



Viewpoint

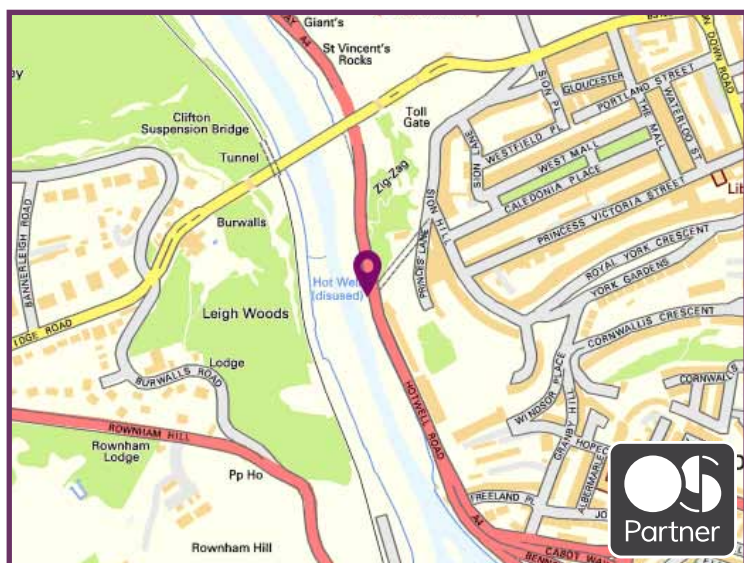
## Rock around the block



Time: 15 mins

Region: South West England

Landscape: urban



Location: Hotwell Road, Bristol BS8 4NU

Grid reference: ST 56546 72857

**Directions:** Go down the steep zig-zag path outside the Avon Gorge Hotel to the main road below. Cross over and turn left until you are opposite the building. Alternatively you can walk along the main road 200 metres from Hotwells/Clifton until you see the entrance on the gorge side.

**Keep an eye out for:** Clifton Gorge Bridge swaying above you

Deep in the bottom of Avon Gorge, across hectic lanes of urban traffic is something you could easily pass without noticing on busy journeys to and from Bristol city. Look again and embedded within the cliff face, the wizened frontage of a mysterious building emerges before your eyes.

The sturdy uprights and grand arches hint at a proud past with rather more grandeur than the unassuming and derelict state we find it in today. Whilst Brunel's mighty Bridge towers above you as a landmark of the city, another engineering feat quietly nestles within its lower foundations.

**What is the mysterious entrance for in the Avon Gorge cliff face?**



Now just a thoroughfare for getting in and out of Bristol, this site was once a hive of activity. Imagine in 1893 a busy port further downstream, huge paddle-steamers dropping off revellers, buses bringing people to and from the city, the River Avon a stinking open sewer...quite different to what you see today!

This area at the base of a limestone gorge was home to the working classes and merchant sailors. Out of sight high above was the Georgian wealth of Clifton, with its awe-inspiring views over the Avon and her city. To protect its style and elegance, Clifton had resisted rail connections with the masses of Bristol - but it wasn't left isolated not much longer.

In 1880 the Clifton Rocks Railway was conceived to link Clifton to the city's train line and the steamers that ferried people to and from Ilfracombe and South Wales. Some 13 years later a proposal finally won over the authorities - a railway buried within the rock face itself. It ran through a nearly vertical line with just two stations - a top and a bottom. We are now outside the latter.

The railway was the only underground cliff funicular in the world! It featured the widest tunnel of its kind at the time and was a self-financed venture by a Mr Newnes, a publisher and Member of Parliament in Cambridgeshire. His country residence in Devon brought him into contact with the Lynmouth Cliff Railway and its engineer, Mr G Croydon Marks. Newnes invested £10,000 - we can only assume that he had an interest in the area and a keen fascination with challenging railways!

At 450 feet (137 metres) long, the line followed an almost vertical height of 200 feet (61 metres) to take passengers to and from the Avon Gorge Hotel and the adjacent spa within the rock face. Four cars in two connected pairs were operated by gravity. Water ballast was let into the cars at the top station and out at the bottom, with a pump returning the water to the top of the system. A clever contraption!

On the opening day over 6,000 people enjoyed the trip and over 400,000 passengers rode it in the first year. Its prosperity was short lived though. Interest in spa destinations declined and as roads improved, the need for the railway diminished. The last journey was in 1934, just 40 years after opening.

There is an unexpected twist to this tale however... In 1941, with the Second World War raging across Europe, the BBC was looking for an emergency transmissions centre. They saw potential in this tunnel bedded deep inside the sturdy rocks and sent the BBC Symphony Orchestra in to test the acoustics. Even if Britain was in grave danger, radio listeners wouldn't be denied concert broadcasts of the highest quality!

The BBC set up in the tunnel until 1960, when costs and changes in technology rendered the site redundant again. It lay dormant until 2008 when a group of local enthusiasts began work to unveil this secret Victorian gem. They are raising funds to restore it and hope to bring people back again to this surprising but history-filled piece of Bristol's hidden heritage.