

# An Introduction

Bristol and its surrounding area has a long and rich maritime history. There is much to learn about how the settlement started and how its population grew due to an increase in trade. In this study, children will gain an understanding of how Bristol became the place we know and love today.

## What you need to know

The earliest evidence of settlements in the Bristol area comes from Stokeleigh Camp, an Iron Age promontory fort which was built in Leigh Woods. After the arrival of the Romans, the town of Bath was connected to Bristol via road. The Romans had a small settlement in the area known as Portus Abonae (present day Sea Mills). As the name suggests, it was a port settlement where boats carrying Roman soldiers and goods would arrive in the country.

After the Romans departed Bristol (and the rest of Britain), the Anglo-Saxons made the first proper settlement at Bristol. We know this from evidence, such as coins, which were minted by Anglo-Saxon kings only if the town had a market or other significant importance.

The arrival of the Normans and the building of Bristol Castle was the start of Bristol becoming a bustling medieval city, with the early stepping stones placed for it to begin its maritime journey.

The Rivers Avon and Frome were important in the development of Bristol. They were useful strategically in defending from invaders and they also allowed access to the River Severn which flows out into the Atlantic Ocean. As the settlement grew, adjustments were made to the rivers. In the 1240s, a large trench called St Augustine's Reach was dug out through marshland belonging to the Abbey of St Augustine. The rivers and newly improved Bristol Bridge helped open up the city to trade.

Trade has always been important to the growth of Bristol. Between the 13th and 19th centuries, trade really took off. At first, trading with Ireland, Bristol then began to make links with France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Denmark, Germany and others.

The signs of the port being a real hub of activity in the country, also helped to bring a host of explorers to the area. None more famous than John Cabot, an Italian man who departed from Bristol to the unknown lands of North America. This discovery would eventually lead to a dark time in humankind's history – the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Bristol's involvement in the triangular trade is undeniable, and it eventually became the number one slaving port in Britain. The money which was gained from this trade, helped to further develop the city and its docks. The trade was eventually outlawed in the 19th century.

Bristol's docks were bustling but the high tidal range meant that they ground to a halt whenever there was a low tide. In the early 1800s, an engineer called William Jessop designed a floating harbour system that would allow water to be trapped in the harbour, regardless of the tide. His design was improved upon by Isambard Kingdom Brunel who devised a system to manage the build-up of silt in the docks. The Floating Harbour allowed larger ships to come into the centre of Bristol and also for larger ships to be built. Bristol's most famous ship is The SS Great Britain which was designed by Brunel and built in the city.

As ships continued to grow larger, Bristol's shipping activity was moved closer to the River Severn in new docks at Avonmouth and Royal Portbury. Over time, the dock areas have been repurposed and regenerated to ensure they remain the hub of a thriving city.

## Resources

Our key enquiry questions, sources, PowerPoints, activities, and other resources will help to build children's understanding of their local area of Bristol and answer the question 'How have the Bristol docks changed over time?'

## Get in touch

Is there an area of local history you'd love to see on our Local History Hub?  
Get in touch to learn how we can work together! Email

[LocalHistory@tpet.co.uk](mailto:LocalHistory@tpet.co.uk)  
to find out more.



Teacher's Pet



Historic England



**Bristol**

# Local History

Historic England and Teacher's Pet have come together to bring you a collection of free resources that you can use in your local history teaching.

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Historic England



Teacher's Pet

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## Who are Teacher's Pet?

Teacher's Pet have been providing downloadable and playable educational content to early years and primary school teachers for over 14 years. We cover all areas of the curriculum and use a team of in-house teachers and designers to create engaging and memorable concepts, that the children will love.

## Why local history?

At [Teacher's Pet](#) we want to empower primary school teachers by giving them the tools they need to deliver inspiring and thoughtful lessons about the local area and its history. We believe local history teaching has such an important part to play in a child's wellbeing – helping to give children a sense of pride in where they live.

Our Local History project is designed to provide teachers across the UK with everything they need to successfully carry out a full scheme of teaching about their local area, through key enquiry questions and source led activities.

Working with [Historic England](#) gives us access to archived maps and photos for resources and information from knowledgeable local historians, as well helping us to provide the content to you free of charge.

For more information about our Local History project or to find out more about Teacher's Pet Classroom Resources, please visit our website.