



Our Project Was the City

Bristol Ideas: 1992-2024



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Our Project Was the City
Bristol Ideas: 1992-2024

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Our Project Was the City

Bristol Ideas: 1992-2024

This book is dedicated to:

The partners of Bristol Ideas for their leadership and support:
Arts Council England South West, Bristol City Council, Business West,
University of Bristol and University of the West of England.

Our colleagues and collaborators.

All those who provided funding and sponsorship.

Those who worked with us:
our staff, poets, writers, scientists, engineers and artists.

Our audiences who watched, read, debated and challenged.

Our speakers in our thousands of festival events.

And Bristol.

Thank you for partnership, support and never-ending inspiration.

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Foreword

Simon Cook MBE

Chair, Bristol Ideas

It has been a privilege to help lead Bristol Ideas for nearly two decades as a board director and chair. What started as the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership in 1993 has always employed a small team but has delivered hugely for the city over the last 30 years. It is a great sadness that the organisation has been wound up, but I and the other directors were determined to end well by celebrating what has been achieved and to help others take forward our work in new ways.

Since we were created, we worked not only in Bristol and across the South West, but also nationally and internationally on a range of cultural projects. These included the creation of new cultural centres such as We The Curious, help with the renewal of existing cultural venues, annual festivals such as Brief Encounters, Festival of Ideas and Festival of Economics, a biennial Festival of the Future City, and celebrations and commemorations including work on Brunel, Bristol aerospace, the First World War and the city itself. We also helped hundreds of smaller, though no less important, projects, gave much support to organisations and commissioned many artists, poets and writers to create new work.

There is much in which we can take pride from this as well as learn for the future of culture in Bristol. This book – our 31st publication, which is another example of our outstanding record – looks at our history by examining the different projects and areas of impact through the words of some of those involved and the wide-ranging legacy of what was achieved. ■

Timeline

Over the past three decades, Bristol Ideas has run many projects and festivals, published 31 books, and been centrally involved in initiatives led by a great deal of others. Here is a snapshot of our work through the years.

Note: The organisation was formed as Bristol Cultural Development Partnership (BCDP) in 1992. It changed its name to Bristol Ideas in 2021. For ease, 'Bristol Ideas' has been used throughout the main text. Until the end, Bristol Ideas remained a partnership organisation, owned and managed by four partners: Bristol City Council, Business West, University of Bristol and University of the West of England. Arts Council England South West was a member of the company for 10 years and a funding partner for 29 years.

1988

- John Savage starts work as director of The Bristol Initiative, which went on to launch, fund and help manage many projects including BCDP.

1992

- Arts Council England South West, Bristol City Council and Bristol Chamber of Commerce form BCDP following a report by Boyden-Southwood Associates.

1993

- BCDP formally launches in March 1993.
- Andrew Kelly takes up post as director on 1 April 1993.
- BCDP is shortlisted (though not successful) for the Year of Photography and the Electronic Image submitted in partnership with Bath. This is part of the Arts 2000 project launched by Arts Council England – an annual series of events, commissions, festivals and other

activities that took place each year until the millennium.

- Work commences on the Centre for the Performing Arts, a new concert hall on Harbourside, which later changed its name to The Harbourside Centre.

1994

- Plans launch for a cultural attraction on Harbourside, Bristol 2000, which eventually becomes At-Bristol and then We The Curious.
- Work continues on The Harbourside Centre as well as the renewal of the wider Harbourside area and city centre, including new public spaces.

1995

- The Brief Encounters short-film festival launches, which BCDP leads for five years.
- BCDP runs a programme to mark 100 years of cinema with the largest programme outside London.

1996

- Behnisch Architekten wins an international competition to design The Harbourside Centre.
- Work takes place on future planning for various organisations, including Watershed, The Print Project and Black Pyramid Films.

1997

- Work continues on The Harbourside Centre and Bristol 2000.

1998

- Arts Council England rejects final bid for The Harbourside Centre.
- The Digital Arts Development Agency launches.
- Work continues on renewing Bristol's cultural organisations.

1999

- BCDP partners with many groups to plan activity to mark the third millennium.

2000

- At-Bristol opens, later to become We The Curious.
- Work starts on the Bristol Legible City project.
- Work starts on the bid to be European Capital of Culture 2008.

2001

- BCDP runs the first Bristol Legible City conference.
- Publication of *Building Legible Cities*.

- Animated Encounters is launched as a partner festival to Brief Encounters.

2002

- Bristol is one of six cities shortlisted for European Capital of Culture 2008.
- BCDP runs a national conference and publishes a book: *Managing Partnerships*.
- BCDP leads evaluation work of Queen Square and Bristol Legible City projects.

2003

- Final decision on Capital of Culture bid: Liverpool wins and Bristol is made a Centre of Culture.
- *Bristol Legible Cities 2: Making the Case* conference, book and academic day.
- Publication of *Arts Sponsorship in the South West*: a consultancy report for Arts and Business South West.
- BCDP works on the business case for the refurbishment and enhancement of the Theatre Royal complex, Bristol.
- BCDP works on a permanent exhibition space to create an animation centre as part of At-Bristol.
- BCDP publishes *Making a Difference – an impact assessment of Animated Encounters, Brief Encounters and Wildscreen*.
- The annual Great Reading Adventure is launched with Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

2004

- Bid submitted to the Urban Cultural Programme to deliver on the 2008 promise, with more than £1.5m secured in grants for projects to run from 2004 to 2010.
- Organisational review of Architecture Centre conducted.
- Launch of Creative Bristol: the initiative to take forward the Urban Cultural Programme with a year of sport launched for 2005.
- The second Great Reading Adventure is John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*.

2005

- Review of Bristol Legible City conducted.
- *How Open is Bristol?* Intercultural city study published in partnership with Comedia, which talks about the need for Bristol to deal with its history in relation to the trade in enslaved Africans.
- The third Great Reading Adventure is Helen Dunmore's *The Siege*, which leads a city programme marking the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.
- Festival of Ideas launches: speakers include AC Grayling, Claudia Hammond, Nick Hornby, John Mortimer and Julia Neuberger.

2006

- Brunel200 programme to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of

Isambard Kingdom Brunel runs all year, with £4.5m raised.

- Publication of *Brunel: In Love with the Impossible*.
- The fourth Great Reading Adventure is Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Carmen Calill, Charles Handy, Bettany Hughes, Ruth Padel, Paul Rusesabagina and Eric Sykes.

2007

- Research and organisational work for South West Regional Development Agency Creative Summit.
- Partners in work on Science City Bristol.
- The fifth Great Reading Adventure is Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, which leads a year looking at Bristol and immigration, Windrush and the trade in enslaved Africans.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Tony Benn, Billy Bragg, Kiran Desai, Wole Soyinka and Clive Stafford Smith.

2008

- BCDP leads Bristol's work on the Heritage Lottery Fund's Portrait of a Nation with a showcase event in Liverpool.
- The sixth Great Reading Adventure is *The Bristol Story* by Eugene Byrne and Simon Gurr: a 200-page cartoon history of Bristol.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include

Kate Adie, Alaa Al Aswany, Matt Frei, Naomi Klein, Astrid Proll, Jon Ronson, Philippe Sands and Raymond Tallis.

2009

- Darwin200: the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin.
- Publication of *Charles Darwin: For the Love of Science*.
- The first Festival of Ideas prize for best book of ideas is won by *Flat Earth News* by Nick Davies.
- The seventh Great Reading Adventure is Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Margaret Atwood, Mary Beard, Steve Bell, Shappi Khorsandi, James Lovelock, Tariq Ramadan and Lewis Wolpert.

2010

- BAC100: celebrating 100 years of aviation in the West of England programme runs all year.
- Festival of Ideas Book Prize won by *The Spirit Level* by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett.
- The eighth Great Reading Adventure is *The Book of Aviation Wonder 2010*.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Steward Brand, Martin Creed, Barbara Ehrenreich, Christopher Hitchens, Andrea Levy and Polly Toynbee.

2011

- The Festival of Ideas Book Prize is won by Dan Hind's *The Return of the Public*.
- BCDP conference launches a citywide debate: 'Should Bristol have an elected mayor?'
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Izzeldin Abuelaish, Temple Grandin, Kristin Hersh, Clarence B Jones and Jackie Kay.

2012

- The first Festival of Economics takes place.
- *The Book of Bristol Genius* is published.
- Festival of Ideas Book Prize won by *Edgelands* by Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts.
- The first Bristol Genius Award is won by Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (Children of the 90s).
- Formal partnerships with the *Observer* newspaper and the University of Bristol begin for Festival of Ideas.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Harry Belafonte, Richard Ford, Peter Hitchens, Robert Macfarlane, Elif Shafak and Jeanette Winterson.

2013

- Festival of Ideas Book Prize won by *Artful* by Ali Smith.
- Bristol Genius Award won by Bristol Urban Pollinators.
- Work on a draft of the West of

- England Strategic Growth Plan.
- First Mayor's Annual Lecture and Debate.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Melissa Benn, Jung Chang, Jared Diamond, Philip French, Michael Palin, James Salter, Lynne Segal and Julia Unwin.
- Launch of Young People's Festival of Ideas: debates on topics including pornography and social media.

2014

- Bristol2014: 100th anniversary of the start of World War One programme runs all year.
- BCDP takes a lead role in annual Arts Council England conference, No Boundaries.
- The ninth Great Reading Adventure is *Bristol and the First World War*.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Shami Chakrabarti, Arianna Huffington, Mark Kermode, Kenan Malik and Irvine Welsh.
- Young People's Festival of Ideas: debates on topics including class and education, and the military.

2015

- BCDP leads major arts projects programme for Bristol 2015: European Green Capital.
- First Festival of the Future City.
- Bristol and Romanticism project including the publication of a walking guide and commissioning of new lyrical ballads from 23 poets.

- The Coleridge Lectures series launches with the theme of Romanticism.
- The 10th Great Reading Adventure is *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Nawal El Saadawi, Caroline Lucas, Roberto Saviano and Theodore Zeldin.
- Young People's Festival of Ideas: debates on topics including masculinity, racism, and mental health.

2016

- Bristol800: year-long programme marking 800 years of civic history in the city including a project on utopia with 25 writers and poets commissioned.
- Publication of *Festival of the Future City* book.
- The 11th Great Reading Adventure is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include Laura Bates, Erwin James, Paul Mason, Chris Packham, Hsiao-Hung Pai, Alexei Sayle, Yanis Varoufakis and Lindy West.
- Young People's Festival of Ideas: debates on topics including body politics, and cultural appropriation.
- Fifth Festival of Economics.
- First City Poet selected: Miles Chambers, who holds the post until 2018.

2017

- Second Festival of the Future City.
 - Coleridge Lectures theme: Revolution.
 - Festival of Ideas speakers include Cordelia Fine, Pankaj Mishra, David Olusoga, Dorit Rabinyan, Michael Rosen and Bernie Sanders.
 - Young People's Festival of Ideas: debates on topics including homelessness, language and representation in LGBT+ culture, and activism.
-

2018

- BCDP marks 25th anniversary.
 - Vanessa Kisuule appointed as City Poet. She holds the post until 2020.
 - Miles Chambers: *This is Our City* – his poems as City Poet published.
 - Festival of Ideas speakers include Akala, Hilary Cottam, Patrisse Khan-Cullors, Madeline Miller and Emily Wilson.
-

2019

- Third Festival of the Future City.
- Homes for Heroes 100 programme on the past, present and future of council housing runs all year.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include: George Alagiah, Paul Collier, Caroline Criado Perez, Robert Macfarlane, Paul Mason, Steven Pinker, Michael Pollan, Angela Saini, Ece Temelkuran and Tracey Thorn.

2020

- Chatterton: a poetic city project runs all year.
 - Publication of: *Poetic City Comic* and *Bristol: A Poetic City* anthology.
 - Vanessa Kisuule's poems as City Poet are published as *The View From Above and Below*.
 - Caleb Parkin appointed as City Poet, a post he holds until 2022.
 - Festival of Ideas speakers include: Anne Applebaum, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, Masha Gessen, Jenny Kleeman, Hermione Lee, Hashi Mohamed, Olivette Otele, Robert Reich and Michael Sandel.
-

2021

- Bristol Cultural Development Partnership becomes Bristol Ideas.
- Film2021: a year-long series of events marking William Friese-Greene and cinema in Bristol.
- Publication of *Opening Up the Magic Box*.
- Tenth anniversary of Festival of Economics.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include: Darran Anderson, Eddie Glaude Jr, Vivian Gornick, Anna Malaika Tubbs, Tamara Payne, Sathnam Sanghera, Samira Shackle, Rebecca Solnit, Brandon Taylor and Patrick Wright.

2022

- Bristol Ideas leads citywide debate on the future of Bristol's governance in advance of the mayoral referendum.
- Kat Lyons appointed as City Poet, a post they hold until 2024.
- Bristol Ideas runs Modernism 2022: Here + There (with partners in Lagos and Toronto) and works with High Sheriff Alex Raikes on A Lifetime for Justice.
- Caleb Parkin's poems as city poet *All the Cancelled Parties* published.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include: Susie Alegre, Paul Clements, Jason Cowley, Francis Fukuyama, Margo Jefferson, Ibram X Kendi, Bob Stanley, Helen Thompson and Lea Ypi.

2023

- Bristol Ideas marks 30th anniversary with Bristol 650 programme.
- Fifth Festival of the Future City.
- Publication of *Bristol 650: Essays on the Future of Bristol*.
- Festival of Ideas speakers include: Julian Baggini, Ayòbámi Adébáyò, Gary Younge, Sian Norris, Hadley Freeman and Noreen Masud.
- Publication of newly commissioned essays on the life and work of James Baldwin with Writers Mosaic.
- October: it is announced that Bristol Ideas will close in April 2024.

2024

- Publication of books on Bristol Ideas, Bristol music and a new book of walks about Bristol and ideas.
- Festival of Economics becomes part of Economics Observatory based at University of Bristol.
- Festival of the Future City becomes a project of the Growing Together Alliance (including: Business London, Business West, Cambridge Ahead, Northern Powerhouse).
- April: final programme and closure of Bristol Ideas.

Bring Your Ideas

Caleb Parkin (February 2021)

Caleb Parkin, our City Poet 2020-2022, wrote this poem for the launch of Bristol Ideas as the new name for Bristol Cultural Development Partnership.

bring your ideas
and let's stitch them into the city, weave them through streets chattering with trees
and we'll sip your ideas, a little fizzy, a little bitter, served with lemon or a pinch of salt

bring your ideas and serve them up
in a meal for 91 tongues, of cardamom, jerk seasoning, garam masala and cumin
serve them in the chalk horizons of equations, the antimatter of cosmic failure

bring your ideas and keep bringing them
even when they laugh, when you have to switch continents for a healing Yes
even if your ideas drop from towers into dark pools, fizzing with threat

bring your ideas and spray them
on the wall of the tallest tower in the city, in a map of the body's earth
we'll learn our edges in a quiet prayer for wellness, a hymnbook for health

your ideas might make us lightheaded or ease our pain
or can we drink them with marshmallows and whipped cream?
can we count them on one hand, eat them from a fruit-bowl?
or will we watch them in shoals and burrows, in fights for survival?

let's purple your ideas, infuse them with vitamin C
let them BUNGEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE
maybe they'll smash in bright blue smithereens in the Gorge of Disappointment
or become smash-hit tracks cut-up remixed and trip-hop glitched

bring your ideas and cast them
in bronze and pop them on a plinth and let's animate them
or cast them differently, turn them to clay then let them dance

let your ideas stop the bus until injustice gets off
let them magic lantern *Liberty* from Fishponds to the Docks
let's talk ideas across borders, over trenches
make them supersonic fledgelings

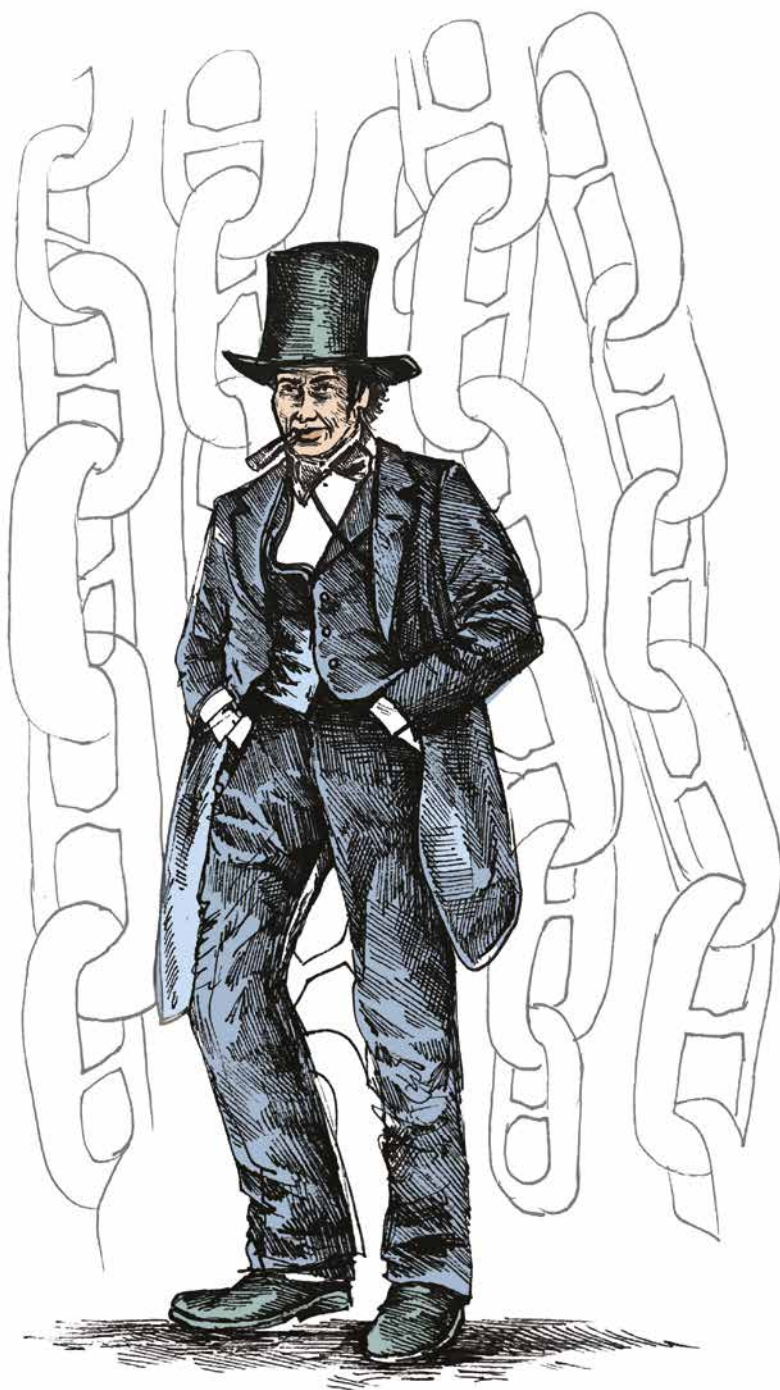
bring your ideas and let's live in them
together – share a bright green common, but keep a backyard
because sure, that new idea might become a regret
or a neighbour you wish you hadn't met
or maybe it'll be that BFF you haven't quite
nearly but – plucked up the courage to chat to – yet





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Bristol Ideas: 1992-2024



Our largest programme was Brunel200 in 2006. Brunel provided the opportunity to celebrate the life and work of the greatest of engineers who brought together arts and sciences, but he also provided inspiration over three decades to all our work. (Jasmine Thompson)

Our Project Was the City

Bristol Ideas: 1992-2024

Andrew Kelly

With illustrations by Jasmine Thompson

Introduction

For more than three decades, Bristol Ideas played an important – sometimes central – role in Bristol’s life and work. It led initiatives that transformed significant parts of the city; created an events programme on ideas, cities and economics that attracted involvement from people worldwide; and ran projects on, among other themes, Isambard Kingdom Brunel and engineering, the Bristol Aeroplane Company, aerospace today and in the future, making cities legible and easier to understand, *Frankenstein*, the First World War, Angela Carter, and contemporary poetry and cinema.

The city of Bristol and the future of cities has always been at the heart of Bristol Ideas. Cities offer home, work and life to 55 percent of citizens globally and this will grow to two thirds by 2050. Much of our work over the past 30 years has been about creating new organisations, institutions and festivals, and strengthening the existing cultural organisations and activity in the city. Above all, we wanted to make the city work for everyone. This meant addressing all aspects of the life and work of cities including architecture, governance, transport, work, housing, leisure, green spaces, immigration, health and education.

This was not just about Bristol; it was about all cities. I have always believed that cities are places where people come together to live and work, learn and play. Cities enable collaboration and creativity. It is in cities that futures can be created, including finding solutions to the environmental crisis. But many cities are developing in the wrong way: superstar cities are growing apart from the rest; and there is rising inequality, a housing crisis, poor transport and tension over

immigration, despite its need. Bristol faces these challenges too.

There are many lessons to learn from the Bristol Ideas' experience in culture and cultural planning, partnership building, adapting to changing cities and raising money. Here we look at the story of the organisation, our philosophy and approach, some of the projects we ran, and the lessons we have learned. Later in this book, some of those involved in Bristol Ideas – staff, audience members, project partners – write about their work with us and what resulted.

The Establishment of Bristol Ideas

A strong partnership committed to the future, and a rigorous evidence base focussed on culture in the city, were essential from the start. Bristol Ideas was established following Peter Boyden's detailed research that took place in 1992. Funded by the three partners in Bristol Ideas – Arts Council England South West, the Bristol Initiative (later to become part of Business West) and Bristol City Council – this was the UK's first ever detailed investigation of a city, its culture and its impact. Boyden concluded that a body should be set up that was independent of the partners but bringing them together to plan long-term cultural development in the city.

We started in 1993, although there had been much work done already. We were led by John Savage, the visionary head of the Bristol Initiative who, in those early years and for decades after, was an important city leader and a strong supporter of culture as part of city life and renewal as well as for business prosperity. The Bristol Initiative came out of the late 1980s report and project *Initiatives Beyond Charity*, led by the Confederation of British Industry, which promoted greater business involvement in the governance of places.

Each partner had its reasons for joining. Arts Council England South West felt that Bristol, as the lead city of the region, was underperforming and should have greater aspirations for cultural development and activity. Bristol Initiative members saw culture as important for the economy of a place as well as for providing momentum for social progress. Cultural development for them was part of a wider programme that included an initiative to house the homeless and plans to mark the 500th anniversary of John Cabot sailing to America in 1497. Bristol City Council knew that it needed to be more ambitious with culture and had to work better with others in the city. It also wanted more investment in culture because its own resources were limited and often spent on very few organisations, the largest grant being to the Bristol Old Vic. Despite improvements, especially in investment in some capital projects, the city council continues to struggle to support culture at the level it would like because it has a low funding base.

We were fortunate to have outstanding leaders in the partners who saw the

value of culture in cities. John Savage led from the front; Louis Sherwood, then chair of independent television company HTV (now ITV West & Wales), invested passion and money and used his networks effectively; Martyn Heighton (then director of leisure services at the council) and Councillor Crispin Taylor helped drag a reluctant city council to work in new ways; and Maggie Guillebaud, Chris Bates and Chris Butchers led Arts Council England into the work and the partnership. Bristol Ideas would not have been created without these and many others, and a huge debt is owed to all for their leadership and ongoing investment. In recent years, both of Bristol's universities have joined the partnership, fulfilling a long-held ambition to bring higher education into the organisation.

Cultural Planning and Cities

Boyden's work and the setting up of Bristol Ideas was based on cultural planning: a concept not used widely, sometimes regarded with suspicion, but essential for our success. It remains important for the future of places.

For the past 80 years, culture has been seen as a lever for policymakers, stretching from culture for its own sake – the belief that everyone should have access to what was then regarded as 'high' culture – to an interest in the economic and social impact that culture can have in the regeneration of cities and neighbourhoods.

Cultural planning links culture with the economic, social and community life of a place. It is more than planning for cultural activity, putting on a festival, delivering a community arts programme, installing public art or the creation of an arts strategy. It might encompass some or all of these, but it is wider and involves many people and organisations that would not normally be involved in planning cities or traditional arts activity. It is about the whole place, not just cultural infrastructure. For the urban planning expert Charles Landry of Comedia – a strong influence on our work – 'the city is the project.' It is both a method and approach because it is concerned with the *way* things are done as much as *what* is done.

Cultural planning makes culture integral to the life and work of a place, as well as ensuring the widest possible involvement. It starts with developing an understanding of local cultural assets and the networks that connect them, often through a process of cultural mapping. The people involved in the process need to be as wide-ranging as the assets identified. Going beyond traditional planning boundaries means that more ideas come forward. And this includes gaining the full involvement and talents of communities.

An assessment of what makes a place unique – which might be as much about community spirit as it is about history and industry – is essential. For cultural planners, culture is about more than the arts. It includes habits and history as well

as natural assets such as parks and gardens. It embraces urban myths – the topic for one of our Bristol Ideas walks – and how people and communities perceive a place.

Cultural planning should not be restricted to an arts or culture department nor solely to a local authority. Rather it is about collaboration between people with a shared interest in a place. The approach needs to be cross-departmental, bringing together city planners with professionals working in economic development, health, leisure, housing, education and – perhaps most importantly – members of the different communities that make up the place. I recently interviewed cultural planners and city leaders and almost all pointed to transport being the biggest current problem in terms of gaining access to culture and enabling people to work in cultural organisations. Cultural planning without considering public transport will not succeed.

Cultural planning draws on many ideas and influences. One of the earliest was the polymath town planner, ecologist, biologist, conservationist and sociologist Patrick Geddes, who was inspired by the French sociologist Frederic Le Play's triad of 'Lieu, Travail, Famille – Work, Place, Folk'. Others include the city planner Lewis Mumford, the 19th century City Beautiful Movement, the Works Progress Administration of the 1930s, contemporary planners and consultants such as Lia Ghilardi, Franco Bianchini, Harvey Perloff in Los Angeles, Robert McNulty and his work for the Washington-based Partners for Livable Communities and, more recently, some of the work of Richard Florida. Within the UK, Glasgow's cultural plan was also influential. The Bristol Initiative made a visit to Glasgow in 1989 to see the role and impact of culture on the city and came back impressed.

Two further important influences on the work of Bristol Ideas were Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and Kevin Lynch's work on legibility and places. Jacobs, influenced by Geddes, and with an approach based on campaigning and much personal observation (another key role for a cultural planner), saw the city as an ecosystem with many people and organisations participating. Jacobs wrote about seeing all aspects of city life and the need to be involved in many different areas.

For Lynch, the city is 'a work of art, fitted to human purpose'. Values are important, with Lynch highlighting: engagement, freedom, justice, control, learning, creativity, access, continuity, adaptability, meaning, health, growth, development, beauty, choice, participation, comfort and stimulus. Lynch's work looked at how people perceive and evaluate their environments. His practice was primarily concerned with substantive clients – the present and future users of a place – and was focused not on how cities *do* work but on how they *should* work for people. For Lynch, it was people, not designers, who made places successful.

Although he appreciated the work of experts, he found their hold over city design aesthetics unhelpful because they failed to promote public debate.

Like Geddes, all cultural planners need to be multi-talented. A strong awareness of and immersion in the literature of cultural planning is essential. But reading needs to be much wider and needs to take in a range of literatures and voices including city histories, memoirs and fiction. It is also important to learn from other places. Any cultural planner working in urban areas needs to visit other cities, walk around them and talk to their people.

Rewarding though it is, it can be hard for cultural planning to be accepted, as we sometimes found in Bristol. Academic and consultant Franco Bianchini told me ‘cultural planning is marginalised and [is] not fully accepted by the cultural policy establishment. Either it’s seen as impractical or maybe... as a threat.’ It was easier in some years to work with planners and transport, for example, than with arts officers. Cultural planning is often also at the margins – the ‘fluffy’ end of policymaking – and yet is needed now perhaps most of all with the growth of people moving to urban centres and the need to make cities work for all.

The Bristol Ideas Approach

Bristol Ideas took these influences in cultural planning and made them locally meaningful. For Bristol Ideas, cultural planning was place-specific and built on and extended local strengths, assets and distinctiveness. In an age of clone towns and cities, off-the-shelf solutions to the challenges a place faces do not work, and cultural planning enables the character of places to shine through, however hard it is to achieve.

Bristol Ideas sought to bring together arts and sciences; build on, celebrate and commemorate Bristol’s unique history to help understand the present and plan the future; help raise and widen debate about ideas and issues crucial to the city; and embrace the widest possible range of organisations and individuals to do this. We aimed to *implement* a few projects directly; *influence* as many organisations and individuals as possible to develop joint projects through coordination of initiatives, fundraising and marketing; and *inspire* widely so that all can participate and take pride in what the city does and has achieved. In this way, significant projects were created, with maximum impact, for relatively modest support from public funds.

Our view of culture was deliberately broad to embrace arts, nature and sciences. In his famous 1959 lecture (which we recreated 50 years on in Festival of Ideas, with a new lecture on the theme by Raymond Tallis), CP Snow talked about the split between arts and sciences that was impeding human progress. Bringing these together was important philosophically for us so that cultural



Questioning and debate was an important part of our work in Festival of Ideas and other festivals and projects we have run. (Jasmine Thompson)

planning could embrace Bristol's significant scientific assets including Brunel, the Bristol Aeroplane company and the BBC Natural History Unit. This belief led to the creation of the arts, nature and science centre which became We The Curious.

Bristol Ideas did the early work that few others could do – establishing the case and partnerships for each project, raising funds and doing all reporting. This meant that organisations and artists could get on with the work they are best placed to do. It also strengthened the cultural sector and artists as funds raised went to organisations, projects and artists directly – something we agreed we should do from the start. At its height, Bristol Ideas only ever had five employees. Having enough core funding from partners meant this work could be done without spending time raising money for salaries.

At the heart of our work were 12 principles:

- Bristol's past contributes to Bristol's future.
- Great art should be available to and celebrated by all.
- Culture is about arts and sciences and embraces subsidised and commercial activity.
- The arts and the creative economy contribute to economic growth.
- Partnership is critical: the more people and organisations that are involved in a project, the greater the opportunity for successful creative thinking and action.
- Lead where needed but mostly work through and with others where possible

and appropriate.

- Extensive research underpins all work.
- Marketing and campaigning are part of all projects.
- Renewal of vision, work programme and activity are ongoing and based on thorough evaluation of all projects.
- Long-term relationships are nurtured – especially in ideas, fundraising and project development.
- Diversity is central to all work.
- At the centre of it all is culture and the importance this has for people; for the place where they live, study, work or visit; for jobs and prosperity; and – most of all – for quality of life.

Bristol Ideas' Work

Bristol's cultural roots run deep. *The Bristol Story*, which we published in 2008, told the story of the heritage and culture of the city from the start. There's much from which to choose: Bristol Old Vic theatre built in 1766 is the oldest continuously working theatre in the English-speaking world; Bristol saw the first publication of the works of the Romantic poets in the 18th century; Angela Carter did early work in the city and three of her books are known as *The Bristol Trilogy*; Bristol's vibrant music, the 'Bristol Sound', showed the city's cultural diversity; with Watershed, Bristol created the country's first media centre; and the artist Banksy is world famous. As our wider definition of culture embraced science and nature as well as the arts, we also have engineering and Isambard Kingdom Brunel; Paul Dirac and Peter Higgs; parks and green spaces, and a wildlife-friendly city.

In 1993, Bristol Ideas started work in four main areas: making the case for Bristol; building the partnership and partnership working; leading on the cultural redevelopment of Harbourside; and establishing at least one new cultural initiative.

I was appointed as Bristol's Head of Cultural Development in December 1992 and took up the role in April 1993. I had been working in the School of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford (I graduated from the school in 1983 and then joined the staff) and then spent 18 months developing a media centre in Huddersfield. Within a few years, I had gone from researching the non-nuclear balance of forces between NATO and the Warsaw Pact and the impact of a nuclear attack on some of Britain's cities (they didn't survive), to building new cultural facilities and helping lead a programme of transformation of Bristol's culture.

I have always been interested in the arts – an interest which has grown over the decades and became both my life and work. But I'm also interested in cities; in history; in management; in making change happen; in politics; science; and

in issues like the environment. Anyone running the kind of programme we did – a programme which changed radically every other year – needs to have wide interests. Extensive reading and the assiduous gathering of information is essential. I guess this is why reading and writing played such an important part in our work, especially with our Festival of Ideas but in many other areas as well.

Much of the work of partnership building and planning is never seen publicly: strategy development, networking, fundraising, planning and marketing. This is often the most underestimated though time-consuming and exhausting of all work and remains so to this day – at least 60 percent of our time was spent raising funds, building and managing networks and partnerships, and developing strategies and business plans. This is long-term patient work which benefits from endurance. It was a critical early part of the work of Bristol Ideas which continued to the end and may be what is missed most of all, or at least will need to be recreated quickly.

Additional early work was to build confidence in Bristol. In 1993, Bristol was not regarded favourably by some national arts funding bodies and national government. We couldn't do much about government – although we did at least contribute to a sense that change was happening and the city, in cultural terms, was moving forward. We had more success with national funding bodies and especially the Lottery, then still young but offering opportunities which Bristol grasped eagerly.

What Did We Do?

The timeline at the start, and the essays in the second half of this book, look at some Bristol Ideas projects. Here, I look at work in five areas: culture and the city centre; making the case for Bristol; bringing together arts, nature and science; using Bristol's past to understand where we are now – and where we might go in the future; and creating a city of ideas and building cities of the future, in particular Bristol.

Much of this work was delivered through projects. I've always been sceptical of the cultural strategy approach where large levels of investment are spent on creating a document that often gets put on a shelf and forgotten about. Have a plan yes. But work with people, embrace and harness their enthusiasms, and deliver projects with them.

The City Centre and the Renewal of Culture

Much early work was devoted to the renewal of Bristol Harbourside, then a top priority for the city, but it also involved creating new initiatives like the Brief Encounters film festival. This was probably the most exciting and the most

important work that the partnership did in terms of early city renewal, even if one major project failed.

Harbourside offered great potential for the whole of Bristol: 72 acres of prime city-centre land, in the heart of the city, next to the floating harbour and near the cathedral, the Council House (later renamed City Hall), Arncliffe, ss Great Britain and Watershed. The case and support for culture in the development was strong and new cultural institutes were regarded as essential, though it was felt that they would come at the end. They were some of the first to be built. Plans for a new concert hall – what became known as The Harbourside Centre – were in my job description, but there were other possibilities too.

Early meetings with consultants – who seemed to want to make Bristol Harbourside the same as other harbour developments worldwide – were depressing (a problem of only importing ideas from outside, something that good cultural planning tends to avoid). At one session there was a reveal of their big idea: an aquarium. I'd already met Chris Parsons, former BBC Natural History Unit director and the genius behind David Attenborough's *Life on Earth*, and he had told me about his plans for an electronic zoo, which would use digital media to show the natural world in a new way. I disliked traditional zoos and felt uncomfortable

Our first major project was *We The Curious* on Bristol Harbourside. It was an early example of our work bringing together arts, nature and science in cultural planning. (Jasmine Thompson)



when visiting them (Bristol Zoo moved to a new wildlife conservation centre in 2023 which is better), so this was an attractive idea which also built on a Bristol asset of natural history filmmaking. There might be funding, too, from the recently launched Millennium Commission which offered support for transformative projects to mark the year 2000.

I argued for this electronic zoo (later called Wildwalk) rather than an aquarium. We quickly established a group, with strong leadership from the council and Nick Hood from Wessex Water as chair, and this, and The Harbourside Centre became the focus of our work. Soon after, science was added with the proposed move of the Exploratory hands-on science centre, then located at Temple Meads, to Harbourside to create Bristol 2000, later called At-Bristol, now We The Curious. The centre would also have an Imax cinema.

It was an exciting time. There was vision and will, a strong partnership, and there was money available from the Millennium Commission and Arts Council England if the right bids could be made. For me, it was an early example, even a vindication, of our approach to cultural development bringing together the worlds of arts, nature and science.

We made huge progress over these years and raised much new money. I felt we were creating something that was new and specific to Bristol, where culture was at the heart of regeneration; and where culture was democratised (a term we didn't use in the early 1990s) in extending arts and sciences from the city centre to the many communities of Bristol.

After a year, I stopped working on Bristol 2000 and spent much of my time, until a director was appointed, on The Harbourside Centre. This was Bristol's great opportunity. The building was architecturally world-class with plans for cultural programming that would have been brand new for the city. We were not just going to replace the ageing Colston Hall but create a new centre for the performing arts, an outstanding place for music and dance in a building which did for Bristol what the Sydney Opera House does for Australia.

We nearly got there. The Behnisch design for the building and the artistic plans were rightly applauded as transformative, ambitious and symbols of a city that was beginning to take its place as one of the leading European cities. Bristol 2000 was well on its way when the decision to refuse final funding for The Harbourside Centre was made in 1998. This came as a shock to those involved and to many watching, although some – including architects on the Arts Council England panel – had had their reservations. I was shocked and appalled. Locally, The Harbourside Centre was regarded as a done deal, and it was thought that any issues were minor and being addressed. The funding had apparently been reserved and Arts Council

England had already paid for the car park so that Bristol 2000 could be built in time for the millennium.

The Bristol project was not the only one rejected that day. We got a very good car park out of it which continues to provide revenue support to We The Curious, and for that, and only half-jokingly, I always wanted to put a plaque up. However, most of those involved seemed to want to forget about it all and move on. This made determining what went wrong hard to identify. And while Harbourside is much better with the new and renewed cultural centres and public spaces that have sprung up in more recent years, some of the housing is poor. At the time, it was said we should avoid the perfect, which can be the enemy of the good. But some of the housing is not even good.

Having The Harbourside Centre there would have raised the game for the rest of the site and for Bristol. Later the Wildwalk section of Bristol 2000 closed. It was probably too early for this idea. An attempt to create something similar, but using technology not available then, was suggested for the old Bristol Zoo site in Clifton in 2023 but that will not go ahead there at least. Ironically, an aquarium took the place of Wildwalk, although Bristol Ideas did help bring back into use the former Imax cinema – which had closed in 2007 alongside Wildwalk – and this now features special film programmes including ones we put together.

I think the failure of The Harbourside Centre affected the city. The city council seemed reluctant for a while to think about big cultural projects. It took the Capital of Culture bid for 2008 to reignite some of that ambition. There may be similar problems now: Bristol Museum & Art Gallery needs major investment but will a future council do this? Can it even afford to do anything, following the experience of Bristol Beacon and the ongoing impact of austerity?

In addition to the cultural development of Harbourside, Bristol Ideas ran a bid for the 1998 Year of Photography and the Electronic Image – one of a series of Arts Council England themed years in the build up to the new millennium – and launched and managed the aforementioned film festival Brief Encounters, established as part of the national celebrations of the centenary of cinema in 1995 (but which was successful enough to become an annual event). Both were about building on Bristol's assets, and both were about encouraging partnerships between city-centre organisations and those elsewhere in the city, west of England and nationally.

The development of Brief Encounters was another good example of how we worked. The idea began to develop in 1993 when I met with Aardman Animations. I knew of their work and an early visit to the offices was a treat. I asked them what we could do to help. They wanted two things: faster planning permission

for the Portakabins they needed for production, and projects that celebrated the media industry in the city. We got nowhere on the Portakabins but went ahead with a festival focussed on short film and animation which celebrated Bristol and filmmaking internationally. The partnership that resulted – bringing together BBC, Aardman, other media companies, Watershed and the universities – led to Encounters which is now approaching its 30th anniversary.

We also spent time over the next decade helping Harbourside's existing cultural organisations, including facilitating major investment in Arnolfini and Watershed by the South West Regional Development Agency and helping the Architecture Centre with its renewal plans.

These early projects showed our approach at its best, even if The Harbourside Centre failed and the Year of Photography bid was lost. They were about arts and

We were keen from the start to have a new film festival which reflected Bristol's strengths. Encounters, launched in 1995, achieved this in its work on short film and animation. (Jasmine Thompson)



Midday Screening**Vanessa Kisuule**

Cinema has played an important part in our work. One of our city poets, Vanessa Kisuule, reflects on cinema as a communal experience in a new poem for us, 'Midday Screening':

with the final bite
of a sandwich he realises
a whole day lays ahead of him

unruly hours spilling from the
afternoon's lip

the bare branches of trees
whistle then hush,

everyone's faces hidden
under hoods, ears plugged
with blinking earbuds

he wanders the harbour
like the ghost of a sailor

Then:

the quiet urge to be alone
in a room of strangers

all staring at the
same source of light.

with a ten pound note
he buys himself a ticket
to a mid-afternoon showing.

picks the film at random.

(the poster shows an old
smiling woman with a tiny
brown dog in her lap)

he enjoys the hushed talk
and rustling packets, even the
earthy stench of wet woollen coats

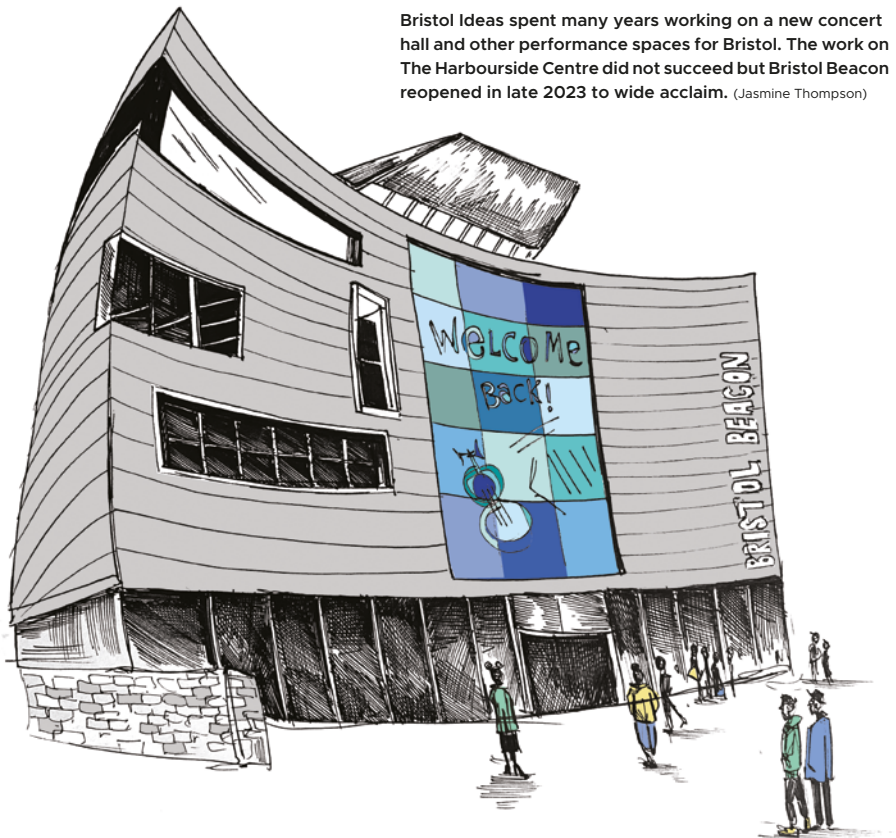
that chorus of *excuse me, excuse me*
an ancient dance past tilted knees

and perhaps he imagines this
but as the lights go down,
he feels them all,
sad scatter of midday
moviegoers, share
the same sharp intake
of breath

sciences; they built on aspects of what Bristol was good at, even excelled in (hands-on science, animation and short film, natural history media) and we did the work no-one else was able to do before handing the reins over to others. These early projects established us as part of Bristol's cultural planning and future and laid the foundations for the work to come. Twenty-five years after The Harbourside Centre was stopped, Bristol Beacon opened and was rightly acclaimed for its physical transformation and magnificent acoustics. It's a shame that we were not able to see The Harbourside Centre built, but we do at last now have the concert hall that Bristol deserves.

Making the Case for Bristol

One of the aims of the cultural partnership right from the start was to put Bristol on the map. When I arrived, a developer said: 'why have you come to the city where good ideas come to die?' That belief was nonsense then and thankfully seems to have disappeared from current talk about the city, although I often tell the story in the many endless and mostly fruitless discussions that take place on city branding.



Bristol Ideas spent many years working on a new concert hall and other performance spaces for Bristol. The work on The Harbourside Centre did not succeed but Bristol Beacon reopened in late 2023 to wide acclaim. (Jasmine Thompson)

However, there was a problem in cultural terms. I also often tell the story about the competition that *Venue* magazine ran on a slogan for Bristol. The winner was ‘It’s better than Stroud’. It seems hard to believe this now, and it was not true then, but there was a feeling that Bristol was underperforming culturally. This was one of the reasons why we had been established. But there was also the problem that the city tended to be looked at by funders with only the Bristol Old Vic in mind. The Bristol Old Vic is critical to Bristol’s culture but had been a problem for many years: when it came to funding, Arts Council England felt the city council didn’t fund the theatre enough while some council members felt it got too big a share of support from what was a meagre arts budget.

Our job was not to solve the problems that Bristol Old Vic faced. Our job was to build the profile of culture and Bristol’s offer and to raise awareness that, valuable though the theatre was, there was more to culture in the city. This is why we put so much effort, over many years, into improving cultural provision in the city, creating new cultural projects and facilities, and in bringing Bristol’s long cultural history to wider attention.

The most important work on this was the bid to be European Capital of Culture in 2008. We worked full-time on this from 1999-2003. Initially, there was not much support for Bristol taking on such an ambitious programme. The partnership wanted to pursue it but there was scepticism among some city council members. This changed after shortlisting when the odds of winning had shortened and funding might be needed. The leader of the council, Diane Bunyan from Labour, was a great advocate at the first stage and was pivotal in convincing judges of the Bristol case as was Simon Cook from the LibDems, Peter Abraham from the Conservatives and Helen Holland from Labour.

More than four years spent focussing on the bid meant we were able to make the case about, and campaign for, culture in the city. I didn’t think we would win, although never stated this publicly. Bristol had many problems but for the judges the priority was always going to be a city that needed more of a hand up than Bristol did. What I wanted was to make cultural planning citywide, to aid the recovery from the disaster of The Harbourside Centre decision, and to lay the foundations for a new programme over the following four years. All of that was achieved – and, unofficially, we do know that Bristol was ranked third behind Liverpool and Newcastle/ Gateshead.

What came out of the bid? A focus on sport in 2005; Brunel200 in 2006; numerous Great Reading Adventures, when we encouraged everyone in the city to read the same book at the same time; a year on Charles Darwin, art and science in 2009, and BAC100 the following year when we marked 100 years of the Bristol

Aeroplane Company and looked at the future of aerospace. We also launched our Festival of Ideas in 2005 which ran for 19 years, and which saw spin-off festivals on economics and future cities.

This, to me, is the importance of bidding: it provides an excuse to plan and to campaign and to deliver a programme. Winning competitions is hard, but it is not a failure to lose. The only failure is failing to plan for disappointment. In 2016, Bristol had another opportunity to bid for the 2023 European Capital of Culture. I thought it essential: culture needed a similar plan and campaign as we provided in the years of 1999 to 2003, but Brexit stopped work on our bid as it did for places like Leeds, another early contender. Leeds adopted a similar approach to Bristol in that they delivered anyway in 2023. Our programme for Bristol 2023, a year which marked the 650th anniversary of Bristol becoming independent, was minor by comparison with previous projects we had led as neither the momentum nor the money was available.

This work – and it was the work of a generation – led eventually to projects like Bristol 2000. We also focussed on Bristol's importance in the world of cinema and filmmaking; celebrated the fact, rarely covered then, that Romantic poetry started in Bristol with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*; brought Mary Shelley's time in the city to public attention, as well as the possibility (I always felt this a long shot but it was worth debating) that her creation of *Frankenstein*, a book that I have read many times over the years, was partly influenced by what she learned about the slave trade when she lived in Clifton in 1815.

Some of these projects took a long time to happen. In 2016, we used the excuse of the 800th anniversary of the first mayor of Bristol to run many events we had planned for some years. We did a weekend on *Frankenstein* and marked Angela Carter's early work in Bristol with an exhibition and book. It took longer to develop our cinema work. Our planned project on William Friese-Greene, the Bristolian pioneer in early filmmaking, was originally intended for 1995 and the centenary of cinema, but lack of funding and time meant that it took another 21 years to come to fruition. This was no bad thing: in that time more research was done on his life and work and a more rounded picture of his contribution could be made.

Making the case for Bristol also meant being involved in debates taking place elsewhere as well as generating our own. We ran a series of conferences with linked publications: an early one was on managing partnerships; another looked at the impact of arts and culture; two looked at legibility and cities; another at arts sponsorship. It meant accepting invitations to speak and attending many national and international events where we could put the Bristol case. Far-reaching research was needed to underpin all work. All this activity brought people together and gave the momentum needed for the development of spin-off projects.



Our annual Great Reading Adventures saw tens of thousands of people read the same book at the same time. An early project was *The Day of the Triffids*. (Jasmine Thompson)

Bringing Together Arts, Nature and Science

CP Snow's influence on our work helped us understand the artificial split between arts and science and how this might be bridged. We wanted to make sure that our cultural planning work helped to overcome this problem and bring in science and nature as part of culture. We were not interested solely in the creativity of artists, writers and poets, important though this has been. We also wanted to look at the creativity of scientists and engineers and promote cross-learning and collaboration. Given Bristol's eminence in this area – from Brunel's projects in the city to future Nobel Prize winners Paul Dirac and Peter Higgs attending Cotham school, to the contemporary work in natural history media – here was another example of our assets that told us something about where the city had come from as well as where it might go in the future.

Much of our early work on this was devoted to the successful creation of We The Curious (and its partner project The Harbourside Centre). The linking of arts, nature and science was extended in our bid for 2008 Capital of Culture. As part of the Capital of Culture bid we launched our annual Great Reading Adventure

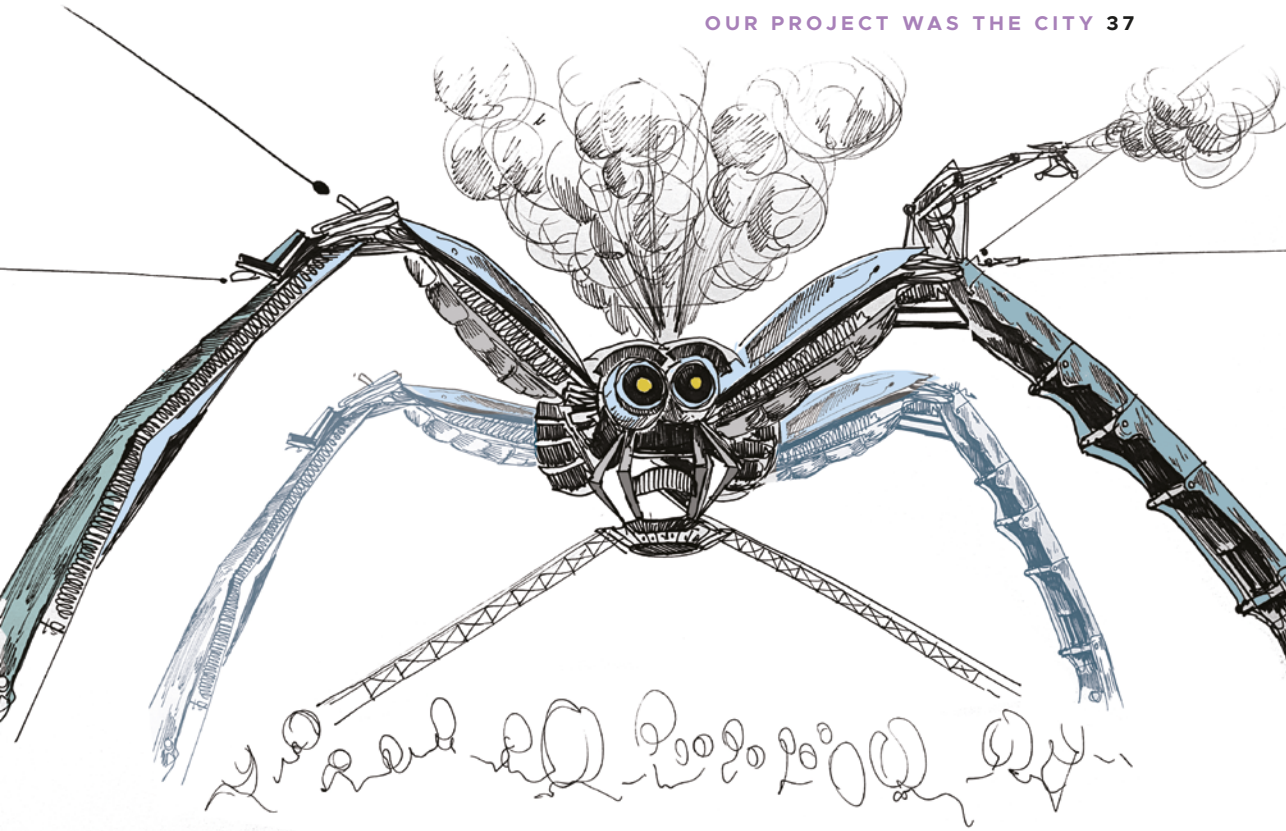
with *Treasure Island* in 2003. The following year we chose John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, which meant we could discuss environmental and climate issues through this magnificent book. Our plans for the approach of 2008 included a huge project on Brunel for the 200th anniversary of his birth in 2006.

Looking back, Brunel200 was my favourite project. It was the biggest one we did and engaged the widest range of people and organisations. It was Bristol-based but regional in its importance and reach. And it inspired widely, with schools, scouts and guides, universities and businesses doing their own initiatives but all contributing to a coherent, coordinated, national celebration. Our press coverage, locally, regionally and nationally was enormous. My essay in part two of this book talks more about Brunel200.

Four years later, we returned to arts and science with our 2010 programme on the Bristol Aeroplane Company. Aviation is an underappreciated part of Bristol's history, but it is a remarkable story: the Bristol Aeroplane Company started with aircraft made of wood, paper and glue and went on to build Concorde, with successor companies creating the Airbus A380. We were able to work closely with the local aviation industry, the companies and their current and retired workers, to explore not only the history and what followed but also what it meant to them. Like all our major projects, we brought together exhibitions and creative workshops in schools, books and celebrations. One project within the wider programme I liked a lot was the building of a replica World War One aeroplane by the apprentices of Airbus and Rolls-Royce.

Aviation is controversial. If the centenary had been just a decade later, it might have faced public protest. However, we did work with the companies to explore how the aviation of the future would work to reduce environmental impact and there is more of that needed.

When Bristol was made 2015 European Green Capital we ran the major arts projects for the year. Nature was key to this, as was operating in a more sustainable way: a policy and practice that we had adopted early and maintained throughout, from the transport we used to the food we ate. Thanks to an Arts Council England Exceptional project grant, we were able to support six core initiatives. Situations – an arts group in the city – worked with the artist Theaster Gates on Sanctum, a new venue made from recycled material at Bristol's Temple Church. We provided a grant to the artist Luke Jerram to stage his abandoned boats project, Withdrawn, at Leigh Woods. Arnolfini put on an exhibition of Richard Long's work, Time and Space. The Bristol Whales saw two beautiful sculptures made from wicker and recycled plastic bottles in Millennium Square. Our Festival of the Future City started in 2015. And the legendary Arcadia Spider made an appearance for two nights in Queen Square.



The legendary Arcadia Spider made an appearance in Bristol's year as 2015 European Green Capital. It performed to 34,000 spectators over two nights in Queen Square. (Jasmine Thompson)

Alongside this work we ran a project I had wanted to do for a while on Wordsworth, Coleridge, Romantic Poetry and Bristol. The fact that Bristol could lay claim to being the place where Romantic poetry started is something we were keen to discuss and test. We already had the example of Thomas Chatterton – Wordsworth called him the ‘marvellous boy’ – and the story of his work here and his tragic death in London was marked in a special poetry project in 2020. In addition to this, both Wordsworth and Coleridge spent time in Bristol: Coleridge’s famous and radical lectures on the slave trade among other subjects took place here; and both poets worked with publisher Joseph Cottle on the first edition of the founding document of Romantic poetry, the *Lyrical Ballads*, published in Bristol. As Coleridge and Wordsworth were concerned with nature, our work linked well to Bristol’s Green Capital status. We commissioned 23 poets to write in the tradition of Romanticism, started our books of walks with one on the Romantic poets in the city (we regularly published new books of walks about ideas in the years after) and launched our Coleridge lecture series which ran for five years.

Each of these said something about the environment, sustainability, the

I Found It Beautiful
Caleb Parkin

Science as part of culture is important to Bristol Ideas. In this new poem, City Poet Caleb Parkin writes about Paul Dirac and Bristol. One day, I hope that Bristol might celebrate Dirac as we did Brunel in 2006.

for Paul Dirac

If this poem was about you, it might
 have strayed into the florid and metaphorical.
 It could, perhaps, have taken issue with your
 assertion that science and poetry are incompatible:
 the former, making difficult things understandable;
 the latter, making simple things incomprehensible.

If this poem was about you, it might have invoked
 the Scale of Strangeness at subatomic and human levels:
 how your colleagues at Cambridge invented a *dirac*,
 a unit equating to one word per hour; how you'd stare
 at the ceiling for five minutes, the window five more,
 then reply *Yes* or *No* – and were always, always right.

If this poem was about you, it may have riffed on
 the universe as multiples of a charge of the electron;
 the way two times three is not the same as three times two;
 on vanishing gradients; how sons can become divisible
 from fathers. How, when asked how you found
 your equation, you said you *found it beautiful*.

But I want to try to speak plainly, and to you. To be
 literal more than literary. I won't call you *Sir*
 and respect that refusal. Take your time
 replying: here is a clear window, a plain ceiling.
 I will welcome your *Yes* or your *No*, try to trust you.

I'd like to know how to see beneath the surface
 of matter, paint it with numbers – can you teach me?

I'd like to understand the way you wrote by thinking
 the whole thing first, no editing – can you show me?

I'd like to see what it's like to take away all
 these *likes*, to see life only as *is* – can you tell me?

I know you'll likely decline. Just as on that
cruise-liner with Heisenberg, you puzzled at why
he might dance. This is not an invitation to dance.
Nor a celebration: you always fled from those.
Not that it matters, but in this city

where you grew up, few know your name.
Unlike Schrödinger's hypothetical pet,
yowling and clumsy in off-the-cuff
chat. You are: one street sign; a sculpture
without text. You are held in matter, precise.

importance of cities in finding solutions to the multiple crises we face (now called the polycrisis) and the role of arts, science and nature in addressing these challenges. What difference did we make? It's hard to say, and we will explore our impact later in this book.

Bristol's Past, Present and Future

Our many projects have all had the aim of connecting generations so that a societal contract is emphasised: what we learn from the past helps us to understand the present and can contribute to a better future. This work included marking the centenary of the council estate in 2019 and what this means for housing in the future, and our work on Bristol's trade in enslaved African people looked at what happened and why but also at social justice today.

We always offered multiple opportunities for participation. Some people involved might read the free books provided; others may read the books, take the walks, and join the debates; some might watch a television programme inspired by the work, listen to the poetry that had been commissioned, or visit a gallery exhibition.

In recent years, the German approach of '*vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*' – working off, or through, the past – has been influential in how Germans have tried to deal with Nazism and the Holocaust, and inspired our work, as well as giving it an underpinning foundation.

The reckoning on Bristol's role in the trade in enslaved people is long overdue. And, in recent years, Bristol has struggled with its past, especially its involvement in the triangular trade. The toppling of the Colston statue in June 2020 followed many years of campaigning. It shouldn't have taken this long and could have been dealt with in a different way, but the follow up work and public debate led by

the Mayor's History Commission on how best to deal with a memorial to such a controversial figure was well received.

The early decision not to call The Harbourside Centre 'New Colston Hall' (which was one of many suggestions made) signalled our intent. Our first Great Reading Adventure, *Treasure Island*, looked at the triangular trade. In 2005, we collaborated with Comedia on a report about building an intercultural city which argued that, before Bristol could move forward, it needed to interrogate and deal with its past better. In 2006, we ran a debate with the then British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (which closed in 2013) on whether we should apologise for the past. The vote in the room was heavily in favour; the phone-in – run by local media – was heavily opposed. The following year, our *Small Island* Great Reading Adventure addressed the trade and looked at the Windrush generation and postwar immigration to Bristol and other cities. We worked nationally with Glasgow, Hull and Liverpool on this. In 2008, *The Bristol Story*, the cartoon history that was used widely across the city, dealt carefully and sensitively with this issue. We provided continuing support for groups, public events and education (some of our work for the 60th anniversary of the Bristol bus boycott in 2023 was a good example of this).

Bristol Ideas also looked for inspiration from Bristol and across the world. In 2016, we worked with the Black group Come the Revolution on film and literature initiatives about Malcolm X. We saw 1,000 people read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* that year, including a group of prisoners at HMP Bristol whose essays written in response to reading the book were published on our website. The best three writers were given dictionaries, because Malcolm X had a dictionary when he was incarcerated, and he credits this with helping change his life.

In 2023, we gave books to HMP Bristol again as part of our James Baldwin project. We also supported 12 writers with their Baldwin work, some of which was published nationally by Writers Mosaic, part of the Royal Literary Fund.

I spent much of 2023 re-reading all Baldwin's work – my personal great reading adventure. Baldwin is one of my intellectual heroes, alongside George Orwell, the 'silent spring' environmentalist Rachel Carson, and Jane Jacobs who showed how American cities could become better places. I have often thought about why these writers and campaigners are important to me and it comes down to their pursuit of the truth.

This helped me understand Bristol more. In *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin writes that he still believes that 'the unexamined life is not worth living' and 'I know that self-delusion, in the service of no matter what small or lofty cause, is a price no writer can afford'. Reading Orwell and Baldwin taught me about being a critical friend to places where I live and work and gives me hope that we can make

something better from the problems of the present, and out of the ruins of the future – a task which becomes more urgent, and harder, by the day. I hope that our focus on the past of Bristol had the same impact on others so that we can all help create a better city.

Creating a City of Ideas and Cities of the Future

UK cities – and Bristol is no exception, and perhaps exemplifies the challenges more than most – are facing great problems. Bristol's growth has placed huge strains on the resources we have, especially with a city council that does not get the funding it deserves and, like all cities and combined authority areas, does not have the powers it needs to manage effective change.

Bristol Legible City was an important development for us. This was a system unique to Bristol and one that highlighted the need to look at the whole city, how people used and understood it, and bring in different disciplines and thinking to find new ways of operating. It saw us run three conferences and publish two books. It influenced initiatives like Watershed's Playable City. And the principles of city navigation and understanding that were developed went on to be adopted by other cities in the UK and around the world. I learned more about cities from this than any other project we have done.

As a key legacy of the 2008 Capital of Culture bid, we launched the Bristol Festival of Ideas. Given the importance of literature to the city, Bristol deserved a literature festival but everywhere else seemed to already have one. Planning for a new initiative, and inspired by work elsewhere, it was clear that ideas were the driving force in Bristol and that we should present and debate these. For nearly 20 years, we ran our Festival of Ideas with more than 2,000 events. We covered arts and sciences, politics and history, feminism and problems facing men, business and work, health and the environment, and more. We worked with partners across the city, launched a Young People's Festival of Ideas (run by young people) and helped many communities and groups launch their own events, one example being Homes for Heroes 2019 on the past and future of council housing.

Building on this, in 2011 we launched our annual Festival of Economics. Our Festival of the Future City started in 2015, as part of the European Green Capital year. This led to more debates and learning across the city. More than 20,000 people participated in that first festival and the linked Bristol2015 events. In 2019, we had our best and most extensive festival yet with activity across the city, but the pandemic made the 2021 festival difficult to deliver, and we had only begun the recovery in 2023 when we announced we would close. Festival of the Future City will be relaunched as the Festival of Flourishing Regions in 2025 led by the



Making Bristol easier to understand and navigate was a key part of Bristol Ideas' work with the Bristol Legible City project. New signage was part of this. (Jasmine Thompson)

Growing Together Alliance, a consortium including Business London, Business South, Business West, Cambridge Ahead, Northern Powerhouse and the North West Business Leadership Team providing a tangible legacy to this work. Our Festival of Economics will continue with the Economics Observatory based at the University of Bristol.

Festival of Ideas lasted until 2024. In the final two years, we focussed on the governance of Bristol with publications and events about Bristol's elected mayor and the referendum to move to a committee system. It was not a good debate, to be honest: there was little public education (no booklet was issued to citizens about the vote as had happened in the past and there were few events, though a group of academics in the two universities put together an excellent report which we and others used). And Festival of Ideas got progressively harder over the years. The pandemic hit us badly, but there were also problems of polarisation and an increasingly difficult environment for open discourse and debate. We stuck robustly to our freedom of speech policy, sometimes in the face of opposition.

As time went on, we got far less media coverage than we had achieved in the period to 2008, although we did benefit for a while from our national media partnership with *The Observer*. Local and national media has changed over the past 20 years. Locally, as sales plummeted and revenues dropped when advertising migrated to the internet, there was less space available for our content and substantially fewer journalists employed. Although local journalism can be frustrating, local newspapers are essential for democracy and we are poorer for their decline. The growth of alternative, predominantly web-based organisations like *Bristol 24/7* and *The Bristol Cable* (we ran events with them in 2023) helped, but the day-in, day-out reporting of local politics and coverage of the courts has suffered and this is something we will not get back.

I'm immensely proud of Festival of Ideas, despite all these challenges. We encouraged year-round coverage of significant ideas from Bristol and around the world. We reached widely into the city with the festival and its many linked activities. We encouraged learning about civic governance and about the city. And I got to meet and interview Margaret Atwood, Harry Belafonte, Ray Davies, Daniel Dennett, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Tracey Thorn, Rebecca Solnit and many others. I even got two custard pies thrown in my face by the Phantom Flan Flinger when we did an event on *TISWAS* with the Slapstick Festival. I learned much from all of this and think the city did, too.

A Bright Spark
Miles Chambers

One of the ways cities are changing is new uses for redundant shops and shopping centres. Miles Chambers, Bristol City Poet 2016-2018, reflects on the closure of Marks & Spencer in Broadmead and its replacement by the environmental centre Sparks.

I haven't forgotten you,
I have fond memories of you
Boarding the train from Trowbridge
with three siblings trapesing behind our
Mother in an age-defined queue

Those shopping days out to Bristol
In the school holidays, usually on Tuesdays
on an expedition to find something smart and new

We didn't come straight through, we'd go around
come around, Broadmead in search of the
bargains and then we came to you, that's
what Mum would always do

Then we'd arrive at a bustling orderly shopping
Metropolis of quality and finesse
Marks & Spencer, an Iconic
institution of Britishness

I felt a calmness, yet an energy of clarity and order
Each had its neatly defined place each age group
sex and section with clearly defined borders

I felt choice and aspiration calling me, I could see
possibility and good standards seducing me and
all presented so visually articulately and then...

There were those cakes and sweets in that bakery

This is where Mum came to get our proper clothes
Good dependable apparel, nice shirts which always fit
and trousers, durable which never split
Quality dress for church which we'd use as our Sabbath best
It was those other shops that we went to get the rest

The underwear would fit snugly
 Girls, despite their shape, could find something
 which hugged comfortably

The longest working hours in Europe didn't benefit you
 No time to get pampered in the sartorial queue
 Shopping online, came to their rescue
 What were they supposed to do?

Prosperity ignored you, Austerity killed you
 Those clothes were bleeding you
 The pandemic, consumed any remains of you
 What were you supposed to do?

The centre was done with you
 Your empty shell echoed the essence of you
 Corridors of commerce
 yearned to be caressed by you

You were not alone; Bristol's centre
 boasted sporadic bruised lonely spaces
 where icons once stood
 the silent screams of your concrete walls
 could be heard shouting into the
 emptiness, but no more of you
 Who would come to rescue your space?

I stumbled in recently, forgot your belated
 essence, expected to be greeted by Jenny
 Be reassured with M&S branding
 anchoring feelings of quality and reliability

I recognise this wasn't it; for a moment
 I took that in and felt sad discomfort
 By the absence of those reassuring anchors
 which had caressed me for so many years

They weren't there but what was this? Sparks!
 Shop, create, recover, recycle, learn, repair
 Reuse, resources, discover energy, travel
 Fashion, nature. Community Champions were all there

A perplexed city centre space
divorces from its commerciality
Finds healing with a new artistic identity
Commerce finds solace in creativity
Champions arise from the ashes of uncertainty

Champions that fight causes that you can see
I saw men and women toppling the past
Crying out for those dispersed from their future
Asking Justice to be fair and reasonable
Building communities within their community

I heard voices crying in unison
I'm happy here, this is the place to be

Everyone's welcome in our community
Let's dance in this festival of creativity
Spark new ideas about energy
Let's travel with simplistic sustainability
Let's deliberate, until the solution comes with clarity
Let's create an environment where
I support you and you support me

So, you see, I haven't forgotten you
I know you, you remind me of my city
You mirror the solution from hostility
You echo its journey
You swooped in and saved me

Measuring Impact

Bristol Ideas was guided by a long-term vision of building a city with creativity at its heart delivered through a mission of partnership. Despite much work across 30 years, it is hard to assess impact. Raw data on numbers of people attending events and taking part in activities is sometimes easy to collect but evidence of changing behaviour, both immediately and over time, is difficult if not impossible. How can we measure whether through culture, and through Bristol Ideas' projects, the city changed for the better? Improved the image of the place? Helped attract more jobs? Promoted the provision of council housing? Led to better civic discourse and reduced polarisation? Created a greener environment?

These have been some of the many outcomes we have attempted to achieve, and we tried many ways to assess whether we did so. We used the pioneering work by the Port Authority of New York in the 1980s on the arts industry in the New York and New Jersey regions. John Myerscough's 1988 book, *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain*, which looked at economic value, was also influential. This, and linked multiplier effect analysis, was supplemented over the years with assessment of social impact, measures of city creativity, the presence and importance of a creative class; cities and interculturalism; the role and impact of creative bureaucrats and more. We learned from others about how they assess impact and lobbied and tried to get better impact measures developed.

Being reliant on external sources of core funding, as well as project-specific funding, meant that measurement was often designed to meet the needs of funders rather than drive the development of the organisation's goals. After each project, reports were submitted on the amount of funding raised and spent, the size of the audiences who attended, and sometimes an element of wider impact. Questions might be asked about happiness and wellbeing and how audience members felt.

Most of our evaluation reports are available publicly on project websites. For this final part of our work, I wanted to go deeper than raw data and worked with the Bennett Institute at Cambridge University on research. I conducted detailed interviews with 85 project partners and collaborators, many of which I hope we will publish, about the impact of our work and cultural programmes generally. Two themes emerged: civic engagement and the role of culture as social infrastructure, with both contributing to social capital, the bonding and bridging needed for the successful operation of a place for all.

Civic engagement: To build a better city, where citizens can listen, learn about and debate different views needs events, spaces and publications. This encompassed many of our activities, particularly those that brought attention to stories about the city and that encouraged learning about the city. For each of these projects, the underpinning research was communicated widely, with much of it being published in a series of books and reports. This helped create wider engagement through enabling better debate. Our work on the history of Bristol and what this means today, as well as projects on city governance in the period 2011-2023 – conferences, the annual state of the city sessions, the output of our city poets, and our many publications – not only helped to promote the referenda taking place but also aid understanding of some of the issues involved. Our wider Festival of Ideas programme promoted extensive debate on topics ranging from polarisation to immigration; the potential of Universal Basic Income and many others.

We also tried to expand civic engagement in key issues affecting the city through creative ways: supporting other festivals and events, such as Bristol Women's Literature Festival, the Working-Class Writers Festival, children's literature initiatives and Come the Revolution; and commissioning writers to address important issues, such as the mayoral referendum of 2023.

Culture as social infrastructure: Linked to this was creating new social infrastructure as well as strengthening existing social infrastructure in the city. The programming of the different festivals and the use of many different methods to encourage people to gather was central to this. All of Bristol Ideas' work was rooted in the Bristol Initiative, in which the churches, the voluntary sector, the arts, business, city leadership, and the universities and colleges debate issues of concern about the city and look together at opportunities for change. Our early infrastructure projects were about creating spaces for learning collaboration. We The Curious provided space for the arts and sciences, and The Harbourside Centre would have provided a similar space for music, dance and ideas. New squares and streetscape design – such as the work we did on Speaker's Corner in Bristol and Bristol Legible City – and the public spaces created as part of the city centre and Harbourside renewal all contributed to the shared public realm of the city and provided places where people can meet. For part of the 1990s, Bristol Ideas also helped organisations renew themselves in terms of their mission and funding. Work with Arnolfini and Watershed, for example, not only saw significant new investment but also the creation of spaces where diverse communities could meet, hence strengthening and adding to the cultural ecosystem of the city.

All this work encourages the development of connectivity and joy; increased trust and confidence; friendships and further collaboration; and resilience. How you measure these is an ongoing project.

Some Lessons Learned

Until our final year, Bristol Ideas had been able to adapt and respond well to most of the challenges and setbacks that it faced over the last three decades. What are the key lessons we have learned which might help cultural planning in future cities and any revival of an organisation like Bristol Ideas?

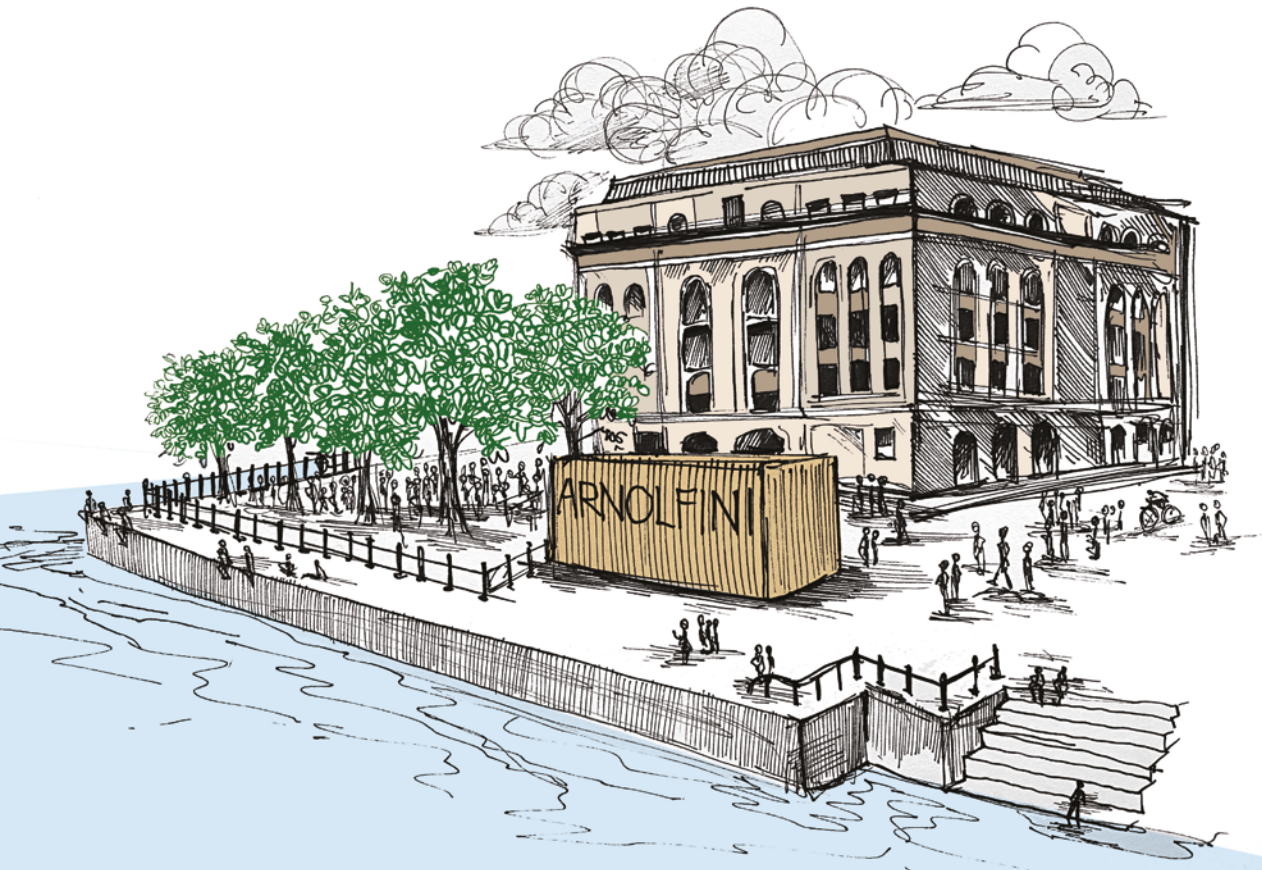
Leadership and vision: Leadership at all levels is critical to overcome silo thinking and bring diverse viewpoints and activities together. It is not just the responsibility of one person or a board of directors. Someone must lead, but leadership is about maximising the involvement of teams, partners, networks, funders and audiences

to connect, gather knowledge, promote creativity, provide motivation to do better and involve those who may not have participated yet.

For all the problems they face, local authorities remain critical to culture, given their levels of investment (even in times of austerity, this funding is far greater than that provided by arts councils) and their responsibility to a place. They work best where key areas of culture are located together organisationally in the same department or service area. This is not the case in Bristol, unlike other places such as Glasgow and Manchester and the more recently formed combined authorities. These all have a broad conception of culture which is reflected in their organisational structure. It took a while for Bristol's City Office to set up the Culture Board and the first draft of the One City Plan didn't include culture at all.

The increasing complexity of places, the challenges they face and the difficulties of finding solutions and funding means cultural planning needs staff with wide ranging skills and competencies. Cultural planners need to have in-depth knowledge and the ability and keenness to gather new knowledge about the history and people of the place through ongoing learning; an interest in politics as well as the political *nous* to be able to work with changing political environments;

Arnolfini is one of many organisations that Bristol Ideas helped over 30 years. Bristol Ideas facilitated major investment in the renewal of the building by South West Regional Development Agency. (Jasmine Thompson)



a feel for how cities and places work; and an ability to scan the horizon to take advantage of opportunities coming up and to anticipate problems. They need to be players in their authority, organisation, business and place, constantly searching for resources. In 2023 and early 2024, I interviewed people involved in culture in cities, combined authorities and universities outside Bristol and admired much of the work underway. There remained the issue of acceptance by others, but the position was much better than 30 years ago.

In recent years, the idea of the creative bureaucrat has emerged and was the subject of a conference in the final Bristol Ideas' programme in April 2024. Being a creative bureaucrat helps to meet some of these challenges and needs to be developed further.

Build on the assets of a place, including its past: Bristol Ideas always worked with and through the assets of the city. This included both physical assets and those that are less tangible. Key among these was the history of Bristol itself, which we used as a way of convening people around the commemoration of events in the long civic life of the city, as well as a starting point to think together about the future. Through these assets, culture contributes to social capital. It helps build trust, promote civic engagement, and bring together and bond communities. Culture also contributes to the creation and maintenance of social infrastructure in the city, such as new third spaces for networking, discussing and debating differences, and encouraging better ways forward.

The importance of the local: Like every place, Bristol has many opportunities and challenges. An assessment of these is the starting point for cultural planning. In Bristol's case this involved considering the city's cultural strengths and weaknesses; its significant anniversaries, individuals and companies; the city's built environment; urban myths and perceptions of the place; and past successful innovations and failures. Looking back at the history of the city does not mean ignoring the new. Rather, building on local distinctiveness and how it has developed over time helps to strengthen both the city and cultural planning and helps to build effective plans. This approach appeared in different ways in the work of Bristol Ideas. The first Great Reading Adventure, *Treasure Island*, was chosen because, in the novel, the ship the *Hispaniola* sails from Bristol. It allowed learning, discussion and debate about Bristol and trade, the British Empire, and specifically the trade in enslaved people. The national celebration of Brunel's bicentenary in 2006, led from Bristol, meant that engineering then and now could be discussed as part of our culture. An early project with Business West was the recognition of individuals

and community groups helping to Build a Better Bristol. Some years later, Bristol Ideas introduced the annual Bristol Genius Award to reflect innovation that made change happen, although this only lasted four years. We should celebrate more.

Partnerships and networks rooted in place: From the start our work was built and thrived on collaborative working. Our founders created a partnership. Each project was the result of strong and supportive networks. Bristol Ideas was deliberately small, never employing more than five full-time members of staff. It always worked with and through others. Managing Bristol Ideas was not just about managing an organisation but about simultaneously developing and managing multiple networks and stakeholders. At the heart was the network of Bristol Ideas' core partners. There were also networks of funders and sponsors, political networks and project networks.

Partnership working comes down to relationships and trust; patience; building and making connections; diversity and inclusion. Trust is a key element, and a shared purpose is also essential. Any partnership needs to make sure that there are opportunities for each partner to gain benefits beyond the purely transactional and develop deep and lasting relationships. Generally, partnerships need to last as long as the project. Each partner needs to bring value with skills and connections that the other partner organisations do not have.

An important principle in bringing together and managing networks is to organise around enthusiasms. The idea is at the start of all projects. This builds on and is strengthened by enthusiasts who go on to deliver the projects. It is sometimes a long search, but enthusiasts can be found for most projects including amateur historians, academics, family history researchers, model plane builders, cinemagoers. We worked with all of these and many more over the years.

Longevity: It is essential to have a long-term approach that can stand the test of time. Bristol Ideas was able to adapt and respond to the changing world in which it operates for 30 years until a combination of the pandemic impact and core funding reductions, among others, led to the decision to close. We moved from being an organisation focused on the development of 'hard' cultural infrastructure such as a new centre for performing arts for the city and one-off initiatives such as the Capital of Culture bid, to delivering a wide programme of events that brought together different parts of a diverse city around the concept of ideas.

The importance of bidding: Losing the 2008 Capital of Culture bid was a blow. In truth, the odds were always stacked against us with a decision likely to be

based on political and social need. I learned from this to make sure that political leadership was solidly behind a bid. We wouldn't have won, but to go into the final judging panel interview with a council in which no party was in control, due to an inconclusive election result, meant that we gave the appearance of chaos when up until then we had shown unity and professionalism (this experience was partly responsible for exploring the potential for an elected mayor). Despite this, it is essential to apply for such awards. Bidding shows confidence. It provides an opportunity to debate ideas and develop plans. The only failing an organisation might make in the bidding process is to fail to plan for defeat. On Bristol2008, we were prepared to move forward even if we didn't win the title and – in addition to the campaign seeing culture rise up the political agenda rapidly over those years – we received much financial support in the quasi-compensation deal established by national government which meant we could deliver Brunel200 and four other years of projects. If we could have bid for Capital of Culture 2023, we may not have won but we may have achieved similar results as we did 20 years before. Leeds did this. They wanted to be European Capital of Culture and were unsuccessful, but they delivered a year of culture anyway.

A broad definition of culture: Culture can be defined too narrowly. We always had a broad view of culture, moving beyond ideas such as 'high' and 'low' culture and a division between the arts and science, to see culture as encompassing the diversity of the city. Alongside this broad definition is the role that cultural planning can play. For Bristol Ideas, cultural planning was more than just delivering a programme of cultural events. Rather, it was about enabling and convening partnerships, establishing standing and trust, and working together to raise funds. Above all, cultural planning provided a way in which the different communities that make up the city can be brought together to express their differences and understand their similarities with the vision of making the city a more equitable place.

Measurement: It can be hard to measure the impact of cultural activity. Various methods have been tried, including economic value-added, the contribution to wellbeing and happiness, as well as engagement, attendance and demographic data. Apart from basic information – such as details of those attending events – none have proved to be satisfactory. But this does not mean that we should not try to understand the role that cultural activity can play. It is through our awareness of how it can create a sense of civic engagement and contribute to the social capital of a place that we can appreciate its value.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that Bristol is in a far better position than it was 30 years ago, although the problems of growth, the lingering impact of the pandemic, and continuing austerity make it harder to sustain cultural programmes and puts the continued development of Bristol in jeopardy. The range and quality of cultural activity is stunning; the city is now seen as a cultural leader and is the city that others aspire to. We can't claim all the credit. Bristol Ideas was a partner and colleague with many others, but we helped change Bristol for the better. I feel fortunate to have been a part of this.

Behind the conception of the organisation was a partnership involving both the public and the private sectors in Bristol looking to respond to the challenges faced by urban areas in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as crime, poverty and lack of opportunity. Some of these challenges may have changed over the life of the organisation. What is particularly noticeable is the longevity of Bristol Ideas and the other organisations, such as the Bristol Initiative, set up more than 30 years ago. Change takes time. And ideas take time to develop and come to fruition and so the ability to plan, convene and deliver over the long-term was a key feature of our work.

Bristol Ideas' way of working was always with and through other organisations. This approach meant that strong partnerships were created across the city. Some partnerships were open-ended and continued without us and others focused on the delivery of specific projects and stopped when complete. What they had in common was their engagement of a wide range of different partners to involve *anyone* with an interest in the city of Bristol.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the relationship that we have had with the city. As well as being intertwined with Bristol's cultural, social and economic life, we have drawn on its stories for our inspiration. Events which have started with a focus on significant moments from the city's past have always led to discussions of the city's future, and provided meeting grounds where different viewpoints and changing perspectives can be brought together and discussed.

The city was our project and remains the project, whoever takes this forward. ■





Reflections on Bristol Ideas

The Rise and Fall of the Bristol Renaissance

ACH Smith

Bristol Ideas had a long relationship with novelist, playwright and poet ACH Smith. His play *Up the Feeder, Down the Mouth* (2001), provided one of the most magical moments in theatre in the city in recent decades. *The Newcomers* – the BBC series he refers to here – has been influential in our work. We showed this twice, to full houses. Smith was also a mentor, providing informal advice on Bristol in the 1960s, a period he reflects on here as he looks at the city and the arts over the past six decades. The environment for public funding for culture then was as challenging as it is now.

Andrew Kelly emailed me in 1995 for suggestions for memorial plaques to significant artistic figures in Bristol's history. I offered a few thoughts but finished with: 'One plaque at Temple Meads could cover them all, though. It might read: "The City of Bristol, always pleased to see the back of artists".'

O tempora, o mores, as we say in Redland. I could not imagine what was to follow. Andrew's brainchild, the Festival of Ideas, cherried a cake that was already baking in Bristol. I've opened this paragraph pretentiously, so I'll finish it by describing the past six decades as a Bristol Renaissance.

I'd credit its inauguration to Richard Hawkins, a composer and the Managing Editor at the Bristol United Press. In 1960, I was working at the *Western Daily Press* (WDP). Seeing how the posh national papers had started to splash arts coverage, Hawkins judged that there would be a ready audience for it in Bristol, and invited me to edit a weekly arts page, broadsheet size in those days. 'Oh,' he said, 'and there's a local journalist called Tom Stoppard who might be a useful contributor.' Stoppard and I had met once and hadn't liked the look of each other, but the first

piece he submitted was a brilliant analysis of the *nouvelle vague* in French cinema: Godard, Truffaut, Belmondo, Moreau, all that. Stoppard has since admitted to me that he'd cribbed this from *Cahiers du Cinéma*. We were soon close buddies; he was best man at my wedding. We ran the arts page jointly, and it survived for more than two years until the WDP editor, who hated it, saw that Hawkins would soon be on his way elsewhere and demolished it. Some years later, Patrick Dromgoole at HTV invited me to reincarnate the page in TV form and it ran monthly for 20 years.

In one of our special single-issue pages, Stoppard and I surveyed the city's meagre provision for the arts (which entailed less outlay than was spent on the upkeep of the Lord Mayor's ceremonial horses) and proposed the formation of a Bristol Arts Trust. To our surprise we fluttered the civic doves. Overnight, three committees – academics, businesspeople and trades unionists – came into being to promote the idea. That every regional centre should run its own arts budget is a case I have been arguing ever since. That is how it's done in France and Germany, and it is what the Arts Council, before it became a canting bureaucracy, had in mind when Stoppard and I ran with it. Then, there was such a swell of support for it in Bristol that it became a Lord Mayor's motion (a rare thing, by tradition unopposed). It was referred to the finance committee for implementation. They dug a hole and buried it. Hawkins told me that the ground of disagreement was that Labour councillors did not like the seating arrangement at the crucial committee meeting. Thirty years later, the City Council came up with a proposal to support the arts: form a Bristol Arts Trust. It got nowhere.

But something was stirring in the city. To the mood music of the Swinging Sixties, Jeremy Rees opened the Arnolfini in The Triangle; the Arts Centre (now The Cube) was created in King Square by the Workers' Educational Association (shepherded by the developer Billy Poeton); and at the University of Bristol, where playwright John Arden was the resident Fellow in Drama, the academic George Brandt turned the drama department's little theatre into an avant-garde studio. This is where Pinter and Stoppard were clapped by their first ever live audiences, and Alan Dossor, later director of the Liverpool Everyman, learned his craft.

Additionally, Charles Wood and Peter Nichols were writing their first plays, with scant support from the Bristol Old Vic. After *Lawrence of Arabia*, Peter O'Toole came back to storm through three Bristol Old Vic productions. Arnold Wesker brought his trades-councils-focussed Centre 42 festival here; one of the many performers was acclaimed writer Angela Carter, then living in Clifton. Derek Robinson's first novel, *Goshawk Squadron*, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize: one of the judges, Saul Bellow no less, said it should have been the winner. John Boorman was vivifying the BBC's documentary unit with *Citizen '63*, a series about uncelebrated



Screengrabs from *The Newcomers*, the TV series that Smith writes about here. It's an important programme as it shows Bristol in the early 1960s, features Tom Stoppard and Bristol artist Derek Balmer, and includes film of the first non-white bus conductor following the Bristol bus boycott, Raghbir Singh, as well as Alison and ACH Smith and their Bristol.

local people who caught his interest, followed by the first big thing on the newly launched BBC2: a six-parter about Bristol, *The Newcomers*. My wife Alison, myself, Stoppard and the painter Derek Balmer were the protagonists, TV rookies all of us. As well as Balmer, Paul Feiler, David Inshaw and George Tute who were emerging as artists of national interest.

The buzz went on through the century: Aardman, Banksy, Watershed, Massive Attack, the Tobacco Factory (created by George Ferguson, and distinguished by Andrew Hilton's nationally acclaimed annual Shakespeare productions), many smaller companies and venues, and a stream of young actors at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School performing for us here and going on to celebrity, a chance to 'spot the coming man before he's come' as the critic Cyril Connolly (was it?) said.

The cultural Renaissance had the potential to bring immense economic benefit. All over the country, you meet people who saw Bristol as a great location to start a business. But two things were lacking.

With the best will in the world – which has occasionally glinted through in a councillor like Estella Tincknell – support from the city council has been hobbled by Westminster's chronic impoverishment of local government. The promotion of 'levelling-up' is face powder. Andy Hay, the most public-spirited director the Bristol Old Vic has had, resigned in despair in 2001 at the tepid backing the council afforded him.

The other thing missing was what in ancient Athens was called 'the agora': a place where creatives and audiences could meet and discuss, learn, and 'argufy' (critic William Empson's word). In 2005, hallelujah, we got one: the Festival of Ideas. Masterminded by Andrew Kelly and a devoted staff, it lured hundreds of speakers, some world-famous, to come and share their thinking with us, and

sometimes be told they're wrong. They were rich ingredients in Bristol's goulash. And now, it's stopped.

The loss of four Andrews – Kelly, Hay, Hilton, and the death of Andy King, the genius behind the Industrial Museum, now M Shed – have been grievous for the city we love, a misfortune for which Oscar Wilde would have found a witty phrase. I'll settle for: it may be time to think again about that plaque at Temple Meads. I'll pay for the screws. ■

Harbourside and Cultural Planning

John Savage

If there is one person who can be credited with having founded Bristol Ideas, it is John Savage. His work in leading The Bristol Initiative from 1988 saw the creation of Bristol Cultural Development Partnership and he remained involved to the end. Savage writes here about the critical role that the Bristol Initiative played in the renewal of Bristol Harbourside and what Bristol Ideas contributed to this. He reflects on the failure of The Harbourside Centre, the concert hall planned as the centrepiece of the regeneration programme, and what this meant for the city.

We turned 74 acres of worthless land, with little access for people, in a central part of the city, into a place that continues to improve and offer experiential activity about life.

The renewal of Bristol Harbourside was a key part of our work in The Bristol Initiative and culture was central to our thinking from the start. We spent many years bringing the five landowners and parties – Bristol City Council, British Gas, British Rail, Lloyds Bank and the JT Group – together in the Harbourside Sponsors Group. Before this, for many decades, development of the site was piecemeal and had little impact.

It was not an easy task to create this group. What *was* easy was agreeing that new cultural institutes were essential. Harbourside was already an example of culture-led regeneration with the Arnolfini art gallery and Watershed Media Centre. But they needed help and we lacked so much. We wanted a new concert hall for the region in the twenty-first century. Colston Hall was old and faded. The Harbourside Centre – which eventually failed to be built – would have been a jewel in the crown of Bristol. The magnificent building would have provided outstanding concert and music education facilities, and its very presence would have done for



The Bristol Harbourside project was a key part of the work of both The Bristol Initiative and Bristol Ideas in the period 1988-2000. The land had been derelict for many years. This aerial shot, taken in the early 1990s, shows much of the site after the completion of the Lloyd's Bank buildings but before the millennium programme renewal. The area has been transformed, even though the major cultural project – The Harbourside Centre – failed.

(Bristol Post)

the image of Bristol what the Sydney Opera House has done for Australia.

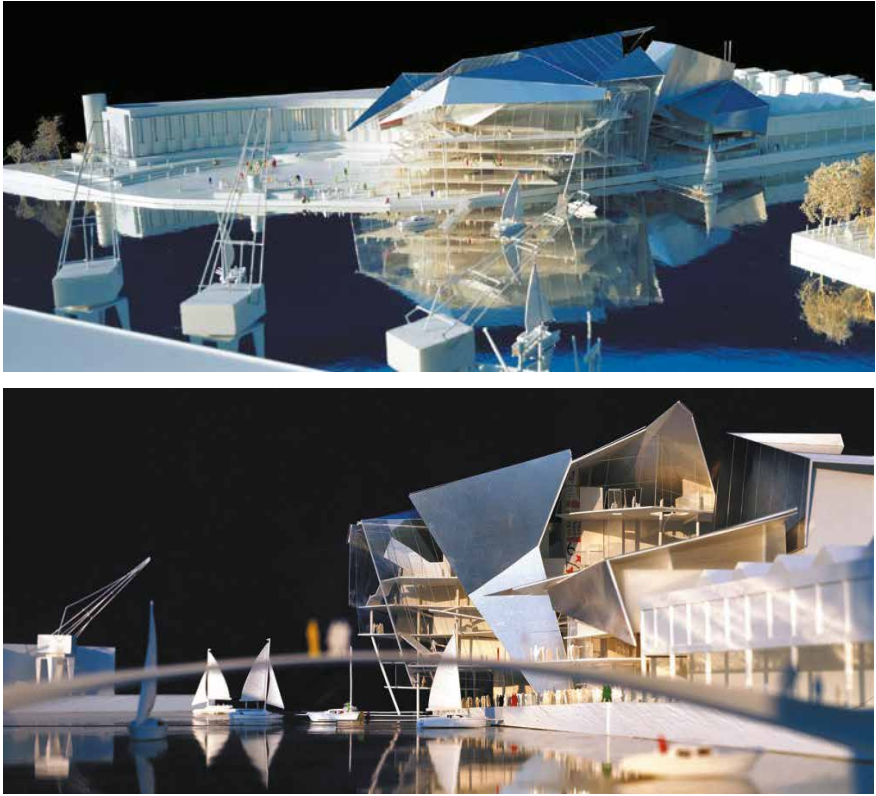
Bristol Ideas led this and added a new centre looking at wildlife – the Electronic Zoo – and science when it incorporated the Exploratory then at Temple Meads station which was looking to move. This eventually became the arts,

nature and science millennium project At-Bristol, now We The Curious.

For the Bristol Initiative, Bristol Harbourside was also about placemaking: offering new opportunities to sit in the sun, take a walk, grab a drink and a meal, visit the cinemas, galleries and museums. We wanted to give people access to more things that make their lives interesting and bearable. Two new public squares were created following Bristol Ideas' work – Anchor Square and Millennium Square – as well as a large underground car park (paid for by Arts Council England), the revenue from which still provides annual support to We The Curious.

Although the funding ultimately didn't come through for this ambitious development in its entirety, I'm pleased that Bristol Harbourside has become a better place for Bristolians as well as a destination for others.

Bristol Ideas was operating in this reimagining of Bristol Harbourside in the most successful way I've ever seen. Without that ability to get people interested and to think ahead, the Bristol Initiative would not have achieved anything, and the dream would have been incomplete, locally shallow and short term. The Bristol Initiative had vision and imagination, but we were all businesspeople at root.



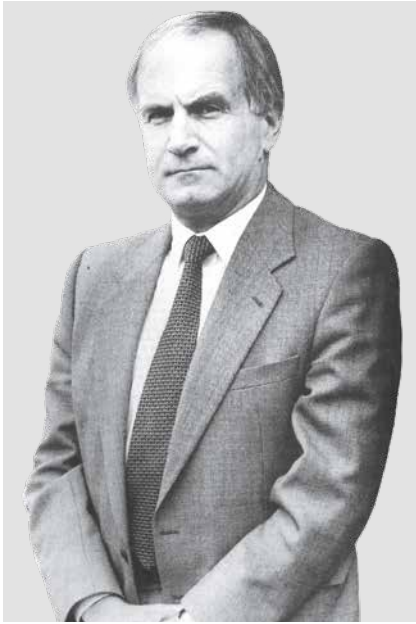
Models for The Harbourside Centre, Bristol. (Behnisch and Behnisch, 1998)

Bristol Ideas and their very small team constantly beavered away to make things work.

Culture in a city is relevant to and must be applied to everybody, and people who understand that are vital to success. Bristol Ideas gave us that ingredient; created the vision; invested the hard work to make it happen; and provided the will and determination to get us through the setbacks and disappointments.

And there were disappointments. I still regard the failure of Arts Council England to make their final investment – after eight years of work with them to create The Harbourside Centre – as a betrayal and a great lost opportunity. However, the re-opening of Bristol Beacon in November 2023 was much needed and a triumph. I like to think the ambition we showed in the plans for The Harbourside Centre inspired the plans for Bristol Beacon in giving the city the concert hall it has long deserved.

The successes outweigh the disappointments. We The Curious now attracts more than 300,000 visitors annually. It helped transform derelict land in the



John Savage in 1993. (Venue)

centre of the city. Arts, nature and science were integrated from the start. It brought together landowners, planners, Bristol City Council, artists and scientists (among many others). The ideas were rooted in placemaking as well as education and economic development; and there was significant citizen participation. We The Curious created new places where people could congregate, learn, discuss and debate. And it showed that culture could lead the way in major city renewal. Bristol Ideas had the vision, the knowledge, the ability to build the partnerships needed, and they were able to marshal resources. Additionally, following the collapse of the Harbourside Centre, they had the resilience to carry on.

Their work also strengthened the Harbourside's existing cultural provision and fomented new cultural projects: the creation of The Architecture Centre; the renewal of Arnolfini and Watershed; the expansion of ss Great Britain; the development of Underfall Yard; and the Bristol Industrial Museum becoming MShed. The completion of a continuous walk around the harbour and wider development including new restaurants and retail outlets on both sides of the river makes the place even more valuable, especially for Bristol people who have long held affection for the historic heart of the city. Only a few decades before, serious discussion took place about getting rid of the water to create space for more car parking. I'm glad we fought so hard to put culture at the heart of Bristol's Harbourside. ■

We The Curious: Bringing Arts and Sciences Together

Donna Speed

The first major Bristol Ideas project was Bristol 2000/At-Bristol on the Harbourside, now We The Curious. Bristol Ideas always embraced arts, nature and science in its understanding of culture. The commitment to build new cultural facilities in the centre of the city, new ideas for the Harbourside area, the relocation of the Exploratory from Temple Meads and Millennium Commission lottery funds meant that We The Curious could be created. Donna Speed, director of We The Curious, looks at what has been created and its impact.

At the heart of Bristol's picturesque Harbourside, among the vibrant cafés, restaurants and bars, you will find We The Curious. Conceptually and architecturally, it is a testament to the enduring impact of Bristol Ideas' pivotal role in the regeneration of Bristol's Harbourside area. Intertwining art and science, making knowledge accessible and engaging for all, it symbolises a celebration of human curiosity, an open invitation to explore the wonders of the universe.

In the late 1990s, Bristol Ideas set the stage for a renaissance of culture and science in Bristol. Bristol Ideas was behind the inception of At-Bristol, with the vision that it would be much more than just a museum. Its mission was simple yet profound: to make science accessible and engaging for all, by bridging the gap between arts and sciences, and placing scientific discovery as part of everyday life for everyone within the city.

The chosen venue for this inspirational venue? A derelict building in the run-down Harbourside area.

The Harbourside of now is a far cry from the one that existed at the end of the



In 1993 Bristol Harbourside was mostly derelict with the old goods shed being used for car parking and car boot sales. By 2000 it had been transformed into a vibrant new arts and science centre and a place for people. Here's the goods shed as it was in 1993. (Bristol Post)

last century, when much of the area was in ruin, including the building that now houses We The Curious. Like many former dock cities, Bristol's Harbourside had fallen into a state of disrepair from its peak in the nineteenth century, when its Floating Harbour was a technological marvel that allowed it to trade across Europe, through to the end of the twentieth century, when it was a largely derelict shell of its former self.

Bristol Ideas helped to envisage a revitalisation of the area that would see, at its core, a multi-disciplinary centre intertwining the arts, media, natural history and physical sciences. Housed in the building that was once the goods shed for Brunel's Great Western Railway, this idea came to life as one of the Millennium Commission's Science Centres.

At-Bristol became the pioneering Harbourside project: a catalyst for the revival of a once-neglected area. This landmark initiative ignited a wave of investment and paved the way for a vibrant Harbourside community, with cultural and scientific institutions, shops, galleries, museums, hotels and recreational spaces that transformed it into a bustling hub of activity.

We The Curious now sits there nestled between the open public spaces of Anchor Square and Millennium Square, its large glass windows reflecting skaters, dancers and passersby who come together to use them as social spaces and a thoroughfare respectively.



Millennium Square at half-term. (Lisa Whiting)

Science is an integral part of our everyday culture, and it is for everyone. When At-Bristol first opened its doors in 2000, it marked a pivotal moment for the city. It was a celebration of human curiosity, an open invitation to explore the wonders of the universe, both great and small, through its mission of ‘making science accessible to all’.

At the heart of this innovative endeavour, first given voice by Professor Sir Richard Gregory, pioneer of the Exploratory, was the attempt to reconcile the often polarised disciplines of art and science, recognising that the two were not isolated but inextricably linked, enriching each other, and contributing to a deeper understanding of our world. A ‘first of its kind’, At-Bristol sought to create an environment where visitors could ‘play with science’, by interacting with exhibits, participating in experiments and connecting with current science.

Over the years, the original intent, to explore the relationship between art and science, was sometimes lost, so the team at At-Bristol started to ask themselves, ‘who and what are we for?’. Was the original aim of ‘making science accessible to all’ still relevant?

In 2017, we saw the culmination of a long process of self-reflection and re-invention involving visitors, staff, city stakeholders and the community of Bristol: At-Bristol evolved into We The Curious.

We The Curious encapsulates the long-term impact of Bristol Ideas’ vision,

shaped and driven by the people of Bristol. Today, it continues to connect people with hands-on experiences, exhibits, live experiments and events that challenge our perspectives and ignite curiosity, but crucially these experiences come from the people of the city, in line with the original Bristol Ideas concept. A true testament to the power of co-creation.

Science is creative, messy and beautiful, while the arts possess the unique power to deeply inspire action in response to the ideas they present. Both are interconnected and an integral part of everyday culture. We The Curious continues Bristol Ideas' legacy by fusing the two disciplines in a way which enables visitors to collectively experience science in a unique, engaging and often surprising way.

Science can sometimes feel intimidating or inaccessible, but We The Curious creates a space for individuals of all ages and backgrounds to explore, celebrating mistakes and breakthrough moments as part of the scientific process. Science thrives on fresh ideas, diverse perspectives and multigenerational connectivity to address complex issues. Visitors are encouraged to ask questions, to experiment and to develop a deeper understanding of the world around them. We The Curious serves as a platform where everyone can voice their opinions, contribute to scientific discussions, and participate in addressing the 'wicked problems' facing humanity.

We The Curious is not only a place of scientific exploration but also a trusted space for connection and discussion. It was proud to be a part of the incredible Festival of Ideas programme, hosting fascinating discussions that brought together some of the brightest minds in various fields. The Festival of Ideas became a platform for in-depth conversations which explored pressing issues in society. It was an opportunity for the public to engage with thought leaders, academics and artists on topics ranging from climate change and technology to social justice and the future of cities. We The Curious played a vital role in providing a space for these discussions to take place, further enhancing its status as a hub for culture and exchanging ideas.

The impact of Bristol Ideas extends far beyond the walls of We The Curious. The organisation's pioneering work has left an indelible mark on the city's culture, economy and educational landscape.

The legacy of Bristol Ideas and the ongoing success of We The Curious are a shining example of how bringing art and science together can lead the way towards a brighter, more enlightened future. Their combined efforts have transformed the cultural and scientific landscape of Bristol, fostering a spirit of curiosity, innovation and inclusivity that will continue to shape the city for generations to come. ■

Me and Bristol Ideas

Eugene Byrne

Bristol Ideas had a long relationship with Eugene Byrne, from his days on the much missed *Venue* magazine, through his creation of many books for our projects, to his unofficial role of Bristol historian to the Bristol Ideas team. With illustrator Simon Gurr, Byrne created graphic novel-type books on Brunel, Darwin and, in 2008, *The Bristol Story*. It remains, 16 years on, the most popular introduction to the history of Bristol. He writes here about some of these projects and the wider work of Bristol Ideas.

Remember the 1990s? It was when some pranksters, whose numbers included Toby Young and Bristol-born professional prole Julie Burchill, decided to do to ‘culcher’ what punk had done to music and published a magazine called the *Modern Review*.

(It says here – I had to look this up on Wikipedia as I never read the thing – that ‘it aimed to give equal cultural weight to Roland Barthes and Bart Simpson’, ie your classic postmodern we-mean-it-but-we-don’t-mean-it bollocks.)

The same people who pretended to read the *Modern Review* often dropped a word that got debased through over-use: *zeitgeist* - literally ‘time spirit’. The same users discovered ‘*schadenfreude*’ around the same time, which they used correctly, and ‘*realpolitik*’, which they usually did not. They didn’t bother with ‘*weltanschauung*’ as it looked too hard to pronounce.

Zeitgeist, though, is a useful word. It sounds more serious and precise than ‘the spirit of the age’, and for 30 years Bristol Cultural Development Partnership/ Bristol Ideas (BCDP/BI) reflected Bristol’s *zeitgeist*. It ‘surfed the *zeitgeist*’, as we pseudos used to say, but only if we could be sure everyone realised we were saying it ‘ironically’.

Surfed how? OK, horrible generalisation, but here goes ...

Bristol Ideas was founded in the early 1990s with hard-headed, clear-eyed purpose to promote local culture in all its forms, up to and definitely including STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), as a means of boosting



Eugene Byrne leads a Festival of the Future City walk on Unbuilt Bristol in 2019. Walks about ideas and Bristol are an important part of the work of Bristol Ideas. Unbuilt Bristol – the only walk we did where there was nothing to see – joined many other walks in the series including Brunel's Bristol, Romantic poetry, Bristol and the First World War and women's Bristol. (Evan Dawson)

local prosperity and improving the quality of life. This was the 1990s/2000s.

In its middle years, Bristol Ideas focussed a great deal of its work on amusing and entertaining things, aiming to bring people from all walks of life together and show the world what a fun place Bristol was. (There are probably still some people who think Banksy is the defining Bristolian artist of the era. He's not. It's Luke Jerram.)

Bristol isn't nearly as much fun nowadays, and that's not entirely down to the pandemic and/or the state of the economy. The children born since BCDP/BI was set up are now weighed down by all the existential threats to the human race. I'm sure I don't smell as much weed as I used to when walking through town.

In more recent times, BCDP became 'Bristol Ideas', something more cerebral, high-minded and serious, with discussions about economics, a Festival of the Future City and earnest events looking at life and death issues.

(Like I said, a horrible generalisation.)

Wider Bristol went the same way; for those who aren't too busy worrying about how to pay for a roof over their heads and feed their children, anyway.

You might also argue that BCDP/BI paralleled the wider city management in that its early years were about grand strategy. Sort out Harbourside, make space

for new businesses and industries to replace the manufacturing base that Thatcher destroyed, make Bristol fit for tourists, make a big noise about the history and heritage, including the bad stuff.

And, yeah, bid to be European Capital of Culture, because, actually, why the hell not?

More latterly, what with the economic crisis, the continuing fallout from Covid 19 and the hollowing-out of local authorities and public services by central government, everything feels more fragmentary and lacking leadership and direction. There's lots of talk but taking action seems too difficult. We feel powerless and we are bitterly divided over many issues.

But at its best, BCDP/BI could bring everyone together for things that made us all feel like Bristolians, not just people who happened to live there.

We all thought the Centre for the Performing Arts, aka The Harbourside Centre, was a great idea. Everyone liked the 200th celebrations of Brunel's birthday.

You can argue about BCDP/BI's achievements, but for my money one of its most inspired moves was to celebrate the centenary of aviation in Bristol. Aerospace was something a lot of middle-class blow-ins with humanities degrees didn't get and never paid any attention to. But it's been paying a lot of the city's bills since 1910.

Likewise, the project on council housing in 2019 reached deep into the real Bristol. It created a fantastic buzz in many places; in Sea Mills, for instance, it gave us a community museum in a phone box.

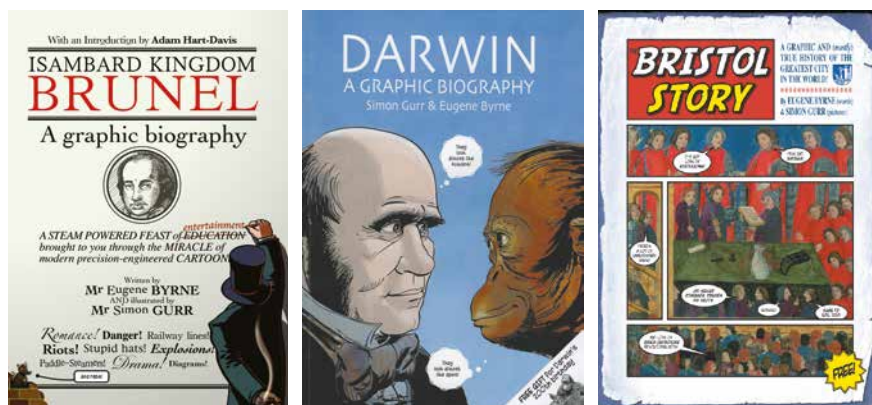
BCDP/BI gave me some wonderful opportunities. I worked with two brilliant artists on some comics, including a graphic novel-style history of Bristol which ran to 85,000 copies which were given away free.

This alone provided a couple of priceless moments; my children's schoolmates liked it, so my kids respected me for a day, which was nice. I also heard from a woman in her mid-40s who was very dyslexic and said it was the first book she had ever managed to read from cover to cover as an adult. Try and imagine how wonderful it felt to hear that. Especially since I'd put so many words in that purists protested that it wasn't a 'proper' comic at all.

I'm grateful to Bristol Ideas for many other things, particularly the numerous opportunities to pontificate in person, in print and online about Bristol past and present.

In more than 30 years, there were bound to be some big disappointments: the Arts Council pulling the plug on The Harbourside Centre and our failure to win European Capital of Culture status.

I had might-have-beens of my own. Bristol Ideas commissioned artist Simon Gurr and me to do a biography in comic form of Charles Darwin. My agent was



Some of the books written by Eugene Byrne published by Bristol Ideas.

all set up to do us a mortgage-paying-off-money deal for the global rights, but then the world economy went pear-shaped. Still, spilt milk, eh? But it has been re-published in American, Spanish, Portuguese and Korean (South, obvs) editions, which is pretty cool.

But that's just me. In its time, BCDP/BI launched and supported no end of creative careers. It brought artists and writers of every kind together for some wonderful collaborations which would not have happened otherwise.

The shame of BCDP/BI folding is that actually we need that earlier strategic thinking about culture more than ever right now. Sure, we also need schools, hospitals, affordable housing, public transport, living wages, sustainable growth etc, etc, etc...

But it was never either/or. We need it all. And culture in the broadest sense – not just plays, art galleries and orchestral concerts, but cinemas, pubs, clubs, books and magazines – adds to a community's prosperity and wellbeing.

The history, the entertainment and arts, the tales we tell, the way we tell them, the way we think, the things we argue about... these are all part of who we are. They're what makes a place somewhere and not just anywhere, and that's what BCDP/BI did. We'd have had a lot less zeitgeist without it. ■

The Day of the Triffids and Bristol Ideas

Melanie Kelly

Melanie Kelly worked for Bristol Ideas for 20 years. She ran many projects, one of which was the annual Great Reading Adventure. She writes here about her favourite book from that project, *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham, and shows not only what the project delivered but also the many partnerships involved, the extensive media coverage achieved, and what this meant to her. Following this, Bristol's City Poet 2022-2024, Kat Lyons, contributes a new poem inspired by the reading adventures.

On 8 January 2004, something sinister was stirring at the Wildwalk botanical house in the heart of Bristol. Following reported sightings of a seven-foot tall homicidal plant, scientist and broadcaster Adam Hart-Davis, award-winning author Helen Dunmore, Councillor Bill Martin, Bristol's Lord Mayor and pupils from Severn Vale School wound their way through the steamy interior to investigate. There, beneath the tropical canopy, they encountered a towering triffid puppet and stacks of John Wyndham's 1951 science fiction classic *The Day of the Triffids*.

And so began Bristol's second Great Reading Adventure, an annual community-focussed cultural initiative that aimed to bring people together and raise standards of literacy by encouraging everyone in the city to read the same book at the same time.

I was employed by Bristol Ideas for 20 years. During that time, it was the various reading adventures that we ran between 2002 and 2009 that were the most enjoyable and rewarding projects on which to work. Of these, *The Day of the Triffids* stands out as my absolute favourite. I already loved the book and took great pleasure in gathering the images and text that I turned into a range of support



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materials to enhance the reading and learning experience.

Wyndham's book was chosen because, as well as being an enthralling story, it could be used to promote Bristol as a place for innovation, creativity and green initiatives. Bristol Ideas was always keen to make meaningful connections across the arts and sciences and make them accessible to the widest possible public.

Among the materials distributed free of charge were: 4,100 copies of the Penguin Classic edition of *The Day of the Triffids*; 1,000 simplified versions of the book (Evans Fast Track Classics series); and 500 picture books on an environmental theme, Michael Foreman's *Dinosaurs and All That Rubbish*. Schools and colleges were asked



Left: Bristol-based writer Helen Dunmore with triffid at the launch of the project. The following year, Dunmore's book *The Siege*, was the 2005 Great Reading Adventure. Right: The triffid puppet, created by Gynormous Rawkus, toured the city, including Bristol Airport. (Martin Chainey)

to pre-register for classroom reading sets and educational packs and 73 of these were distributed.

As part of its 150th birthday celebrations, JW Arrowsmith Ltd printed 10,000 readers' guides free of charge, along with feedback questionnaires and some of the publicity posters, which featured a special Wallace and Gromit image by Bristol's Aardman Animations. Arts & Business – an organisation dedicated to increasing business involvement in the arts – provided matched funding for Arrowsmith's support through its New Partners Scheme. The guides and promotional material were designed by Qube Design Associates Ltd. The guide was the most beautiful and satisfying publication with which I have been associated. Qube also designed the project website, which had more than 10,000 visits in the first three months.

A specially commissioned 12-part comic serial based on the book was published in Bristol's *Evening Post*, with an estimated readership of around 216,000 people a day. It was devised by local artist Simon Gurr. Creative workshops inspired by themes raised by the project took place in schools and libraries. There was also a science fiction weekend with screenings of classic films and television programmes, and lectures and discussions on Wyndham's work. City Inn provided



Many schools in Bristol, like Fair Furlong Junior here, joined the reading adventures. Students and staff read the book, wrote articles on it and created artwork. (Bristol Post)

free accommodation for the speakers, who included the authors Brian Aldiss and Christopher Priest.

Grayling PR managed the media campaign as support in kind. The project was the topic of 14 national media stories, including on *BBC Breakfast News*, *You and Yours* and Radio Five Live, widespread trade and professional media coverage, more than 25 picture stories in the *Bristol Evening Post*, local radio and television items, and features on *The Guardian* and BBC websites.

The triffid puppet commissioned from local artists Gynormous Rawkus made a tour of the Galleries shopping centre, Bristol International Airport, Henbury library and the local BBC TV newsroom on launch day. It was borrowed by schools and libraries during the project and featured in a Valentine's Day promotion organised by Bristol Tourism and Conference Bureau.

Other activities included workshops and events at At-Bristol and Arnolfini; a local scout troop using the book as part of obtaining Book Reader and Librarian badges; and reading group discussions in libraries and other locations. In addition to all the free copies available, the book was borrowed 1,000 times from branches



The reading adventures reached into business, higher education and the Bristol City Council. Bristol University's then vice chancellor, Professor Eric Thomas, refused to stop reading even through filming. And Bristol City Council's cabinet read the book together. Pictured left to right are councillors: Richard Eddy, Graham Robertson, Peter Abraham, Barbara Janke, Peter Hammond, Helen Holland and Anne White.

of the library service, several of which had set up wonderfully imaginative displays as part of the project.

Among the many examples of positive feedback received was an email from the librarian at HMP Bristol, who wrote to say that 'having had the intention of setting up a book group in the prison for some time, the gift of multiple copies of *The Day of the Triffids* gave us just the impetus we needed to get started'.

Another came from the Bristol Gateway Special School, which said:

We have been really impressed with the response of the students to the story. Normally they are very reluctant to read (or even listen to) pieces of extended prose but they have all listened to, read and discussed the story with great enthusiasm. It has been a real pleasure working on the story and they have arrived at lessons desperate to carry on reading. For our students, this is a major achievement. They particularly like the idea that the book is being studied across Bristol and they are part of a big project.

From the completed reader questionnaires, we learnt that nearly 99 per cent of those who expressed an opinion thought that citywide reading projects were an excellent or good idea, and more than 98 per cent would consider participating in future events.

All of this was achieved at a time when Bristol Ideas had only two members of staff and this demonstrates how effective our methods of gathering, enthusing and supporting partners to work on a collaborative project could be.

In 2009, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* – which included partners from Edinburgh to Cornwall – was the last standalone Great Reading Adventure. After that, although we used the Great Reading Adventure name whenever we distributed free books as part of other projects, this was not on the same scope as before. Having begun with the commitment that the books should be provided to all free of charge, the full-scale Great Reading Adventure became a prohibitively expensive enterprise in a time of dwindling funding. It would have been against the spirit of the project to have expected individual readers to pay to take part.

The Great Reading Adventure showed the magic of reading and of sharing that experience with others. It highlighted the importance of libraries to many parts of the city. And it was fun to do. In many ways, it was the Bristol Ideas project that reached the largest and widest range of people.

By the time I retired in early 2021, I had become rather jaded and dispirited about my working life. However, whenever I come across a copy of *The Day of the Triffids* readers' guide on our bookshelves, it still gives me a sense of pride and brings back many happy memories. ■

Danger! Heavy Plant Crossing***Kat Lyons***

Inspired by the Great Reading Adventures, and The Day of the Triffids especially, City Poet Kat Lyons provides their tribute to the importance of books.

When the triffids left, they blocked the suspension bridge,
held up traffic all the way to Hotwells. We queued behind
the triangular yellow sign, its stern exclamation mark.
On drive time radio a councillor apologised for the delay
and told us it was *a historic moment*, that we were *probably safe*
as long as we maintained a respectful distance.

The first recorded sighting was in the old botanical house.
A rogue specimen. We assumed
it was contained, but the locks were rusted
and those stamens proved surprisingly dextrous.

It was chaos for a while, and bad for business.
Plants aren't big spenders; shopkeepers complained
they scared the customers. Buskers said they didn't care for music,
although one went viral on TikTok,
lurching through Broadmead after a local MC,
scattering pigeons, clattering a dubstep rhythm with its roots.

They settled in quickly, moved upmarket, squatted
the luxuriant gardens of large town houses. In Clifton's leafy avenues
they slouched against lamp posts, looped calloused tendrils
into boutique shops to finger the merchandise.
Mottled flowers drooped like suede trombones,
their variegated foliage complementing the heritage paintwork.

There were *a few unfortunate incidents* but eventually
we learned to co-exist. Apex predators, watching
our separate spheres collide, become a Venn diagram.
We took it easy on the pesticides and in return
they kept down the rats. We treated weeds more kindly.
Bristol won awards for rewilding initiatives. Pollinators thrived.

Later, experts traced the original outbreak to a library.
 On TV they wore protective suits and frowns;
 what were we thinking, scattering stories around so freely—
have we learned nothing from history?
 There's no limit to what books can do.
 Their pages are fertile ground, can grow anything.

Potential measures were discussed. The Authorities
 shook their heads at our Triffid Tales events—
all those kids playing dress-up with leaves and petals.
Best not cause confusion. Impressionable minds, etc.
 But we'd grown used to them. Giant carnivorous plants
 were just part of the furniture.

And then one day, they left. All of them—
 even that famous one from the postcards, hunched
 in silent vegetative malice on Colston's plinth—
 just picked up their roots and went. We watched them go;
 their long slow swaying parade, bulbous silhouettes
 against the bridge struts in the fading light.

We swept their soil from our pavements.
 Alone at the top of the tree again, we wandered
 through our manicured lives. We visit garden centres now,
 buy pitcher plants and tiny Venus flytraps,
 take them home and feed them fruit flies.
 We sleep deeply, without dreams. We know

it won't be long. Around us pages rustle.
 On a bus, on uniformed knees
 under cover of a school desk, beneath a duvet after lights-out,
 in the last 10 minutes of a lunch break,
 in the strange still waters of 3am, somewhere
 a book is opening. Something is coming out.

Local Learning and Bristol Ideas

Ruth Myers and Pete Insole

Local Learning – created in 2005 by Ruth Myers and Pete Insole – is a small Bristol-based community interest company that aims to explore local heritage with all members of the community to uncover and share what we learn about our past, helping to collectively shape a better future. Local Learning worked with Bristol Ideas on many projects, including Homes for Heroes 100 and Film2021. Heritage projects for Bristol Ideas were always about using the past to understand the present and to help plan new futures. The work of Local Learning was essential in this.

We have enjoyed working closely with Bristol Ideas in neighbourhoods across Bristol on many innovative grant-funded projects, using heritage as a vehicle to help strengthen community cohesion. We work with a variety of partners to create engaging and inclusive learning experiences for all participants, incorporating street theatre, storytelling, art, film, photography, radio, archaeological investigations and digital technologies. We adopt creative approaches that promote an understanding and appreciation of Bristol's heritage and culture and ensure learning can be easily disseminated to the wider community.

Our first collaboration with Bristol Ideas saw the city come together to mark the centenary of the First World War in 2014.

With Heritage Schools and National Lottery Heritage Funding, Local Learning and Bristol Old Vic worked in Avonmouth and Shirehampton, the scene of Bristol's own 'War Horse' drama, where more than 300,000 horses passed through the Remount Depot on their way to the Western Front. Charlie Day was one of hundreds of soldiers caring for these animals. His letters home describing life stationed in the fields around Shirehampton and Avonmouth helped to inform a roaming drama performed by Avonmouth Primary School on the former site of the Remount Depot.



Recreating the international delegates' visit to Hillfields in 1920 for Homes for Heroes 2019. (Local Learning)

Bristol Ideas enabled this project to be connected to the wider city events, the national and international context, thereby increasing the audience and appreciation for this little-known but significant story. The role of these animals was most recently recognised in the 2023 unveiling of a permanent War Horse sculpture in the Daisy Field park in Shirehampton, made from hundreds of horseshoes like those from the war which continue to surface in back gardens today.

Building on this connection, Local Learning and Bristol Ideas collaborated on a different First World War story in 2019. The story of Hillfields Homes for Heroes began as servicemen returned from the Great War to an overcrowded, industrial Bristol where many still shared an outdoor toilet and washing facilities in the backyard with their neighbours. The Prime Minister at the time, David Lloyd George, announced that Britain should be 'a country fit for heroes to live in', with newly created neighbourhoods based on Ebenezer Howard's garden cities vision that stretched far beyond bricks and mortar.

Our project explored the important story of Bristol's first council estate in Hillfields. Bristol Ideas helped to connect our community activities to similar projects in Sea Mills and Knowle, ensuring that these stories featured in the city-wide programme of events and publications. In 1920, people from around the world, curious to see how this universal issue had been addressed, arrived at Staple

Hill railway station where they were met by boy scouts and girl guides to escort them around the new houses. Just over a century later, as we were beginning to emerge from Covid 19 lockdown, Bristol Open Doors saw hundreds of people from beyond the neighbourhood visit Hillfields for the first time to attend resident-led history tours, helping to raise awareness of the role that this place played in the creation of quality living environments locally and nationally.

Bristol Ideas edged forward in time to 1921, celebrating Bristol's filmmaking past and marking the centenary of the death of William Friese-Greene, a Bristolian inventor and the pioneer of early motion picture filmmaking. Opening Up the Magic Box – the title of the Film2021 project – allowed Local Learning the opportunity to revisit connections made through Hillfields Homes for Heroes in a different area of post-First World War housing, on the other side of the city in Knowle West. Drawing on recollections from residents of smuggling in popcorn and a stray dog, of plush red velvet seats and hazy smoke-filled auditoriums, pupils from Christ the King Primary School collectively composed 'A Cinema's Memories' with city poet Caleb Parkin.

Bristol Ideas made it possible for us to take around 100 pupils from three Bristol primary schools to the Curzon cinema in Clevedon, where they had the opportunity to see themselves on the big screen in a film made by Michael Jenkins, who was documenting community activities within and beyond the classroom. They watched themselves making silent films. They played with Bristol Cinema Top Trump-style cards and lanterns, drawing on shared memories about the lost cinemas of Castle Park. The culmination was a magical final outdoor heritage trail / lantern parade in Castle Park. For many of the pupils, visiting the Curzon was their first cinema experience. This was a lovely, unexpected opportunity that was made possible by Bristol Ideas to provide such a special introduction to cinema in one of the country's longest continuously running heritage picturehouses.

Many threads can be followed through the Local Learning experience: threads that are often facilitated by Bristol Ideas, allowing us to build on existing networks and create new connections. The latest collaboration was Bristol 650, our most ambitious project to date, going from the post-First World War garden suburb vision to post-Second World War comprehensive education, from the Industrial Revolution to universal health and wellbeing, and from the steam and electric powered transport networks to the technological and sustainable vision of the future city.

The Bristol 650 project involves co-creating a community atlas telling the story of how a union of unique neighbourhoods has created an overarching city identity today. Through shared activities and conversations, we are exploring how the



Ruth Myers and Pete Insole of Local Learning outside Hillfields Library for Hillfields Homes for Heroes community event. (Zed Photography)

heritage of these distinct places can inform the city's unified future and who we are and who we want to be.

Writing this piece has emphasised for us the interwoven connectedness of these stories. One of the integral threads has been Bristol Ideas. It was following primary school teacher Celia Jenkins from Avonmouth to her new school, Fonthill Primary, that led to our Southmead community soap opera, *Meadows to Meaders*, telling the true stories of people who have lived, worked and grown up in the neighbourhood. With continuing support from Bristol Old Vic, this long running storytelling adventure grew into a larger community drama performed live by residents on the streets of Southmead. The same Avonmouth and Shirehampton First World War project explored the inter-war housing in the area, ultimately leading to the Homes for Heroes project in Hillfields.

Conversations with Bristol Ideas, from the initial project inception and throughout the process, are always inspiring, creative, ambitious. Opportunities are rarely missed, often taking us beyond the expected outcomes. It is these unanticipated results that make for an exciting, engaging journey for all participants. As custodian of our city's interconnected cultural ecosystem, Bristol Ideas has continued to foster collaborations, promoting an ethos of sharing ideas across the city, bringing citizens together to celebrate Bristol. ■

Encounters Film Festival and Bristol Ideas

Liz Harkman and Rich Warren

Bristol Ideas was committed from the start to seeing a new film festival in the city to complement the film and television festival Wildscreen. Many places have film festivals, but few are rooted in the work of the city – in Bristol’s case, short film and animation as well as natural history for Wildscreen. As Bristol Ideas worked with the assets of the city, this was an easy festival to develop, especially with the support and involvement of Aardman, BBC Bristol, Watershed Media Centre and many others. Encounters has grown over the past 30 years and presents a different programme to that of 1995. Other film festivals, also building on Bristol’s strengths and assets have followed. Liz Harkman and Rich Warren have been involved with Encounters, formerly Brief Encounters, for many years. They look back on three decades of work here.

Encounters Film Festival began life in 1994 as an initiative of Bristol Ideas and was led by Andrew Kelly who continued to serve as festival director until stepping back in 2001, shortly after Encounters became a stand-alone company. Bristol Ideas continued to work with Encounters on projects after this and has remained a continued source of support, advice and inspiration.

In the Encounters retrospective publication produced to mark the 20th anniversary of the festival in 2014, three interpretations of the reasoning for the establishment of the festival are offered by some of the key individuals involved in its origins. David Sproxton, Aardman’s co-founder and former Encounters trustee, recalled how he was keen to be involved in developing Encounters as an attempt to ‘woo the international animation festival back to Bristol from Cardiff’. Mark Cosgrove, curator of the festival from 1994-2010, pointed out that one of

the driving factors was the need for Bristol to be represented in the British Film Institute's (BFI) national campaign to mark the centenary of the birth of cinema. Andrew Kelly, festival director from 1994-2001, described the need for the newly formed Bristol Cultural Development Partnership to invest in and deliver a project that showcased the ability of the creative industries in Bristol.

This perfect storm of priorities led to a series of screenings that were widely considered a success and, due to the popular reception and collaboration with Watershed, what was intended as a stand-alone event became annual.

After the success of the formative years of 'Brief Encounters', the festival began receiving and seeking out contemporary short film and animation to form its central showcase, and in 1996 a competitive programme was introduced to contextualise the work. As a direct result of these competitive showcases, advertising executives, commissioners, festival programmers and other members of the UK film and television industry started to attend the festival and engage with the talent exhibiting their work. It was at this point that the festival realised that this was not a local phenomenon, and that Encounters could play a much larger role as part of a wider international network.

During this period in Encounters' history, as the festival strove to gain recognition and a place within this network, its growing international reputation was acknowledged through the continued local funding by Bristol City Council and its wish to attract the industry and creatives to the city, through national support, through sponsorship and later through funding from the UK Film Council/BFI and, in 2012, European support through Creative Europe MEDIA funding. Alongside this financial support, Encounters' reputation was bolstered by becoming accredited by the BAFTAs in 2008 and the Academy Awards in 2010, and by becoming the European Film Academy's UK-nominating festival for their Short Film Award in 2012.

Encounters' inclusion in these networks generated new collaboration opportunities. The best examples of this are the country focusses, held in partnership with national organisations including Swiss Films and the Finnish Film Foundation.

The Finnish activity was curated in collaboration with Tampere Film Festival. We identified multiple synergies on a city-wide scale, included a pop-up cine-sauna in an unoccupied shop at the bottom of Park Street, an animation retrospective of the Moomins and a special screening of *Aelita: Queen of Mars* in a temporarily erected big top behind Temple Meads, with a live score performed on reconstructed kitchen utensils from the cross-dressing futuristic punk band The Cleaning Women.



Top: 2019 Encounters Awards Ceremony at Bristol Beacon. Bottom: Audiences at 2019 Award Winners screening at Watershed. (Matt Whiteley)

As the festival grew there was less archival content on show and what was screened was chosen for its value for new and emerging talent; for instance, retrospectives on existing animation studios to highlight their progression path. The emphasis was on curating contemporary work, with a desire to create a hotbed of new talent within Bristol and become an international marketplace for the industry.

The annual call for submissions has seen huge growth since the introduction

of the competitive programme. The festival now attracts more than 5,000 submissions each year from all over the world. From these submissions, the festival has had the opportunity to screen early work from – and play a role in the career development of – names such as Andrea Arnold (*Dog*, 2002), Taika Waititi (*2 Cars, 1 Night*, 2003) and Ruben Ostlund (*Incident by a Bank*, 2010).

In recent years, Encounters has continued to play a role in the development of the next generation of storytellers, including Charlotte Wells (*Tuesday*, 2016), Aneil Karia (*Work*, 2017) and Molly Manning Walker (*Good Thanks, You?*, 2020).

A clear distinction between the curation of the industry-facing activity and audience-facing events became evident, with both being presented as separate strands of the festival. The industry activity was headlined by the competitive programme, but greater emphasis has been placed on networking opportunities and panel discussions with a view to connecting filmmakers with the industry in attendance.

From an audience development perspective, greater attention was placed on the introduction of feature films in the programme (the ‘Shorts 2 Features’ strand) and headline activity featuring well-known personalities from the industry. The competition programmes were curated around genre rather than theme. New outreach activity – such as the Solar Cinema tour around parks in Bristol and a pop-up cinema at the bottom of Park Street – took place during the festival weeks from 2011-2013. This activity has resulted in the festival attracting an audience of between 10,000-15,000 people each year.

Collaborations with Bristol Ideas have ensured that the festival remains relevant to local talent, partners and audiences. Highlights of these collaborations over the years include Desert Island Flicks events with high-profile guests like the political commentator Paul Mason and the production of three short films by local emerging artists to celebrate the city’s UNESCO Creative City of Film status.

2024 sees the festival celebrate 30 years, along with a new team and a new set of challenges: Brexit, the Covid 19 impact and a cost-of-living crisis all affecting how audiences engage with cultural activities. However, the original ambition remains. While many of the initial inspirations for starting the festival have lost their significance in the last 29 years, Bristol Ideas’ motivation for the city to be recognised for its creativity still rings true as Encounters continues to grow its industry reputation and subsequently ensure that Bristol, and its creative community, are acknowledged on an international platform. ■

En Avant! What Brunel Taught Me

Andrew Kelly

Brunel200 was a year-long celebration of the life and work of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, one of the world's most versatile, audacious and innovative engineers. Held in 2006, it marked the 200th anniversary of his birth. It was one of the build-up projects in Bristol's unsuccessful application to be 2008 European Capital of Culture and was delivered despite the result. Andrew Kelly led Brunel200.

Brunel's impact on Bristol has been, and remains, considerable. The Clifton Suspension Bridge and ss Great Britain are the most popular tourist attractions in the city. And we wanted to get even more people to visit Bristol in 2006 and show how important these and his other projects – not just the ones in Bristol – were in engineering terms. We also wanted to promote engineering, arts, science, innovation, design and architecture. And, inspired by him, we wanted to encourage new Brunels.

Here was a chance to unite Bristol, the South West and even much of England and South Wales in a cultural project. We grasped this opportunity in full. I have not worked on a project since then that did so much, in so many different areas, across the country.

Brunel200 was both a celebration of the past and a demonstration of the relevancy of history to the way people live today and will live in the future. The programme included exhibitions and debates, arts and engineering projects, garden tours and urban trails, television programmes, guided and self-guided walks, comics and academic books. It reached communities in towns and cities, in schools, colleges and universities, in museums and galleries, and online. I knew that we had reached as far as we could when our Heritage Lottery officer said there was even a Brunel200 display in his local community centre, in a small village deep



Beermats for the special Brunel200 beer produced by Butcombe Brewery. Hundreds of thousands of four different beermats were used in pubs in Bristol and the South West with information on Brunel and Paddington Station, Clifton Suspension Bridge, Temple Meads Station and ss Great Britain. These received funding from the Arts & Business New Partners Scheme which had a long relationship with Bristol Ideas.

in the South West.

Bristol Ideas spent four years developing the project. Initially looking at the prospects within Bristol, by early 2004 the advisory group had grown into a much larger body of interested parties and the proposed programme had expanded to cover the whole South West and parts of the UK. Successful applications to the Millennium Commission's Urban Cultural Programme and the Heritage Lottery Fund, along with backing from a range of sponsors and other funders – including Arts & Business, Arts Council England, Arup, Bond Pierce, Butcombe Brewery, Discovery Channel, First Great Western, Osborne Clarke and Rolls-Royce – provided a total spending budget of around £4m: our biggest ever to that date and one we never surpassed in the nearly two decades that followed.

The press launch for the programme was held on 12 April 2005 on the ss Great Britain and then journalists and guests went on a bus tour of Brunel sites. The Brunel200 website went live on this date and featured hundreds of images that had been gathered for use in publicity and research material. To better support our increasing workload, the advisory group made way for a smaller operational group backed by marketing, education and exhibition sub-committees. The core team of Melanie Kelly (research director and project manager), Alison Parsons (accountant) and myself as director was supplemented by three fixed-term Brunel200 staff appointments: Ruth Sidgwick (project manager), Sue Sanctuary (education coordinator) and Laura Thorne (project support). Martyn Heighton served as South West Brunel200 Champion in the early stages of development.

On 8 April 2006 – a day of glorious sunshine and torrential rain – thousands gathered on Observatory Hill at Clifton Down for a free concert featuring performances from Brunel Brass, Bristol Choral Society, Dance Bristol, acta community theatre, jazz musician Andy Sheppard and 200 saxophonists. Thousands more gathered in Cumberland Basin for the best view of the star of the show, the Clifton Suspension Bridge.

As darkness fell and the final notes of Sheppard's rendition of 'Happy Birthday to You' drifted away, author and broadcaster Adam Hart-Davis, accompanied by our three young winners of the Send Brunel a Birthday Card competition, pressed a giant plunger on the terrace of the Avon Gorge Hotel. From this cue, the Clifton Suspension Bridge was bathed in a new, state-of-the-art lighting system and, seconds later, the opening salvo of a spectacular display of fireworks set to music rose into the air. This was the stunning culmination of our official opening event.

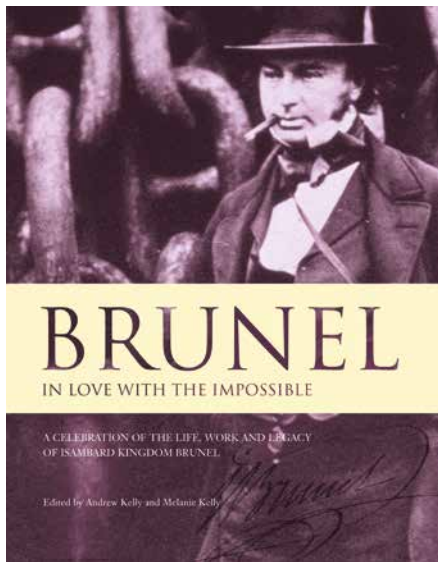
There were three major Brunel200 exhibitions in Bristol – held at the ss Great Britain's Maritime Heritage Centre, Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, and We The Curious – in addition to smaller-scale exhibitions in Bristol and across the region. A personal favourite was the collection of photographs by Nick Hand of local companies bearing the Brunel name shown in a disused early twentieth-century toilet block on Park Row.

There were a variety of publications of which the most ambitious was *Brunel: In Love With the Impossible*, a large-format, beautifully designed collection of newly commissioned essays featuring more than 460 high-quality illustrations. Our subtitle came from Kenneth Clark's TV series and book *Civilisation*: Brunel 'remained all his life in love with the impossible'. Another important publication was the comic-book biography of Brunel written by Eugene Byrne and drawn by Simon Gurr.

Brunel200's main educational programme was developed with Creative Partnerships. It provided a wide range of learning opportunities for all ages and



A special Christmas card created by Simon Gurr for 2005 looking forward to Brunel200.



Left: Cover of *Brunel: In Love With the Impossible*. Right: Extract from Brunel200 comic by Eugene Byrne and Simon Gurr portraying the collapse of the Rotherhithe Tunnel. It is estimated that at least 150,000 people read the comic.

abilities. At least 20,000 children benefited from the Brunel200 school residencies and other live projects in Bristol. Individual venues and organisations across the region also organised their own Brunel-themed educational activities.

Brunel200 sought to bridge the gap that has developed between the arts and sciences, celebrating all forms of creativity and raising awareness of the shared goals and methods of visual artists, performers, engineers, architects and scientists. This approach saw 30 new arts projects supported by Brunel200 in Bristol and 18 more in the wider region, which used an array of art forms to explore engineering, industrial heritage and local communities. They included music commissions, quilting, touring theatrical shows, site-specific sculpture, crime fiction and an epic poem.

Brunel200 gave everyone the opportunity to celebrate Bristol's close association with a charismatic character who changed the world; to bring together arts and sciences, as Brunel did, showing the importance of creativity then and now; and to bring together people in the South West in a manner that no other project has done before or since. It was certainly the most ambitious project we ever undertook, and we reaped the benefits of its success for many years, including the new partnerships we established.

Brunel was an inspiration to me before we did the project, and he has continued to inspire me since. When he died, Brunel's friend and fellow engineer Daniel

Gooch said: 'By his death the greatest of England's engineers was lost, the man with the greatest originality of thought and power of execution, bold in his plans but right. The commercial world thought him extravagant; but although he was so, great things are not done by those who sit down and count the cost of every thought and act.' This is a lesson we need to continue to learn. And when I have felt low, or tired, or fear our work has lost its way, I always remember his motto: *en avant!* Forward. ■

What did Brunel200 do?

- 46** Number of alternate uses found for a stovepipe hat in the Hotwells' Hats Off to Brunel! Great Stovepipe Hat competition.
- 70** Percentage increase in number of enquiries to the Brunel Archive at the University of Bristol throughout 2006.
- 70** Number of different nationalities that visited the Clifton Suspension Bridge visitor centre between May and November 2006.
- 92** Number of appearances as Brunel by the Bristolian actor Martin Williamson at Brunel200 events.
- 301** Percentage increase of people visiting ss Great Britain on the Easter weekend in 2006 compared with 2005.
- 380** Number of people who had a slice of Brunel's birthday cake in Stroud.
- 449** Number of entries to the 200 Ideas for Bristol competition.
- 700** Number of entries to the Send Brunel a Birthday Card competition.
- 800** Number of visitors to Nick Hand's photographic exhibition in a disused toilet.
- 999** Total number of entries to the Clifton Crossing competition to design an alternative bridge.
- 1,317** Number of votes cast in the straw poll at the Battle of the Gauges exhibition at STEAM Museum in Swindon, asking visitors which gauge they preferred, narrow or broad...and the number of votes that Brunel's broad gauge received: 1,005.
- 1,800** Number of items referring to Brunel200 that appeared in the media.
- 2,000+** Number of people who visited Brunel's gardens at Watcombe during the week of his birthday.

3,400	Number of Brunel in Devon trail guides produced.
5,000	Number of outsize replica platform tickets issued in Stroud for their Brunel200 events.
5,024	Number of children who took part in Brunel workshops and performances run by Folk South West in the region's schools.
7,600	Number of copies of <i>Brunel: In Love with the Impossible</i> sold or given as gifts.
8,614	Number of visitors to the Brunel exhibition at Falmouth Art Gallery.
10,000	Number of bottles of Fizzambard bottled water produced.
20,000	Approximate number of children who saw Sixth Sense's production of <i>Toad's Great Western Railway Adventure</i> .
23,291	Number of people who borrowed <i>Around the World in Eighty Days</i> by Jules Verne from library services in the South West in the three months of the Great Reading Adventure (compared with 704 in the previous six months).
25,831	Number of people who saw the Royal Mail's touring Brunel stamp exhibition.
37,500	Number of visitors to Clifton Suspension Bridge's visitor centre between May and November 2006.
37,900	Number of visitors to Brunel and the Art of Invention exhibition.
40,000	Estimated number of people who attended Brunel's birthday party on Clifton Down.
90,000	Total number of copies of three walking guides to Brunel sites in Bristol used in 2006.
135,000	Pints of draught Brunel Butcombe beer drunk in 2006.
136,000	Number of copies of the free Brunel graphic biography circulated across the South West.
136,000	Number of South West Tourism Brunel200 maps produced.
147,000	Estimated number of people who visited the exhibition <i>The Nine Lives of I K Brunel</i> .
159,236	Number of visits to the Brunel200 website between April and September 2006.
1,000,000	Estimated number of people to have taken part in Brunel200.
£1,593,905	Estimated monetary value of media coverage (advertising space equivalence) of Brunel200.

What the Frock! Comedy

Jane Duffus

One of the roles that Bristol Ideas played was to help other initiatives and projects develop. It helped with advice, bids, marketing support, ideas and sometimes funding. Jane Duffus looks here at What the Frock! Comedy and the role Bristol Ideas played in starting this project that challenged the sexism of the comedy industry. Duffus is a writer whose subsequent books on the historical women of Bristol have not only brought to public attention women in the city but also helped fill gaps in Bristol Ideas' work and knowledge.

After moving from London to Bristol in 2008, I was floundering around trying to find my feet. Watershed quickly drew me in and, among its charms, was a regularly updated stash of leaflets advertising events that appealed to the sort of people who went to Watershed. Among them were booklets for the Festival of Ideas: a programme of conversational events that I quickly came to look forward to.

The Festival of Ideas offered me many things over the following 15 years, but the most significant was the initial backing for my idea for an all-female comedy project: What The Frock! Comedy.

I'm a writer with, at that time, little interest in comedy or events promotion. But I was frustrated at the lack of women being booked by the traditional comedy clubs both in Bristol and elsewhere. The promoters I spoke with told me two things: there weren't many funny women or, if they did book a woman, nobody came. Nonsense!

With the backing of the Festival of Ideas, we hired Arnolfini and programmed a night with four wonderful comedians for April 2012. Even though they weren't household names, the event quickly sold out and generated glowing reviews... And then, before the first event had happened, the third one had been booked. The fourth What The Frock! was at the Southbank Centre in London, in front of an audience of 1,000.



Scenes from the first What the Frock! event which Bristol Ideas helped launch: Dana Alexander, Kate Smurthwaite, Tiffany Stevenson. (Reuban Freeman)

Over the next six years, I organised almost 80 What The Frock! Comedy events in seven UK towns and cities, booked around 150 female comedians, launched an annual award to promote emerging female comedy talent and published a book celebrating the long history of funny women. What The Frock! generated a lot of national publicity for the fact the comedy industry was knowingly overlooking women, and one highlight was appearing on Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, who broadcast from a show in Bristol. We also raised around £5,000 for the Bristol-based women's charity One25. There was a lot to be proud of, and it all got off the ground thanks to the Festival of Ideas giving me the backing for that first event in Arncliffe.

Although What The Frock! Comedy has been resting since 2018, that's not due to a lack of demand for the events or for a lack of female comedy talent. It was simply that demand for my books started to take off and writing is where my heart truly lies.

Bristol Ideas will leave a huge hole in the city. The team could be relied upon to bring a varied selection of speakers to the city and take a refreshing attitude to free speech; admirable at a time when so many others are giving in to noxious cancel culture. I thank the Festival of Ideas team for the 15 years of cultural enlightenment that I was able to experience at their hands. And I thank them for pushing me out of my comfort zone to try something new and extraordinary. ■

A Friend, Mentor, Comrade: A Personal Reflection on the Festival of Ideas

Edson Burton

Bristol Ideas worked with Edson Burton on projects about Malcolm X and James Baldwin, as well as the future of Bristol and other cities. Burton reflects here on his personal relationship to Bristol Ideas as an audience member and as a partner.

After the completion of my doctoral thesis, I found myself mashing together what is now fancifully termed a portfolio existence. In my case, the term was certainly a post-event rationalisation for a collision of happy accidents, meanders and aptitude. My wide-ranging thesis and teaching experience had placed me in good stead to comment on Bristol's fractured race relations at a time when the city was markedly more schismed than it is today. I had developed, in parallel, a career writing poetry, audio and stage drama.

Despite some success on all fronts, I was still mentally making the transition from academic to public speaker, from 'trying a ting' to naming myself as artist. I had no career direction, no sense of pathway except a vague reasoning that I would raise the profile of my work. But I was fired with restless conviction that complex ideas should, *must*, be shared in forums outside the university. What was the point of consciousness-transforming knowledge if it remained on some publicly unavailable university catalogue? My passion noted, I called upon and looked for ways to contribute where I thought I could be useful.

My relationship with the culture sector was familiar and yet informal. This



Germaine Greer was one of the many speakers Edson Burton saw in Festival of Ideas. Greer spoke in the festival three times. This event in 2014 was in association with the Bristol Natural History Consortium. (Jon Craig)

began to change in 2014 when, encouraged by Watershed Media Centre, I became a founder member of the Black curatorial group *Come the Revolution*. This in turn brought me into greater contact with Bristol Festival of Ideas.

At this point, I was mostly a consumer of the festival's programme. Andrea Levy, Kenan Malik, Germaine Greer, Ekow Eshun, Gary Younge, AC Grayling and Colin Grant were just a few of the minds brought to the city by the festival's team. At that point in my transition, they were proof that academics and creatives – dare one say 'intellectuals'? – could speak to a wider public in a relatively more accessible mode.

When invited to submit a creative response to the Festival of the Future City, a new initiative launched by Bristol Ideas in 2015, I felt flattered. I gulped when its director, Andrew Kelly, listed the authors with whom I would be sharing an evening presentation of our submissions. Shangri La was suddenly very close, very real. I asked myself if I was ready.

I am suspicious of reflections that become modern mantras – 'set up to fail'; 'you have to try twice as hard if you're Black' – but there is no smoke without fire. I had experienced, as a novice speaker and writer, the sense that I had one opportunity.

I asked myself if this was another such occasion, but I knew this invitation marked an important movement in my career. The pressure felt immense. The pressure is not always to do with those who confer the opportunity but how I, one of many culture sector outsiders, exhibit a debilitating sense of double consciousness. If I 'fail', I am proof that my place was secured by affirmative action, that I had been



Edson Burton (pictured here sixth from the left) was one of 13 people awarded social enterprise grants in a joint British Council/ Bristol Ideas project which ran for two years. Burton went to Chicago: 'a life-transforming research trip to...a city which has been central to my past and will be to my future work.'

(Evan Dawson)

overhyped in the first place.

The moment of stepping up to the lectern felt far more loaded than any other step. It felt like *the* step. As I listened to my fellow writers, I sagged inside. My piece, a dystopian take on a future Bristol where human beings were reduced to hyper-monitored bots, was by far the longest that night and far too dense with ideas, at least so I thought. I can't recall how well I recited. Did I breathe? Did I pause? I didn't think I was abysmal, but it wasn't my best moment. It would be entirely understandable, I reasoned, for this to be my only invitation as a speaker to a Festival of Ideas event. I was genuinely surprised, therefore, when only a few weeks later I was back in the fray discussing plans and projects with the team.

In fact, the following year, I wrote perhaps my most provocative essay, 'A Reply to the N Question', as part of a series of Festival of Ideas events commemorating the work of African American Pulitzer Prize-winner James Baldwin. I returned to writing about Baldwin in 2023 as part of a centenary programme. In the intervening years, I have written articles, chaired panels and been a guest panellist as part of the festival's programmes.

My debt to Bristol Ideas cannot be covered in one article. It has given me the platform to share ideas outside the academy using the personal essay, a form which first drew me to Baldwin. My relationship with Writers Mosaic and its community of writers would not have occurred without Bristol Ideas. In conjunction with the British Council, Bristol Ideas funded my life-transforming research trip to Chicago, a city which has been central to my past and will be to my future work.

But the debt I owe most to Bristol Ideas is trust. It is a shock to be nurtured if you

are – by race, class or education – a culture sector outsider. Bristol Ideas trusted in my potential. I could be awkward, miss the mark, have an off day or score a blinder.

Reviewing past programmes, one witnesses Bristol Ideas' journey. Through commitment and consistency, it has formed relationships in its fractured home city that are best described as extraordinary. I worry that rebuilding such networks may not be possible without Bristol Ideas.

I shed a tear when I discovered that Bristol Ideas was coming to an end. I have lost a partner for my work and lost colleagues who have been friends, mentors and comrades. The city has also lost a voice. ■

Free Thinking: Ideas for All

Suzanne Rolt

In her work as director of St George's Bristol, Suzanne Rolt partnered with Bristol Ideas on many events in the Festival of Ideas programme. Rolt later joined the board of Bristol Ideas and was made chair during 2019-2023. Here she reflects on the ethos of Bristol Ideas, the festival, the remarkable people presented on the stage and some of the significant and most memorable events she encountered.

Stay in your lane. That's the message so many of us hear from an early age. You're arts or science, maths or humanities. Stick to what you know and don't, for heaven's sake, try to be something you're not.

What joy, what liberation then, to arrive in Bristol and to encounter its Festival of Ideas. Here was a festival whose currency was free thinking, where no subject was considered beyond anyone's reach. It was a trusted friend to thousands of people, leading them through a seemingly endless celebration of ideas from the past and for the future.

So often when we think of festivals we conjure something static, a fixed point in a calendar with a clearly defined beginning and end. In a city famed – notorious even – for doing things differently, it wasn't surprising that we should forge our own way. After all, no single week could hold something as expansive as ours: a festival in perpetual motion, weaving in and out of the city, meditating on, and soaking up, culture and ideas in all their infinite complexity and glory. It was a constant pulse, its events finding their way into nooks and crannies as well as the mainstream all year around. A catalyst for partnerships, a vehicle for change, and a reminder of what truly matters in life.

Those of us who were close to it were caught up in its infectious energy and imaginings. It coaxed people into its orbit, encouraging them to engage at

whatever level felt right. There was depth and heft to its work, but it had a lightness of touch, too. It was generous with its own ideas, reaching out to cultural venues, universities, schools and community spaces and inviting them to add their unique perspectives. Over time, the hour-long presentations of ideas came to be threaded through with music and theatre, poetry and painting. Theories of quantum science and evolution seeped out beneath the doorways of the hallowed halls of academia, eager to take their place alongside contemporary affairs and popular culture. Nothing was out of bounds and speakers from all disciplines, all places, were given the space to express their most deeply held thoughts and beliefs.

Surprisingly, it was a festival that rarely drew the critics in the numbers it deserved, their heads more often turned by the big-budget literary lights of Hay-on-Wye and Cheltenham. *The Observer* newspaper was the exception, a handsome media partner for many years. But Bristol Ideas was no less for it and, besides, we didn't need external endorsement because we knew we had a good thing and audiences agreed. They turned out in their thousands and generated expansive returns lists for the most popular events.

I have a deep attachment to the festival and it became one of the great professional loves in my life, bonding with, and flowing through, the beautiful concert hall, St George's Bristol, that I led from 2005 to 2021. We didn't know it then, but this was a golden era in our history, a time before pandemics and austerity-induced budget cuts laid waste to so much of our cultural landscape. At St George's we had the confidence and the means to dream big, investing in our music programme and launching a succession of expansive, stand-out series that took on major themes: migration, revolution, nature and the environment. This was when we began to collaborate with the Festival of Ideas, augmenting these themes through joint programming. With nearly 600 seats, we were ideally placed to host the festival's bigger names and soon became the go-to venue for some of its most celebrated events. I shared the same excitement as the festival organisers, moving heaven and earth to secure the dates needed to fit in with often narrow and last-minute availability. The effort was repaid a thousand times over as St George's threw open its doors to household names across disciplines as varied as literature, politics, science, philosophy, journalism and drama.

I remember patient queues snaking across the stage at the end of events, audiences grasping their newly purchased books in the hope of a personal dedication on the front page; if they were lucky, a photograph too with a celebrity speaker like Michael Palin or ballerina Darcey Bussell. Over the years, the festival sent us poets and thinkers, agitators and sceptics, truth seekers and truth speakers. We encountered utopias and dystopias, people at the start of careers and those

who had reached great heights. It attracted speakers from across the world, so it was all the more remarkable that tickets were often free or modestly priced, but the principles of fairness and accessibility were ingrained from the start; all speakers, regardless of stature, were paid the same token fee. This was a vital aspect of a vision to democratise ideas, ensuring they could be heard and stated by all.

At home, my bookshelves displayed uncharacteristic purchases inspired by festival events, not least Carlo Rovelli's *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*. As someone who still feels shame at having failed two physics exams at school, it felt surreal to encounter one of the world's great theoretical physicists all these decades later and to finally, and briefly, glimpse the wonders of the poetically expressed truths he shared. The bookshelves soon groaned under the weight of the 130 books that arrived, neatly boxed, when I joined the judging panel of the inaugural Bristol Festival of Ideas Book Prize. This was a significant prize of £10,000 awarded to a title which presents 'new, important and challenging ideas which are engaging, accessible and rigorously argued'. With fellow judges Tim Dee (BBC Radio producer/writer), Judith Squires (deputy vice chancellor at University of Bristol) and Adrian Tinniswood (historian/author), I immersed myself in the seemingly impossible task of reducing 130 books down to a shortlist of six. I remain proud that we chose as our winner *The Spirit Level* by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, a book whose lessons on why equality in society is better for everyone remains highly relevant today.

I've been asked many times to name the speakers who have stood out for me. James Lovelock, still mentally and physically agile at 90 years old, articulating the most important environmental issue of our time. Historian Simon Schama, gracious and erudite, who shared his thoughts as generously with backstage staff as he did when he stepped on stage. Arundhati Roy, a modest figure who, through the might of her words on social injustice, soared above us all as she spoke out from the pulpit of Bristol Cathedral. Philosopher AC Grayling, who wryly requested that a torn cardboard box be used to conceal the painting of Christ overlooking the stage – not to ward off divine intervention but to avoid being photographed with a halo hovering above his own head that would be instantly lampooned by a publication like *Private Eye*. And Bernie Sanders, sweeping in, hot off the campaign trail for the American presidential election to deliver a rousing speech, not in a stadium but in a quiet residential street in a city all but anonymous to most Americans.

I remember the quiet reflections of unassuming individuals living and writing in our city. The greatly missed Helen Dunmore, an unofficial patron, who read from her novel *The Siege* as part of another outstanding initiative of Bristol Ideas, The Great Reading Adventure. BBC producer/writer Tim Dee whose observations of



Writer Salman Rushdie interviewed by Andrew Kelly in St George's Bristol in 2015. Defending freedom of expression was a key part of the work of Bristol Ideas. In 2023, Bristol Ideas ran one of the first events on Rushdie's novel *Victory City*. We talked about cities as part of our Festival of the Future City work, but also reflected on and supported Rushdie in his recovery after the murder attempt the year before. (Jon Craig)

the natural world are always so thoughtfully and elegantly expressed. Or Julian Baggini, whose ability to convey the essence of complex philosophies with humour and humility helped so many of us to grasp 'the meaning of it all' – and inspired me to appoint him as our philosopher in residence at St George's, a world first for a concert hall.

There have been the people, too, who, by daring to appear in the public domain, have underlined the potency of the written word. The life of Roberto Saviano, author of *Gomorrah*, has been under threat since the publication of his best-selling expose of the Camorra Mafia in Naples. A rare appearance at We The Curious necessitated an entourage of black-clad security guards who stood like sentinels around the stage, poised to counter any attacks. This brought a palpable sense of tension to the evening, only dissipated once Saviano was manoeuvred with military precision out via a back stairwell of the building and speeded away in a waiting car. Or Salman

Rushdie, whose appearance to publicise his testament to the power of love and humanity in chaotic times, *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-Eight Nights*, while still under a fatwa, required multiple police sweeps of St George's and nervous vigilance by every staff member from start to finish.

There were events too that broke free of the constraints of the hour-long format to become something altogether more affecting than we ever believed they might be. Upholding the environmental concerns of her new novel, *The Year of the Flood*, Margaret Atwood had travelled to Europe from Canada by ship and adopted a vegetarian diet throughout her book tour. Her commitments spurred us on to present something far more ambitious than just a Q&A and readings. Atwood had written and commissioned music for a special performance for the novel. Music to bring to life the hymns featured in the book was hastily adapted by local choral director Ali Orbaum and performed by a newly assembled chorus, together with a small troupe of actors under the theatre direction of Sheila Hannon. With just one afternoon of rehearsal, the stage of St George's became the setting for what felt to be a rapidly assembled modern-day Mystery Play – one that even featured a (swear) call out from the gallery by Andrew Kelly. It showed that wonders are possible when artistic imaginations are given the means and freedom to express themselves. Seeing it in rehearsal for the first time that afternoon Atwood commented that this is how she hoped it would be performed.

Ultimately though, I will never forget the borderline euphoria of an audience on catching its first glimpse of the civil rights activist, singer and screen idol Harry Belafonte. The day was hot, and excited crowds drawn from all quarters of the city had found their way to St George's, many for the first time. Harry Belafonte remains the only person I can remember in all my time at St George's who received a standing ovation before he'd uttered a single word. In the spontaneous rising to their feet of every last member of the audience as he entered the hall, it felt as if the entire city had turned out to bear him aloft to the stage and to make him its own. If there were keys to the city to bestow, they would surely have been his.

The sharing of a handful of memories can never convey the full extent of the reach, influence and impact of Bristol Ideas. Festival of Ideas burned brightly for nearly 20 years igniting an appetite for cultural and community events that will continue well beyond its own time. It has been the inspiration for spoken word events and creative programming right across Bristol, and awakened a love of knowledge and learning in both young and old, and in people from all backgrounds. For an all too brief period, so many of us were challenged and enabled to become more than we ever thought we might be. To my mind, that's an idea worth celebrating and an ideal to be held close as we contemplate an unknowable future. ■

Bristol's Festival of Economics: An Annual Forum for Public Debate in Times of Crisis

Romesh Vaitilingam

Bristol Ideas launched Festival of Economics in 2012. At the opening event, a *Guardian* journalist said on a panel that he had left London with the fear that he would be speaking to an empty room. He was delighted to see a full house of 400 people. Festival of Economics has grown even more since then and, in 2024, will enter a new phase when it becomes part of the Economics Observatory, based at the University of Bristol. Romesh Vaitilingam worked with Bristol Ideas for a decade on the festival. He reflects here on its success and what this means for economics.

‘Just one damn thing after another’ is an amusing portrayal of historical narrative. It also applies rather neatly to Britain’s past few decades of almost continuous economic disaster. Since the late 2000s, the country has lurched from the fall of Northern Rock and the global financial crisis through the self-inflicted economic pain of austerity and Brexit in the 2010s to the recent unavoidable hits to incomes and wellbeing from the Covid 19 pandemic, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing surge in food and energy prices.

All of this takes some explaining to British people, whose lives and livelihoods have been so affected. That’s a task to which the Bristol Festival of Economics has sought to make a local and national contribution over the past dozen years



One of the core aims of our annual Festival of Economics is to encourage young people to take up the subject. Here's a workshop held as part of the festival. (Ibolya Feher)

with an annual series of public events bringing together economic experts from universities, thinktanks, the private sector and the media with policy-makers, practitioners and West Country residents keen to understand what's going on.

The 12 editions of the festival since 2012 have covered an enormous range of topics including the economics of climate change, new technology, geopolitical tensions, food security and the ageing society. It's welcomed many of the economics profession's top thinkers, policy officials and media stars: including Nobel laureates Angus Deaton, Robert J Shiller and Jean Tirole, Bank of England policy-makers Swati Dhingra, Andy Haldane, Mervyn King and Huw Pill, and journalists Stephanie Flanders, Tim Harford and Linda Yueh. And speakers have spanned the generations: from the youngest panellist, school student and Bristol youth mayor Alice Towle, to octogenarian writer and feminist Katharine Whitehorn.

The annual gathering attracts large and highly engaged audiences, including big numbers of young people from local schools and universities. By making economics relevant to their futures, the Festival provides valuable support for initiatives to address the uncomfortable fact that, for many years in this country, economics students have been disproportionately male, white and privately educated. It also helps economic policymakers in their efforts to listen directly to the public's concerns about jobs, pay and the cost of living: not least in the Bank



One of many panels in the festival, *We're All Doomed (Again)* looked at what could go wrong in the global economy. From left to right the panellists are: Michelle Cini (University of Bristol), Swati Dhingra (now an external member of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England), Linda Yueh (writer and broadcaster), Jagjit Chadha (Director, National Institute of Economic and Social Research) and Diane Coyle (founder of the festival, director 2011-2023, and co-director Bennett Institute, Cambridge). The panel was introduced by James Durie of Business West, who have been one of the partners in Bristol Ideas since the start. (Jon Craig)

of England's citizens' panels that have opened the festival for the past few years.

Two people have underpinned the festival's success. One is economics scholar and commentator Diane Coyle, who on returning from a festival of economics in Trento, Italy, in the summer of 2012, asked on Twitter (now X) why no such civic event happened in Britain. The other is Bristol Ideas director Andrew Kelly, who picked up that challenge, replying: 'You programme it, and we'll organise it!' The rest, as they say, is history: a popular annual forum for promoting the public understanding of economics and debating issues of broad social concern.

Back then, it seemed laughable to think that there was a connection between the words 'festival' and 'economics'. Now, their combination has become a widely known and highly regarded fixture in the calendar for economists and the public: not as inexorably intertwined as 'economic' and 'crisis', but it's getting there. ■

Bristol Ideas: A Festival of Freedom

Marwa Al-Sabouni

Marwa Al-Sabouni is an outstanding Syrian writer and architect whose books have especially inspired the work of Festival of the Future City. She writes here about her two visits to Bristol: the first pre-Covid, the second in the more difficult years after the worst of the pandemic was over. The pandemic saw audiences fall, some speakers reluctant to travel, and the atmosphere was less positive. Though there were signs that things were beginning to improve, these were all factors that contributed to the decision to close Bristol Ideas. Given the past success of the Festival of the Future City – and the momentum beginning to be regained in 2023 – the festival was rescued and will be run by the Growing Together Alliance from 2025.

I visited Bristol for the first time in October 2017. Bristol Ideas invited me to speak at the Festival of the Future City about my first book, *The Battle for Home*. Although by that time I'd had the opportunity to travel to different places around Europe and Australia, to get a UK visa for a Syrian citizen who is still living in Syria was (and probably still is) extremely difficult. Nonetheless, Bristol Ideas persisted and eventually my visa was granted against all the odds. I saw that as a genuine desire to gather different voices from different places in order to participate in the discourse of city building.

Indeed, the festival was uniquely diverse, in the true meaning of the word. The festival went beyond diversity in appearances and exhibited a wide spectrum of intellectual contributions: liberal and conservative, technical and creative, general and specific. This is a rare sight in the western cultural scene, where cultural institutions usually follow the general political mood of their city or their funders. True intellectual freedom is the way to reach answers to the problems with which our cities and communities around the world wrestle. This freedom is only achieved



Marwa Al-Sabouni and Marvin Rees, Mayor of Bristol, at Festival of the Future City in 2017. (Jon Craig)



Marwa Al-Sabouni debates future architecture and future cities with, left-to-right, former mayor of Curitiba Jaime Lerner, Ben Derbyshire (then president, RIBA) and Barra Mac Ruairi (YTL). Chaired by Pam Alexander. Festival of the Future City 2017. (Jon Craig)

through such a comprehensive invite as the one I experienced with Bristol Ideas, where no single lens is offered to look at the questions on the table.

In my experience, when it comes to addressing the question of city building, the issue is usually tackled through the premise of architecture and planning. We rarely see a cultural endeavour like Bristol Ideas dedicated to deal with the matter from 360 degrees; where politicians, economists, philosophers, poets, writers and journalists are invited to the table along with architects and city specialists. This not

only provides the best chance for addressing the subject matter comprehensively, but also lends itself to the general open invite to the people of Bristol who are an equally important part of the success of the festival. When an audience is introduced to as many voices as those described above, they will inevitably lead an even wider conversation and reach better results.

I loved Bristol when I visited for the first time in 2017. By being less pretentious than London, and more welcoming in its human-scale buildings and topology-tracing streets, it reminded me of my own city, Homs, where simplicity didn't necessarily mean failure. Where people were as nice and welcoming as their streets.

Visiting in 2023 had a different feeling: Bristol Ideas had announced it was closing, and the heaviness of this news was reflected in the way the festival carried itself, no longer buzzing with life as it was the last time I took part. The audience seemed less engaged, the guests were less diverse, and the burden of running the sessions fell on the shoulders of Andrew Kelly, the man behind it all. Bristol as a whole is changing as well. It seems to be blindly marching towards stardom for which I fear it will be sacrificing its lovely soul. My hope is that the immense work achieved throughout the years with Bristol Ideas will in some way save Bristol even if the festival can't be salvaged. ■

Andrew Kelly and the Festival of Ideas

George Ferguson

Bristol Ideas worked with architect – and Bristol’s first elected mayor – George Ferguson from the start, first on the Harbourside projects, then European Green Capital and more recently on Festival of Ideas and Festival of the Future City. Bristol Ideas also launched the annual mayor’s State of the City address and discussion with Ferguson which continued to 2024.

I have always said that Bristol is defined more by the individuals who take initiatives than by our formal governance. Andrew Kelly is one of those key individuals who turned his ever-expanding mind into an institution with a reach far beyond the city: the all-encompassing Festival of Ideas.

Where do I begin? I first encountered Andrew in the 1990s, when I was involved in planning proposals for our abandoned inner-city docks area, now known as Harbourside. Having saved it from proposals in the early 1970s to cover it in a concrete spaghetti of urban highways and bland buildings, we envisaged it as a cultural revolution for the city, putting arts, science and the environment at the heart of this urban regeneration. I remember Andrew introducing us to the idea of the digital revolution that was going to change all our lives. Some of the ideas that we shared then materialised into great things, aided by a massive grant from the Lottery-funded Millennium Commission. Others, including the Centre for Performing Arts, withered on the vine, but the overall transformation was a testament to the power of ideas and has undoubtedly contributed to a better, more connected Bristol.

The Kelly ideas factory kept churning with our bid to become UK Capital of Culture. While the crown went to Liverpool, a worthy winner, the bid process made us look beyond the more obvious big attractions to the many smaller initiatives across the city that make us what we are. It also proved to be a useful learning curve



George Ferguson with Sir Peter Bazalgette (then chair, Arts Council England), preparing for their Festival of the Future City session, 2015. (Jon Craig)

for the development of the Green Capital Partnership and what was to become our triumphal bid to become European Green Capital 2015. Bristol Festival of Ideas became a key component of our year as green capital, with hundreds of talks and discussions by authors and others on everything from local food to liveable cities and global climate. Big names flocked to Bristol to share their ideas and experiences, feeding into my time as mayor and well beyond.

Keen to learn from other cities, the Festival of the Future City helped inform my mayoral programme. The annual State of the City mayoral address at its heart, in partnership with the University of Bristol, enabled me to highlight the lessons and achievements of the previous year and set the scene for the next. This continued throughout the 12 years of Bristol's dalliance with an elected mayor, becoming an annual institution.

It is a sad fact of life that all good things come to an end, and in this case a remarkable initiative that lasted all of 30 years because of the energy and creativity of its conductor who corralled the prime movers in this city from the public, private, cultural and academic sectors to work together to produce something special. The Festival of Ideas may not have noticeably penetrated all parts of Bristol, but it has undoubtedly had a significant influence on public life and has played an important part in Bristol's reputation across the world. ■

Some Personal Reflections on Bristol Ideas

Barry Taylor

Bristol City Council was a member of Bristol Ideas from the start. The University of Bristol joined as a supporter in 2010. Barry Taylor, who led on corporate communications for them both over a total of 24 years, connected the two organisations and our work. Partnerships such as Bristol Ideas need officers like Taylor for ongoing advice, ideas and, frankly, smoothing the way. He writes about his work with us [here](#).

I was two hours into my 14-year stint at Bristol City Council when a senior politician popped into my office to introduce himself. After the usual pleasantries, he announced with mystifying relish that Bristol was ‘the city where good ideas come to die’.

That was in 1986. Seven years later, when Andrew Kelly took the reins of the organisation that would become Bristol Ideas, a different cynic, this time a property developer, welcomed him with exactly the same words.

Thankfully, this old cliché about Bristol was on its last legs by the time Andrew arrived. A set of bold new ideas had gained traction. Perhaps chief among them was this: in order to reverse the decline that had set in during the 1980s and early 1990s, council and business leaders had to overcome their mutual suspicion, rise to Bristol’s big challenges together and work far more closely with other agencies and the community at large.

John Savage was the principal architect and advocate of this partnership approach. One of its early successes was the creation of Bristol Ideas: heady stuff for someone like me who had come to Bristol after working for 10 years on cultural events, projects and venues. Bristol Ideas opened up three enticing vistas: new



Naomi Klein spoke at the festival in 2017 for the second time. (Jon Craig)

activities for me to enjoy after a hard day's spin-doctoring; the opportunity to present the city council as a key player in a novel venture that could benefit the whole of Bristol; and the emergence of a more creative, outward-looking and high-profile city.

It is a tribute to Andrew's drive and tenacity that none of these vistas proved illusory. If not for Bristol Ideas, I probably wouldn't have experienced riveting talks by the likes of Steven Pinker, Naomi Klein and John Boorman, and I definitely wouldn't have performed (for 90 seconds, badly) on Watershed's stage with an ex-Python; it would have been even harder to dissuade the *Daily Mail* from depicting the council leadership as a cabal of introspective, anti-progress lefties; and Bristol would have been a less open-minded, exhilarating and admired place.

When I moved from the bottom of Park Street (City Hall) to the top (the University of Bristol), Andrew and his miniscule team had been operating for seven years and was widely respected. The four-year process of bidding to become European Capital of Culture was under way and would see hundreds of organisations and thousands of individuals coalesce around a single vision. The bid's ultimate failure was depressing but almost beside the point.

I maintained a strong working relationship with Andrew in my new job. Apart from being a personal pleasure, it continued to bring professional benefits. My

responsibilities at the university included PR, events and public engagement, and a link with Bristol Ideas was handy for all three.

For instance, I was project director of the university's year-long centenary celebrations in 2009. Imagine what a boon it was to have Andrew's expert advice and practical support on everything from organising 19 big-name public lectures to producing a heavily illustrated, 300-page hardback with 70 eminent contributors.

I nominated John Savage for an honorary degree in 2005 and Andrew Kelly for one in 2008. It was a way for the University of Bristol to acknowledge their achievements and celebrate the city's evolution as a place where people are adept at finding common ground and making headway through joint action; where good ideas are welcomed in, or generated afresh through vigorous discussion; and where such ideas don't die but fly. ■

Personal Reflections on Bristol Festival of Ideas from Two Attendees

Andrew Jester and Natalie Jester

Andrew Jester and Natalie Jester have been long-term attendees at Bristol Ideas events. As with many members of our audience, it's not been a passive relationship. We've enjoyed and benefitted from the many discussions with Andrew and Natalie about the ideas presented and argued, and we sought their suggestions for new programmes of work both formally on the advisory group and informally at events and over drinks and lunch. They write here about their experiences, what they have learned and the discussions they have held afterwards.

Andrew Jester

At the time of writing, I'm still in a state of disbelief after hearing that Bristol Ideas will close this year. I probably wouldn't have believed it had the news not come from such an impeccable source as Andrew Kelly himself. I've been attending its events for quite some time now and am proud that they have been held in my home city of Bristol. Its Festival of Ideas has become a cultural gem renowned not only in Bristol but also in the UK and further afield. The speakers and diversity of subjects, far too numerous to mention, are second to none and speak volumes for its pull.

With its remit to 'stimulate minds and passions', Bristol Ideas certainly ticked those boxes for me and became one of my favourite things to do in the city, given my interests in the wider world.

To say there were standout events would do an injustice to each speaker I've heard. One of the most memorable events was seeing Harry Belafonte. It was like listening to living history: he spoke about his incredible life, including his involvement in the US civil rights movement. Another was seeing former Prime Minister Gordon Brown: his good sense of humour was quite a revelation. I was especially proud to see my daughter, Natalie Jester, host a debate presciently named 'War with Russia', with General Sir Richard Shirreff as the main speaker.

More broadly, the festival has spoken to my interests in politics and philosophy. It was always good to see Naomi Klein. She got a good Bristolian welcome in 2017 with 'Bristol Welcomes Naomi Klein' painted in big letters alongside the M32, which she saw and appreciated. But it was only by chance Naomi saw it: she was meant to arrive via Temple Meads train station but came in via Parkway instead. I always enjoyed seeing Bristol-based philosopher and journalist Julian Baggini, who chaired some fascinating discussions. I even managed to get a laugh out of Simon Schama at St George's Bristol: we were discussing US president Bill Clinton at the end of the book signing and I mentioned the 'Arkansas handshake'.

Seeing Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders was quite a memorable experience: he certainly knew his brief and is a remarkable politician and speaker.

Recently, at the 2023 Festival of the Future City, I saw the deeply harrowing film *20 Days in Mariupol*, a documentary directed by Mstyslav Chernov with the team from *Frontline* and the Associated Press about the 20 days Chernov spent in Mariupol with his colleagues after Russia invaded. It showed in graphic detail the brutalities and realities of war and is as strong an anti-war film as I've seen, perhaps alongside the Syrian film *For Sama* about the bombing of Homs, shown a few years before as part of Bristol Ideas.

I'm going to deeply miss the Festival of Ideas and all the other Bristol Ideas activities but I'm glad to say that it has played an important part of my life, stimulating and stretching my mind. It got me thinking and it has been an inspirational experience. It was brilliantly organised by a great team and my thoughts go out to them for the future.

Natalie Jester

I've been attending Festival of Ideas events for as long as I can remember. I became especially interested in the programme when I worked as front of house staff at Watershed, where I would get to see what was coming up and sometimes meet the speakers. At the time I was a Masters, and later PhD student, at the University of Bristol, and I was eventually approached to sit on the Festival of Ideas advisory board as a student voice, attending for about four years. One thing that always

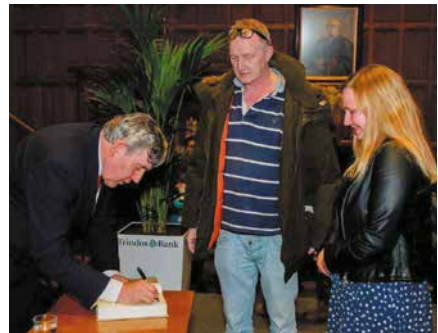


One of the historic moments in the work of Bristol Ideas was the visit of Bernie Sanders. Audience members greeted him rapturously as he addressed the packed audience live and online. (Jon Craig)

struck me about this was that every member of the Festival of Ideas team was incredibly keen for young people to engage, offering free tickets to many events.

My specialism is international relations and I have always felt so lucky to have Festival of Ideas bring so many amazing speakers to my doorstep. Highlights for me have included seeing Gordon Brown, Naomi Klein, Tony Benn, Angela Saini and Margaret Atwood. I was also able to chair an event with General Sir Richard Shirreff, the former NATO Deputy Supreme Commander for Europe, which was attended by more than 200 people. This was my first big introduction to public speaking, a skill I have used regularly since then in my role as a lecturer at the University of Gloucestershire. The festival has provided a space for ordinary people to come together and hear about politics and international relations in a way that is simply not provided by any other organisation or venue. At a time when decision makers and decision-making structures feel further away than ever, this is a particularly bitter loss.

I would also send event links to my dad and, at some point, we started attending regularly together. For me, Festival of Ideas has been something that I have shared with him. We are similar in our interests, especially politics and global affairs, and when I was able to get only one ticket to see US presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders speak, I gave it to him (you're welcome, Dad). It has been wonderful attending a whole variety of events with him, and



Andrew Jester and Natalie Jester with Gordon Brown in 2017.

Festival of Ideas has definitely brought us closer. If I'm completely honest, it will be spending this time with my dad that I will miss the most when the festival is no longer running.

More broadly, Festival of Ideas has never shied away from getting us to think about difficult topics like war and violence. There is something important about 'bearing witness' in this space. I would probably say that, of the two of us, my dad is the more optimistic one. After Festival of Ideas events, we would always have a bit of a debrief and see what the other thought. Even though the world can feel like a bleak place, both my dad and I have always appreciated the sense of hope that, at least most of the time, these events would leave us with. ■

A Lasting Impression: What Bristol Ideas Means to Me

Vicky Washington

Vicky Washington worked for Bristol Ideas for three years. Bristol Ideas always had a small team – during Washington's time there were three employees and there have never been more than five – as the aim was to work with others, to support organisations and creative people in their work, and to provide funding raised to them. Washington writes here about what working for Bristol Ideas meant for her.

I first encountered Bristol Ideas back in 2006 through the Festival of Ideas, a year-round programme of discussion and debate staged in venues across the city. It was shortly after this, in 2007, that I began working with the partnership as cultural project coordinator, having been drawn to the initiative by the innovative projects it was running at that time.

There was the Great Reading Adventure, a mass reading initiative promoting literacy across the city to schools, libraries and the general public; and, in 2010, a vibrant programme of cultural activity and exhibition for BAC100, celebrating the centenary of the Bristol Aeroplane Company and 100 years of aviation in the West of England. The Festival of Ideas was also going from strength to strength, with many events reaching capacity and question and answer sessions providing a real platform for meaningful exchanges around current issues.

At this point, early on in my career, it was awe-inspiring to deliver events with luminaries such as Tony Benn, Margaret Atwood and David Attenborough, and many



One of the many projects Vicky Washington worked on was the annual Great Reading Adventure. The 2006 Great Reading Adventure was Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*. This was part of Brunel200, our year-long programme celebrating the life and work of Isambard Kingdom Brunel in the bicentenary year of his birth. We wanted a book that linked to Brunel themes of travel and optimism. Our partners Aardman prepared this special image for us. We did get a complaint that the Union flag was upside down, but pointed out that this was typical of Wallace's work. (© & TM Aardman/Wallace & Gromit Ltd. All Rights Reserved.)

fond memories stand out – from chasing a taxi across Harbourside with Wayne Hemingway, to finding the perfect broom for Vic Reeves to use as a pointing stick.

In those early days, with limited resources and a core staff of just three, it is incredible to think how the partnership galvanised organisations and individuals across the city, bringing people together from all walks of life and across generations to celebrate and explore the arts, sciences, ideas, heritage and culture. Bristol Ideas has long been a cornerstone of the city's cultural landscape, and its contribution to the creative and economic growth of the region should not be underestimated.

Having moved away from Bristol in 2010, it is remarkable how connected I still feel to the projects and people I was involved with through Bristol Ideas at that time. The partnership's unique spirit of innovation, its dynamism and its unfaltering ambition have certainly made a lasting impression, and the creative and collaborative skills I was able to develop here have undoubtedly helped to shape my career in arts marketing for the cultural sector during the past 15 years. ■

My Reflections on Bristol Ideas

Kate Sim Read

Kate Sim Read joined Bristol Ideas in 2023 as an intern and then took up employment with the company. She had previously attended Bristol Ideas events and writes here about what this has meant to her as both an audience member and as a member of staff.

There's something about being part of an audience that I've always loved. About sitting in a darkened room, phones down for a moment, all focussed on the same stage, personal conversations petering out to make space for the collective conversation that we've come to engage with. And I love the moment after the lights come up again, when the spell of concentration is broken and you turn to friends, colleagues or the stranger next to you and ask, 'What did you think?'

At the Bristol Ideas events I've attended during my time working here, I've felt collective fascination, a collective sense of broadening understanding, and sometimes even collective rage. A lot of the talks at the Festival of Ideas, and on future cities and economics deal with difficult subjects. I have learned about the pulverising of reproductive rights as fascist groups press their influence into mainstream society and law. I also have learned about food poverty, about how many children do not have enough to eat, about people choosing less nutritious food from food banks because it often takes less electricity and money to cook. I have heard people talk about feeling othered because of their race or sexuality or so many other things.

While the speakers on the Bristol Ideas panels speak of reasons for hope and take a solutions-based approach, there is still sometimes an underlying feeling of bleakness about what they explore. They often discuss issues that don't occupy much space in mainstream media, or that become sensationalised but not holistically explored. Yet by setting up discussions about problems in our society,



Being part of the audience was a special time in Festival of Ideas. Our audience at Wills Memorial Building applauds speakers at the start of Festival of the Future City 2019. (Evan Dawson)

and then looking at where we can find solutions, we take important, if small, steps in building a kinder world. This space to learn as a group, to question and to form opinions is foundational in effecting positive change, and I often leave a talk feeling inspired both by the speakers and my fellow audience members.

I'm very interested in community and collectivity. After many Bristol Ideas events, I've had fascinating conversations with strangers. You quickly learn about someone when you have conversations prompted by the complex subject matter of many of the talks. To me, it's so much more fun and fulfilling to discuss how we address the housing crisis than to talk about the Bristol weather. It's such a launch point for stories: I've spoken about the dire state of the house I rent when I moved in, where we found a dead pet gecko on top of the washing machine. And I've listened to people share stories from countries they grew up in, about stories from their grandparents and the food they ate. I have found that the context of being part of an audience at Bristol Ideas events opens space for these exchanges with strangers that we would normally save for friends.

I deeply appreciate the space that Bristol Ideas has created for these conversations, both between the speakers on stage and between everyone else afterward. I hope that even though Bristol Ideas will cease to exist, there will still always be these precious pockets of community around Bristol that allow this way of learning about our city, each other and, therefore, ourselves. ■

Bristol 2014 – The City and the First World War

Clive Burlton

One of the aims of Bristol Ideas is that projects should continue after our work on them has ended. A good example of this is the 2014 programme to mark the centenary of the start of the First World War and what followed. Clive Burlton worked on Bristol 2014 and writes about this [here](#).

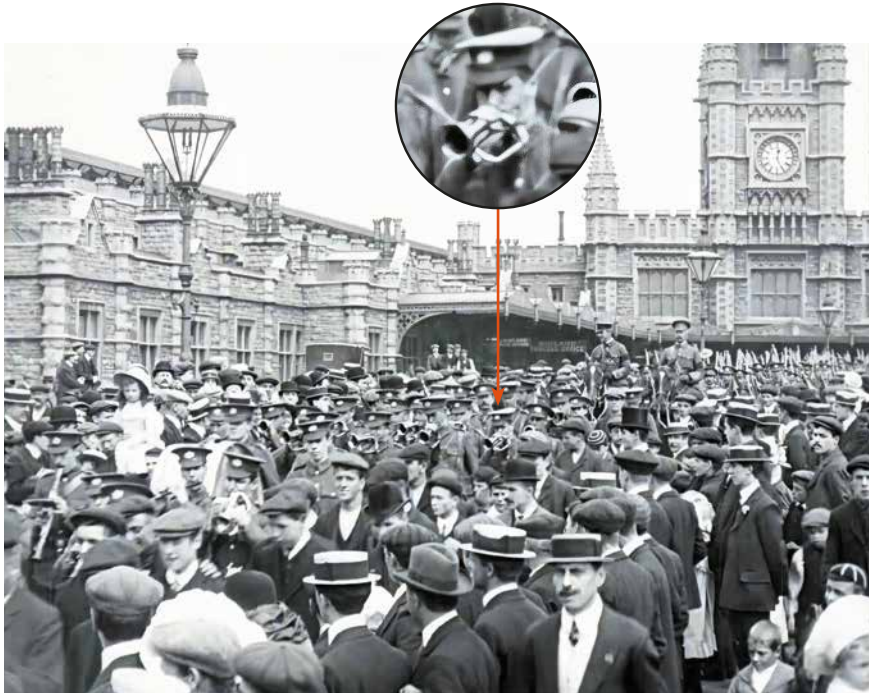
I wrote three of the essays in the book for the 2014 Great Reading Adventure – *Bristol and The First World War* – and was one of those privileged to contribute to the broader programme of Bristol 2014. The experience was immensely fulfilling and has had a lasting impact.

I was already familiar with the effect the First World War had on Bristol families. Both my grandfathers fought with local units and were injured in the war. My maternal grandmother served in the local Land Army, and my wife's grandfather, George Pine, and his three brothers all fought.

Two of these relatives never returned to their Bristol families and left behind widows and children. George wrote about his life experiences in a memoir shortly before he died in 1972. I reproduced his words and added my own home front and western front context in the book *Trenches to Trams – The Life of a Bristol Tommy* published by Tangent Books in 2011.

Building on this knowledge, and already a volunteer at Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives, I was asked by those curating the Moved by Conflict exhibition at M Shed – part of Bristol 2014 – to delve into the collections at the reference library and Bristol Archives, for stories, objects and imagery for use in the exhibition.

A spin-off involved me acting as a conduit, providing or highlighting information and resources for use by other researchers involved in creating content



Bristol Territorial soldiers of the Gloucestershire Regiment, returning hastily from their Minehead camp and about to be mobilised. George Pine can be seen marching down the incline playing his bugle. The officer on horseback on the right, is Col H.C. Woodcock who commanded the 6th Gloucesters up to the start of the war. Woodcock was also President of the Society of Bristolians, he gave his name to both the football and swimming shields across the city and was a leading advocate of the Bristol-Béthune adoption. (Clive Burlton)

for the Bristol 2014 programme and associated initiatives across the city. This was really rewarding; facilitating the distribution of stories, documents and photos to everyone involved, including academics researching for local broadcast news organisations.

There were plenty of highlights but two in particular stand out. First, while searching for the existence of any Bristol-related audio and film footage from the period, I discovered a reel of film in a rusty tin can held by the British Film Institute at Southbank. It hadn't seen the light of day for 100 years. An intriguing and somewhat oblique catalogue reference to 'returning Bristol soldiers' led to the film's restoration and digitisation.

On viewing, it revealed beautifully shot footage at Temple Meads Station on 3 August 1914, showing Bristol Territorial soldiers of the Gloucestershire Regiment, returning hastily from their Minehead camp and about to be mobilised for the ensuing conflict. Among them, marching down the incline and proudly playing his bugle, was none other than George Pine.



Moved by Conflict exhibition at M Shed, part of Bristol 2014. (Bristol City Council)

This was an amazing discovery for the family. Perhaps of more profound interest, was the imagery it conveyed and what else was happening in Bristol on that fateful Bank Holiday Monday; the day before Britain declared war on Germany.

Across town, the Bristol International Exhibition – part trade fair, part theme park – was in full swing at the Cumberland Basin. Billed to show off the ‘achievements of Britain’s Empire and Dominions’, revellers loved it, despite it costing £100,000 (£10 million at 2024 prices) to stage.

At Temple Meads, Bristolians were also in bank holiday mood, wearing their best clobber, basking in the August sunshine, watching their friends and loved ones marching down the station incline, heading for battalion headquarters and their fateful destiny. Fun, pride and trepidation were all on show that afternoon.

The film was shown as part of the Moved by Conflict exhibition at M Shed. The exhibition itself received much critical acclaim, including this observation from Dr Dominiek Dendooven, historian, curator and writer from In Flanders Fields Museum, in Ypres, Belgium: ‘I’ve seen several exhibitions on the centenary so far and the one at Bristol is by far the best, both to what concerns design (some bright ideas) as to what concerns balanced views. To include war profiteering, conscientious objection and the colonial world in a local exhibition is – unfortunately –



The formal opening ceremony 24 March 1925 attended by civic leaders and dignitaries from Bristol and Béthune for the housing project supported by the people of Bristol. Col H.C. Woodcock – seen above riding his horse in August 1914 – is here with other dignitaries. (Bristol Archives Ref No: 17563/1/75) The second picture shows a group from Bristol visiting the original site of the houses in October 2023. Clive Burlton is front, right-hand side. (Western Front Footsteps Tour)

«du jamais vu» in the UK.’

The second research highlight was when I found out that Bristol had ‘adopted’ the French town of Béthune under an initiative by the British League of Help, a charitable organisation formed in 1920 to provide aid to devastated communities in northern France.

Documents, plans and photographs uncovered at Bristol Archives, revealed

that Bristol was one of 80 British cities and towns that ‘adopted’ nearly 100 French communities. Bristol decided to fund the cost of providing homes for some of the widows and families of French soldiers killed in the war and resident in Béthune. Although fundraising was slow, by 1924, £5,800 (£555,000 at 2024 prices) had been raised and Bristol architect WH Watkins was commissioned to draw up plans for 16 houses and maisonettes.

Built by the French contractors Hoebeke & Flitz, the homes were completed in 1925. Families moved in and, on 24 March 1925, a formal opening ceremony took place, attended by civic leaders and dignitaries from Bristol and Béthune. Photographers were on hand to record the historic event. In the centre block of houses was a stone panel. Below Bristol’s coat of arms were the words: ‘Given by the citizens of Bristol, England, to the town of Béthune, in memory of true comradeship during the Great War, 1914-1918. Erected 1925.’

Sadly, and surprisingly, in 1967 the Maire de Béthune wrote to his opposite number in Bristol seeking permission to demolish the houses and to move the residents to another municipal location that would forever be known as Cité de Bristol. Subsequent research and a site visit revealed the Maire was true to his word. On the other side of town, and where the 16 homes once stood, is now a car park. All that remains is the stone panel, fixed to a wall, on a grass verge, among the parking places.

Work on city-wide projects marking the centenary of the First World War didn’t stop with the Bristol 2014 programme. The network of 30 plus individuals and organisations drawn together for the Bristol 2014 programme was inspired to continue their collaboration for a further three years under the banner of the Bristol Great War Network.

Led by Naomi Miller, then at Bristol Cathedral and more recently at Bristol Ideas, the network provided the catalyst for more related projects including:

- Three touring exhibitions – ‘Bristol Women at War’, which showed how Bristol women contributed to the war effort and kept families going while husbands, brothers and sons were away on the front line; ‘Parcels of Comfort’, an exhibition of textiles and other media, showing the importance of sending parcels to loved ones during the war; and ‘No News of Fred’, an exhibition tracing the final days and hours of a shoemaker’s son from Easton who died at the Somme.
- ‘At the Going Down of the Sun’ – inspired by Laurence Binyon’s poem, an atmospheric exhibition of photographs of war graves and memorials, taken at night in Bristol cemeteries.

- ‘Returning to Fight’ – a UWE project about expat Bristolians who fought with Dominion Forces.
- Film screenings put on by the Remembering the Real World War One group.
- Several new publications including *Bravo Bristol*, mostly about the city on the home front; *We Have Our Lives*, the stories of 52 men from the Diocese of Bristol who fought and died during the First World War – one man for each month of the war; *Bristol’s Lost City*, about the Bristol International Exhibition and how the site was converted into a barracks for volunteer soldiers; and *Bristol’s Australian Pioneer*, about Robert Bush and his wife who converted their house into a 100-bed war hospital at Bishop’s Knoll.
- Publications and research into the names on memorials across Bristol.
- ‘Refusing to Kill’ – booklet and exhibition by Bristol Radical History Group about the 580 local men who refused to fight.
- Refurbishment and re-installation of memorials in Bristol churches.
- ‘A Guide to Researching Your Bristolian Ancestors in the First World War’ – a booklet written by Eugene Byrne, assisted by the Bristol & Avon Family History Society
- ‘Leaving the Line. Images & Words of War & Wondering’ – a series of poems written by Tania Hershman and Jeremy Banning

There were many more projects, and I am still involved in marking this period in Bristol’s history with local and international history tours and giving lectures to community, history and school groups across the city.

The environment created by the Bristol 2014 programme was fundamental to the continuation of work associated with the centenary of the First World War in Bristol. The resources produced for present and future generations, and the enduring connections and collaborations, are a testament to the success of the programme and the legacy it has created. ■

Changing Bristol and Celebrating Homes for Heroes: 30 Years with Bristol Ideas

Paul Smith

As a councillor and cabinet member (1988-1999 and 2016-2020), Paul Smith played a central role in many projects led by Bristol Ideas. He was the inspiration for 2019's Homes for Heroes 100 project but contributed much more with ideas, writing and fundraising. His involvement with Bristol Ideas goes back to the early days of The Harbourside Centre project and what is now We The Curious.

My first direct involvement with Bristol Ideas was in connection with a project which would change the city fundamentally. Until this point – adorning many postcards, pictures and promotional materials, as well as appearing whenever a film is made about the city – the classic image of Bristol had always been Brunel's Clifton Suspension Bridge, opened in 1864. I felt that it was time for a new structure in the centre of city, one which would herald a new millennium and act as a new culture hub for the city.

As the chair of the council's land and property committee at the time, I was working with the Bristol Ideas Bristol 2000 project to secure the sites for two potential venues: the relocation of the exploratory hands-on science centre and a centre for performing arts (not to mention a new underground car park which would partly fund the two new destinations). I was excited by the new science centre especially as I was a lapsed physicist. In my land role, and later as the chair



Top: Mary Milton (local project leader) and Paul Smith in Sea Mills at the launch event for Homes for Heroes 100 with a special cake made for the occasion. Bottom Left: Vanessa Kisuule reads her poem for Homes for Heroes 100 in Sea Mills. Bottom Right: A specially inscribed spade was given to Bristol City Council to mark the council housing project at Ashton Rise as part of the launch of Homes for Heroes 100. It is accompanied by a copy of John Boughton's book *Municipal Dreams*. Boughton's research underpinned much of our work in 2019. (Evan Dawson)

of the leisure services committee, which included the cultural brief, I found myself as vice chair of the Centre for the Performing Arts, shortened to the CPA and also called The Harbourside Centre.

The partnership seeking to develop this project was driven by Andrew Kelly, newly appointed to head up the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership. He was hidden away in a rather grotty office, Colston House, alongside the old Colston Hall, long since demolished. Andrew brought huge energy to creating a broad-based

partnership. The organisation later had its own employed director, but it was Andrew who held the early partnership and the vision together, sometimes having to deal with the fractious relationships between some of those involved. Soon a cheque from Arts Council England for £4.3m (famously delivered by helicopter) arrived and the resources were there to develop the centre and a programme of events across the city. It was clear to me that it was Andrew who ensured the project from the start was focussed not just on the building but also on outreach and bringing the concept to communities, including mine in Hartcliffe, across the city.



Sea Mills telephone box was turned into a museum for Homes for Heroes 100. James Steele (pictured here) provided the illustration. (Evan Dawson)

The building itself was a stunner, designed by the German architects Behnisch & Behnisch. It was quickly described as ‘the exploding greenhouse’ and considered to be Bristol’s equivalent of the Sydney Opera House. Unfortunately, parochial voices in Bristol’s architecture community sought to undermine a building which wasn’t commissioned from one of their number.

More devastating was the decision by Arts Council England in June 1998 to ditch the project. Its budget was cut by the new Labour government and an early version of levelling up saw the money left granted to the Baltic Mill Gallery in Gateshead instead of Bristol. This was a huge setback for Bristol, a massive opportunity lost: an opportunity created by the energy and vision of the partnership. Although the new science centre was constructed, as was the massively complex and expensive car park, the loss of The Harbourside Centre was the tipping point which led me to announce my resignation from the council.

Many years later, as Britain and Europe marked a range of centenaries capturing the moments and horrors of the First World War in 2014, my mind was drifting to the rebuilding of Britain once the war was over. The nation was promised a ‘country fit for heroes’. Foremost in this ambition was housing and the Housing and Town Planning Act 1919, later called the Addison Act after the minister who steered it through Parliament.

I had returned to the council in 2016 and was cabinet member for housing. I was keen that Bristol had a celebration of this anniversary. I saw many council tenants as modern-day heroes who were often stigmatised by the local media. The important role that council housing played in shaping the city was another driver. I knew that the council's housing department did not have the skills or capacity to stage such a commemoration. It was obvious who did: Bristol Ideas.

I pitched the proposal for what became Homes for Heroes 100 and was met with overwhelming enthusiasm. A plan was quickly formed to take the project forward. Within days we were in Exeter sounding out the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The Bristol Ideas team assembled a multi-agency steering group which included council housing officers, librarians, academics, historians and community activists. A programme of events was pulled together and funding was secured.

Bristol Ideas then took on the coordination of the programme. It became evident that Bristol had the most significant celebration planned in the UK, so we started contacting other cities and national bodies, including the Chartered Institute of Housing, the Association of Retained Council Housing and the National Housing Federation, as well as *Inside Housing* magazine. Some activities were initiated in the areas we contacted but nowhere was able to mobilise the resources and coordination which was available to us through Bristol Ideas and its team.

The programme we produced for Homes for Heroes 100 was eclectic and unique, and included walking tours, a publication of reflections of growing up in council housing, an attempt (sadly unsuccessful) to get Bristol's 'Addison Oak' in Sea Mills elected as Britain's Tree of the Year, and community-based history events, from intergenerational coffee and cake discussions to a series of talks.

As well as providing fundraising, promotional and organisational support, Bristol Ideas was able to draw on its experience of other projects and contribute new ideas. One of its previous successful initiatives was the publication of a free graphic history of Bristol. Bristol Ideas suggested a similar project: creating a graphic magazine which would contain a cartoon family's story through the years and their life in council housing alongside facts about Bristol's housing story. It was to be provided free to all the children in the schools in the estates which were built under the Addison Act, and copies were distributed to all of Bristol's libraries. Fifty thousand copies of the comic were produced. Other cities produced more worthy material but only Bristol Ideas had the vision to develop something which was instantly accessible to people of all ages.

All the projects, events and publications were curated and promoted on the Bristol Ideas website, where they will remain as an ongoing legacy after the organisation has faded away. ■

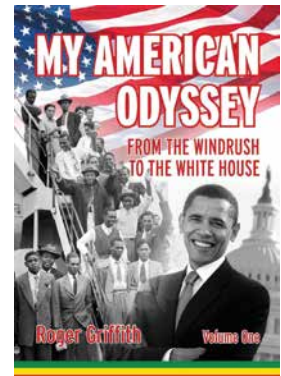
My Work with Bristol Ideas

Roger Griffith

Roger Griffith MBE – writer, social activist, consultant and CEO of Creative Connex CIC – was involved with many Bristol Ideas projects. We also supported him in his writing work. Here, Griffith reflects on some of these projects and the work he did with Festival of Ideas to get into parts of Bristol which may have been missed.

Picture the scene. A packed auditorium in one of my favourite venues, Bristol Watershed, filled with family, friends and well-wishers. Your name joins the pantheon of writers, thinkers and artists you admire, and you are introduced by a genial host. As a debut author you dream about such moments after years of honing your work in the midnight hours. Yet this dream did come true with the launch of my debut non-fiction book, *My American Odyssey: From the Windrush to the White House*, in 2015. Andrew Kelly interviewed me, and we presented film clips that complemented my writing about growing up Black and British and travelling through the Deep South of America. All this came after witnessing the inauguration of President Obama.

Throughout their years of giving wonderful moments to thousands, I have watched, listened to and met my heroes such as the journalist Gary Younge. His book *No Place Like Home* inspired my travels and writing. Meeting international artists in person, such as the writer Margo Jefferson, was also inspiring. I attended Bristol Ideas courses for working-class writers which helped my development, and the



Cover of Roger Griffith's book *My American Odyssey* which Bristol Ideas launched in 2015.



Roger Griffith asking a question at Festival of the Future City 2015. (Jon Craig)

opportunity to network with new people and old friends was always a bonus.

As the former lead for Ujima Radio and member of the Come The Revolution film collective, we collaborated with Bristol Ideas on several projects to engage under-represented communities. This included giving out 1,000 free copies of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* to new readers. We also partnered on a live simulcast with US politician Bernie Sanders, interviewed on stage by two Ujima Black and Green ambassadors – a programme which aimed to celebrate and promote diverse leadership and community action on environmental issues in the city. In 2023, we partnered on initiatives to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Bristol bus boycott and memorialising James Baldwin’s life and career.

Over the years, thanks to the platform I was given, my writing improved so much that parts of my 2019 Bristol Ideas essay about growing up on a Bristol council housing estate were published in *The Observer*. In 2021 I contributed to the Bristol Ideas book *Opening Up The Magic Box* celebrating 100 years of cinema about how film has contributed to my life and activism.

I will be forever grateful for the opportunities, memories and moments the fantastic Bristol Ideas team have provided and the partnerships we’ve created. You will be missed! ■

Roger Griffith's essay extract which appeared in *The Observer*:

After her divorce, my mother chose to move to Bristol. We lived in one room in a house of multiple occupation in Easton for more than a year in 1975-6 and shared a bed that was no more than a big piece of foam on the floor.

We were offered a council flat on the top floor of a three-storey block without a lift, on a 99% white working-class housing estate on the outskirts of Bristol in Lawrence Weston. Mum didn't drive, we were miles from friends and our Black culture. My mum – not one of life's complainers – got a job in nearby Shirehampton and made the best of our new environment.

Aged 11, I befriended an older girl at Lawrence Weston comprehensive school who was also dating the local hard man. I was not untouchable, but I did now have someone to watch over me, as no one messed with 'Sally'. My quick wits meant I made a range of friends from different backgrounds. You could count the number of Black families on the estate on one hand.

Due to my mother's insistence I addressed all my friends' parents as 'Mr' or 'Mrs'. This meant I often got invited to 'tea', something my West Indian upbringing had no reference of, but I intrinsically knew was an important occasion. While I played with their children, these various parents would fill the gaps in the void left by the rest of my family being more than 120 miles away in London. We lived without fear of life's everyday dangers. Soon we had a tight gang of kinship rather than terror. We fought, argued, laughed and cried together. The youth clubs, boxing gyms and a plethora of sporting clubs kept most of us away from the glue-sniffers, speed-freaks and junkies.

I miss the banter and camaraderie of life on the estate. It could be vicious, yet have the most acerbic observational humour of the finest stand-up comedians. It certainly helped to build my character, sharp tongue and canny pragmatic skills in response to an array of insults and challenges. There were no safe spaces and this sink-or-swim approach to growing up is not recommended for the faint-hearted.

As I grew older, I became more aware of the ritual racist abuse. I recall one vicious attack that took place when I was alone at a bus stop, which left me physically and mentally scarred. It was carried out by two assailants who shouted 'nigger' at me, individuals who hated what they didn't understand. I was lucky, I got up: Stephen Lawrence in similar circumstances did not.

Clint Eastwood was our hero back then and I describe my time in Lawrence Weston as 'the Good, the Bad and the Ugly'. The reality for a skinny, small Black kid on the brink of adolescence without immediate family or friends meant life was tough, but it was also the making of this man.

What's Another 25 Years? William Friese-Greene and Bristol

Peter Domankiewicz

Sometimes it can take a long time to develop and deliver a project. In the case of William Friese-Greene and Bristol, it took 25 years from early discussion and work in 1995/96 for the centenary of cinema to the 2021 programme on film and the city. No-one has done more than Peter Domankiewicz to bring to public attention this pioneer of filmmaking, often in the face of much criticism. Through Domankiewicz's work we have a better understanding of Friese-Greene's role and importance – as well as some of the myths about his life and work – and there is more to come as the research continues. The Film2021 project showed the importance of the longevity of Bristol Ideas and never giving up.

Twenty-five years certainly sounds like a long time for a project to come to fruition but, just occasionally, it can be exactly the right amount of time.

It was in the lead-up to the centenary of cinema in 1995/96 that I first approached Andrew Kelly. I was a filmmaker who had become curious about a story I had heard that the inventor of cinema came from Bristol: a certain William Friese-Greene. Andrew lent me his copy of a 1948 biography of Friese-Greene with a warning that I was wading into a controversial subject area with strong views on both sides. I read the book, which built Friese-Greene up as an inventor, then I read some things written on the 1955 centenary of his birth, which pretty much trashed his reputation.



William Friese-Greene. Sequences of images taken about 1885 to recreate movement. These cyclical sequences were projected using a lantern designed by John Arthur Roebuck Rudge.

(Science Museum Group, objects 1994-5014/6, Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 Licence).

On that centenary, the leader of attempts to celebrate Friese-Greene in Bristol and beyond was local historian Reece Winstone. His energy and enthusiasm were admirable, but there was something uncritical about his approach. Meanwhile, Friese-Greene's critics were at pains to exclude any information that would cast a favourable light on the man. He was clearly an interesting and complex figure and a reassessment was equally clearly needed.

I went back to Andrew and proposed that something be done during the cinema centenary to look at the work of Friese-Greene, and that this could be used to spin off various other local events. Andrew found a small amount of money to fund me doing further research and we developed a whole raft of proposed projects. But in practice there was neither time nor resources to do the subject justice before 1996

was upon us.

I continued to be obsessed with William Friese-Greene and carry out research but in 2004 I finally let it lie. In 2016 my interest was reignited and I decided to pursue putting my research into a concrete form of some kind. The film festival Cinema Rediscovered invited me to give a talk about Friese-Greene in 2019 and this led to renewed conversations with Andrew, and other potentially interested parties, about planning some kind of celebration and reassessment of Friese-Greene for 2021, to coincide with the centenary of his death. I felt that now the time was right for a more balanced assessment of his work.

Bristol Ideas jumped into action and started to look for funding, the plan being to use Friese-Greene as a springboard for a year-long celebration of filmmaking and filmgoing in Bristol. It felt like a dream come true, until Covid 19 hit and threw everything into doubt. But amazingly the funding was finally granted and it all came together for 2021, including a series of events at Cinema Rediscovered. And as if to set the seal on the idea, after three years of trying, that March I secured *my* funding to undertake a PhD into the moving picture work of William Friese-Greene.

New research had enabled me to understand the man far better and comprehend how humble his beginnings were in the city and how remarkable his rise was. Bristol Ideas commissioned me to write a series of pieces for their website that allowed me to take a more rounded look at William Friese-Greene, covering subjects as diverse as his proto-feminist ideas and his love of writing bad poetry. All this activity in Bristol stimulated other organisations in the UK to also stage events relating to Friese-Greene, including the Cinema Museum and Highgate Cemetery in London, and the Harwich Festival in Essex.

Then, just as Andrew predicted, a veteran documenter of early film wrote extensively and critically of just about every single thing that had been said by me during that centenary year. My PhD supervisors had to talk me down from responding, assuring me that my research was of such a superior quality to my critic's that it would eventually supplant it.

Time had enriched our understanding and allowed us to celebrate William Friese-Greene in a more nuanced way, in all his complexity, rather than simplistically blowing the trumpet for a city or a country. One that could accept that although there was no singular 'inventor of cinema' there *was* a remarkable pioneer from Bristol. The Friese-Greene story was a great way to open the door to examine the city's cinema history with many making wonderful contributions. But for some, even 25 years does not mellow a controversy and, in that sense, William Friese-Greene is still very much with us. ■

Reflections on Bristol Ideas

Sian Norris

Sian Norris worked with Bristol Ideas on Festival of Ideas events as a writer and commentator. She launched the Bristol Women's Literature Festival in 2013 with some small help from Bristol Ideas. This is an example of how Bristol Ideas worked: supported groups, funded them where possible, so that they could work on their creative project.

The first time I attended Bristol Festival of Ideas was after I retweeted one of their posts, which resulted in me winning a free ticket to an event of my choice. I chose to go to a talk by the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, thinking en route to Watershed what it would be like if she did her whole event in French and I didn't understand a word of it. Turns out, I didn't have to imagine. She spoke the whole time in French, although the chair was doing a good job on translating. But even if she had given the talk in RP English, I'm still not convinced I would have understood.

That was 2011. The same year, the Bristol Feminist Network and Bristol Fawcett Society co-hosted an event at the Cube called *Where are the Women?*, presenting research on the lack of female representation in the British cultural scene. A lack of female representation was not an issue, thankfully, for Bristol Ideas, which has always put equality and diversity at its heart. Irigaray was no token: the festival's programme has always celebrated smart, feminist thinking, and it has platformed a wide range of female, LGBTIQ+, and Black and global majority speakers. More recently, in 2023, unlike far too many events which prefer to invite speakers who shout over Ukrainian people, the biennial Festival of the Future City platformed Ukrainian voices to discuss their experiences of the war.

It was Bristol Ideas' commitment to representing women's writing and thinking that led to our main partnership: the Bristol Women's Literature Festival.



Sian Norris with panel, Festival of the Future City, 2017 on women building cities: left-to-right writer Sabrina Mahfouz, Caterina Turcu (UCL), Finn Mackay (UWE). (Jon Craig)

Fresh from the success of the *Where are the Women?* panel discussion, I was determined to stop complaining about the lack of women on the British cultural scene and take action to put women at the heart of Bristolian culture. The writer and broadcaster Bidisha suggested I set up a women's literature festival. That's exactly what I did.

The first programme, in 2013, brought together TV writers, feminist journalists, novelists and academics to discuss their work, the place of women in the literary scene, the history of women's writing and the barriers to women in publishing. Debut novelists spoke alongside seasoned writers; lecturers delivered talks that put women back into the literary canon; and audiences could not get enough of the conversations we staged. That led to a second programme in 2015, then our biggest event yet in 2018, featuring panels on Young Adult writing, journalists and activists, Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein*... and a heart-stopping snowstorm that nearly led to all talks being called off, until panellists and audiences alike braved the sub-zero temperatures, driven by an enthusiasm for discovering women's writing.

Sadly, the fourth festival, scheduled to start on 26 March 2020, had to be cancelled as the first Covid lockdown had been announced a few days before.

As the Bristol Women's Literature Festival evolved from a naively embarked-upon project to a sold-out feminist extravaganza, Bristol Ideas was always by our side. From providing practical advice and sharing contacts, to picking up the phone during some tearful moments to talk me through my anxieties, their team became

my team – while never stepping on my toes or impinging on my creativity.

Then there was the financial help. After being turned down for Arts Council England funding, Bristol Ideas provided a grant that transformed the festival from amateur to professional, allowing us to pay speakers a fair fee. And when the Covid 19 pandemic stopped the 2020 programme from launching, they were there with more offers of help, practical advice, emotional support and, further down the line, offers of work and one-off partnerships throughout that difficult and discombobulating time.

Fairness has always been key. Unlike some of the bigger festivals, Bristol Ideas didn't pay already-wealthy speakers a big bucks fee while sending lesser-known authors home with a free bottle of prosecco or a bouquet. The team committed to paying all panellists and chairs the same rate no matter their perceived 'status'. Working with an event that put fairness and justice at its heart inspired me to always do the best job I could for them, whether chairing a panel, speaking on a panel, writing a book chapter or partnering as Bristol Women's Literature Festival.

Throughout my time working alongside Bristol Ideas, I've had the privilege of interviewing Val McDermid, Joanna Walsh, Katharine Angel, Rachel Holmes, Leslie Kern and many more. I've chaired panels featuring Katrine Marçal, Diana Souhami, Rosa Rankin-Gee, Thomas McMullen, Sabrina Mahfouz, Salena Godden, Finn Mackay and more. I've had the privilege to meet world-famous writers such as Margaret Atwood, Ali Smith and Andrew Davis. Drinks in the bar after a panel have turned into life-long friendships and led to new collaborations. And I will never forget the evening I took my dad to see the screening of *High-Rise* introduced by Will Self. I had no clue of quite how explicit the sex scenes would be, as I wished for the cinema floor to open up and swallow me whole.

So many memories and so many joyful times. But it was June 2023 and the launch of my book, *Bodies Under Siege: How the Far-Right Attack on Reproductive Rights Went Global*, that will be the happiest memory of my partnership with Bristol Ideas.

As soon as the book deal was confirmed, the team was determined to give me a launch to remember. An audience coming to hear me speak about abortion rights in the historic St George's Bristol building delivered just that, followed by a panel discussion a week later with Paul Mason, Nick Lowles and Madhu Krishnan. The magic of that event, and the confidence and happiness I felt throughout the hour-long conversation, was the culmination of a 12-year working partnership built on trust and mutual support. The photos Bristol Ideas took from the audience glowed with a golden light: now it shines as a golden memory. ■

Poetry, Bristol and Ideas

Danny Carlo Pandolfi

Poetry played a key role in the work of Bristol Ideas. We had poets in residence for the Bristol Legible City project, Bristol2008, Festival of Ideas, Bristol2015 and Festival of the Future City. We had two special evenings when, in 2015, 23 contemporary poets read new work on the theme of Romanticism to mark Bristol Ideas' work on the Romantic poets and Bristol; a year later, 20 poets read new work on the theme of utopia. In 2020, our Poetic City project marked the life and work of Thomas Chatterton and celebrated Bristol's vibrant and diverse poetry scene. We also partnered with the Mayor's office to have a city poet since 2016 and supported Lyra, Bristol's annual poetry festival, since it started. Danny Carlo Pandolfi from Lyra reflects on poetry and ideas here.

You could argue that poetry is all about ideas. A poet interrogates an existing idea, dreams a new idea, or seems to have absolutely no idea (often my favourite kind of poem). It's been said that the purpose of a poem is not to provide an answer, but instead to ask a question. These ideas and questions can have a lasting impact on individuals, communities and public bodies who engage with them. Bristol Ideas has been a dream collaborator for Lyra at every juncture, and a reminder that the idea of poetry pushes boundaries, sparks conversations and connects people.

Together with Bristol Ideas we have delivered four commission projects, each focusing on a different landmark or theme. These commissions generate exciting work, form deeper connections with ideas, embrace a diversity of perspectives and artistic modes and, crucially, give artists paid time to execute their vision. Throughout Bristol Ideas' history they have been a beacon for artists and organisations to explore and collaborate.

In 2020, our first commissions invited poets to respond to Henry Wallis'



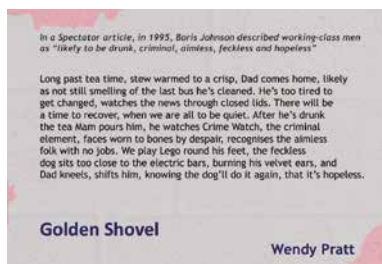
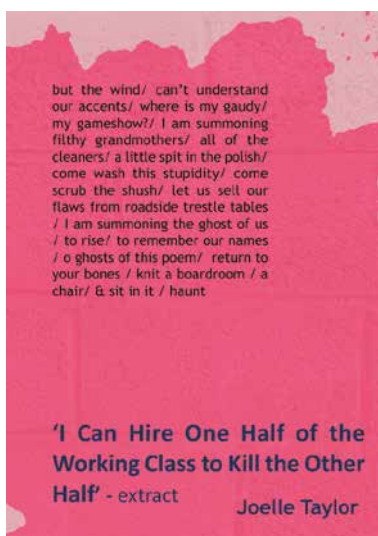
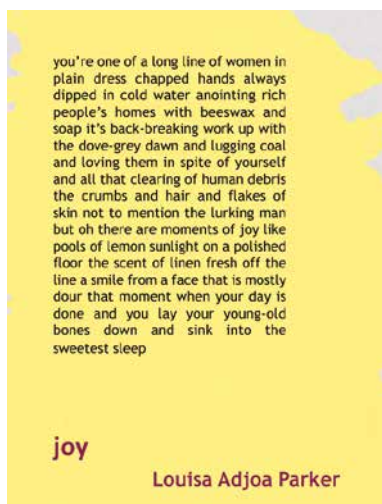
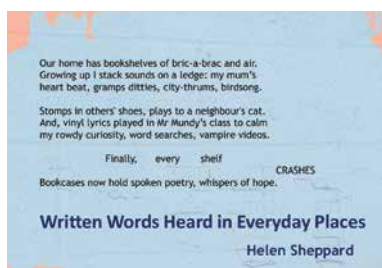
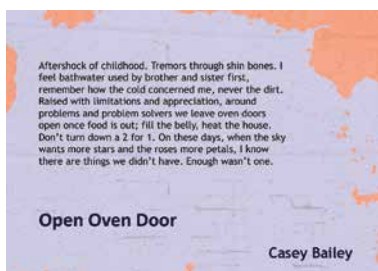
Poets Emma Taylor, Lynton Kwesi Johnson, Stephen Lightbown at Lyra Festival. (Sam Cavender)

painting *The Death of Chatterton* (1856) on the 250th anniversary of the young poet's death. The writers formed modern responses to themes of mental health, grief, forgery and much more, showing how poetry helps to cultivate connections with our history and to dream futures. It's remarkable that Bristol Ideas managed to get the original copy of the painting to RWA Bristol during a pandemic, another example of their commitment and ambition. We invited poets to have a video made in front of the painting and, with masked faces, sanitised hands and socially distanced air-hugs, we made it work. For numerous poets it was their first in-person work engagement in six months.

In 2021, we commissioned 12 working-class writers (in collaboration with Working-Class Writers Festival), printed the poems onto postcards and distributed them around the city to make them easily accessible to the public. In 2022, we invited poets in the UK (alongside Nigeria and Canada) to respond to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* on its 100th anniversary of publication, including the late great Gboyega Odubanjo. In 2024 we commissioned five poets from Bristol to write their perspectives of the city.

The City Poet scheme, which Bristol Ideas has led since 2016, has now been transferred into the hands of Lyra and we will do our best to continue furthering the role's legacy, alongside our Young City Poet scheme (which Bristol Ideas also helped us launch). These poets reflect the events, feelings and voices of the city, and articulate the everyday experiences which are so often inexpressible or invisible. Some of these poems, such as Vanessa Kisuule's *Hollow* (responding to the toppling of the Colston statue in 2020 – see page 148), had a national and worldwide impact, taking Bristol's stories across borders.

The purpose of all these projects has been to provide a platform for a variety



Some of the Lyra postcards published for the Working-Class Writer's Festival 2021. (Sally Mundy)

of perspectives, champion poets in the city, celebrate Bristol's cultural DNA, and explore poetry's unique role in marking occasions and articulating ideas. I have been to countless events, talks, film screenings, book launches and conversations from Bristol Ideas, and a huge hole has already been left in the city's artistic output. Bristol Ideas made an incalculable contribution to Bristol's cultural life, which Lyra is fortunate to have been a small part of.

Bristol Ideas' untimely closure should, however, raise stark alarm bells for UK art and culture. The creation of art, the celebration of cultural landmarks, and the existence of organisations who dream projects into reality, are not inevitable. Art and culture do not happen of their own accord. Every single person seeks entertainment through art in some way – the pandemic showed just how important it is. Although art may be seen as dispensable when it comes to budget cuts around a corporate roundtable, the impact of cultural events, festivals and celebrations cannot be understated in the way they connect communities, enable discussion and collaboration (in a backdrop of fear and division), and provide the joy and entertainment so needed in these times. We must take this opportunity to celebrate Bristol Ideas, and to reflect on how the city can protect its cultural institutions to ensure that ideas continue to thrive in Bristol. ■

Hollow
Vanessa Kisuule

Bristol City Poet Vanessa Kisuule's response to the toppling of the Colston statue in June 2020, her poem Hollow, went viral worldwide including being covered in the New Yorker.

You came down easy in the end
the righteous wrench of two ropes in a grand plie
briefly, you flew
corkscrewed, then met the ground
with the clang of toy guns, loose change
chains
a rain of cheers.

Standing ovation on the platform of your neck
punk ballet. Act 1.
there is more to come.

And who carved you?
They took such care with that stately pose and propped chin.
Wise and virtuous the plaque assured us.
Victors wish history odourless and static
but history is a sneaky mistress
moves like smoke, Colston,
like saliva in a hungry mouth.

This is your rightful home
here, in the pit of chaos with the rest of us.
Take your twisted glory and feed it to the tadpoles.
Kids will write raps to that syncopated splash.
I think of you lying in that harbour
with the horrors you hosted.
There is no poem more succinct than that.

But still
you
are permanent.
You who perfected the ratio.
Blood to sugar to money to bricks.
Each bougie building we flaunt
haunted by bones.
Children learn and titans sing
under the stubborn rust of your name.
But the air is gently throbbing with newness.
Can you feel it?

Colston, I can't get the sound of you from my head.
Countless times I passed that plinth
its heavy threat of metal and marble.
But as you landed a piece of you fell off
broke away
and inside
nothing but air.
This whole time
You were hollow

Bristol Ideas' Impact

Owen Garling

Evaluation and assessment of impact was always important in the work of Bristol Ideas, although cultural programmes are hard to measure. In 2023, Bristol Ideas collaborated with the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge, on a study of Bristol Ideas. Eighty-five in-depth interviews were conducted and transcribed and the first report, *The City is the Project*, was published in late 2023. Research collaborator Owen Garling from Bennett Institute looks at this work and his experiences of Bristol.

The only real connection that I have to Bristol is through my mum. Her father, my grandfather, worked for BBC Schools and, during the Second World War, the organisation was evacuated to Bristol from central London. As a result, my mum was born in Iron Acton, just outside Bristol, and spent the first few years of her life there. She subsequently returned to study English at Bristol University at the very beginning of the 1960s and used to regale us with stories of both her lecturers and landladies. I remember talking to her a while ago about the Bristol bus boycott, which took place while she was in her final year at university. Much to her shame, Mum had no recollection of being aware of the boycott when she was in Bristol; she may have forgotten it or perhaps, more likely, the events of the city did not make an impact on a young student with a head full of Shakespeare.

This conversation came back to me a number of times while talking with Andrew Kelly of Bristol Ideas as we planned our report into the work of the organisation.

Had Bristol Ideas been in existence at the time of the bus boycott, one can imagine that a number of events would have been organised to create both the spaces within the city to learn about the events taking place, and to enable debate between different communities within the city. One can also imagine a series of cultural events taking place, perhaps similar to the events funded by the Community Grant Scheme in 2023 as part of Bristol 650 for projects honouring the 60th anniversary of the Bristol bus boycott.

This ability to respond to events – be they from the recent or deeper history



Bristol Legible City is an ongoing programme incorporating street signage, art, maps, digital projects to help better understand and navigate the city. (Bristol City Council)

of the city – and look at them in a way that casts light on the present and future of the city, as well as reflecting them back onto the past, is, I think, one of the key lessons that I have learned from the work of Bristol Ideas. For Bristol Ideas, the past is not another country. The past is still present in both the physical form of the city, the memories and feelings of the people who call it home, and in the way that the city can respond to the events that will shape its future.

Another key lesson has been the ways in which the work of Bristol Ideas has contributed to the civic life of the city. Over the last few years, one strand of my work

at the Bennett Institute has focused on questions relating to social infrastructure: in short, those spaces and places that bring people together. Being an academic research institution, our work focused on the ways in which the value of these spaces could be quantified, how they contributed to other related concepts such as social capital – ‘the glue that binds communities together’, in the words of Andy Haldane of Royal Society for the Arts – and the role that policymakers at the national, regional and local levels could play in supporting these types of places.

The opportunity to work with Bristol Ideas enabled me to move beyond the sometimes narrow confines of the academic debate and consider how social infrastructure could interact with questions of culture in a specific place. What struck me about the work of Bristol Ideas was that it was not centred on a specific venue – in many ways, Bristol Ideas is an organisation without a home – but rather used the existing assets spread out across the city. And this was not confined purely to ‘art spaces’. Projects took place against a wide backdrop, including traditional art spaces, but also taking in the city’s housing estates and the public realm across

the city. This ability to use the most appropriate venue for each project meant that the role of the organisation was much more about animating the space in such a way as to bring it to life for participants. Sometimes when thinking about social and cultural infrastructure, we focus too much on physical spaces at the expense of those people and organisations that breathe life into them and who connect people together. In Andrew Kelly, Bristol Ideas has had a director who implicitly understands the importance of this, and who has continually looked to bring together different partnerships centred around the organising principle of ideas.

Having spent time working with Andrew looking back over Bristol Ideas' proud history of projects, I think that the one that stands out for me as typifying their approach is the very early project that helped to waymark the city, Bristol Legible City. Rather than imposing its own design on the project, the ways in which signage across the city was re-thought worked with the grain of the place and helped to open the city up and make it legible for people, while demonstrating the connections between different spaces. The project approach also typified Bristol Ideas, working with the local authority, private sector organisations, including those companies providing advertising space across the city and, perhaps most importantly, the people of the city and those who visit.

And now, 60 years after my mum left Bristol, my niece is studying in the city. On the morning of the 2023 Festival of the Future City, we both went on a guided walk of Bristol led by Eugene Byrne, looking at the urban myths of the city. As well as seeing the city through my niece's eyes, it was also a great opportunity to see the warp and weft of the city in a different light, and think about how stories are created, shared, remembered and – perhaps most importantly – connected. ■

Bristol as a City of Ideas

Julian Baggini

Julian Baggini is one of Britain's most well-known public philosophers. He worked with Bristol Ideas for more than 15 years, interviewing writers and commentators, judging our book prize, and presenting and debating his work. Baggini writes about Bristol Ideas and the city of Bristol as a 'philosophy town'.

Around the world there are towns and cities known for their arts, crafts and culture. There are places famous for their bookshops, lacemaking, pottery, weaving, concentrations of artists' studios and so on. Bristol is well-known as a world-leading centre of contemporary music, animation and wildlife filmmaking. But nowhere is known as a philosophy town.

The very idea sounds almost comical, at least to the British, with their traditional disdain for high theory. Still, in the early years of this millennium there was a plan to make Malmesbury in Wiltshire – the birthplace of the seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes – a philosophy town, but that failed to come to anything.

Over the lifetime of Bristol Ideas (including its forerunner, the Bristol Festival of Ideas), our city has had perhaps the strongest claim to be the United Kingdom's capital of public philosophy. The boast becomes more credible when you consider how the word 'philosophy' should be used. People often point to France as a country where philosophy is much more a part of public life than it is in the UK. But *la philosophie* is a much broader domain of enquiry than it is here, including aspects of political theory, sociology, anthropology, economics and psychology. So, although only a small (but significant) proportion of Bristol Ideas' work has come under the formal umbrella of 'philosophy', much of it has been extremely philosophical.

Cynics and sceptics may ask how this has benefited the city, and their doubts

ought to be taken seriously. First, even the most popular philosophical events only attract a tiny proportion of Bristolians, and most of these people probably already have some kind of interest. Can public events really galvanise interest in ideas, or do they simply satisfy the desires of those who already have a thirst for them?

A second worry is that talks and panels give people the illusion of encountering depth in a 60-minute reality that is actually quite superficial. Consider the TED talk phenomenon. The 18-minute talk format suits people who have increasingly short attention spans in a noisy, frantic world. But rather than encouraging people to go deeper into ideas, TED talks arguably provide an alternative to doing so. As anecdotal evidence, one of my TEDx talks was placed on the main TED website and has received more than two million views. But the book upon which it is based has hardly received any extra sales as a result. The video replaces the need to go deeper, or at least seems to.

A third worry is that discussing philosophy does not change anything anyway. It may make us feel clever, but it is more likely to lead to paralysis than action. The upshot is invariably that things are more complicated than they seem, which is hardly a rallying call to mount the barricades.

There is something to all of these objections. But they are only powerful against the naive view that public intellectuals can magically transform society. If we are more modest and realistic about what we expect serious public debate to achieve, we have reasons to be reassured that a thriving ideas scene can make a difference.

Take the fact that the Bristol Ideas programme attracts a small percentage of the population and that most are from the more affluent postcodes. This criticism can be overstated. It should also be pointed out that Bristol Ideas has run many projects in addition to its talks and events programme, and many of these have reached Bristol's less affluent postcodes. Take the Homes for Heroes 100 project that reached out to and involved people on council estates, or the many Great Reading Adventures that sent free books to schools and libraries across the city.

In any case, ideas always have their impacts through ripple effects. For example, a person may go to a panel discussion and then talk about it with several people afterwards. Awareness is raised so, the next time the issue comes up, people touched by the event react to it in a more thoughtful way. Encounters with ideas can flick switches, but more often they light slow-burning fuses.

It may be true that most people who go to such events are already interested in philosophy, broadly construed. But hearing leading thinkers talk and discuss ideas, responding to questions, adds a whole new level of engagement to simply reading for oneself at home. Thinking *for yourself* is all very well, but thinking *by ourselves* is difficult and it often leads to wrong conclusions. We become better thinkers when



Julian Baggini interviewing Sir Michael Marmot, Festival of the Future City, 2015. (Jon Craig)

we practice not only in our armchairs but in the seats of halls and auditoria.

The concern that people use talks as an alternative to deep readings rather than as a spur to it is a serious one but should not be exaggerated. Given time is limited, is it better to read ten books a year carefully, or to read nine but also expose yourself to the key ideas of 20 other books in talks and discussions? ‘Shallow reading’ should be seen as a useful complement to ‘deep reading’, not an alternative to it. As long as talks do not displace deeper engagement, they broaden our intellectual horizons. Indeed, at most events books are for sale afterwards and, on average, around 10% of an audience might buy one and many others may do so later. That suggests that at least one in ten of all attendees at an event goes on to have a deeper engagement with the ideas.

More breadth is often said to imply less depth, but even this is contentious. Depth is itself a kind of breadth: a broader thinker can make the kind of horizontal connections between ideas that the narrow, deep one cannot. Breadth of thinking has its virtues and public ideas events can help nurture them.

As for the worry that ideas do not change anything, that barely seems credible. It is certainly true that geopolitical, societal and economic forces do a great deal to shape the course of history. But ideas have changed the world. France was shaped by the ideals of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*; women’s liberation and the civil rights movements were based on ideas of the equal dignity of all human beings. Right now, bad ideas are fuelling Hindu nationalism in India, a false sense of Russia’s destiny as a regional superpower, and excessive resistance to immigration. One of

the most heated issues in public life concerns an idea: whether ‘woman’ has any role to play as a biological as well as a social category.

How ideas spread remains mysterious. But given that they do, it can only be a good thing when civic life has a space to discuss them seriously and openly. At a time when online debate has become increasingly polarised and vicious, public events also provide a rare safe and civil space for debate. The most gratifying responses I have had to events I have been involved in is when people come away saying that they have a richer and more sympathetic understanding of those they disagree with, even if they have not changed their minds.

Every hub of powerful new thinking – Enlightenment Edinburgh and Paris, Ancient Athens, Baghdad in the Middle Ages – has been a place where citizens discuss and debate openly, freely and rigorously. No independent organisation can create such a culture by itself, but it can help to incubate and grow one. With the sad demise of Bristol Ideas, those in the city who care about such things face a challenge to continue to nurture thought and reflection. ■

A Note on the Cover

Till Lukat

Ending things is hard. Moving out of a place we called home, ending a relationship, or a book we enjoyed. It reminds us that nothing lasts forever and that we can't turn back time. The end is also a good point to take a moment, to think about what we have accomplished so far and what lies in front of us.

Let's take this moment and celebrate rather than get gloomy. That's the feeling I wanted to capture in the cover I designed for the publication that you have just finished reading, and which will hopefully stay in your mind long after it's over. Let's keep being curious and creative. Let's watch a good movie, one that we haven't seen yet. Let's go for a walk in the rolling hills around Bristol. Let's keep trying to change the place we live in for the better.

In the centre of my cover design stands We The Curious with the planetarium in front. To me, Millennium Square is a great place of celebration where people of all backgrounds come together and enjoy their leisurely activities. Since I live close by, I cross the Square daily and there is always something new and surprising to discover: that so many people in Bristol practice Capoeira; breakdancing is back; and you can still roller skate when you're 73.

I do wonder what Brunel would have said about all of this if he was still alive. Maybe he would have just shrugged his shoulders, refilled his vape, gotten onto his longboard, and rolled off toward a new project of his. Maybe something to do with renewable energies. How we could use the River Avon's tidal range of 13 metres to power the city, perhaps?

Biographies

Marwa Al-Sabouni is an award-winning architect and author, a well-known public speaker, named by *Prospect* as one of the Top 50 thinkers around the world. Her books include *The Battle for Home* and *Building for Hope: Towards an Architecture of Belonging*.

Julian Baggini is a philosopher and the author, co-author or editor of over 20 books including *The Great Guide: What David Hume Can Teach Us about Being Human and Living Well*, *How The World Thinks*, and *The Ego Trick*. He was the founding editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine*.

Clive Burlton is an author and social historian and a regular speaker on local history. His books include *Bristol's Lost City*, *Trenches to Trams: The Life of a Bristol Tommy*, and *Bravo, Bristol!: the City at War, 1914-1918* (with Eugene Byrne). He has curated several First World War-related exhibitions.

Edson Burton is a writer, poet, academic and compere. His projects include a study of Bristol's Old Market ward, *Vice and Virtue* and Black South West Network's Race Through the Generations. He has also written on cinema as well as James Baldwin for Bristol Ideas.

Eugene Byrne is a Bristol-based author, historian and journalist. He has written several books on Bristol's history, including *The Bristol Story* (with artist Simon Gurr) and a brief history of council housing in Bristol (with artist Anthony Forbes). He edits the *Bristol Post*'s 'Bristol Times' local history pull-out.

Danny Carlo Pandolfi, aka **Craft-D**, is a rapper, poet, educator and cultural producer. He has been a Resident Poet/Rapper at Roundhouse London and Bristol Boat Poet. He is co-director of Lyra – Bristol Poetry Festival and founder of Raise the Bar.

Miles Chambers was Bristol City Poet 2014-2016. His book of poems from this time, *This is Our City*, was published in 2018.

Simon Cook is a former leader of Bristol City Council, Lord Mayor and long-standing councillor. He chaired Bristol Ideas for many years. He is also an actor.

Peter Domankiewicz is a film director, screenwriter and journalist with an abiding interest in the beginnings of moving pictures. He has written for *The Guardian* and *Sight and Sound* and is currently pursuing a PhD on William Friese-Greene.

Jane Duffus has worked as a journalist, editor and public speaker since 2000. She founded and ran the What The Frock! Comedy project between 2012 and 2018 and is the author of six books including two (soon to be three) in the popular *The Women Who Built Bristol* series.

George Ferguson was the first elected mayor of Bristol, 2012-2016. He is an architect and has been involved in many Bristol projects over 50 years.

Owen Garling works at Bennett Institute, Cambridge University linking researchers

and policy makers nationally and internationally. He worked with Bristol Ideas on research on culture, social capital and social infrastructure.

Roger Griffith is a writer, social entrepreneur, lecturer and activist. At UWE Bristol he has been central to work to decolonise the curriculum. He is the author of *My American Odyssey: From The Windrush to the White House*.

Liz Harkman is a past director of Encounters and Bristol Festivals and is currently managing director for Live Cinema, the country's only organisation focused on bringing artists, exhibitors, distributors and producers closer together to create experiential cinema events.

Pete Insole has worked as a heritage professional in Bristol for 30 years. He created and manages the Know Your Place web resource for Bristol City Council.

Andrew Jester is a long-standing audience member at Festival of Ideas and linked events and contributed many ideas for speakers and themes.

Natalie Jester is lecturer in Sociology and Criminology at the University of Gloucestershire. She worked with Bristol Ideas for many years as an adviser and attended many events.

Andrew Kelly was director of Bristol Ideas 1993-2024 (apart from a brief period when he became creative producer). He was director of most of Bristol Ideas' projects and founded and led Festival of Ideas and Festival of the Future City. He is the author of many books.

Melanie Kelly was project manager and researcher for Bristol Ideas 2002-2022. She led the annual Great Reading Adventure and key elements of Brunel200, BAC100 and Film2021 among many other initiatives. She also wrote and edited many Bristol Ideas books.

Vanessa Kisuule was Bristol City Poet 2018-2020. Her poem on the toppling of the Colston statue, 'Hollow', went viral in the summer of 2020. She has two poetry collections published by Burning Eye Books. Her new book *Neverland: The Pleasures and Perils of Fandom* will be published in 2024.

Till Lukat is a comic artist and illustrator, originally from Berlin, now living in Bristol. He is the author of *Tuff Ladies: 24 Remarkable Women of History* and *Dur-e-à cuire: 50 Athlètes hors du Commun qui ont Marqué le Sport*. He designed the cover for the Bristol 650 book of essays on the future of the city.

Kat Lyons was Bristol City Poet 2022-2024 and is a writer, performer and workshop facilitator working in the field of spoken word poetry and performance storytelling. Their debut poetry collection, *Love Beneath the Nails*, was published by Verve Poetry Press.

Ruth Myers is part of Local Learning and works with local communities on stories of place, community narratives about neighbourhoods and the landscape legacies created by people there, past and present.

Sian Norris is an investigative journalist, writer and commentator with a long association with Festival of Ideas as a

chair and speaker. She founded Bristol Women's Literature Festival and ran it for eight years. She is the author of *Bodies Under Siege: How the Far-Right Attack on Reproductive Rights Went Global*.

Caleb Parkin was Bristol's third City Poet, 2020-2022. His debut collection, *This Fruiting Body*, was published in October 2021. In 2022, he published *All the Cancelled Parties*, his collected work as City Poet.

Suzanne Rolt is CEO, Quartet Community Foundation. Before joining Quartet, she was CEO of St Georges where she led a transformational capital project. She was a long-standing board director of Bristol Ideas and served as chair, 2019-2023.

John Savage was pivotal in founding Bristol Ideas in 1992. He was full-time chief executive of The Bristol Initiative from 1989 and, from February 1993, chief executive of Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative and then executive chairman of Bristol Chamber of Commerce and Initiative.

Kate Sim Read works with Bristol Ideas on marketing, archiving, events and project management. She is a graduate of University of Bristol.

ACH Smith has written over 20 plays and screenplays, including *Up the Feeder*, *Down the Mouth* and *Walking The Chains*. He has also published a dozen novels, poetry, and several non-fiction books including *Wordsmith*. He has written and presented some 200 programmes for HTV and BBC.

Paul Smith is CEO of Elim Housing. He previously served as a Bristol City Councillor from 1988 to 1999 and 2016 to 2020 when

he was Cabinet Member for Homes and Communities. His book on the history of Hartcliffe will be published in 2024.

Donna Speed is committed to science communication. She is CEO at We The Curious and has worked for the organisation since 2000.

Barry Taylor was head of corporate communications at Bristol City Council from 1986 to 2000. He then became communications and marketing director at the University of Bristol. Ten years later he went into business as a freelance writer and editor, working mostly for companies and universities.

Jasmine Thompson is an illustrator and designer with work often rooted in social issues, culture, and sport. She specialises in visuals for brands and social media campaigns, murals and live illustration at conferences and events.

Romesh Vaitilingam MBE is editor-in-chief of the Economics Observatory based at the University of Bristol. He is the author of *The Financial Times Guide to Using the Financial Pages*, now in its sixth edition. In 2003, he was awarded an MBE for services to economic and social science.

Rich Warren is lecturer in film and creative media at Bath Spa University. He was CEO Encounters Short Film and Animation Festival 2014-2023.

Vicky Washington was cultural projects coordinator for Bristol Ideas from 2007 to 2010. She worked on many projects, including Festival of Ideas. She is currently senior marketing officer at NTU Nottingham School of Art and Design.

Acknowledgments

In his late poem 'Lullaby', W.H. Auden wrote 'Let your last thanks all be thanks'. There are many people to thank for this book and for supporting and participating in our work.

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Not all the projects we did are here, but each essay shows the range of ideas and subjects we have engaged with and our collaborators. Thank you to Marwa Al-Sabouni, Julian Baggini, Clive Burlton, Edson Burton, Eugene Byrne, Danny Carlo Pandolfi, Simon Cook, Peter Domankiewicz, Jane Duffus, George Ferguson, Owen Garling, Roger Griffith, Liz Harkman, Pete Insole, Andrew Jester, Natalie Jester, Melanie Kelly, Ruth Myers, Sian Norris, Suzanne Rolt, John Savage, Kate Sim Reid, ACH Smith, Paul Smith, Donna Speed, Barry Taylor, Romesh Vaitilingam, Rich Warren and Vicky Washington for their contributions.

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The Kevin Lynch quote on page 22 is in the collection *City Sense and City Design: Writings and Projects of Kevin Lynch* (MIT Press, 1995). The quotation from James Baldwin on page 40 is from his introduction to *Nobody Knows My Name* (in Library of America collected edition). Parts of this book are based on research conducted with Bennett Institute at University of Cambridge. I conducted 85 detailed interviews about our work. I am grateful to all interviewees for their participation. Diane Coyle – our partner on Festival of Economics – gave Bristol Ideas a grant to support this. Thank you, Diane. Owen Garling provided research and writing partnership as well as helping me identify – and this is hard – the impact we have had. Any errors that remain are my responsibility.

In our work we have often cited the importance and impact of the 30 glorious years that took place after the Second World War. They were not glorious years for all, but for working-class people it meant better health and free education, secure employment and decent housing, and social mobility. This helped me, and millions of others, gain chances in life that were denied to those who came before and which for many are absent now. I am grateful to all who built those glorious years and those who gave us 30 glorious years with Bristol Ideas. Thank you all.