

History of The Downs

Early History

The Iron Age hillfort of Clifton Down Camp, at Observatory Hill, provides the most obvious evidence of the early history. Clifton Down Camp faced two other Iron Age Fortifications, Stokeleigh and Burwalls, on the Leigh Woods side of the Gorge. A subsequent Roman use of the fort has been suggested by reported coin finds in and around Clifton Down Camp in the 19th century.

Anglo Saxon, Medieval and Early Post Medieval History (c400 to Mid 18th century)

The Clifton and Durdham Downs were the commons of pasture for the Manors of Clifton and Henbury respectively, and provided shared grazing for the village commoners. Clifton and Henbury were both small villages at the time and separate from nearby Bristol. The history of Clifton and Henbury Manors is characterised by a range of divisions and changes of ownership. By the 17th century, Henbury (and with it Durdham Downs) had been divided and was tightly controlled by three or four Lords. They also readily leased land for limestone quarrying, limekilns, lead mining and clay workings.

Mid 18th to mid 19th century

Through the late 17th century and 18th century Clifton had, due to the hot spring waters emerging from the Gorge rocks at Hotwells, established itself as an inexpensive, but fashionable summer spa. With this popularity came the need for additional information and Hotwells, and subsequently Clifton, expanded to the needs of the spa visitors, their servants and numerous physicians.

The site of the largest spring was below St. Vincent Rock (Observatory Hill) from which water at 76 degrees emerged at almost 60 gallons per minute. By 1785, Hotwells was in need of modernisation and could not compete with the new spas in Cheltenham and Tunbridge Wells. However, expansion at Clifton continued as wealthy merchants preferred living in this fashionable suburb.

Mid 19th to 20th century

The scale of mineral extraction and mineral working on the Downs had steadily increased up until the 18th and 19th century. Over the time, large scale quarrying had significantly modified some of the Gorges slopes giving rise to the rock faces we see today. The pressure to preserve The Downs increased and the City wanted to achieve this via an act of parliament. The City finally purchased The Downs from the Lords of the Manor of Henbury for £15,000. The Clifton and Durdham Downs Act received royal assent on 17th May 1861 ensuring the preservation for future generations. A Downs Committee assembled for the first time in November 1861, appointing a Downs Ranger to oversee works to 'beautify' the Downs.

To this date The Downs continue to be managed by a Downs Ranger, under the supervision of the Downs Committee, for the benefit of Bristol.