

Portfolio - Edward Colston Statue

History of Edward Colston

'Offensive, abusive and distressing'¹ are the words used to describe the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol. When in Bristol, it is hard to avoid the legacy and effect of Edward Colston. Numerous streets, along with Bristol's principal concert hall, are titled after Colston; two schools and a few of the city's well-preserved almshouses carry his name; and the statue of Colston sits in the centre of Colston Avenue in the city centre. It is apt that there is an abundance of reminders of Colston everywhere in present-day Bristol, as Colston was the foremost philanthropist hailing from the city who donated to the city's charities and schools.² Colston was deeply worried about moral and social reform in his later years. Colston bestowed ample funds to numerous organisations in and around Bristol.

Edward Colston was born in Bristol in 1636 and died in 1721. Colston was a philanthropist, slave trader, English merchant and politician. He was an MP for Bristol from 1710 til 1713. Colston joined the family business as a sea merchant, originally trading in fruits, fabric and liquor, largely in Portugal, Spain and European harbours. By 1680, Colston was participating in the slave trade, taking the senior executive position in the Royal African Company. This company occupied a monopoly on the British trade regarding enslaved Africans. Colston also held the position of deputy governor of the Royal African Company from 1689 to 90.

On 7th June 2020, the statue of Edward Colston was torn down by protesters during protests across the world subsequent to the unlawful killing of George Floyd in America. The protesters smeared the statue with blue and red paint, and one of the protesters put his knee on the neck of the statue mirroring how Floyd died, by a white police officer kneeling on Floyd's neck for close to ten minutes. The statue was subsequently pushed down Anchor Road and tumbled into Bristol Harbour. Just before this event, a petition was sent to the Bristol Council to take down the monument and accumulated more than 11,000 signatures. The Avon and Somerset police Superintendent Andy Bennett asserted that they had decided not to interfere and allow the monument to be pulled down, stating a concern that getting involved and attempting to stop their actions, would increase violence and could cause a riot. The police also asserted that it was criminal damage to topple the statue and confirmed that an investigation would take place to identify who was involved, adding that they were in the process of gathering video recordings of the event.

¹ Katy Watts, *The Bristol Cable* (2022) <<https://thebristolcable.org/2022/09/colston-4-judgement-the-government-is-tearing-up-our-protest-rights/>> [accessed 21st February 2023]

² Kenneth Morgan, *Edward Colston and Bristol*, Bristol: Historical Association (1999), p.1.

The Bristol Council recovered the statue from the harbour on the 11th June 2020 at 5 am. When retrieving the statue, the Council found it was structurally sound; however, parts were missing, such as the walking stick and one of the coattails. Damage was also done to the statue's left side and one of the feet. The statue was cleaned to avoid corrosion, and the Council announced that they arranged for the statue to be shown in a museum including the graffiti and cables wrapped around it by the protesters.

The slave trade was crucial to Bristol's prosperity and success, and there were few slave trader that was more notorious or financially prosperous than Edward Colston. According to the BBC:

'Colston made his fortune through human suffering. Between 1672 and 1689, ships are believed to have transported about 80,000 men, women and children from Africa to the Americas'.³

Slaves shipped from West Africa were burned with 'RAC' on their skin, the initials of the company, followed by being forced onto overcrowded vessels and shoved into an unspeakable and horrific crossing. Hundreds of slaves were laid down in dirt and excrement, closely restrained with chains and manacles together. Homicide, disease and suicide were rife on the ships; somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of slaves died throughout the six to eight-week crossing from West Africa to America. This massive scale of human misery made Colston incredibly wealthy.⁴

The crucial thing is, whilst it is unavoidable that you will come across Colston in Bristol, an emphasis on one person in:

'many ways misses the point and leads to a misunderstanding and distortion of the legacy of Transatlantic slavery. This is especially true when it comes to port cities cities such as Bristol and Liverpool.'⁵

The legacy of the slave trade cannot be affixed to one person; this trade did not and could not have occurred and survived in isolation.

The statue and its controversy

The statue of Edward Colston is an 18-foot statue made of bronze. It has been located on Colston Avenue since 1895 as a memorial to Colston's charitable endeavours, 'an avenue he developed after divesting himself of

³ Pamela Parkes, *BBC* (2020) <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-42404825>> [accessed 22nd February 2023]

⁴ Pamela Parkes, *BBC*

⁵ Caine Tayo Lewin-Turner, Bristol Museum <<https://www.bristolmuseums.org.uk/stories/blood-on-bricks-more-than-colston/>> [accessed 18th March 2023]

links to a company involved in the selling of tens of thousands of slaves.¹⁶ His endeavours in Bristol involved funds to run schools, churches and almshouses. The monument had been positioned in central Bristol; it was implemented during the peak of imperialism during Queen Victoria's reign.

'Bristol, an important merchant port city, was a central hub of colonial trading from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Some of the first colonial voyages set sail from Bristol to the Americas in the late fifteenth century.'¹⁷

The statue of Colston was assigned as a grade II listed construction in 1977.⁸ The monument has been a topic of contention and controversy because Colston's vast wealth was partly created from his participation in arranging the Atlantic slave trade due to his role as a senior executive of the Royal African Company. Opposition to Edward Colston existed long before his statue was pulled down during a Black Lives Matter protest in 2020. Starting in the 1990s, discourse on the ethics of revering and honouring Edward Colston has escalated. It led to an aggressive debate in Bristol and demanded the statue's removal. Before the demands, historians mainly presented Colston very positively, focusing on him being an extremely prosperous merchant who became a benevolent Philanthropist in his later years. Due to his charity, multiple buildings are named after him several of these buildings are being retitled.⁹

The historian Olivette Otele wrote a research article in 2012 in which she notes that in 1996, Bristol commemorated its Maritime history by spotlighting 'key explorers' while leaving out their participation in slavery and imperialism. This resulted in the Bristol Museum holding an exhibition in 1999 named '*Bristol and the Slave Trade*'. This exhibit remained until 2006 at the Bristol Industrial Museum. The sudden and hasty dethroning of Colston's statue from its plinth incited mass festivity. It also highlighted questions regarding how public education teaches imperialistic history to children, and the benefit of 21st century 'cancel culture'.¹⁰

Contesting Edward Colston statue

The author Bernardine Evaristo tweeted on the 8th June 2020:

⁶ Martin Farrer, *The Guardian* (2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/08/who-was-edward-colston-and-why-was-his-bristol-statue-toppled-slave-trader-black-lives-matter-protests>> [accessed 22nd February 2023]

⁷ Lydia Figes, *Art UK*, (2020) <<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/pushed-off-the-pedestal-who-was-the-slave-trader-edward-colston>> [accessed 28th February 2023]

⁸ Historic England, *Statue of Edward Colston* (2023) <<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1202137>> [accessed 25th February 2023]

⁹ Lydia Figes, *Art UK*,

¹⁰ *ibid*

'We cheered when Saddam Hussein's statue was toppled in Iraq after only decades as a dictator, so why object to the toppling of Edward Colston's 1895 statue in Bristol, a brazenly triumphant totem of 300 years of the British slave trade? Long overdue!'¹¹

The statue's destruction followed campaigns in other countries to get rid of monuments to slave owners and racists. One of these was a campaign called Rhodes Must Fall in South Africa, which called for a statue of Cecil Rhodes, who held racist views.

Aftermath of the events of 7th June 2020

The four people accused of toppling the statue during a Black Lives Matter protest in June 2020 were found Not guilty. The jury found them Not Guilty at the Bristol Crown Court after a short two and a half hours of deliberation. The trial lasted eight days, and the jury heard the four accused admit to their involvement. Rhian Graham and Milo Ponsford disclosed that they brought ropes, Sage Wiloughby admitted to fastening ropes to the statue, and Jake Skuse acknowledged that he assisted in rolling the statue into Bristol Harbour. There were estimated 10,000 people who attended the protest and encouraged the statue to be toppled.

The protesters' actions on the 7th June 2020 cumulated various responses. Priti Patel, Home Secretary, stated it was 'utterly disgraceful', and Boris Johnson, Prime Minister then, said the action was a 'criminal act', while other people held a more nuanced view. The Mayor of Bristol, Martin Rees, stated that the statue was a 'personal affront' to him; along with numerous other individuals for many decades, also that he 'did not feel any sense of loss'¹²; however, he did not accept the destruction. In interviews, Rees expressed the intricacies of the circumstances in which it had transpired, emphasising the difficulties and the necessity for a direct and candid discussion regarding the racial past and injustice in Bristol.

Although many people conveyed anger and shock that the monument was toppled, David Olusoga, professor of Public History, expressed that the most significant query was 'why 21st-century Bristol still had a statue of a slave trader on public display'¹³ to begin with. To the people who argued that getting rid of Colston's statue was an effort to eradicate Bristol's history, Olusoga replied that 'the toppling of Edward Colston's statue is not an attack on history - it is history'. The quickness with which similar cities in the

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Conrad Duncan, *The Independent* (2020) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/bristol-mayor-edward-colston-statue-black-lives-matter-protest-marvin-rees-a9554646.html>> [accessed 17th March 2023]

¹³ David Olusoga, *The Guardian* (2020) <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/08/edward-colston-statue-history-slave-trader-bristol-protest>> [accessed 17th March 2023]

UK acknowledged the incident by reassessing and taking down statues that do not echo the culturally diverse essence of modern Britain displays that these opinions are at long last being heard. The long and complicated history of the slave trade and colonisation that powered Britain's societal, political and financial authority for hundreds of years has become entwined with organisations and our society, with masses of individuals left blinded to everyday racism and power imbalance to continue.

Renegotiating and Reconsidering Edward Colton's statue

Countering Colston is a campaign established in 2015 by a system of activists and scholars; to campaign against the honouring of Colston. The campaign has endeavoured to alter how Bristol interacts with the past and legacy of slavery. It has used criticisms of Bristol's long-established celebration of Edward Colston to open discussions regarding slavery and to continue the economic and racial heritage.

The group are calling for change to attain and sustain the subsequent goals:

- 'Remember the full, true history of transatlantic slavery, colonialism and exploitation;
- Commemorate and mourn the people who suffered and died as a result of the slave trade, and recognise the coerced economic contribution that they made;
- Celebrate the people who courageously resisted slavery and fought for abolition and emancipation;
- Acknowledge and repair, as far as possible, the negative effects in the present day of historical slavery;
- Promote ideas human dignity, equality and freedom.'¹⁴

Countering Colston is vehemently opposed to the Society of Merchant Venturers, an organisation that has been criticised for its historical connections to slavery and, of course, slave trader Edward Colston. The society played a significant role in the management of establishments, including educational institutions and care facilities, connected with Edward Colston.

Following the toppling of the statue, in the summer of 2021, the 'We Are Bristol' History Commission started a public engagement regarding the

¹⁴ Countering Colston, *Countering Colston* (2020) <<https://counteringcolston.wordpress.com/useful-links/>> [accessed 17th March 2023]

future of the Edward Colston monument. Close to 14,000 people participated in voicing their opinions and ideas.¹⁵

The results of the poll found that the majority of people wanted to see the statue in an exhibit in a museum in Bristol. Three out of four respondents voiced that they believe the monument should be exhibited in a museum (74%). Bristol inhabitants choose this choice exceedingly more actively, with four out of five inhabitants of Bristol stating the statue ought to be displayed in a museum in Bristol (80%). Approximately one in six inhabitants from Bristol (16%) did not wish for the statue to be in an exhibit in a museum in Bristol. Within this 16%, around three-quarters wished for the statue to be reinstated on the plinth and around one-quarter believed it should be demolished or not in an exhibit.¹⁶

The poll found that there was a majority support for attaching a plaque to the plinth to indicate the circumstances of 7th June 2020. Over five out of eight participants (65%) approve of attaching a plaque. Encouragement for a plaque is even more noticeable in Bristol, where seven out of ten inhabitants of Bristol (71%) concur with attaching a plaque to indicate the circumstances of 7th June 2020.¹⁷

The poll discovered that views on what should happen with the plinth differed, even though the most chosen option was for the plinth to be utilised for provisional statues and artworks. Just below half of all respondents (49%) and almost six out of ten respondents from Bristol (58%) encourage utilising the plinth for provisional statues and artworks. More than seven out of ten respondents from Bristol are amenable to this idea (72%). This is favoured over the plinth being used for one artwork indefinitely - favoured by less than four out of ten (35% of the entire respondents and 38% of respondents from Bristol) - or the other option of keeping the plinth vacant - favoured by approximately three out of ten (29% of the entire participants and 31% of respondents from Bristol). A limited amount of people wanted the statue to be reinstated on the plinth (favoured by a little over one out of ten in Bristol) or wanted to see the plinth to be withdrawn altogether.¹⁸

¹⁵ We Are Bristol, *'The Colston Statue: What Next?: 'We Are Bristol' History Commission Full Report'* (2022) <[¹⁶ We Are Bristol, *'The Colston Statue: What Next?'*](https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/1825-history-commission-full-report-final/file#:~:text='On%2013%20November%201895%2C%20a,the%20enslavement%20of%20African%20people.> [accessed 28th February 2023]</p></div><div data-bbox=)

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ *ibid*

The poll discovered that most respondents felt the statue being removed was constructive. Over five out of eight respondents from Bristol (65%) stated they felt 'either very positive' (50%) to 'positive' (15%) regarding the monument being removed. Although inhabitants from Bristol were the most encouraging for the statue being removed, across the poll, more than half of the respondents (56%) stated they felt 'positive or very positive' regarding the statue being taken down. A little over one in three respondents (36% of the entire respondents in comparison to 27% of respondents from Bristol) stated having a negative emotion regarding this, with the way that the statue had been removed as the foremost reason for feeling like this.¹⁹

The poll found that age was the most prominent factor for the differing opinions. The younger generation reported more positive emotions regarding the removal and destruction of the Colston statue, while the older generation reported much more negative emotions.²⁰

Conclusion

The events of 7th March 2020 display the significance of an honest, open conversation in implementing and continuing social change. Both Martin Rees and Andy Bennett stated that although police were on the scene when the monument was pulled down, a choice was made to not interfere as involving themselves was highly probable to create a riot. In clarifying this choice, Bennet stated, 'whilst I'm disappointed people would damage one of our statues, I do understand why it has happened, it is very symbolic.'²¹ Bennet, similar to Rees, exhibited a nuanced comprehension of the problems and the opportunity for unanticipated reactions from him taking measures. It can also be inferred that he contemplated the broader circumstances of criminal justice in Bristol and the prolonged effects of stern and insensitive policing in circumstances such as the events of 7th June 2020.

This country's heritage of art and monument should shape a section of the critical and larger conversation that is necessary to have regarding how we tackle the disgraceful legacies resulting from the transatlantic slave trade in this day and age. Yet again, it presents the urgent and crucial query of whether imperialistic history should be a compulsory component of the education curriculum. Something that is unquestionable is that Colton's statue will not be the final monument that will be confronted, disputed and

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ ibid

²¹ Conor Gogarty, Bristol Live (2020) <<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/right-wing-people-came-down-4205570>> [accessed 17th March 2023]

discredited. The British public is observing and responding to public monuments today more than they have previously done.

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