your supply chain, your personnel and the money, and that was it. Now you have to consider things like equality, diversity, inclusion, mental health... and there is also now the fallout from Brexit and Covid, and things like working from home and the digital world.

The most important thing, I think, is how businesses use people and how people want to work for businesses. There have been major changes in how people approach work. 'A job for life' is no longer something employers offer and employees, on the whole, want. Now that digital working has been proved to be effective, and people can work from more or less anywhere, there are basic questions about how and where they work. Clearly if your business is a factory or a bakery, you need a work place. But if you don't need to be physically in an office, how do we now manage that different working culture? Is it about collaboration? Creativity? Socialisation? These are questions for now and the future.

## Ben Shorrock Managing Director of TechSPARK

Alongside my main role as Managing Director of TechSPARK, I also wear various hats around how we support the city and the region. I help with the Bristol One City Board, and I sit on the Tech Southwest advisory board, the UK Tech Cluster Group advisory board and the UK Cyber Cluster Collaborations Board. So I am deeply involved in tech all over our region.

As an organisation our mission is to help grow and strengthen the community here in Bristol and Bath. It all started in Bath, in the pub, with a group of people who all ran different businesses, and who felt that they didn't talk enough about their achievements, or share and collaborate more. That was ten years ago, and since then BathSPARK and TechSPARK have gone from an idea in the pub to a not-for-profit which now works with thousands of people a month, lots and lots of businesses, lots of different programmes and activities.



We work to support businesses and people at every level, from the very early stages of new business start-ups right through to huge global corporates. We run over 200 events a year, we push out content and stories and leadership ideas about what's happening in the region, and we aim specifically to help businesses to solve problems around technology or start-ups. Some of our events offer very basic advice and help, while others can be highly technical.

Bath Digital Festival has been running for 11 years now, with around 3,000 attendees a year; and Bristol Tech Festival now has just over 5,000 attendees a year, and last year reached just over 2.5 million views on the internet through our social and campaign activities. Both festivals now have a significant reach and are showcases for the great things that are happening here.

Supporting innovation is a massive part of our work. When we started, the approach was broadly around greater understanding of the internet – how you communicate and sell things through that medium. Now so many businesses in the region are at the cutting edge of innovation: quantum technology, artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics.... It's about deep expertise, the capacity to take risks and to learn from setbacks and failure. We are also proud to be more and more involved with businesses that are focused on making the world a better place; and we also work with all four universities, which are increasingly the source of some amazing innovations. It's very rare now that businesses don't include some sort of positive social impact within their thought processes, and a huge proportion of those are about net zero.

***Techspark is an organisation that Business West has partnered with to reach technical innovators in our region.***

## Nick Hounsfied

Founder and Chief Executive of The Wave, Bristol and member of Business West

My background is in healthcare, and about 12 years ago I began to think about and understand that a lot of people's ill health is because they aren't connected to the outdoors and nature. I have been a surfer for 46 years, and I came across this amazing technology which allowed you to create waves inland. It was a real eureka moment, where I felt that I could put that technology at the centre of an outdoor health and well-being place. Roll forward ten years and we've managed to get it funded and built, the first one of its type in the whole world. We've been open now for three years.

Our business has changed quite a lot since we founded it. We opened in October 2019, with the hope that we would learn as much as possible over the winter to be ready for the first spring and summer. And then pandemic lockdown hit, so we never got to have that first spring and summer, and just had to survive.

When lockdown finished, suddenly everybody seemed to realise how important it was to get outside into nature and to access blue space and green space. And we were inundated. But we hadn't had time to learn, so there was a lot of firefighting going on. It's starting to calm down now, and we're learning fast; and we also recognise that the main thing about being a young business is that we must keep that agility, that ability to pivot when you need to and be able to react to market conditions and what is going on in society.

Pretty much one of the first organisations I spoke to about the idea was Business West; and we found the black book opening with access to the key stakeholders, alongside the promise that BW would get behind us as a business community and shout about the idea, and lend a huge amount of support all the way along the process. They even came along to the planning meeting and stood up and talked about how important this was for the region, and what economic benefits would result from what we were going to be doing. It's that connectivity and support that are so important.

We are a young business, and from the start our principles have centred on creating a balance, as far as possible, between people, the planet and profit – creating a sustainable future. But equally, there is a social aspect,

*Business West lent us a huge amount of support all the way along the process.*



looking at how we can break down barriers to create a more diverse workforce, and also looking at the environmental side. We've always said that we would never use any petrochemicals to create our very power-hungry waves, so we currently use renewable energy. But we have been building our own solar array and battery storage solution and we'll be completely off grid and actually be a net contributor back to the grid.

Bristol was the perfect place to build The Wave because it is the gateway to the South West where many people who want to surf visit. We have been approached about similar projects across the UK and abroad, which we are exploring; but the heart and soul of our business is here in Bristol, and there is certainly the capacity to grow the business within Bristol. 2023 is our first normal year, and there are all sorts of potential to develop The Wave in other directions – music and film nights, perhaps, and lecture series. But we want Bristol first of all to really know exactly what we are doing and what we will be doing. We'll be doing it Bristol-fashion, doing it the way that we always wanted to.

The Wave.  
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## Anne Allin

Commercial Director, Limbs & Things and member of Business West

'I have full responsibility for the sales, marketing and product development of our business, which is based in Bristol but has a global reach, with business units in the USA and Australia, and sales to the rest of the world through distributors. We design, manufacture and sell a range of simulation products known as task trainers which allow clinicians to gain competence and confidence in learning procedures before they apply them to human patients.

Margo Cooper started the business over 30 years ago. She trained as a medical artist, and then realised that there was more that was needed than just pictures to teach doctors and nurses procedures and how the human body works. So she set up a small kitchen tabletop business here in Bristol, and she has developed the business to what it is now, worth over £30 million and selling to over 70 countries globally. We're very fortunate in Bristol in having a wide base of people and skills and opportunities. Recreating the human form in a simulated fashion needs an awful lot of creativity, which in our case we need to marry with technical intelligence, and then with manufacturing. Bristol is this fantastic hub of creativity, but also has an industrial heart, so it brings the two nicely together. We have also been influenced recently by movements like Black Lives Matter, in the realisation that there is a real need for diversity in the skin tones of our models; it's really good to see, when we are out there in hospitals, that the models truly represent the communities that they are serving.

We have over 30 people in our research and development team, working on new materials and models; we are often treading new ground. And then the clinical world is changing fast, with new procedures being developed, all of it moving at a pace. So innovation is wholeheartedly at the root of what we do.

We are a small to medium size business in Bristol, and we often need that bigger collaborative aspect, somebody looking out for us on the national level and helping us to deal with those big issues, where on our own, we just wouldn't have a voice. That's where Business West is so crucial for us. We all sometimes soldier on on our own, but through involvement with people like those working for and with Business West we start to see common issues and learn from other people's experiences, and can be in touch with people who can help, so they're a great supporting arm to businesses in Bristol and the South West.'

## **Darren Jones**

**MP for Bristol North West and Chair of the Business and Trade Committee of the House of Commons**

'As chair of the committee, I have oversight of the government's performance as it relates to business in the UK, and also the ability for businesses to export abroad. I also used to lead Parliament's oversight of energy and climate change, and I've inherited the International Trade brief.

With regard to the importance of business to cities and to city regions, it's huge. A vibrant city requires vibrant businesses, whether that's your local high street or your major employers. And that's what makes a city like Bristol so alive, so popular and such a great place to live and work. Businesses in cities employ people. It's where people go to work every day. They operate and reside within our local communities. They can have an impact on our environment and climate. They can have an impact on people's lived experience every day, depending on the work culture and the way in which they go about their lives. So they are a massively important part of the fabric of a city like Bristol and the environment in which we all live and work.

I also very much support businesses having a broader societal role than just making profit. I'm passionate about social mobility – showing young people the really interesting and great career opportunities that are available to them in Bristol, and the routes they need to follow to take advantage of them. Businesses have a major role in that area, coming into schools, doing open days, offering apprenticeships and work experience, just showing young people what is available to them. And that's a benefit not just to them and to society, but also to the future prospects for business and the economy in the region.

We obviously have to recognise that inequality is often deeply entrenched in society. For young people at school who don't see the relevance of studying maths or science, if higher education is something they think is not for them and they don't know what apprenticeships or vocational training opportunities or degree level apprenticeships are available or how to access them, it's no wonder that they don't move up the social mobility ladder. And yet we know that there are enormous skills shortages across the economy. Let me take one example. There are some great businesses in the north of Bristol working in the aerospace industry, a proud heritage industry for our part of the world. They increasingly need people who know how to do coding and gaming and design because they're building digital versions, simulators, before they build physical aeroplanes.'

If you are a young person who loves gaming but you don't make the connection between the things you are interested in and the fact that you can do those things as a job and get paid really well for it in the area you live in, you are not going to reach out to take the opportunities available to you. It's up to businesses and employers to present those opportunities to young people at all levels of society.

Another issue is that I would like to see more devolution to the region in due course. We've obviously voted as a city not to have a directly elected city mayor, so there's a new form of local leadership coming in. We have enterprise areas, enterprise zones, we're part of the Western Gateway powerhouse and obviously in the West of England Combined Authority, and there are lots of other partnerships and governance models. There is clearly more devolution to come in the years ahead. The question is what that might look like and how we secure that investment and that devolution when the opportunity arises. We need to find the right levers that the West of England needs to pull or push to make sure that this happens sooner rather than later.



## **Stephen Bashford**

**Business and Skills Director, the West of England  
Combined Authority**

We are about supporting skills in a variety of ways, supporting small businesses in the region, encouraging businesses to come to the west of England to create jobs and stay and support the ecosystem here so that the area becomes even more vibrant. We're particularly strong in terms of our aerospace and engineering capabilities, our tech sector and our creative and culture industries too. We're often cited as, outside London, one of the strongest professional services hubs, and increasingly in green technologies as well. Having four universities in the area is a great benefit too.

We recognise that there are disparities. There are parts of the region and some sectors that haven't shared in growth and development generally. For example, parts of south Bristol are among the most deprived nationally, just a few miles from some of the wealthiest parts of the country. We see that if we don't address those inclusion challenges, we won't be spreading wealth in a way that is good for everyone. The skills agenda is key in that area, because you're creating pathways, good quality jobs, jobs that people may have felt were out of reach.

But this area is a vibrant place because there are new industries being developed all the time, and the way technology is permeating all of our sectors is really exciting. I think the quality of life here is strong and the South West is a fantastic place to live, with our beautiful countryside and landscapes. But we also need growth in our economy, we need strong productivity to continue and for that productivity to pick up. We need to find a new narrative and new ways of working with government positively to make the case for investment in our region. And we need to remain really competitive going into the future. One of the positive things we're working on at the moment is a West of England Good Employment Charter: improving diversity, looking at gender inequality, wage inequality and so on. That's where politicians and businesses can combine in partnership to work together.

***We're often cited as, outside London, one of the strongest professional services hubs, and increasingly in green technologies as well***

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