

The purpose of the Clifton Suspension Bridge Visitor Centre is to inform and entertain visitors to the Bridge. It depends on volunteers to keep open. A team of thirty cover two shifts a day 362 days a year, supported during the week by the Visitor Services Manager and at the weekends by a part time worker. Some have been volunteering for almost twenty years. Between us, we welcomed over 61,500 visitors during 2012. The numbers range from ten on a dark winters afternoon to over 600 on Doors Open Day. Visitors come from every corner of the world, from Iceland and Siberia to Zimbabwe and Peru, as we learnt in October 2012 when we invited visitors to place a dot on a large world map to show where they came from. For non English speaking visitors we have a factsheet, now in 15 languages, the translations provided via friends and contacts of the volunteers. We also have volunteers who are multilingual, including Mandarin, German and Greek.

The Visitor Centre, currently housed in a temporary portakabin, includes an exhibition about the history, construction and maintenance of the bridge, a small sales area and activities for younger visitors. Most popular of the activities are two large wooden jigsaws, made for and donated to the bridge. Children can design their own bridge on a colouring sheet. There is a life size cut out of Mr Brunel which is popular for a "photo op", particularly for those with school projects, and we can provide a top hat. We stamp passports for the Children's University 'Passport to learning' scheme and give free postcards to new visitors who have checked in on Foursquare. The Penny Press is popular with visitors of all ages.

Volunteers provide information about the bridge, Brunel and the local area. Questions are wide ranging covering the practical (directions to local facilities, walks and attractions), historical (who opened the bridge, what did Brunel die of, where is he buried) and technical (what is wrought iron, the weight of the bridge chains, the tidal nature of the River Avon). We encourage children to think about how the first link was made across the Gorge, why it is called a "suspension" bridge and just how does it stay up. Volunteers engage in a variety of ways, some enjoy getting down on the floor with young children doing the jigsaws, leaving parents time to look at the exhibition, others are comfortable discussing engineering details with civil engineers. To develop our own knowledge and improve the service we give volunteers have written an information sheet for a local walk under the bridge, prepared "The Bumper Book of Bridges" to help us answer questions about other famous bridges, brought in relevant newspaper cuttings and provided a local map showing how the area has changed through the ages.

A group of 11 volunteers have been trained to give bridge tours. There are free tours on Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holidays from Easter to the end of October. A volunteer organises the tour guide rota. In addition there are paid, booked group tours usually during the week. These can be school children, specialist groups or coach trips. Occasionally volunteers give talks about the bridge at other venues to groups, clubs or societies. They tailor the on site bridge tour to accommodate being away from the bridge.

Volunteers also sell souvenirs, deal with things that don't work, keep stock topped up and do the hoovering and dusting. We assist with the annual stock take and contribute suggestions for new products. When the Visitor Service Manager is away volunteers cover the cashing up and banking and deal with any problems that might arise with the rota. A new Visitor Centre is planned and during the Heritage Lottery Fund bid everyone has contributed ideas and more formally one volunteer is on the Property Committee. One of the volunteers maintains a large planter outside the Visitor Centre adapting the display to the season and we all keep an eye on the watering (not such an onerous job during 2012!)

Comments from visitors

"Very interesting exhibition, friendly and knowledgeable volunteers." "Interesting. Friendly staff."

"Really fun, lots of nice people." "Thanks Diane for all your knowledge."

"I briefly called in at the Visitor Centre on a purely informal basis. I was warmly welcomed by Diane and Andrew, two of the volunteers on duty... I was stuck by the well-designed name badges the volunteers wear. A small detail I know, but one that – alongside others like the visitors' book and the map on the wall showing where visitors come from – goes a long way to making people feel really welcome." – Simon Timms (Chair, HLF SW Committee)