

Re-evaluating the role of statues

Stuart Boydell

Like them or loathe them, statues are excellent learning resources and the recent events in Bristol and elsewhere should not dissuade us from using them to aid children's historical knowledge and enquiry skills. In fact, in the current climate, statues need a careful re-evaluation of their role within our towns.

The appalling murder of George Floyd in the US has led to protests around the world to highlight the horrors of racism. Much of the protest within the UK has thrown light on our history which includes people who are not only major historical figures but also played a part in slavery and other aspects of historical racism. The Black Lives Matters (BLM) movement has helped to put our knowledge of British history into a national discussion, including for schools and the history curriculum. It has raised the bar on the expectations of our history curriculum and it is challenging history teachers to be bolder about the topics we teach.

Statues and memorials play a central role in the discussion, with the statues of key historical figures, such as Sir Winston Churchill, Lord Nelson and Christopher Columbus firmly in the spotlight. Regardless of whether local and national elected assemblies decide that specific statues are to remain in public spaces or are moved to local museums they are still a valuable source for teaching the past. They do not have to remain to be seen as celebrations of an individual's achievements, but rather as historical artefacts through which

Edward Colston (1636–1721). The controversial statue was sculptured by John Cassidy in 1895 and toppled as part of the Black Lives Matters movement in 2020



society and schools can learn about and from the past. They can be the inspiration for more frank and honest debates about the roles these individuals had in local, national and international narratives. Teachers can help in making this change.

The people of Bristol still need to settle the legacy of Edward Colston and his statue. A relatively obscure man who died 299 years ago became a global symbol of the horror of historical slavery, on 7 June 2020, when his 195-year-old

statue was torn down and dumped into Bristol harbour. Attempts a month later to replace it with the statue of the BLM campaigner, Jen Reid, itself proved controversial and was quickly removed by the city's council. Statues are proving to be culturally and politically problematic but they need not be.

One of the outcomes from the BLM movement is the spotlight hovering over the history curriculum. For teachers like us, the content of our history provision is now subject to scrutiny from groups of current and

former students who want to see that school history covers topics and interpretations of history that are inclusive of all demographic groups. One way we can help to enable this national debate is by involving the youngest children and presenting them with age-appropriate evidence in carefully-crafted schemes of work that gives statues a new purpose and will empower them to form their own ideas about people and events in the past.

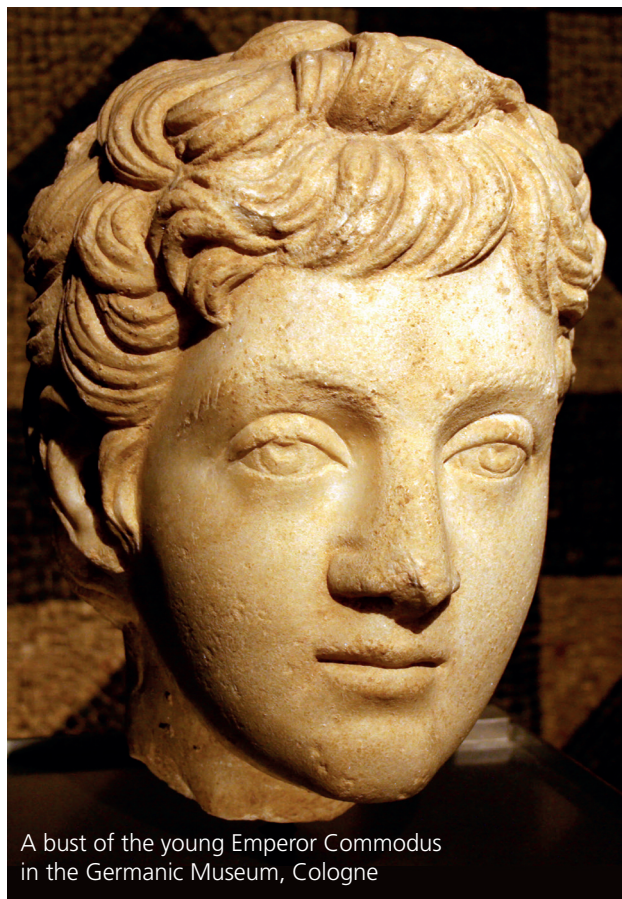
When there are so many statues of uncontroversial figures, such as the Jewish World War II pilot Arthur Aaron VC in Leeds, can we get away with sidestepping controversial figures? Not easily. Individuals such as Sir Francis Drake are often on a school's schemes of work because of their local as well as national historical significance. We shouldn't refuse to teach about them because of any personal qualms with negative aspects of the past. Equally, we don't want to be guilty of focusing only on their achievements.

How can we use statues to help us teach history in a primary classroom?

Every statue has its own history. The act of creating and placing statues has historiographies that can be as revealing about past societies as the figures they represent.

In Key Stage 1, the children begin to handle historical artefacts and to understand a little about how the past is recorded. A local statue makes a good starting point for an investigation exploring lives and events beyond living memory. It can be as simple as commenting on the style of dress before moving on to explore old photographs of the statue and the person it depicts at different times in the past. Key questions could include: has the statue always been in the same location? What came first: the person or the statue? Are there any similarities and/or differences between the time when the person was alive, his/her statue being created, and today? The statue could become part of the timeline within an investigation.

Brunel is a popular topic at Key Stage 1. One man but six statues of him along the M4 corridor. Why? What do these statues tell us about Brunel? For children in Hull: why is the Amy Johnson statue looking up into the sky and why is she holding a compass? From these simple starting points, we are encouraging the children to raise their own historical enquiry skills, look for similarities and differences and begin to develop a sense of chronology. With a bit of creativity, a statue could lead to a nice cross-curricular investigation. Many Key Stage 1 children learn about Queen Victoria and the Victorian era. Why not use a statue of her somewhere else in the world in order link the history to learning about contrasting locations in geography. There are plenty of statues of Victoria around the world. It would be a nice local link to the outside world geographically and historically.



A bust of the young Emperor Commodus in the Germanic Museum, Cologne

In Key Stage 2, statues again can be a key resource for investigation – most obviously, the ancient civilisations where statues were used as political and religious icons. Children can learn much about costume and the way key figures were seen by later artists. Key questions could include: Why do Roman leaders hold out their arms? Why do the male leaders hold something that looks like a stick? Why don't the women have the same pose as men? Why do the Roman statues rarely depict their leaders holding a weapon? What types of people do not have statues? Upper Key Stage 2 children can be introduced to the concept that there is as much, if not more, value in exploring what ancient statues don't show as much as what they do show. Also, children could explore statues of British monarchs from the Stuart and Hanoverian eras, which usually have classical historical overtones. It is from the Romans that we get *damnatio memoriae* (the erasure of memory) following the destruction of the statues after the assassination of Emperor Commodus in the second century AD. This is a perfect opportunity for children to explore the chronology (continuity and change) in reasons why statues are pulled down.

An exploration of the Islamic world, for example, could include investigating the significance of the gigantic statues of Persepolis. What do these statues tell us about power in that region before the arrival of Islam? What other ancient civilisations had a similar style of sculpture and art? Why did the statues survive the wars during the fifteenth century when so many

'Kindertransport' statue in London, Liverpool Street Station



other ancient sculptures were destroyed? Why do victors choose to destroy the signs of the people they defeated?

A post-1066 investigation could easily focus on a local statue. A statue I recall from visits to my grandparents' house as a child is an impressive statue of Prince Albert on horseback in Wolverhampton city centre. Its inauguration in 1866 is said to have been Queen Victoria's first official visit after Albert's death. An investigation of Britain during the wars could very easily focus on a local war memorial or statue to a local serviceman or servicewoman. Other possibilities include the poignant 'Kindertransport' statue in London, Liverpool Street Station reminding commuters of the thousands of Jewish children who were transported to the UK from Nazi-led Germany and Austria. Or, there is the 'Women of Steel' in Sheffield which honours the city's women working in steel factories as part of the war effort. It is a superb example of using the local area to ground learning about Britain more generally and its role within the world.

The 'Women of Steel' statue in Sheffield



Using statues as part of our primary history toolkit also hits all six aims within the National Curriculum:

1. Statues can help children begin to know and understand how people's lives shaped this nation. A quick search of local statues in your school's vicinity should help to identify key individuals who had an impact on the past.
2. Children need to know and understand the history of the wider world. A local statue, such as Colston, can easily be used to introduce world history, as well as why that history might be controversial. In Bath, for example, the Roman statues at the Baths are a superb link that brings the city and the country into the wider Roman world. The fact that the statues do not date back to the Roman era furnishes further opportunity for teachers to explore the impact the Romans had on later periods of history long after the empire had collapsed. Similarly, any local war memorial can link the world wars to the local context.

3. By making history relevant we can develop a 'historically-grounded understanding of abstract terms'. Empire, for example, is a difficult concept to teach which should include an exploration of the impact the empire had on different nationalities. Sir Walter Raleigh's statue in Devon is testament to his role as an early proponent of empire. He is a local link into imperial historiography. Through his statue children can begin to see how abstract past concepts had a real impact both on lives in the past and, in Raleigh's case, continues to have an impact on people today.
4. Similarly, we can explore continuity and change using statues. Children in Shropshire might be familiar with the statue of Clive of India. Lord Clive is synonymous with the wealth generated from Britain's subjugation of India, but despite his controversial role, a recent meeting of Shrewsbury Council decided that the statue will stay. For children in Shrewsbury the statue links their lives, their period and the modern debate to their town's difficult but significant past.
5. We can use statues as hooks to explore contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past. Somebody in the past decided these people were significant enough to warrant a statue, but we don't have their full story. Does the statue itself tell us something more about the individual? Another potential area for investigation is exploring why some key historical figures do not have statues and why others, such as Mary Seacole, had to wait until recently to have a statue. Florence Nightingale's statue was put up in 1915, 101 years before Seacole was given the same recognition. Why is this?
6. Statues are a superb historical resource to help children to make connections between different contexts. Whether a statue is in a public space or has been removed to a museum it is still a key resource for teaching local history. Often statues are the only tangible evidence for primary children to know of the existence of a historical figure or event within their location.

A statue gives children a tangible artefact to hook their interest to explore the positives and negatives as history and society changes. The very fact that past societies chose to remember specific individuals will help to draw vital comparisons between today and the past in meaningful contexts that draw together local, national and even international histories. Crucial historical questions can be explored: questions about how much the past shaped and changed us today. It is important to remind ourselves that in exploring the lives of people behind the statues, particularly controversial figures, we don't appear to be condoning or crediting the past. The children are detectives and

The Mary Seacole statue, St Thomas' Hospital, Lambeth



analysts. A problem particularly within the primary years is that we tend to use our history topics to influence the rest of the curriculum. Not only should we re-evaluate what we teach but how we teach it and how we get the children to record their historical knowledge and understanding.

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Websites

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