

History and architecture of Brandon Hill and Cabot Tower

History

Brandon Hill may be the oldest municipal open space in the country. Granted to the council in 1174 by the Earl of Gloucester, it was sublet to farmers for grazing until 1625 when it became a public open space, used for what seems to be "unrestricted recreational pursuits" including hay-making and clothes drying! During the Civil War, Brandon Hill was a key point in the defence of the city and there are remains of a fort and earthworks to the west and south of the Cabot Tower.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the hill was second only to Queen Square as a popular venue for often riotous public meetings by reform groups like the Chartists, and from 1840 the council began "improvements" to Brandon Hill in response to requests from local residents for increased protection. These improvements included the provision of walls and walks, but Brandon Hill still hosted the crowd of 30,000 which came to watch the launch of SS Great Britain on 7 July 1843.

The boundaries, which we see today, were probably set in the later nineteenth century. The completion of the Cabot Tower in 1898, marked the start of the development of the garden element on the hill. With its wealth of trees and shrubs, Brandon Hill still retains the atmosphere of rough grazing land in the heart of the city which must always have been part of its character and which is being enhanced by the Avon Wildlife Trust's management of the site.

Architecture

A steep outcrop is crowned by the Cabot Tower, one of Bristol's great landmarks. Built in 1897 and opened on 6 September 1898, it commemorates the four hundredth anniversary of John Cabot's voyage of discovery to America in 1497, when he set sail in the *Matthew* in search of a new route to Asia. It was designed by the Bristol architect William Venn Gough, (who claimed that the design was based on a tower in the Loire in France) and was paid for by public subscription. The tower is made of red sandstone dressed with cream coloured Bath stone. The winged figure on top of the spires represents Commerce. It is set 260 feet above the harbour and the tower is 105 feet high. The tower is a landmark that can be seen from many parts of the city and at night its beacon flashes a message in Morse Code.

The 'CCCC' cut into each side of the tower represents the four hundredth anniversary of Cabot's journey. Above the entrance door in the north side is the coat of arms of Bristol, and the coat of arms of Henry VII is on the eastern side, together with a plaque relating Cabot's achievement. On Signal Hill overlooking St Johns in Newfoundland is another Cabot Tower also built to commemorate Cabot's achievement and celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria.

The Cabot Tower is normally open daily from approx 8am until half an hour before dusk. For those happy to climb the narrow spiral staircase inside, there are splendid views from the top across the city and over the harbour to Dundry. Unfortunately, the Tower is currently closed for repair work.