



Royal  
Geographical  
Society  
with IBG

## Connecting cities

A self guided walk to routeways in the Avon Valley



Discover the village of Saltford between Bath and Bristol  
Explore how it has been shaped by four major routeways  
Find out the physical and political stories behind their development

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the stories of our landscapes  
discovered through walks







## Contents

Introduction	4
Route map	5
Practical information	6
Commentary	8
Credits	21

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# Connecting cities

## Explore four different routeways in the Avon Valley

### Introduction

You may think of routeways just as means of getting from A to B, but on this walk in the Avon Valley you will discover that every route has its own story.

The Avon Valley links the cities of Bath and Bristol. Half way along, in Saltford village, you can find four different routeways located within a stone's throw of one another.

There is a former stagecoach road, The Great Road, now the present A4 and one of Britain's busiest A roads. There is the River Avon, which was converted into a canal in the eighteenth century, although it is used now by narrow boats for holidays rather than by barges carrying coal.



Cycle route sign  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



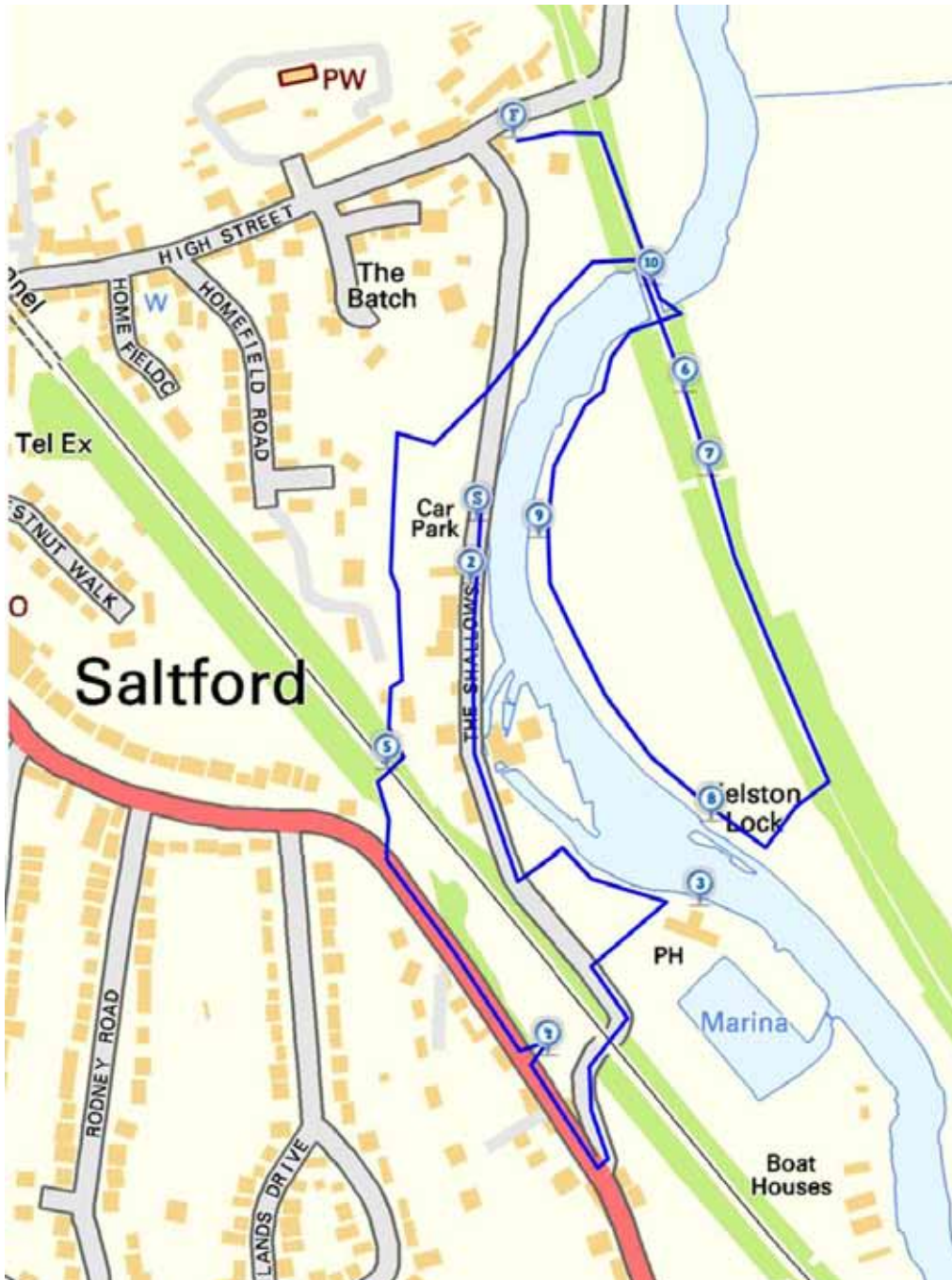
Narrow boats moored at Saltford Marina  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

And there are two railway lines – Brunel's Great Western Railway, still the main Bristol-London route, and the now-defunct Midland line, which was converted into Britain's first Sustrans cycle track in the 1980s.

On this walk you will find out how each routeway fits into the landscape, hear some of the stories about the physical and political challenges to their construction, and discover how the routeways have been variously used for industry, transportation and leisure.



## Route map



### Stopping points

1. The Shallows
2. The Shallows
3. The Riverside Inn
4. A4 Bath Road
5. Footbridge over the railway
6. Information board, Bristol and Bath Railway Path
7. Information board, Bristol and Bath Railway Path
8. Beside Kelston Lock
9. Riverbank footpath
10. Saltford Bridge
11. Bird in Hand pub

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## Practical information

<b>Location</b>	Saltford, Somerset, Southwest England
<b>Getting there</b>	<p><b>Train</b> - the nearest railway station is Bath Spa (5 miles away). Direct services run to London Paddington twice an hour plus connections to Southwest England, the South Coast and South Wales</p> <p><b>Car</b> - Saltford is on the A4 between Bristol (7 miles away) and Bath (5 miles away). The only car park in Saltford is at The Shallows. It is free of charge. There is also some street parking</p> <p><b>Bus</b> - a bus service runs between Bristol and Bath, stopping outside the Co-op in Saltford. Services run every 12 minutes from 7am until 7pm each weekday and every 30 minutes at weekends.</p> <p><b>Bicycle</b> - Saltford is on National Cycle Network Route 4. There is a metal bike rack in the Bird in Hand pub car park</p>
<b>Start point</b>	The Shallows, Saltford, BS31 3EZ
<b>Finish point</b>	The Shallows or the Bird in Hand pub, BS31 3EJ
<b>Distance</b>	1½ miles
<b>Level</b>	Gentle – A largely flat route with just a small ascent and descent
<b>Conditions</b>	The route is on a mixture of lanes, pavements and paths. It is mostly quiet bar a short section beside the A4 where you should take care due to the fast moving traffic here. Also take care of children by the Avon Canal towpath.
<b>Suitable for</b>	<p><b>Families</b> - one short section on a busy road so take care with children</p> <p><b>Dogs</b> - keep dogs on a lead by roads and on grazing land</p>

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**Directions  
from the A4 to  
the walk start**

- On the A4 through Saltford look for a crossroads near a parade of shops (which includes a post office and car dealership).
- Turn into Beech Road (left if coming from Bristol; right if coming from Bath) which is indicated with an old fashioned signpost for Saltford Village and a modern sign for St Mary's Church and Evangelical Church.
- After about 250 metres is a T junction. Turn right into High Street and follow the sign for St Mary's Church. Take care as this road is quite narrow in parts.
- After about 300 metres turn right in front of the Bird in Hand pub and follow the narrow lane. Pass the public toilets on the right and park in the car park on the right immediately after.

**Refreshments**

The Shallows is an ideal place for a picnic.

There are two local pubs on the walk route which serve refreshments and food: the Riverside Inn (Stop 3) and the Bird in Hand (Stop 11).

**Facilities**

There are free public toilets at The Shallows (Stop 1 and 11)

**Other info**

**Saltford Brass Mill** is well worth a visit. The only working 18th century water mill in Britain, it is open on the second and fourth Saturday of the month from May to December. Group visits by prior arrangement. Contact Brian Cooper 01225 872954.

**Tourist  
information**

Bath Visitor Information Centre, Abbey Chambers, Abbey Churchyard, Bath BA1 1LY (Tel: 0906 711 2000)

Bristol Visitor Information Centre, E Shed, 1 Canon's Road, Bristol, BS1 5TX (Tel: 0906 711 2191)

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# 1. Welcome to the Avon Valley

## The Shallows

Hello! I'm Dick Bateman, a retired teacher. I've lived in Saltford village for 30 years and love exploring it on foot. I never tire of this place and am always discovering something new.

This is the Avon Valley, a busy but beautiful area on the southern edge of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The valley has a key position between the two cities of Bristol and Bath and this walk explores the routeways created to link the two cities and support various industries and economic activities in the area.



The Avon Valley at Saltford  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Half way between the two cities of Bath and Bristol is Saltford village, and here we can find four different routeways located within a stone's throw of one another. There is a former stagecoach road, The Great Road, now the present A4, one of Britain's busiest A roads. In the eighteenth century, the River Avon was converted into a canal but narrow boat barges are now used for holidays rather than for carrying coal. And there are two railway lines – Brunel's Great Western Railway is still the main Bristol-London route and the now-defunct Midland line, which was converted into Britain's first Sustrans cycle track in the 1980s.

On this walk you will find out about how each routeway fits into the landscape, hear some of the stories about the physical and political challenges to their construction, and discover how the routeways have been variously used for industry, transportation, leisure. The walk is a couple of miles long and it loops in a figure of eight, starting and finishing at The Shallows car park, which is just by the river bank. The route is mostly flat, with just a few steps and slopes, and so should be suitable for most people. I hope you enjoy the walk!

### Directions 1

From The Shallows car park, go to the river bank for Stop 2.



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## 2. What's in a name?

### The Shallows

Though people have lived in this area for thousands of years, the village was probably first built in the period 1200 to 1500 years before the present day. The place name 'Saltford' is Anglo-Saxon, although there are at least three possible meanings for the name, which people argue about.

It could mean 'Salt Ford', because in those days there were no weirs on the River Avon and water here could have been salty, whereas, the tidal salt water did not reach the riverside village of Freshford, on the Avon to the east of Bath.



A peaceful stretch of river – The Shallows, Saltford  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

The Domesday Book entry for this place was 'Sanford' and that could have come from 'Sand-ford' because the banks are sandy. Equally interesting are early references to 'Saehl ford', meaning ford of the willows. That is also plausible – indeed, you will see many picturesque willows along the bank here.

Each of these three possible name origins includes 'ford', which means a shallow place in a stream or river that can be crossed on foot by people or horses. When you're looking across the river towards the Cotswolds, this spot with the Brass Mill to the right and the Bird in Hand to the left, is that fordable section of river and is now known – appropriately – as The Shallows.

#### Directions 2

Walk along The Shallows with the river on your left. Shortly after Saltford Brass Mill and a cottage is a footpath on the left hand side. Follow this footpath into the grounds of The Riverside Inn. If this path is too overgrown or waterlogged, you can continue along the lane and enter the pub grounds through the vehicle entrance and car park. Stand outside the pub overlooking the weir for Stop 3.

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### 3. Improving navigation

#### The Riverside Inn

Here we are at the Riverside pub looking at Kelston Lock. The River Avon is the first of the routeways that we shall be looking at on this walk.

In the days before the Industrial Revolution, anyone wishing to move goods across the country had to entrust their merchandise to jolting carts or pack animals on deplorable roads. The Bath Corporation were keen on various schemes to make the Avon navigable as far as Bath because road transport from Bristol was difficult and expensive “by reason of rockie and mountaynous waies”.



Kelston Lock on the canalised River Avon  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

But there was a lot of opposition to these plans. There were too many powerful people with vested interests in maintaining the status quo. Here on the Avon, mill owners didn't want the river made navigable in case it reduced the flow to their waterwheels. So, although an act was passed in 1712 to make the Avon navigable as far as Bath, nothing happened.

Eventually, the various voices of opposition were overcome and a consortium set about the task in 1724. Building the Avon Navigation was actually quick because no horse towing path was needed – all the boats were hauled by men. In December 1727, the first cargoes arrived in Bath.

But the improved waterway still wasn't popular with everyone. Here we are at Kelston Lock, but in 1738 Saltford Lock – the next lock downstream – was blown up by Somerset coal miners who feared that the new waterway would mean that cheaper Midlands or Welsh coal could be brought in and thus threaten their livelihoods. The navigable river was upgraded further in 1820 to connect with the Kennet and Avon Canal, achieving the long-held ambition of a waterway linking Bristol with London.

#### Directions 3

Leave the Riverside Inn through the car park. Turn left onto the lane and follow it under the railway bridge. Take care here as vehicles can come round the blind corner at speed. At the main A4 Bath Road, turn right along the pavement. After a short distance is an entrance to a railway storage yard. Stand here for Stop 4.

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## 4. The Great Road

### A4 Bath Road

This is the former Saltford Station. A group called Saltford Environmental Group are trying to re-open the station, but more of this at the next stop.

This is the A4, a road that runs all the way from Trafalgar Square in London to Avonmouth via Maidenhead, Reading, Newbury, Chippenham, Bath and Bristol. It used to be called The Great Road. This routeway has gone through many transformations through the ages – from Roman roads to basic wagon tracks connecting market towns in the Middle Ages.



A Bristol to London mail coach with a hunt beyond  
Oil painting by John Charles Maggs  
<http://www.wikigallery.org/> (Creative Commons License)

It was not until the seventeenth century that a distinct route between London and Bristol started to resemble today's road. During the seventeenth century, that's when the A4 was known as The Great Road to Bristol. But when Queen Anne started patronising the spa city of Bath, the road became more commonly known as Bath Road. This stretch of road in Saltford still bears that name.

As Bath became more popular with the wealthy and famous, Turnpike Trusts were set up under the terms of the Turnpike Acts to pay for maintenance to the road.



An 1823 Turnpike Trust milestone  
near Saltford

Dick Bateman © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

With improvements being made to the road system, the business of moving mail became easier and thus more profitable. Journey times from Bristol to London fell from 2 days in 1752 to 38 hours in 1782 and only 18 hours by 1836. Royal Mail coaches in 1836 were able to do the trip in 12–13 hours.

In the early part of the nineteenth century coaching was at its height. In 1830, there were six stagecoaches each day carrying passengers to and from London along the Bath Road. This had risen to ten per day by 1836.

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But the coaching services were to be short-lived with the rise of the railways. The Great Western Railway, which we shall see at our next stop, followed a very similar route with stations in many of the same towns as the road passed through. By 1843, the coaching service had finished altogether.

In the twentieth century, the A4 lost its status as the primary road between London and Bristol. The M4 motorway was constructed between 1965 and 1971. Journey time from London to Bristol by car is now about 2 hours – quite different from the days of the mail coaches!



The Toll House on the A4 is now a private house  
Dick Bateman © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

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#### **Directions 4**

Continue up the hill. Just before the top of the hill where the road bends to the left is a footpath on the right hand side. This is a good point at which to stop and look at the view of the valley including the river and railway. Follow the footpath to the bridge over the railway for Stop 5.



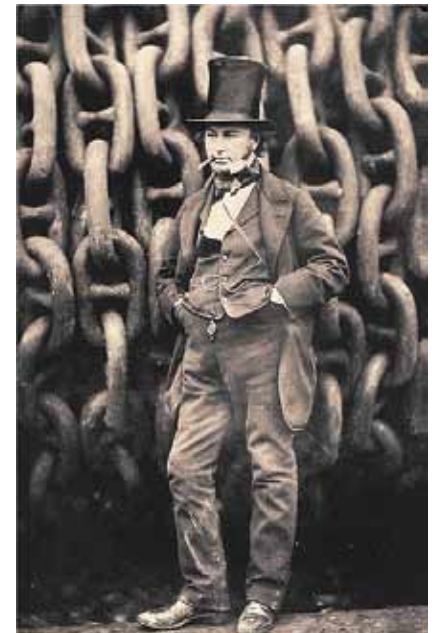
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## 5. The Great Western Railway

### Footbridge over the railway

As we heard at our previous stop, the Great Road was superseded by the Great Western Railway. By 1830, a railway was under construction linking London with the port of Liverpool. Merchants in Bristol were afraid that they would lose their status as the second port in the country and the primary one for trade with America. So Bristol wanted its own railway line. In 1833, Isambard Kingdom Brunel was appointed to be Chief Engineer for the Great Western Railway. It was to be built to unprecedented standards of excellence in order to out-perform the lines being constructed in the north-west.

Many stretches of the route between London and Bristol posed engineering challenges to Brunel, who – when he took the job – had no previous knowledge of railways. But he was an engineering genius and managed to design and construct track, buildings, locomotives, bridges, cuttings and embankments to overcome every problem in his way.



Isambard Kingdom Brunel (1857)  
Wikimedia Commons



“Began Digging the Rail Road June 11 1836”  
Historic graffiti found at Saltford Brass Mill  
By kind permission of Tony Coverdale

On this stretch, the line parallels the River Avon. To maintain a low gradient, it runs over the flood plain on an embankment and in cuttings through the valley sides. The rock in this cutting – blue and white Lias limestone – is laminated by mudstone (in other words, clay). This is a combination that is unstable, causing frequent landslips. It is a hazard that faced Brunel 170 years ago and is still present. Preventative work in the cutting has cost Network Rail – we reckon – over £10 million pounds over the last ten years.

On 30 June 1841, the first train carried the Great Western Railway’s directors and Brunel from London to Bristol in just four hours. Just over one hundred years later, the Great Western Railway became the Western Region of British Rail.



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This is still the West Country's main railway line. These days, high speed trains make the journey from London Paddington to Bristol Temple Meads in as little as one hour and 42 minutes. But they don't stop in Saltford. The station – where we stood at our previous stop – closed in 1971. But locals – such as Chris Warren who we have with us – are campaigning to reopen the station.

**Chris:** Saltford Environmental Group was formed in January 2011 and by July 2011 we were ready to have our first public meeting to gauge public opinion about whether the villagers would like their station back. It was an overwhelming success – we had 140 people turn up – and we were all singing from the same hymn sheet. So the current situation is we have political support at Bath and North Somerset Council and we are about to launch a doorstep petition just to get a body of opinion which we can then present to various people who will ultimately make the decisions. But as a lobby group, we've had incredible success in a very short space of time and I'm very hopeful that we can achieve our ultimate aim of, within five years, having our station back.



Saltford station c. 1920  
© Akeman Press Archive



Site of Saltford station 2010  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

### Directions 5

Cross to the other side of the bridge and turn left with the metal fence of the railway cutting on your left. After a short distance, the path forks – take the right fork between houses. Where the path forks again with steps upwards to the left and a path straight on, go straight on. After a short way the path goes down steps to reach the Shallows car park.

Turn left onto the lane past the public toilets. On the opposite side from the toilets is a gateway leading to a permissive footpath. Follow this footpath and up the steps onto the embankment of the old railway and turn right.

**Note:** After wet weather this footpath path can get very muddy. For a dry alternative, continue along the lane to the Bird in Hand pub. Turn right down the lane and just below the pub car park is access up onto the embankment of the old railway. Turn right along the track.

Keep to one side as the track is often busy with speeding cyclists. Cross the bridge over the river. Stop after about 200 yards at the information board and bench.

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## 6. An industrial line

### Information board, Bristol and Bath Railway Path

Just a few hundred metres from the Great Western Railway is another railway line. This line was part of the Midland Railway, which was primarily an industrial route, built in 1844, to link Bristol's industrial centre with local collieries in Kingswood to the immediate east and north of Bristol. Twenty years later, this spur line was built from Mangotsfield – on the already existing line – through Saltford to Bath.

This is the site of the old Kelston Station. Interestingly, the landowner – Inigo Jones – allowed the railway to go through his land on condition that he could contact the railway company and get the train to stop to allow his wife and daughter to go to Bath. They agreed and that's what used to happen!

Like the A4 road and the Great Western Railway, this line also followed the easiest route through this area along the lowlands of the River Avon valley. The nearby Bird in Hand pub opened in 1869 to service 'navigators' – the navies – the men employed to dig out a cutting and build a bridge and embankment for this railway.

In the twentieth century, this was part of the London, Midland and Scottish line (LMS), which used to link Birmingham and Bristol with Bath.

This line linked with the Somerset and Dorset line (or the 'Slow and Dirty' as it was fondly known). This stretch was closed to passengers in 1966 and finally to freight in 1971. But that was not the end of the story, as we shall hear at our next stop.



Site of the former Kelston station by the track up to Kelston village – for the convenience of Inigo Jones and his family  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Kelston station  
From [www.bristolbathrailwaypath.org.uk](http://www.bristolbathrailwaypath.org.uk)

#### Directions 6

You can stay at the information board or continue walking for Stop 7.

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## 7. Second incarnation

### Bristol and Bath Railway Path

As you can see, after the railway line closed, it had a second incarnation – as a cycle track. In 1977, the Cycle Bristol Action Group (Cyclebag) was formed. They were a group of cyclists and environmentalists, led by John Grimshaw, who were concerned about the over-dependence on cars and the lack of specific provision for cyclists in most British cities, in contrast to some other European countries.

In 1979, the group obtained planning permission to create a 2 metre wide dust track on the abandoned line between Bath and Bitton. Then, with the help of the county council, the group leased more of the line. And between 1979 and 1986, they constructed a cycle track on the full 13 mile length.



Bristol and Bath Cycle Path at Salford Bridge  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Information post at Salford  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG  
Discovering Britain

By 1983, Cyclebag had evolved into the charity Sustrans, still led by John Grimshaw. The Bristol and Bath Railway Path was the first cycle route created by Sustrans. Since then, Sustrans has created many more cycle routes across Britain, often making use of disused railway lines like this one. Individual routes were gradually joined up to make over 10,000 miles of designated cycle routes – the National Cycle Network.

Today, the path is a 3 metre wide tarmaced surface from Bristol to Bath and an attractive leisure and commuting route. Meanwhile Sustrans has become the UK's leading sustainable transport charity – and it all started here.

#### Directions 7

Continue along the track a short way until the first gap in the bushes on the right hand side where there is a wooden seat. Go through the metal gate and follow the path down the field. Go through another metal gate to the riverside. Go to the side of Kelston Lock opposite the Riverside Inn for Stop 8.



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## 8. Pleasure boating

### Beside Kelston lock

Just as the rail line we saw was transformed from a commercial routeway to a leisure routeway, so too has the main function of the river altered from one of trade and industry to one of pleasure and recreation. Salford Marina, across the river, is one of several examples along this stretch of the river of this changed usage. The marina is a family-run business with 85 moorings on the river front and within the marina. There are residents who live on boats all year round and commute into Bristol and Bath, as well as holiday boats and day trippers.



Salford Marina  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Narrowboat at Salford Marina  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



Narrowboat at Salford Marina  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

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#### Directions 8

From the lock, follow the riverside footpath with the river on your left. Pause partway along this path for Stop 9.

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## 9. From towpath to trail

### Riverbank footpath

We have already seen how the railway line and river have changed in their primary uses from commercial routeways to leisure routeways. There's a third change of use here on the riverbank too.

As we heard earlier, when the river was made navigable in the eighteenth century, boats were hauled by men. They walked along towpaths on the bank dragging ropes attached to the barges and boats.



River Avon Trail information board at The Shallows  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain



River Avon Trail logo  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Now this former working routeway, where men sweated and toiled, is a designated footpath – the River Avon Trail. The trail runs 23 miles from Pulteney Bridge in Bath – upstream along this valley – through Bristol and to Pill in North Somerset. At this point the trail is on the south bank, opposite to where we are now.

#### Directions 9

Continue following the river bank footpath. Look out for kingfishers along this stretch of river. Go under the railway bridge then turn right to climb up the embankment. Turn right onto the cycle path and go onto the bridge. Stay on the right hand side of the bridge looking at the view for Stop 10.



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## 10. Ancient routeways

### Saltford Bridge, Bristol and Bath Railway Path

From here on the bridge, look up the hillside to the hedgerow line leading to the saddle between Kelston Round Hill on your right and the flat top of Lansdown straight ahead where Bath racecourse is. That hedgerow follows the line of a Roman Road. This ancient routeway is believed to have linked the Roman city of Bath with the port of Abonae, which is now Sea Mills near the confluence of the River Avon with the River Severn.

Like the modern routeways that we have looked at, this ancient routeway also follows the line of the Avon valley, but the major difference is that it is positioned on the rim of the valley rather than in the bottom of the valley.



The horizontal hedgerow on the hillside marks the Roman road between Aquae Sulis (Bath) and Abonae (Sea Mills)  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

Up on that hillside, there is not only evidence of human presence in the Roman period, but also of the earlier Stone, Bronze and Iron ages. There are several reasons why these ancient peoples preferred to be on higher ground. First of all, most of the country at that time was covered in thick forest. On higher ground, trees were sparser and people could move about more easily. Second, hills and ridgeways provided defensive sites.

Over subsequent centuries, people gradually moved downhill. All across the country, you will see that today, there are many more villages and towns on the river terraces just above the valley bottoms – like Saltford – than on the valley sides or the hilltops.

#### Directions 10

Immediately after the bridge, you can turn left down the steps and follow the footpath the way you came back to The Shallows for Stop 11.

**Alternatively**, you can carry on a short way further along the track to the Bird in Hand pub on the left hand side for Stop 11. You might like to finish your walk with some refreshment. The 'bacon buttie and a cup of tea' deal is highly recommended (not available Sundays).

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## 11. More than just getting from A to B

### Bird in Hand pub or The Shallows

Routeways are essentially ways to get from A to B. They are linear paths. But here in Saltford, rather than travelling along routeways, we have looked at a cross section of routeways in one location. Here in the valley bottom are four different routeways – a river, road and two railway lines. We have seen how the physical landscape strongly influenced how the routes were positioned, but also posed some challenges for construction.

We have learnt how the routeways were vital for industry and commerce, in particular linking this area with the capital, London, and with the port of Bristol. Many industries thrived in this area because of these routeways. We have also seen how the functions of routeways have changed over time – the main road superseded by a motorway, a disused railway line turned into a cycle track, the river used for pleasure rather than for commerce, and a towpath turned into a walking trail.

I hope you've enjoyed this walk. Perhaps next time you cross over a railway bridge, walk alongside a river or drive along a main road, you can think about the reasons for its position, the challenges of its construction, the people and traffic that have used it, and its future.



The four routeways in the Avon Valley at Saltford (clockwise from top left): the A4, the Great Western Railway, the Bristol and Bath Cycle Path and the River Avon at Kelston Weir  
Rory Walsh © RGS-IBG Discovering Britain

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## Credits

The RGS-IBG would like to thank the following people and organisations for their assistance in producing this Discovering Britain walk:

- **Dick Bateman** for creating the walk and providing photographs
- **Vivian Godfrey** at the old station master's house for sharing the fabulous view from her garden
- **Chris Warren**, Saltford Environment Group transport spokesperson, for talking about the campaign to re-open the village station
- **Jenny Lunn** for editing the walk materials
- **Rory Walsh** for taking photographs
- **Caroline Millar** for editing the audio commentary
- **Neil McKenna, Alex Ricketts, Nick Stanworth** and **Florence Lee** for additional assistance with compiling walk resources
- **Tony Coverdale** and **Akeman Press** for additional archive photographs

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## **Further information**

Find out more about the walk story and places of interest along the route:

### **Bristol and Bath Railway Path**

[www.bristolbathrailwaypath.org.uk](http://www.bristolbathrailwaypath.org.uk)

### **Brunel 200 - Great Western Railway**

[www.brunel200.com/great\\_western\\_railway.htm](http://www.brunel200.com/great_western_railway.htm)

### **Queen of Waters: A journey in time along the Kennet and Avon Canal**

by Kirsten Elliot, Bath: Akeman Press, 2010

### **River Avon Trail**

[www.riveravontrail.org.uk](http://www.riveravontrail.org.uk)

### **Saltford Environment Group**

[www.saltfordenvironmentgroup.org.uk](http://www.saltfordenvironmentgroup.org.uk)

### **Saltford Marina**

[www.saltfordmarina.co.uk](http://www.saltfordmarina.co.uk)







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