

Bristol 2014: Great War Stories Map: Old City



This walk is based on the Great War Stories map and app devised for Bristol 2014. The stories were researched, written and uploaded by Eugene Byrne. Email bristol2014@btopenworld.com if you require a large-print Word version of this document.

The dotted line in the map is approximate and gives an indication of the general direction to take, rather than a strict route to follow. Special care will be needed when crossing roads and always look for the safest place to do so. The walk will take 35-40 minutes to complete.

Begin on Old Market Street, close to the Stag & Hounds pub on the roundabout corner. Carry on up Old Market Street for a few yards and you will come to a large building with Bristol's coat of arms over its arched gateway.

1 The Drill Hall: The 4th Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment, one of the pre-war Territorial battalions, had previously been based on Queen's Road. Work had started on their new Headquarters in Old Market before the war, but it was not opened until June 2 1915. During and after the war it was also used for a large number of events and functions, including dinners for wounded soldiers and receptions for visiting troops from other countries. It's likely, for instance, that the first time the traditional Maori Haka was ever seen in Bristol was at the Drill Hall when a group of soldiers from New Zealand visited in May 1917.

The Drill Hall nowadays is split into apartments.

Return to the Stag & Hounds and use the pedestrian crossing to cross to walk along Temple Way/Bond Street. Carry on along here, past one pedestrian crossing. When you come to the second crossing, go across and you will see a narrow, pedestrianized lane called Milk Street with the Five Guys burger restaurant at the corner. Go down to the end of Milk Street. You are now in the Cabot Circus shopping centre. This was built in the early 21st century, but in 1914 this area was

a densely populated neighbourhood of small factories and workshops as well as housing. The line of Milk Street was then part of the longer and wider Stratton Street.

2. Avoiding the call-up - the hard way: On June 17 1918 John Henry Brown, a young carpenter employed by building firm Cowlin & Son at its works on this site, pleaded guilty at Bristol Police court to a charge of unlawfully injuring himself in a manner likely to render him unfit for military service. Two years previously Brown had been passed as medically unfit for service. In early June 1918 he was examined again and passed as fit for service. Brown objected; his original rejection had been on account on a broken ankle, and he claimed that he would still not be fit for all the marching that military service would involve. "The great mental worry I was going through," he said in a statement to his insurance company, "made me think that if I mutilated my hand I should get out of the infantry and not have to do any marching. On June 5 I bored two holes in a piece of wood big enough to take my two fingers to the second joint. On June 6, about 12 o'clock, I left my bench and went to the band saw at Stratton street works and inserted my fingers in the wood and they were cut off by the band saw." The chairman of the magistrates told him that he would be fined £10 or given 61 days' imprisonment.

Now continue through Cabot Circus along Concorde Street and into the Horsefair, until you reach the entrance to the Marks & Spencer store.

3. Obscene verse: In October 1914 John Flynn, who had a 'newspaper shop' on this site was arrested for selling obscene material. This was a single leaflet containing eight short verses of a patriotic poem titled 'A Call to Arms'. Bristol Police detectives had gone to the shop and Mr Flynn readily admitted selling the leaflet, and handed over his stock of around 1,000 copies. Police visited once more with a search warrant, but found no other copies, and no other questionable material. The case before Bristol magistrates turned on whether or not the verse was actually indecent, and this all came down to the repeated use of a certain word. Flynn was defended by E J Watson, a highly cultured Bristol solicitor who was fluent in Italian and was himself reckoned a fine poet in his spare time. Mr Watson claimed that the verse was coarse and vulgar, but it was powerful poetry and could only arouse patriotic feelings. He went on to quote several literary passages, including those by Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw, which had used the offending word. The magistrates dismissed the case, provided Mr Flynn destroy all copies of the pamphlet, and stressed that proceedings should not reflect in any way badly upon him. So we don't know what the poem said. But we do know what the offending and potentially obscene word was, the word which Bristol Police considered they ought to prosecute the newsagent for: "Bloody."

Carry on to the end of The Horsefair, cross at the pedestrian crossing and continue straight on onto Nelson Street . Go right at the H&M shop into Nelson Street and continue along here until you reach St John's church with its three arches. Go through here and into Broad Street. Your next stop is the office building on the corner of Broad Street and John Street, which was once the site of ...

4. The Inquiry Bureau: Early on in the war, as wounded men started to arrive at Bristol's hospitals, it was realised that something was needed to put injured soldiers in touch with their families. The Inquiry Bureau was set up here as a small voluntary organisation; it was started by local businessman Harry Townsend and solicitor Frederick Lazenby. The Bureau put together a card index system for Bristol's hospitals, recording details of each man; by the war's end there were 90,000 cards and the Bureau was helping trace men who had gone missing either on the battlefield or in the medical system back at home. But the Bureau's volunteers soon found themselves having to deal with other queries from soldiers and their families which no-one else could help with; finding accommodation for visiting relatives, sorting out matters of pay and pensions, even changing French currency back into Sterling. The Inquiry Bureau soon had offices in all the major hospitals, and several hundred volunteers looking after all aspects of wounded soldiers' welfare. It was particularly pleased with the

case of a young soldier brought to Bristol with serious injuries and who was not expected to live. The boy's parents came to visit; his father could not stay long, and had to return home to work and look after the other children, while his mother could not afford to stay in Bristol. The Bureau paid her boarding fees for nine weeks, after which her son had recovered and would live. The Bureau also helped men who had been discharged as unfit for further military service, assisting with war pensions and pay and helping them find work. It organised outings and entertainment for the troops as well; everything from trips to the theatre and teas at the zoo, to lectures at the museum and sporting events.

Carry on to the end of Broad Street, and turn right into Corn Street. The building on the corner of Broad and Corn Streets is now Bristol's registry office, but in 1914 it was the Council House.

5. The Council House: This was Bristol's Council House until the new one on College Green was completed after the Second World War. It was the seat of local government, where the Council and its committees met, and where most of the important decisions affecting the city were taken. It was also where the Bristol Military Service Tribunal met several times a week from early 1916 until the end of the war, deciding whether or not men's applications for exemption from being drafted into the army should be accepted or rejected. Perhaps the most famous case to be heard here was that of Walter Ayles (1879-1953), who was very well known to the panel as a local Labour councillor and anti-war campaigner. He was called up in June 1916 and at his tribunal hearing refused, as a Christian, to serve in the army or do any work which would help with the war effort. "I believe that to kill a man is to strike a blow at the heart of God," he said. He went on to cross examine the military representative on the panel, getting him to admit that as a soldier he would have to follow orders, even if it meant shooting innocent people. Ayles was ordered to take non-combatant service but refused. He was arrested at an anti-conscription rally in Glasgow in November 1916, handed over to the military authorities and remained in prison until 1919. Walter Ayles' pacifism did him no harm in later public life. He was elected Labour MP for Bristol North in 1923, and in 1931. He was MP for Southall in 1945 and was MP for Hayes & Harlington when he died in 1953.

Continue a few yards along Corn Street and on your left you will come to The Exchange building, the entrance to St Nicholas Market with its distinctive three-handed clock over the entrance.

6. The longest queue in Bristol's history: By the later stages of the war, shortages of manpower, disruption to the normal economy and attacks on shipping by German U-Boats, led to serious food shortages. Bread and 'scrape' - thinly spread margarine - was the staple diet for many, and there were frequent queues outside shops when supplies were known to be in. Here, in February 1918, people lined up in what was claimed to be the largest queue in Bristol's history. Around 4,000 people, mostly women, waited for supplies of margarine which the local Food Control Committee had obtained in large quantities and was now selling in half-pound (226g) packages. Some people found a way of getting to the front of the queue. In Bristol, and elsewhere in the country, devious shoppers noticed that women with babies were often served first by the shopkeeper, or were invited by the others in the queue to go to the front. So apparently it was common for unscrupulous women to borrow or even hire other women's babies to get to the front of the queue.

You now need to get to Baldwin Street. If you know your way around, and fancy going through St Nicholas Market (and it's open) then do so. Otherwise turn right into All Saints Lane and carry on to the end. Directly across St Nicholas Street you will see some steps. Cross the street carefully and go down the steps and turn right. You will soon find yourself in front of a pub called the Old Fish Market.

(If you are a wheelchair user or if you have a pram or buggy which you cannot lift down the steps, return to the junction of Corn Street and Broad Street and turn right into High Street and carry on

until you have almost reached the river and turn right into Baldwin Street, continuing along there until you reach the Old Fish Market pub on your right.)

7. "The soldiers' friend": Mrs Elizabeth Pearce ran the Fish Market - it had been built by her grandfather - during the war. She became well known for her work for soldiers' welfare. She used her own money, and money she raised, to send comforts to the troops; chocolate and cigarettes, socks and other woolens, books and even the occasional gramophone. Naturally she also sent gifts of fish to the men. Just before Christmas 1917 a company of infantrymen received a box of kippers from her, a great luxury in the cold misery of the Western Front. That evening the men set about toasting them, causing envious groans from neighbouring soldiers. It was even said that the Germans on the other side of No Man's Land held up a sign written in English begging for any leftovers. A few weeks later, one of the men, a corporal, was home on leave. Straight from the train, and with Flanders mud fresh on his uniform he went to the Fish Market to seek out Mrs Pearce. "I have been sent by my pals in France mum, to thank you - For the kippers, mum, they were grand," he told her. Looking sheepish, he then added, "I've got something give you, mum, from my officer, but do not like to tell you what it is." "Do not be afraid young man," she said. "What is it?" The corporal explained that his company commander, who had himself partaken of the kipper feast, had said to him, "Look here, when you get to Bristol, find out the lady who sent those kippers and thank her for me. And look here, just you give her a kiss for me." Mrs Pearce accepted the captain's kiss, via the corporal. Then she told the corporal that he was to return the favour and kiss the officer on her behalf! Mrs Pearce died in 1925 and was buried at Arnos Vale, where her headstone describes her as "the soldiers' friend."



Go back the way you came. Continue along Baldwin Street and use the pedestrian crossings to continue in a straight line along the path next to the water along the edge of Castle Park. You will eventually see on your left the ruins of St Peter's Church. Take the path up to the church, pass in front of it. Ahead of you and slightly to the right you will see the entrance to the Galleries shopping centre car-park. Halfway between here and the car park entrance in what's now Castle Park is where the Cat & Wheel pub used to be.

8. Landlord fined for letting customer buy a round: The First World War saw the government bring in severe restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol. Under the Defence of the Realm Act - 'DORA' - pub opening hours were restricted and the strength of beer greatly reduced. While older people will remember the restrictive opening hours continuing into the 1980s, what has long been forgotten is that during the war it became illegal to buy someone else a drink in a pub. 'Treating' as it was known, was outlawed for several reasons. One of them was that soldiers returning home on leave, or with wounds, were often bought vast amounts of drink in their local pubs. In some cases elsewhere in Britain there were reports that some had even died of alcohol poisoning. The first prosecution in Bristol under the new law was brought against Frederick Charles Eagles, landlord of

the Cat and Wheel pub, which stood on this site until it was destroyed by German bombing in the Second World War. In November 1915 Eagles was before the magistrates, accused of allowing a customer to buy five drinks for five people. Eagles' defence was that the customer did not buy the drinks for the others; everyone in the round had paid for their own drink and the customer had simply collected their money and come to the bar to fetch the drinks. Eagles' not guilty plea was rejected and he was fined £5. The law was widely disliked and regarded as absurd. According to local legend, which may or may not be true, an army officer in Bristol was prosecuted for buying a drink in a pub for his own wife.

Now retrace your steps back to the river and turn right onto the path next to the water; it veers away from the water at one stage but soon comes back to it. Continue along this until you come to a small footbridge. Cross this and take the path straight ahead of you until you reach St Philips Bridge.

9. Caterpillars: One of the most curious images of Bristol in the First World War is of caterpillar tractors going through the streets. Here they are pictured crossing St Philips Bridge, known in 1914 as the Ha'penny Bridge on account of the half penny toll which users had to pay when it originally opened.

In 1914 these machines were a novelty, and most were imported from the United States, but they proved themselves valuable at the Front, where they could be used for towing heavy guns and other loads in the worst environments. Numbers of them were taken to Bristol, where they moved up Park Street and across the Downs to Avonmouth, where they were shipped off to France. Later in the war there was a special caterpillar tractor depot at Avonmouth. It is not difficult to see where the idea for tank-tracks came. The first tanks used in warfare were shipped to France from Avonmouth as well.

