



The Centenary of

The Cabot Memorial Tower

Brandon Hill

1897 - 1997



The Cabot Memorial Tower

The Cabot Memorial Tower is one of Bristol's landmarks. By day, it is visible from many parts of the city, and at night its beacon flashes a message in Morse code. A climb to the top gives spectacular views over the city and surrounding countryside.

Yet the Tower's existence owes a lot to luck, as the story of its planning and construction reveals.

Visiting the Tower

The Tower is open from dawn to dusk every day and admission is free. The walk to the Tower takes no more than ten minutes. The climb to the top involves many quite steep stairs, so some people may find it difficult, but there are worthwhile views from the base of the Tower.

As you leave the Museum, turn left and walk to the traffic lights just beyond the Wills Tower entrance. Cross Park Row and Park Street to Berkeley Avenue (by Blackwells bookshop). Walk to the top of this road where it enters Brandon Hill park. Bear right, where you will see the footpath that leads up the hill to the Tower.

Written by A King
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Features of the Tower

Around the base of the Tower are the emplacements constructed for captured Russian guns brought back to England after the Crimean War and placed on Brandon Hill in 1857.¹ The site had previously been occupied by a fort during the Civil War and before that, a mill and a hermitage; evidence of all these uses was uncovered when the foundations for the Tower were dug.

Over the entrance door in the north side are the ancient arms of the City. On the eastern arch are the arms of Henry VII and a plaque recording Cabot's voyage. In the south arch, under the arms of the Society of Merchant Venturers is a tablet placed by the Bristol branch of the Peace Society, and in the west the arms of Venice (Cabot's supposed home) and a plaque recording the start and opening of the Tower.

The observation platforms are reached by two spiral staircases (though the original plan was to have a square main staircase), the second being very narrow. Provision was made for the stairs to be lit by electricity, quite a novelty at the time, and four arc lamps illuminated the top.

On the upper platform are brass plates recording the distances and directions to places and landmarks which can be seen from the Tower, and others which cannot. When the Tower first opened, there was an exhibition of sketches by the Bristol artist Sidney Loxton showing buildings which could be seen from the balconies.

A flashing beacon seems to have been installed on top of the Tower in the 1920s as a navigational aid to aircraft. It nightly flashed the word "BRISTOL" to aircraft in Morse code. The mechanism was replaced in 1995 with a computer-controlled machine capable of being programmed with different messages.

The Architect and His Design

William Venn Gough (1842-1918) has been described as "a rogue architect with at times something maniacal about his designs."² His buildings include several which can still be seen today, notably the former Port of Bristol Authority offices in Queen Square, the Western Counties Co-operative Society warehouse on Redcliffe Back and St Aldhelm's Church in Chessel Street, Bedminster.

Gough said his design for the Cabot Memorial Tower was based on a tower in the Department of the Loire in France, but in a style prevalent in England at the time of Henry VII. Originally intended to be built in local grey limestone with Bath sandstone dressings, Gough altered the main body to be Mansfield red sandstone, the better to emulate Tudor style, in his opinion. Modern architectural commentators find the whole building confusing, with assemblages of details that are unexpected and strange.

The Tower is square, measuring 27ft (8.4m) each way and stands 105ft (32.4m) high overall. The upper of the two balconies is 75ft (23.4m) high and above this, on top of the spire, is a gilded figure, intended to be Peace or Commerce, surmounting a globe (various sources attribute both names to the figure).

¹ A photograph of one of these guns is printed in Reece Winstone's *Bristol in the 1890s*. They were removed during the Second World War as a contribution to the war effort, and can be seen being loaded aboard a ship in the video *Bristol Through Time; Part 2, The War Years*.

² A Gomme, M Jenner, B Little, *Bristol; An Architectural History* (1979).

History of the Tower

Beginnings

In the 1890s, Canadian academics began lobbying for celebrations to mark the 400th anniversary of John Cabot's voyage of discovery in 1497. They had the political support of the new Liberal government under Wilfred Laurier, who was keen to promote the idea of Canadian nationhood. Cabot was seen as a symbol of this national identity, the founder of the new nation. Canada unveiled a plaque at Halifax, Nova Scotia, and erected a memorial signal tower at St Johns Newfoundland. It was considered important that Bristol should mark the event with equal enthusiasm.

Bristol, which in former years had done little to mark Cabot's anniversaries, was taken aback to be invited to contribute. The local press took up the idea and designs for a proposed memorial were published; Mr John Fisher of the Kensington College of Art in Berkeley Square made a small model of his proposal, showing a 5m high Cabot (looking somewhat like Garibaldi) and son sighting the new land,³ whilst the well-known local sketch artist Sidney Loxton suggested a large domed building containing a Cabot Museum for Brandon Hill.⁴

Committee and Competition

A committee was formed to discuss how best to mark the event. Many of Bristol's foremost citizens served on it. The Chairman was W Howell-Davies, the Lord Mayor who had witnessed the unveiling of the Nova Scotia plaque in his official capacity. One of the two Secretaries was JW Arrowsmith, the head of a major local printing firm, who also dealt with the Committee's printing requirements. Other members included Francis Fox, Herbert

Ashman, Mark Whitwill, JR Bennett, JF Fry and others representing Bristol's commercial and industrial interests. They decided upon a memorial, and a £50 prize was offered in the competition for the best design. The cost of the memorial was to be raised by public subscription, with a target of £5000; in the event, only a little over £2000 was raised and the subscribers had to be asked to contribute a second time to meet the full cost.⁵

The competition attracted six entries, those of architects WV Gough and G Oatley being shortlisted over designs by J Hart, a Mr Hirst and EP Warren.⁶ All were local architects, although Warren was practising in London. Gough's design eventually triumphed.⁷

Finding a President

Having been turned down by Joseph Chamberlain (then Secretary of State for Trade) and the Marquess of Lorne, the Committee was understandably relieved when their third choice, the Marquess of Dufferin & Ava, a former Governor-General of Canada, finally agreed to become the Cabot Celebration's President. The Committee Secretaries then spent some time persuading the Marquess to break a prior engagement and officiate at the foundation stone ceremony on 24 June 1897.

Where should the Tower go?

Until the middle of April 1897, no-one knew where the Tower would be erected. The original intention to build it on Observatory Hill on the Downs overlooking the Avon Gorge met with opposition from powerful local residents, unhappy with the idea of the lower classes being able to see into their houses and gardens. The Downs Committee and the Society of Merchant Venturers would not support the project without an indemnity

protecting them from anyone taking action against them at a later date. A second proposed site on the Downs between the Gully and the top of Fountain Hill met with no more success. The Leigh Woods Land Company was approached for a site on the opposite bank, but no suitable plot could be found.⁸

Early in April 1897, the City Council was approached for permission to use Brandon Hill. At the meeting of the Council on 14 April, it was reported that "*An effort was made to show that the site was objectionable because persons who climbed the tower might possibly, with the aid of a telescope, see into the back gardens of some of the surrounding houses.*"⁹ With typical Bristolian caution, Councillor WW Jones expressed the opinion that "*they ought to do them (the Cabots) honour; but they had waited 400 years to do it and do not let them rush into the wrong thing in a hurry at the last moment.*"¹⁰ Despite this opposition, the site on Brandon Hill was agreed. On 25 May, with less than a month to go, Lord Dufferin finally decided to break a prior engagement and to officiate at the stone laying ceremony. The Committee breathed a sigh of relief.

Laying the Foundation Stone

On 24 June 1897, the Marquess of Dufferin & Ava came to Bristol by train. He was driven in state from Temple Meads station to be presented with the Freedom of the City at the Council House. After an official luncheon in the Victoria Rooms, Lord Dufferin led a party of notables to Brandon Hill. There they found a number of spectators, probably slightly befuddled from the celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee the previous day, enjoying the music of Mr Webb's brass band which had been engaged to play for two hours. The stone was laid, using a ceremonial trowel which cost the Committee £8.25, and the usual speeches were made.¹¹

Building the Tower

Local builders Love & Waite of Backfields, St Pauls, who had tendered successfully for the building work, then began the work of building. A photograph survives showing the Tower under construction with Love & Waite's foreman Mr Henry Horseman standing alongside the site hut and at least nine men posing on the scaffolding.¹²

Opening the Tower

The Tower was completed in July 1898, but the official opening was delayed to coincide with the visit of the British Association for the Advancement of Science to Bristol in September. Lord Dufferin duly returned to Bristol on 6 September 1898 to open the completed Tower officially. The Lord Mayor handed him a ceremonial key, which Dufferin handed back having performed the unlocking.

3. *Bristol Observer*, 25 July 1896, p7.

4. *Bristol Observer*, 15 August 1896, p1.

5. The final cost was £3300, not completely met until February 1899 and helped by a £300 donation from the British Association for the Advancement of Science and the income from an Industrial Exhibition. Even the architect contributed over £15! *The Minute Book of the Cabot Celebration Committee housed at the Central Library, Bristol*, (Acc No B4398) list all of the individual contributions.

6. Warren's submission, a statue of Cabot on a plinth surrounded at a lower level by figures in the dress of sailors and soldiers of the day, is illustrated in *The Builder*, 6 October 1898, p308. I have been unable to trace any of the other unsuccessful designs.

7. Two of Gough's drawings survive at the Bristol Record Office, Acc No 4312(29). These, a perspective view and a plan showing a square staircase, scribbled over to represent a spiral replacement, are the drawings submitted to the City Council on 14 April when permission to build on Brandon Hill was sought.

8. *Minute Book* op.cit.

9. *Bristol Observer*, 17 April 1897 - not an entirely impartial report.

10. *Bristol Observer* 17 April 1897.

11. Both the trowel and the freedom casket survive in the hands of the present Marchioness of Dufferin & Ava.

12. A second, earlier photograph was published in Reece Winstone's *Bristol in the 1890s*, plate 87.