

City, Trees, Water

AVON GORGE, BRISTOL

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I remember when the first row of plane trees was planted along the cobbled Narrow Quay in the 1970s. The Arnolfini Gallery had not long moved from the other side of the water into Bush House at the end of the quay. The saplings were among the earliest signs that Bristol's historic Docks were not going to fall into utter dereliction and disuse now that commercial shipping had left for Avonmouth. Few saw any beauty in the raw desolation of Bristol's port, but the seeds of its regeneration were already being sown. The planners who had wanted to send a splendid dual carriageway over the water were in retreat, even though buddleia still sprouted from disused warehouses, the demolition ball was swinging, Canon's Marsh was a huge and gloomy car park and the water of the Docks was a byword for filth. If you fell in, the story went, you would get Weill's disease from the rats which thrived while everything else decayed.

One night back then I walked from The Grove past the Arnolfini and along the quay. One of the freshly-planted saplings had been seized, bent over from its stake and broken. A torn-off branch lay on the ground, its leaves trampled. I willed the other trees to grow quickly, to put themselves beyond reach of vandalism. There is something in us that does not love a tree and makes it a target, and perhaps this is because we know the tree will grow so much taller than ourselves, and will outlive us. Then, it will take a chainsaw, knowledge and organisation to take it down. Now, any fool can destroy it.

That line of trees is more than forty years old now. There is no gap in it: another sapling must have been planted to repair the damage, or perhaps the tree, by some miracle, regenerated itself. The planes have come into their magnificence, while around the water more and more trees have been planted, and are still being planted. Leaf shadows ripple, people sit with coffee and beer in the shade or stroll in and out of the dappled light. Warehouse after warehouse has been converted into housing, restaurants, shops, cafés, museums, galleries, cinemas, and each time, more trees have been planted. The water quality is assessed regularly and the results posted up, because so many rowers, canoeists, sailors and paddle-boarders are at play on the water. Swans glide from houseboat to houseboat, knowing where they will be fed.

The raw glory of the Docks' working past has gone, along with its dirt, smoke, labour, venture, endurance, profit. Even its name has changed. To the satisfaction of the tourist industry and the developers of luxury waterside apartments, Bristol Docks are now Bristol Harbourside. But there is still the same intricate, brilliant engineering of locks and sluices to keep the water in the Floating Harbour at a level despite a tidal range of more than 12 metres. There is still the same voyage out through the lock that secures the 200-year-old Floating Harbour, down the River Avon and towards the sea.

It was a mild sunny October morning when I first made this voyage, more than four decades after I first came to live in Bristol. The ferry swung out from its mooring by the *SS Great Britain*. I was going to spend the next few hours travelling down the Avon Gorge to the mouth of the river, with commentary from the naturalist and broadcaster Ed Drewitt.

I live overlooking the harbour and its swans, cormorants and ducks are my garden birds. The Avon Gorge is familiar to me in every season: the electric green flicker of new leaves over black twigs in spring; the summer branches bearing their loads of darker leaves; the fire of autumn and the rich compost and mushroom smells of winter. But this was the first time I'd gone all the way to the mouth of the Avon by boat, following the river's twists along the deep limestone

gash made by glaciers or perhaps by the giants Goram and Vincent in their battle for the beautiful Avona.

Few cities possess such wild places so close to their hearts. The centre of Bristol is not really its centre at all, because while the city has grown to the north, east and south, its western edge has remained much as it was, bounded by the river and the plunge of the Gorge, rimmed by National Trust land, by nature reserves and Forestry Commission woodland, by the Downs gifted in perpetuity by Act of Parliament to the people of Bristol, and by the publicly-owned estate of Ashton Court. There is a wealth of ancient green spaces and forest within walking distance of the city centre, and these spaces are knitted into Bristol life. They have their own rhythm of balloon and kite festivals, long muddy weekend walks, charity runs and mountain bikes rides, endless picnics and parties, sunbathing, fireworks and Dark Sky stargazing. When Concorde made its last flight home to the city where it was born, it swooped over the trees, the Gorge and the Clifton Suspension Bridge like one of the peregrine falcons that nest on the cliff face. Crowds of thousands lined the Gorge from the Observatory to the Sea Walls.

Like everyone who lives in Bristol, I have walked over the Suspension Bridge many times and stopped to gaze down 300 feet at the glisten of mud or the swell of a rising tide. I think of the ships coming in after long and dangerous voyages, centuries ago, and how the sailors would have snuffed up the smell of trees, sap, soil and blossom after months out on the ocean. I can't help thinking of the Bridge's sorrows too: the lives it cost to build it, the lives that are lost every year as people come to it in desperation to end their sufferings. From here the forest looks very dark. For once it's possible to see the trees as birds see them, their crowns visible, their trunks dwindling into the earth far below.

As our ferry left the harbour we turned to watch the final struggle of an eel in the gullet of a cormorant. Every so often the fish would show as a flash of silver in the bird's mouth while the cormorant gulped, head thrown back, in the throes of its swallow. Then it was the lock and the dank, mineral-smelling silence of the lock, the water level dropping and dropping as if it would swallow us too into this grave of water.

We came out onto the light of the river, and there were the trees on either bank, rising steeply above the rich mud. Oak, ash, birch, hazel, holly, guelder rose, yew, hawthorn, coppice hazel, small-leaved lime, dogwood and whitebeam of all kinds. According to the plant taxonomist Dr Tim Rich, there are more than twenty differentiated species of whitebeam growing in the Avon Gorge. There are two which are unique to this place: the Bristol Gorge whitebeam and Willmott's whitebeam. They flourish in the thin limestone soil, among the crags.

When I was young I would climb over the fence beneath the Observatory, 300 feet above the water. There were secret places in the scrub, where sun fell on exposed stone and there was no sound but the cries of birds. Even the traffic below on the Portway was stilled for months while a canopy was built over the road to protect it from rockfall. Opposite, there was the dark mass of Leigh Woods and far below, the glisten of mud at low tide. I would wedge myself in among low, knotted branches, eat an apple, read, close my eyes and feel wind and sun on my skin.

There is something entrancing about such wildness which is not only close to a city's centre but is also part of the city's breath and being, part of its understanding of itself. In spring, the encampments of hawthorn, blackberry and wild cherry on the Downs break into foam. It looks as if the blossom will spill in a tide over the roads. In November, the dense ivy which grows over these thickets is alive with the buzzing of innumerable honey bees, taking nectar for their winter stores. The light is low but in these sheltered places the sun is warm enough for the bees to cluster and suckle. In winter-time the naked trees reveal their beauty of line and structure. All along the roads across the Downs the avenues of horse chestnuts are bare. Generations of Bristol children have come to pick up conkers, or hurl sticks into the branches to bring them down. In spring, there are cowslips all over the Downs close to the Sea Walls, and in summer the meadows are mown for hay. There are harebells, scabious, ox-eye daisies, pimpernel and orchids, and rippling, exquisite grasses, bronze, thistle-blue and silver in summer twilight. In the background, always, the trees: the frame and protection of this landscape. And always, the eye is drawn back

towards the 300-foot-deep gash in the landscape.

We sail under the Suspension Bridge. There are buzzards circling high above it, and from this angle the Bridge might as well be flying too. So much is visible, and so much is hidden. On either side of the Gorge there are Iron Age hill forts, built in defensive positions which gave a clear view as far away as Wales. Stokeleigh Camp, Clifton Camp and Burwalls Camp rose out of the trees and then returned to them. Their fires charred stones which are still buried somewhere under centuries of leaf-mould. The people who lived there cut down the trees to enclose their camp, and burned the wood to keep themselves warm. Stokeleigh Camp alone covered seven acres of land. The forest must have rung with voices, the clang of tools and weapons, cries of children. The people who lived in those camps have left behind pottery, a coin or two, a brooch. Like the buzzards they circle in a blue immensity of time, part of the world in which we live and yet flying in their own element. The trees grew back again, hiding deep ditches and raised ramparts. Roots dug deep into the wreckage of huts and walls.

Later there were foresters, quarries for limestone and celestine, charcoal burners working in their clearings. Generations of work, and the trees grow back over it. The 400 or so acres of woodland contain ancient woodland, veteran trees, wood pasture, coppice and post-war plantation.

We were on deck, watching as the trees slid past. Every so often Ed Drewett would swing up his binoculars and call out the birds that he saw long before we did. These woods are rich in prey and the crags are rich in birds of prey. We saw buzzards, kestrels and a peregrine falcon at roost in its limestone eyrie, invisible until we were shown where to look. I have only once seen a peregrine in flight over the Gorge, adrift it seemed on an updraught, its wings drawing energy from the wind with the most perfect economy. The peregrines hunt pigeon, starlings, doves, waders, swifts, thrushes, bats – and they are well fed here. The woods are full of birds. Nightingales, ravens, green woodpeckers, song thrushes, bullfinches, sparrowhawks, nuthatches. They reveal themselves only in glimpses, then go back to their secret, intricate lives. The woods hide and sustain them.

The river widens. There's salt in the air now, and seaweed clinging to the banks. We see redshanks and common sandpiper, shelduck and lapwing. Herons stand at strict, heron-regulated intervals, fishing their territory. The trees have thinned out. Everything is broad, tidal and suffused with light. We sail under the motorway bridge at Avonmouth and for a moment it seems possible that this little blue and yellow ferry might go on and on, trudging through wilder and wider water as river becomes estuary becomes sea.

But of course we go back. The tide has turned and is pushing us in with it. The trees run down almost to the water again. A golden fox slips out of the grass at the Gunpowder House. The Gorge is steep now on either side and cars drum along the Portway, echoing. This is where we see the peregrine, folded against grey rock, 200 feet above us. Another buzzard steers above the tree canopy, balancing, waiting. Here is the Suspension Bridge again, and soon we will turn into the lock. Now everything is in sight at once: city, trees, water, the dazzle of windscreens, a brutal flyover, a buzzard's looping flight.