CONTESTED HISTORIES

STATUE OF EDWARD COLSTON

Bristol, United Kingdom

51.4545, -2.5989

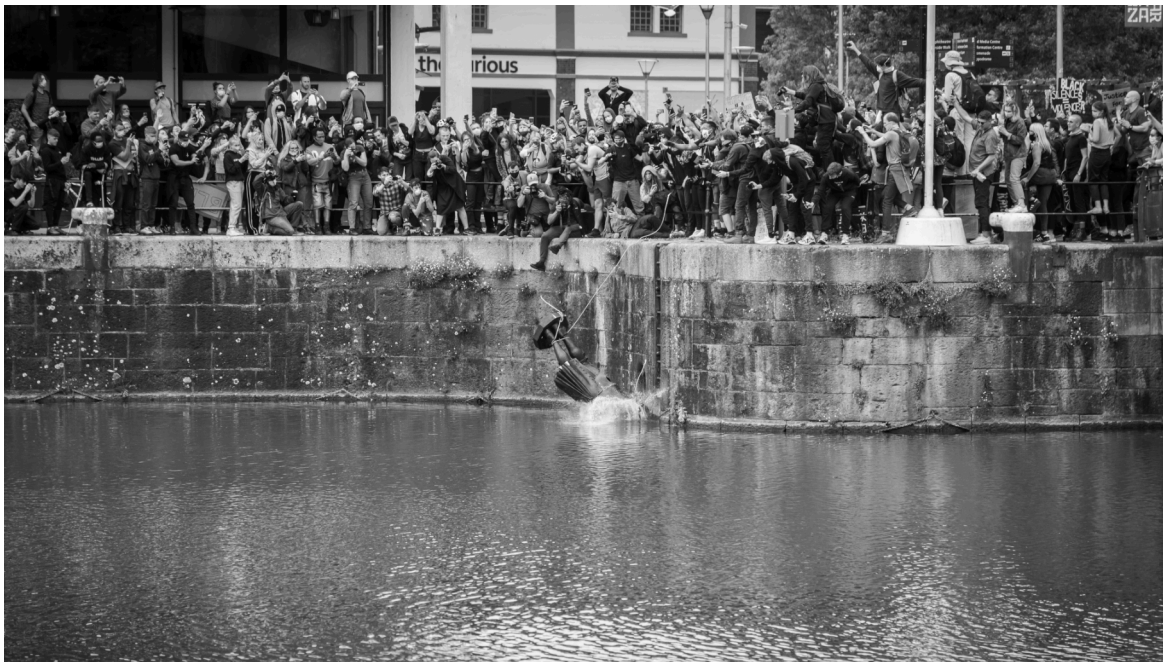

Image by Keir Gravil via Flickr CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

Executive Summary

The legacy of Edward Colston, a Bristol-born merchant and Royal African Company executive, involves a complex history relating to local politics, educational institutions, and organisations in Bristol. For many years, the Society of Merchant Venturers, which held significant influence over local heritage policy-making, curated and protected the Colston legacy. At the same time, several groups and individuals attempted to remove Colston's presence from Bristol's public spaces due to his involvement in the Transatlantic slave trade. The debate surrounding Colston's legacy spread outside of Bristol after Black Lives Matter protesters toppled Colston's statue into the Bristol Harbour in June 2020. The city is still dealing with the effects of these events and looking for solutions regarding contested narratives about imperialism and slavery in the city's public spaces.

Introduction

Edward Colston, a merchant born in Bristol, continues to contribute to worldwide conversation regarding the memory of the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism due to his complicated legacy surrounding imperialism, slavery, and local philanthropic activities. On June 7, 2020, during the height of the global Black Lives Matter protests, a multi-ethnic group of protesters pulled a statue of Colston down from its plinth and threw it into Bristol Harbour. This came after years of activist groups and individuals unsuccessfully petitioning for the statute to be removed through official channels.[1] The inability of campaigners to remove the statue through legal channels reveals a deep-rooted connection between heritage, public narratives of the past, and local government in Bristol.

Following the statue's removal and the international public attention generated from the incident, the Society of Merchant Venturers, a politically influential Bristol-based charitable organisation which had previously supported and cultivated Colston's legacy, reversed its commitment to protecting Colston's presence in public spaces.[2] In a public statement made on June 12, 2020, the group expressed a newfound commitment to 'removing statues, portraits and names that memorialise a man who benefited from trading in human lives' despite him having once been a member of their society.[3] Notwithstanding this high-profile change in stance towards Colston's legacy, various groups and individuals publicly advocated for the statue to be put back on its plinth and the Colston name to remain present in Bristol's public space, arguing that to remove them would be to erase or obscure parts of Bristol's history.[4] Overall, the forced removal of Edward Colton's statue and the subsequent acquittal of those responsible demonstrates how direct action outside of official processes can result in institutional and societal change. The contestation also represents a key moment in the timeline of the ongoing public discussion around controversial statues and heritage related to colonialism.

Background

Edward Colston was born in 1636 to a wealthy and well-known merchant family with Bristol connections dating back to 1340. His father was a member of the Society of Merchant Venturers (SMV), the largest mercantile organisation in Bristol.[5] Though Edward Colston inherited a significant amount of money from his father, he made the majority of his wealth through trading wine, spices and sugar. He had particular financial interests in trading sugar from the Caribbean island of Saint Kitts, where enslaved Africans produced the sugar.[6]

In 1680, Colston became a shareholder in the Royal African Company (RAC). The RAC held a monopoly on the British trade of enslaved persons. Around the time that Colston became a leading

[1] Tristan Cork, "How the city failed to remove Edward Colston's statue for years," Bristol Post, June 10, 2020.
[2] P.J. Gough and S.J. Morgan, "Manipulating the Metonymic: The Politics of Civic Identity and the Bristol Cenotaph 1919 - 1932," *Journal of Historical Geography,* no. 30 (2004): 669.
[3] Society of Merchant Venturers, "Statement from the Society of Merchant Venturers," *Society of Merchant Venturers*, June 2020.
[4] Damien Gayle, "Campaigners try to block Edward Colston display at Bristol museum," *Guardian*, June 7, 2021.
[5] Kenneth Morgan, "Edward Colston and Bristol," *Bristol Branch of the Historical Association*, (1999): 1.
[6] "Edward Colston, Slave Trader born," *AAREG,* Accessed August 16, 2022.

RAC officer and investor, the company reached the height of its trade and power. Colston involvement with the RAC lasted 12 years, during which time the company forcibly transported at least 84,500 enslaved West African people,[7] 14 per cent of whom were children.[8] One in five did not survive the journey, and those who did have RAC branded onto their chests before arrival.[9] Even after leaving the RAC, Colston continued his association with the Atlantic slave trade, supporting petitions for increased British involvement in the Transatlantic slave trade during his short term as a Member of Parliament.[10]

Before recent historical reinterpretations, Colston's legacy in Bristol predominantly related to his philanthropic activities and not his involvement in Britain's official slave trading apparatus. Despite spending most of his childhood in London and eventually settling in Surrey, Colston donated large sums of money to charitable causes in Bristol. This included founding hospitals and schools and donating to many Anglican organisations. In his will, Colston bequeathed 71,000 pounds (valued at over 16 million pounds in 2021)[11] to charity. This included over 40,000 to the Colston Hospital in Bristol, an education fund for one hundred poor boys from the city, and donations to almshouses and workhouses in London, Surrey, Lancaster, Devon, and Bristol.[12]

Legacy Cultivation by the Society of Merchant Venturers

The Society of Merchant Venturers largely presided over the cultivation of Edward Colston's legacy, as Colston conducted much of his charity work through the society and ceded control of his school trust to the society upon his death.[13] To the SMV, the Colston name represented their ability to do good in the city. The charitable actions of Edward Colston thus became part of the identity of the SMV, who, since the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act in Britain, were more concerned with charitable work and less involved in trade. The Colston name constituted an important part of their branding; he served as a symbol of the philanthropic values of the organisation. In 1895, 174 years after his death, the Society erected a statue in Colston's honour on Colston Road in Bristol city centre to celebrate his philanthropic contributions to the city. The plaque adorning the statue read: 'Erected by: citizens of Bristol as a memorial to one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city, AD 1895.'[14] The statue was not the only representation of Colston in Bristol's public spaces. His name was lent to roads, stained glass windows, Bristol's most famous concert hall, and several schools.[15] The Society also established a public celebration on Colston's birthday - November 13 - marked by

[7] Roger Ball, "Edward Colston Research Paper 2: The Royal African Company and Edward Colston (1680-92)," Bristol Radical History Group, June 10, 2020.
[8] Roger Ball, "Edward Colston Research Paper 2: The Royal African Company and Edward Colston (1680-92)," *Bristol Radical History Group*, June 10, 2020.
[9] Antonia Layard, "Edward Colston: Listing Controversy", *University of Bristol Law School blog*, June 2020.
[10] Roger Ball, "Edward Colston Research Paper 2: The Royal African Company and Edward Colston (1680-92)," *Bristol Radical History Group*, June 10, 2020.
[11] 'Inflation Calculator' *Bank of England.* Accessed: 16.02.2022
[12]Kenneth Morgan, *Edward Colston and Bristol* (Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, The University, Bristol 1999) p. 16.
[13] 'SMV's historical links to Edward Colston.' *merchantventurers.com.* Accessed 17.02.2022
[14] Jessica Moody, "Off the Pedestal: The Fall of Edward Colston,'" *Public History Review,* 28 (2021): 1.
[15] P.J. Gough and S.J. Morgan, "Manipulating the Metonymic: The Politics of Civic Identity and the Bristol Cenotaph 1919 - 1932," *Journal of Historical Geography,* no 30. (2004): 669.

a sermon in Bristol Cathedral and the giving of 'Colston Buns' to children.[16]

The SMV held significant influence over several areas of local policy. During Colston's lifetime, the Society leased shipping bays to merchants.[17] They heavily invested in several aspects of Britain's colonial trade, including the trade in enslaved persons, lobbying officials and petitioning the government to protect their interests abroad.[18] After the abolition of slavery, the Society shifted the focus of its activities to Bristol's educational and commemorative infrastructure. In 1861 the Society acquired joint ownership of Clifton Downs, an area of public open space, which they continue to possess despite rising controversy.[19] Members of the SMV continue to hold positions in a range of bodies, both public and private, that control representations of Bristol's cultural heritage and its public spaces. They continue to heavily fund several independent schools in Bristol, including two that were named after Edward Colston until recently. Until only ten years ago, at least half of the University of Bristol's board at any time were SMV members.[20]

With such an influential group protecting Colston's legacy, it is little surprise that he remained prominently displayed in the naming of Bristol's built environment for so many years. With influence over education and public space policy, the SMV cultivated an image of Colston as a hero by naming statues, street names, stained glass windows, charitable institutions, and independent schools. In this way, the semi-mythological figure of Colston as 'the most virtuous and wise son' of Bristol worked to represent the charitable capacity of the SMV.

History of the Contestation

Contestation of the Colston Statue before 2020

Today, the Edward Colston Statue is a well-known case of contested memory. Although there were earlier critiques of Colston and his presence in Bristol's public spaces, some of the first attempts to make real change in Bristol occurred in the 1990s. Despite facing petitions and scholarly criticism, city officials and SMV members failed to proactively address the controversy around the public commemoration of Colston's legacy. Back and forth between supporters and critics of Colston continued through different avenues, with the efforts of anti-Colston campaigners escalating from petitions to full-fledged protests. Historian Madge Dresser of the University of the West of England was one of the first individuals to challenge Colston's public legacy and cult-like following. While raising public awareness, Dresser highlighted how Colston and other well-known names played a major role in the Atlantic slave trade.[21] Since the late 1990s, public calls for acknowledgement of Colston's involvement in slavery increased.

---

[16] Jessica Moody, "Off the Pedestal: The Fall of Edward Colston." *Public History Review* 28 (2021): 1.
[17] Kenneth Morgan, "Edward Colston and Bristol," *Bristol Branch of the Historical Association*, (1999): 1.
[18] William A. Pettigrew, "Free to Enslave: Politics and the Escalation of Britain's Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1688-1714." *William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2007): 13.
[19] "Bristol: Slavery-linked society called on to hand over Clifton Down," *BBC*. January 25, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-60124141.
[20] Tristan Cork, "Staff Challenge University of Bristol on links to Society of Merchant Venturers." *Bristol Live.* February 3, 2022.
[21] Research Excellence Framework, "Transforming public awareness of the impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on British culture," *Research Excellence Framework,* 2014.

In 1998, the first exhibition on Bristol's role in the slave trade was held in St. Paul's, a suburb of Bristol. The exhibition explicitly referenced Colston's extensive involvement in Britain's trading in enslaved persons and received a multi-racial audience. The following morning, '"Fuck" off slave trader' was scrawled in red paint upon the statue's base.[22] Over the next 20 years, isolated incidents protesting the statue occurred; however, the majority of Bristol residents remained uninvolved in controversy over commemorative public representations of Colston. In 2017, an activist painted Colston's face white, attaching an unofficial plaque to the plinth, naming Bristol 'Capital of the Atlantic slave trade.'[23] In 2018, an art installation depicting human bodies crammed into the shape of a slave ship appeared at the foot of Colston's plinth.[24] During this time, several petitions, including many on the Bristol City Council's own online petitions portal, called for the removal of the statue. Many of these garnered moderate success, with the number of signatures reaching the thousands. *Bristol Live* reported in 2020 that although calls to remove the Colston statue existed, activists viewed its toppling as a long-term goal. In the early 2000s and 2010s, campaigners did not believe city authorities would take such requests seriously, especially because the mayor at the time was a former SMV member. Thus they focused their efforts on potentially easier targets, such as renaming Colston Hall, where they felt that those with the power to make changes were more sympathetic to their appeals.[25]

In 2018, activist groups *Journey to Justice* and *Countering Colston* succeeded in pressuring the city to reword the plaque beneath Colston's statue. Previously, the plaque contained vague, dated language describing Colston simply as a 'virtuous and wise son of [the] city.' The first proposed rewrite included the active role played by Colston in trafficking 84,000 enslaved Africans, including 12,000 children, and that during his time as an executive of the RAC, 20,000 died en route.[26] The original proposal caused a stir among local residents and leadership. Conservative Councillor Richard Eddy suggested that theft or vandalism of the plaque 'may be justified' lest 'our city's history [be] delivered by ignorant, left-wing incomers.'[27] In an attempt to find a middle ground, local historian and member of the SMV Francis Greenacre suggested a rewording that primarily focused on Colston's charity work and significantly reduced the plaque's perceived severity.[28] Such changes included opening the text with a description of Colston's charitable work instead of his part in slavery and stating that Colston 'played a part' in the slave trade as opposed to an 'active role.'[29] The Bristol City Council and the SMV approved of the more passive language, resulting in the production of a new plaque.[30] Despite this approval by the Council and SMV, the next city mayor, Marvin Rees, came out against the new plaque in March 2019. Rees spoke out on the BBC that the

[22] Madge Dresser, "Obliteration, Contextualisation or 'Guerrilla Memorialisation'? Edward Colston's statue Reconsidered," *Open Democracy*, August 29, 2016.
[23] Tristan Cork, "How Bristol Challenged Colston for 100 years," *Bristol Live.* June 7, 2021.
[24] Inspiring City, "Anti Slavery Art Installation by Colston Statue in Bristol," *Inspiring City*, October 2018.
[25] Tristan Cork, "How the city failed to remove Edward Colston's statue for years," Bristol Post, June 10, 2020.
[26] Tristan Cork, "Plaque marking slave trade victims to be put on statue of Edward Colston in Bristol", *Bristol Post*, February 28, 2018.
[27] Tristan Cork, "The wording of second plaque proposed for Edward Colston statue linking him to 20,000 deaths", *Bristol Post*, July 22, 2018.
[28] "Francis Greenacre," *Society of Merchant Ventures,* Accessed: February 24, 2022, https://www.merchantventurers.com/author/francisgreenacre/.
[29] Tristan Cork, "Theft or vandalism of second Colston statue plaque 'may be justified' - Tory councillor," *Bristol Post*, July 23, 2018.
[30] Tristan Cork. "Row breaks out as Merchant Venturer accused of 'sanitising' Edward Colston's involvement in slave trade," *Bristol Post,* August 23, 2018.

SMV had been 'extremely naive' to think that they could have the final say over the plaque without consulting him, the first mayor of a major city in Europe of African heritage, or consulting with Bristol's Black community. As such, Rees refused to approve the plaque, and no new plaque was ever installed on the statue's plinth.[31]

Contestation of Other Representations of Colston's Legacy

In addition to protests surrounding the statue, several campaigns contested other manifestations of Colston's legacy in the city. Most notably, calls for a change in the name of Bristol's primary concert venue, 'Colston Hall,' dated back to the 1990s. In 2017, the pressure group *Countering Colston* held a demonstration and handed out leaflets outside Colston Hall advocating for the venue to change its name. In April of that year, a project led by Black Bristolian and Colston Hall Trust member Marti Burgess finally managed to secure a commitment from the Bristol Music Trust to open the venue under a new name after scheduled renovations.[32] In 2020 the venue announced its new name, 'Bristol Beacon,' after years of protests and boycotts by both performers and concert-goers.[33]

Other examples of anti-Colston activism include demonstrations against the 2017 Colston Day celebrations. Institutions involved in the holiday responded to calls to rethink the annual tradition in different ways. Notably, St Stephen's Church refused to hold the annual Colston Day ceremony, ending a hundred-year tradition by acknowledging the criticisms of the holiday.[34] Other institutions continued to participate in the celebrations in 2017. Local fee-paying schools, including Colston's Girls' School, which has since been renamed Montpelier High, attended, with the students receiving their Colston buns despite the withdrawal of some invitees.[35] The Bristol Post described the celebration service as 'awkward' in its attempt to honour Colston as a great philanthropist while also acknowledging, although somewhat hedgingly, his participation in the slave trade.[36]

Around this time, the first serious calls came for three schools named after Edward Colston to rebrand. Colston's Primary School, the only school named after Colston not to receive SMV funding, was the first to change its name in 2018.[37] At this time, Colston's School and Colston's Girls' School were not so receptive to criticism. The latter institution's leadership informed parents in 2018 that it was 'not appropriate' to remove Colston's name, claiming that this would obscure the school's history.[38] In 2021, Colston's Girls' School became Montpelier High School after students voted to change the name, and a replacement was chosen by pupils, teachers and the SMV.[39] Following a

[31] Dave Betts, "Edward Colston: Plaque to Bristol slave trader axed over wording," *BBC News,* 25 March, 2019.
[32] Patrick Sawer, "Colston Hall row: Campaigners want Bristol's famous concert venue named after slave trader to be renamed" Daily Telegraph, 18 February, 2017.
[33] Steven Morris, 'Bristol's Colston Hall renamed after decades of protests,' *Guardian,* September 23, 2020.
[34] Tristan Cork, "Police guard Colston Society annual church service held on Anti-Slavery Day," Bristol Post, October 18, 2017.
[35] Tristan Cork, "Bristol church refuses to host most important thanksgiving service to honour slave trader Edward Colston for the first time in almost 300 years," Bristol Post, November 15, 2017.
[36] Tristan Cork, "Buns, sermons and slave songs - how slave trader Edward Colston was awkwardly commemorated on Anti-Slavery Day," Bristol Post, October 20, 2017.
[37] Sally Weale, "Final Bristol school to shed name of slaver Edward Colston." *Guardian,* December 6, 2021.
[38] Tristan Cork, "Row breaks out as Merchant Venturer accused of 'sanitising' Edward Colston's involvement in slave trade," Bristol Post, August 23, 2018.
[39] "Colston's Girls' School reveals new name," *Montpelier High School.* Accessed: February 23, 2022.

lengthy consultation process and a public survey receiving over 2,500 responses, in 2022, Colston's School changed its name to Collegiate School. Interestingly, the majority of responses opposed the change, however, analysis by the school governors revealed that the majority of those closest to the institution (students, teachers and parents) were in favour, and school officials decided to go ahead with the name change.[40]

Statue Removal

The general frustration over this back-and-forth political process eventually came to a head in June 2020 after the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. This event emboldened the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and resulted in a nationwide public discussion in the UK regarding the legacy of the British Empire and the continued presence of colonial symbols in Britain's public spaces. As Black Lives Matter protests were planned throughout the UK, anti-Colston groups and individual campaigners mobilised, taking more direct action and trying new methods to provoke change. Meanwhile, the sudden movement to rethink the legacy of slavery and colonialism in Britain drew public attention to a three-year-old petition by the group *Countering Colston* called Bristol City Council to remove the Colston Statue. In the three years that the petition had been online it received a little over a hundred signatures. In the two days after George Floyd's murder, the number of signatures skyrocketed to more than ten thousand.[41] On June 7, 2020, after a planned BLM demonstration, protesters pulled the statue of Edward Colston down from its plinth with ropes. The statue was then graffitied, knelt on, and eventually thrown into Bristol Harbour.[42]

Immediate Response

Bristol city authorities responded to the incident by first discreetly recovering the statue from the harbour and putting it into storage. Four protesters, Jake Skuse, Rhian Graham, Milo Ponsford, and Sage Willoughby, who would later come to be known as the 'Colston Four,' were arrested for criminal property damage. All four pleaded not guilty when they appeared in Bristol Crown Court for the first time on March 2nd, 2021.[43]

In the days directly following the toppling of Colston's statue, public reaction was mixed. Several national political figures and news outlets came out to support the protesters' removal of the statue. Opposition leader Keir Starmer expressed a mixed response, saying that he did not condone vandalism but that Britain could not continue to honour slave traders with statues.[44] Bristol's mayor, Marvin Rees, supported protesters, calling the toppling of the statue 'a piece of historical poetry.'[45] The outcry against Colston and his legacy resulted in the SMV reassessing their support of their controversial former member. In an open letter to Bristol City Council released on June 11, 2020, the SMV clarified that they were not in favour of pressing charges against demonstrators for damage to public property, although they acknowledged that the final decision was in the hands of

[40] Board of Governors Colston's school, "Statement on the name of the school." *Colston's.* December 6, 2021.
[41] Tristan Cork, "How the city failed to remove Edward Colston's statue for years" Bristol Post, 10 June, 2020.
[42] Haroon Siddique, Clea Skopeliti, "BLM protestors topple statue of Bristol slave trader Edward Colston." *Guardian*, June 7, 2020.
[43] Tristan Cork, "Trial of Colston 4 will take more than a week" *Bristol Live,* March 2, 2021.
[44] Heather Stewart and Kate Proctor, "Labour's left uneasy with leader's view on tearing down Colston statue," *Guardian.* June 8, 2020.
[45] Steven Morris, "Bristol mayor: Colston statue removal was act of 'historical poetry'," *Guardian*, June 13, 2020.

the Crown Prosecution Service.[46] In a public statement made the following day, the society acknowledged an 'energy for change' in the city and stated that they supported the removal of the statue. On their commitment to re-evaluate the Society's past, the statement continued: 'To build a city where racism and inequality no longer exist, we must start by acknowledging Bristol's dark past and removing statues, portraits and names that memorialise a man who benefited from trading in human lives.' Finally, the statement ended by supporting Colston's Girls' School and Colston's School in finding a name that 'accurately reflects the school[s'] vision and values.'[47]

Despite many voices supporting the protesters' actions, public reaction directly after the fact was not unanimously positive. In June 2020, Robert Poll founded the campaign group Save Our Statue, proclaiming its mission to 'speak up for law and order - as well for our history - and to ensure that no more statues [fall].' At the heart of the campaign's ideology is the belief that statue toppling is a symptom of a bigger issue in British society, which aims to reduce Britain's complicated history into a single narrative of wrong-doing.[48] In Colston's case specifically, the group raised concerns that the manner of the statue's removal posed a danger to the rule of law and the respect for due process in the city. As such, they argued that the statue should be returned to its plinth before any further public inquiry into its future.[49] Prime Minister Boris Johnson repeated this concern over law and order. On June 8, 2022, Downing Street made a statement condemning the previous day's events as 'a criminal act' and stating that 'the police will want to hold to account those responsible.' Unlike Save Our Statues, Johnson acknowledged the offence caused by the continued presence of such a colonial symbol in Bristol's city centre; however, he argued that any change to public property should be conducted through a democratic forum.[50]

Decision-Making Processes

Bristol History Committee

In September 2020, Mayor Marvin Rees established the Bristol History Commission to work with citizens and civil society groups to help Bristol better understand its history. The Commission's first task was deciding what to do with the toppled Colston Statue.[51] To fulfil its mission, the Commission issued a survey aimed at better understanding public opinion on what should happen to the statue. While conducting the survey, the M Shed Museum in Bristol displayed the statue as the centrepiece of an exhibition on Colston, the slave trade, and activism in Bristol.[52] The survey garnered almost 14,000 responses, with 55 per cent of respondents from Bristol.[53]

The M Shed exhibition, entitled 'The Colston Statue: What Next?' sought to present the changing meaning of the statue within its historical context. Early in the exhibition, visitors were presented

[46] Society of Merchant Venturers, 'Open letter to Bristol City Council.' *The Society of Merchant Venturers*. June 11, 2020.
[47] Society of Merchant Venturers, "Statement from the Society of Merchant Venturers." *Society of Merchant Venturers*, June 2020.
[48] "Home," *Save Our Statues.* Accessed: February 23, 2022.
[49] "Edward Colston," *Save Our Statues*. June 4, 2021.
[50] Zosia Eyres, 'Prime minister Boris Johnsons' reaction to Edward Colston statue being torn down," *Bristol Live*, June 8, 2022.
[51] "We are Bristol History Commission." *Bristol City Council Services.* Accessed February 27, 2022.
[52]T. Cole et al., *The Colston Statue: What's Next.* 'We are Bristol' History Commission Full Report. (2022: Bristol): 3.
[53] Ibid., 4.

with an explanation of Colston's life and why his statue was erected. This explanation remained neutral in tone while describing Colston's connection to the Atlantic slave trade, his generous donations to the city, and how the SMV cultivated his legacy. Later in the exhibition, visitors could examine a timeline mapping the changing cultural significance of Colston's name and likeness within the city. Beginning with his death, the timeline guided visitors through the different periods of Colston's legacy, from the SMV's cultivation of his legacy to criticisms of him in the 20th century and, finally, the statue's toppling and its immediate aftermath. The exhibition also highlighted the social context of the statue's removal and the controversy that it caused. The exhibition opened not with Edward Colston but George Floyd and displayed newspaper headlines expressing opposing reactions to the June 7, 2020, protests amid Black Lives Matter placards.[54] In an interview published by the *Museum Association*, exhibition curators Lisa Graves and Amber Druce shared their intent for the exhibition to provoke conversations. Graves shared her hope that the quiet, contemplative atmosphere of the museum would encourage visitors to reflect critically on their own views and consider what should be done with the statue in the future.[55]

Indeed, community engagement constituted a large part of the exhibition's mandate. Part of the motivation for the exhibition included the hope that visitors would use what they learned at the exhibition to inform their responses to the Bristol History Commission's survey distributed at the end of their visit. The Commission aimed to integrate these survey results into the decision-making processes concerning Colston's legacy. While the corresponding exhibition emphasised the contentious nature of the events of June 7 and appealed to visitors to consider how they would heal a divided society, the survey results showed that the statue was less controversial than previously believed. The survey found that 74 per cent of respondents (rising to 80 per cent among Bristol residents) believed that the statue was best housed in a museum, with only 10 per cent stating that Colston should be returned to his plinth.[56] Furthermore, among the group in favour of the statue staying permanently in a museum, those who believed that it should be displayed as it was at M Shed, lying down and covered in graffiti, outnumbered those who believed the statue should be displayed cleaned and upright five to one.[57]

The survey results showed less consensus regarding the question of what to do with the empty plinth. Sixty-five per cent of respondents wanted to see a new plaque placed on or near the plinth, reflecting the June 7, 2020 events, while 58 per cent wanted the plinth to be used to display temporary artworks.[58] Opinion divided on whether the current plaque should be removed or left in place alongside the new plaque. Some in favour of removing the old plaque argued that it should also be taken to the museum, whereas others in favour of leaving the plaque in place cited that removing it would amount to an erasure or whitewashing of history. Others stated that it should only be left in place so long as the graffiti stating that Colston had been 'rejected by the citizens of Bristol' also remained.[59] Opinions on what kind of statue should be displayed atop the plinth

[54] "The Colston Statue: What's Next Virtual exhibition." *M-Shed.* Accessed February 27, 2022.
[55] Geraldine Kendall Adams, "Q&A: 'The aim was for the display to be a conversation starter." *Museums Association*, June 18, 2021.
[56] T. Cole et al., *The Colston Statue: What's Next.* 'We are Bristol' History Commission Full Report. (2022: Bristol): 26.
[57] Ibid., 4.
[58] Ibid., 35.
[59] Ibid., 36.

differed substantially, with answers ranging from national figures such as Queen Elizabeth to a memorial dedicated to enslaved persons or victims of COVID-19. Respondents showed a mild preference for a rotating display of artworks, with some justifying this as representing changing societal values.[60] Respondents felt this would also provide a forum to represent some of the multicultural voices of Bristol by displaying works by artists of different backgrounds.[61]

Finally, in answer to the question of how they felt about the toppling of the statue, 56 per cent said they felt either positive or very positive. Among Bristol residents, this number rose to 65 per cent. Conversely, 36 per cent of all respondents, and 27 per cent of Bristol respondents, responded feeling either negative or very negative.[62] Among those who felt very negatively about the events of June 7, most reported being more concerned with the manner in which the statue was removed than the removal itself. Many were concerned with the significance of the events of the rule of law in the UK, with some expressing that they felt it was an act by an aggravated minority without consulting the majority.[63] This echoes the words of the Prime Minister and Home Secretary in the immediate aftermath of the protests, who both felt that those responsible should face legal charges for vandalism and 'disorderly and lawless behaviour.'[64] Other reasons given by those who reported feeling negative included the arguments that Colston was a part of the city's history and that Bristol should not ignore nor try to change aspects of its history. Only a small fraction of respondents defended the statue by saying that Colston deserved to be honoured with such a monument.[65]

Overall, the survey showed that over a year on from the forced removal of the Edward Colston statue from its plinth in Bristol City Centre, public sentiment regarding the future of the statue overwhelmingly favoured it to remain in the care of a local museum and displayed lying down and covered in graffiti. Though some remained concerned about what the events of June 7, 2020, said about the respect for the rule of law in Bristol, a small majority felt positive about the statue's removal. The Bristol History Commission made several recommendations regarding the future of the statue. Broadly, they recommended that it enter into the permanent collection of the Bristol City Council Museums Service while remaining at M Shed as part of an exhibition that offered nuanced contextual information regarding the historical background of Colston's actions. For the future of the plinth, the Commission recommended that it display temporary artworks with periods of intentional emptiness between them alongside a new plaque to commemorate the events of June 7, 2020. Finally, they gave some broader recommendations concerned with easing societal division, including creating more opportunities for older and younger city residents to interact and maintaining public conversations surrounding topics of slavery, colonial legacy, and racism.[66]

Legal and Political Fallout

The courts also played a key role in the decision-making process, as four protesters, Sage

[60] Ibid., 39.
[61] Ibid., 41.
[62] Ibid., 43.
[63] Ibid., 46.
[64] "Priti Patel: Toppling Edward Colston statue 'utterly disgraceful'," *Sky News*. June 7, 2020.
[65] T. Cole et al., "The Colston Statue: What's Next," 'We are Bristol' History Commission Full Report, (2022: Bristol): 50.
[66] Ibid., 57-58

Willoughby, Rhian Graham, Milo Ponsford and Jake Skuse, stood trial for criminal damage for forcibly removing the Colston statue.[67] On January 5, 2022, the group, known as the 'Colston Four' was found not guilty of criminal damage by a jury at the Bristol Crown Court. The jury expressed that a charge of unlawful damage would not have been 'proportionate' due to the fact that Bristol City Council had not acted on calls for the statue to be removed legally for several years. According to reporting from the BBC, the verdict met with cheers that could be heard from the observers' gallery and outside the courthouse. Despite support from members of the public and the backing of the judicial system, some individuals mobilised in opposition to the 'Colston Four,' with one coming up to one of the defendants and calling the verdict 'disgusting.'[68]

Though the 'Colston Four' were found not guilty, the legal fallout from the removal of the Colston statue reached beyond Bristol to the national level. Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick announced new legislation for protecting monuments in the House of Commons on January 17, 2021. This law proposed making removing monuments more difficult by requiring planning permission from the local council that handles proposals for new monuments. Additionally, the legislation included a requirement for the council to notify the Communities Secretary, giving the government the final say on removing historic monuments. Jenrick justified the proposed legislation by arguing that this would protect British heritage for future generations. Speaking in parliament, Jenrick said

> We cannot – and should not – now try to edit or censor our past. That's why I am changing the law to protect historic monuments and ensure we don't repeat the errors of previous generations, losing our inheritance of the past without proper care. What has stood for generations should be considered thoughtfully, not removed on a whim. Any removal should require planning permission, and local people should have the chance to be properly consulted. Our policy in law will be clear, that we believe in explaining and retaining heritage, not tearing it down.[69]

The 2021 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill proposed further new legislation to protect statues and memorials. The bill proposes an increase in the maximum sentence of criminal damage under £5,000 of a public monument or memorial from three months to ten years imprisonment. In the past, a ten-year sentence was not possible due to the monetary cap of £5,000, however, the bill argues that including the emotional impact of damage to a memorial (including to the flowers of wreaths surrounding it) widens the courts' competencies. The policy paper announcing this bill expressly states that this new legislation was felt to be necessary due to ' widespread upset about the damage and desecration of monuments following a flood of incidents during the summer of 2020.'[70]

Summary and Conclusions

The statue of Edward Colston stood in Bristol city centre for 126 years, built by the Society of Merchant Venturers to celebrate Colston's philanthropy. In 2020, Black Lives Matter protesters

[67] Steven Morris, "Four charged over Colston statue damage to be tried in Crown Court," *Guardian,* January 25, 2021.
[68] "Edward Colston statue: Four cleared of criminal damage," *BBC*. January 5, 2022.
[69] "Press Release: new legal protection for England's heritage," *gov.uk*. January 17, 2021.
[70] "Police, crime, sentencing and courts bill 2021: Criminal damage to memorial factsheet." *gov.uk,* February 28, 2022.

forcibly removed the statue and threw it into Bristol Harbour. This came after several years of activists petitioning Bristol city council to remove the statue due to Colston's role in the Atlantic slave trade. Since the removal of the statue, Bristol authorities, primarily the Bristol History Commission, have conducted surveys to gauge public opinion regarding the controversial events of June 7, 2020. Survey results found that Bristol residents overwhelmingly supported the statue remaining displayed lying down and covered in graffiti in a museum.

The follow-up survey carried out by the Bristol History Commission a year later found that most respondents felt that the protesters' actions were justified and that the statue should not be replaced. Nevertheless, not everyone favoured removal, with some respondents believing that such actions constituted a 'rewriting of history,' destruction of heritage, or a degradation of law and order. The ongoing work of the Bristol History Commission seeks to bridge this divide by collaborating with historians, community leaders, and activists to implement community awareness-raising activities and public education.

Research contributed by Catherine Lilja, Abigail Osbourne, and Elisabeth Tamte; Excerpts taken from *Contested Histories in Public Spaces: Principles, Processes, Best Practices*.[71]

Last updated December 2023

References

Ball, Roger, "Edward Colston Research Paper 2: The Royal African Company and Edward Colston (1680–92)." Bristol Radical History Group. June 10, 2020. www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/edward-colston-research-paper-2.

Betts, Dave. "Edward Colston: Plaque to Bristol slave trader axed over wording." BBC News. March 25, 2019. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-47670756?SThisFB.

Board of Governors Colston's school. "Statement on the name of the school." Colstons. June 12, 2021. https://www.colstons.org/perch/resources/documents/211206-governing-body-statement.pdf

Burch-Brown, Joanna. "Case Study I: Toppling Edward Colston." In Contested Histories in Public Spaces: Principles, Processes, Best Practices, ed. Timothy W. Ryback, Mark S. Ellis, and Benjamin Glahn (London: International Bar Association, 2021), 19-50.

Burch-Brown, Joanna, "Is it wrong to topple statues and rename schools?" *Journal of Political Theory and Philosophy* 1 (2017): 59-88.

"Colston's Girls' School reveals new name." Montpelier High School. Accessed: 27.02.2022. https://www.montpschool.org/631/news-blog/post/446/colston39s-girls39-school-reveals-

[71] Joanna Burch-Brown, "Case Study I: Toppling Edward Colston," In *Contested Histories in Public Spaces: Principles, Processes, Best Practices*, ed. Timothy W. Ryback, Mark S. Ellis, and Benjamin Glahn (London: International Bar Association, 2021), 19-50.

new-name.

Gough, P.J, Morgan, S.J. “Manipulating the Metonymic: The Politics of Civic Identity and the Bristol Cenotaph 1919 - 1932.” *Journal of Historical Geography*, no 30. (2004): 665-684

‘Bristol: Slavery-linked society called on to hand over Clifton Down.’ BBC.com. January 25, 2022 https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-60124141.

Cole, T. et al. “The Colston Statue: What’s Next. ‘We are Bristol’ History Commission Full Report.” (2022: Bristol).

Cork, Tristan. “Bristol church refuses to host most important thanksgiving service to honour slave trader Edward Colston for the first time in almost 300 years.” *Bristol Post*. November 15, 2017. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/bristol-church-refuses-host-most-782798.

Cork, Tristan. “Buns, sermons and slave songs - how slave trader Edward Colston was awkwardly commemorated on Anti-Slavery Day.” *Bristol Post*. October 20, 2017.https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/buns-sermons-slave-songs-how-652628.

Cork, Tristan, ‘How Bristol Challenged Colston for 100 years.’ Bristol Live. June 7, 2021. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/how-bristol-challenged-colston-100-5496144.

Cork, Tristan. “How the city failed to remove Edward Colston's statue for years.” *Bristol Post*. June 10, 2020. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/how-city-failed-remove-edward-4211771.

Cork, Tristan. “Plaque marking slave trade victims to be put on statue of Edward Colston in Bristol.” *Bristol Post.* February 28, 2018. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/plaque-marking-slave-trade-victims-1278081.

Cork, Tristan. “Police guard Colston Society annual church service held on Anti-Slavery Day.” *Bristol Post.* October 18, 2017. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/police-guard-colston-society-annual-648611.

Cork, Tristan. “Row breaks out as Merchant Venturer accused of 'sanitising' Edward Colston's involvement in slave trade.” *Bristol Post.* August 23, 2018. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/row-breaks-out-merchant-venturer-1925896.

Cork, Tristan, ‘Staff Challenge University of Bristol on links to Society of Merchant Venturers.’ *Bristol Live*. February 3, 2022. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/staff-challenge-university-bristol-links-6587529

Cork, Tristan. “The wording of second plaque proposed for Edward Colston statue linking him to 20,000 deaths.” *Bristol Post*. July 22, 2018. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/wording-second-plaque-proposed-edward-1810137

Cork, Tristan. “Theft or vandalism of second Colston statue plaque 'may be justified' - Tory councillor.” *Bristol Post*. July 23, 2018. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/theft-vandalism-second-colston-statue-1815967.

Cork, Tristan. “Trial of Colston 4 will take more than a week.” *Bristol Live*. March 2 2021. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/trial-colston-4-take-more-5061652.

Dresser, Madge. “Obliteration, Contextualisation or ‘Guerrilla Memorialisation’? Edward Colston’s statue Reconsidered.” *Open Democracy*. August 29, 2016. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/obliteration-contextualisation-or-guerrilla-memorialisation-edward-colst/.

“Edward Colston.” *Save Our Statues*. June 4, 2021. https://saveourstatues.net/campaigns/f/edward-colston.

“Edward Colston, Slave Trader born.” *AAREG.* Accessed August 16, 2022. https://aaregistry.org/story/edward-colston-born/.

“Edward Colston statue: Four cleared of criminal damage.’ *BBC*. January 5, 2022. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-59727161.

Eyres, Zosia. ‘Prime minister Boris Johnson’s reaction to Edward Colston statue being torn down.’ *Bristol Live.* June 8, 2022. https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/prime-minister-boris-johnsons-reaction-4204340.

“Francis Greenacre.” Society of Merchant Ventures. Accessed: February 24, 2022.https://www.merchantventurers.com/author/francisgreenacre/

Gayle, Damien. “Campaigners try to block Edward Colston display at Bristol museum.” *Guardian*. June 7, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jun/07/campaigners-try-to-block-edward-colston-display-at-bristol-museum.

“Home.” *Save Our Statues*. Accessed: February 23, 2022. https://saveourstatues.net/.

Kendall Adams, Geraldine, “Q&A: ‘The aim was for the display to be a conversation starter.” *Museums Association.* June 18, 2021. https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/people/2021/06/qa-the-aim-was-for-the-display-to-be-a-conversation-starter/#.

Layard, Antonia. “Edward Colston: Listing Controversy.” *University of Bristol Law School Blog*. June 15 2020. https://legalresearch.blogs.bris.ac.uk/2020/06/edward-colston-listing-controversy.

Moody, Jessica. “Off the Pedestal: The Fall of Edward Colston.” *Public History Review* 28 (2021): 1-5.

Morris, Steven. “Bristol mayor: Colston statue removal was act of ‘historical poetry’.’’ *Guardian*. June 13, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/13/bristol-mayor-colston-statue-removal-was-act-of-historical-poetry.

Morris, Steven. ‘Bristol’s Colston Hall renamed after decades of protests.’ *Guardian*. September 23, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/23/bristols-colston-hall-renamed-in-wake-of-black-lives-matter-protests.

Morris, Steven, “Four charged over Coolston statue damage to be tried in Crown Court.” *Guardian*. January 25, 2021.https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/25/four-charged-colston-statue-damage-bristol-tried-crown-court.

Pettigrew, William A. ‘Free to Enslave: Politics and the Escalation of Britain’s Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1688-1714.’ *William and Mary Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2007): 3-38. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4491595.

“Police, crime, sentencing and courts bill 2021: Criminal damage to memorial factsheet.” gov.uk. February 28, 2022. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-factsheets/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-criminal-damage-to-memorials-factsheet.

“Press Release: new legal protection for England’s heritage.” gov.uk. January 17, 2021.https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legal-protection-for-england-s-heritage#:~:text=The%20new%20legal%20protections%20mean,and%20explained'%20for%20future%20generations.&text=Historic%20England%20and%20the%20Secretary,in%20the%20most%20exceptional%20circumstances.

“Priti Patel: Toppling Edward Colston statue ‘utterly disgraceful.’” *Sky News*. June 7, 2020.https://news.sky.com/video/priti-patel-toppling-edward-colston-statue-utterly-disgraceful-12002452.

Sawer, Patrick. “Colston Hall row: Campaigners want Bristol's famous concert venue named after slave trader to be renamed.” *Daily Telegraph*. February 18, 2017. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/18/calls-rename-famous-concert-venue-named-slave-trader/.

Siddique, Haroon and Clea Skopeliti. “BLM protestors topple statue of Bristol slave trader Edward Colston.” *Guardian*. June 7, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/07/blm-protesters-topple-statue-of-bristol-slave-trader-edward-colston.

“SMV’s historical links to Edward Colston.” merchantventurers.com. Accessed February 17,

2022https://www.merchantventurers.com/who-we-are/history/edw ard-colston/.

Society of Merchant Venturers. “Open letter to Bristol City Council.” *The Society of Merchant Venturers.* June 11, 2020. https://www.merchantventurers.com/news/open-letter-to-bristol-city-council/.

Society of Merchant Venturers. “Statement from the Society of Merchant Venturers.” *The Society of Merchant Venturers.* June 2020. https://www.merchantventurers.com/news/statement-from-the-society-of-merchant-venturers/.

Stewart, Heather and Kate Proctor. “Labour’s left uneasy with leader’s view on tearing down Colston statue.” *Guardian*. June 8, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/jun/08/labour-left-uneasy-with-leaders-view-on-tearing-down-colston-statue.

“The Colston Statue: What’s Next Virtual exhibition.” M-Shed. Accessed February 27, 2022. https://www.theasys.io/viewer/V9YtZeFNysfb5F1yq1DdmDxxViyDV4/.

Weale, Sally. “Final Bristol school to shed name of slaver Edward Colston.” *Guardian*. December 6, 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/dec/06/last-edward-colston-school-in-bristol-to-change-its-name.

Figures

Keir Gravil. “Black Lives Matter Protest, Bristol, UK” June 7, 2020, Flickr accessed June 21, 2021 https://www.flickr.com/photos/129454532@N05/49984347227. (Cover Image)

Matt Brown. “Colston Hall” August 8, 2013, Flickr accessed June 21, 2021 https://www.flickr.com/photos/57868312@N00/9488060792. (Figure 1)

About Contested Histories

Many contestations have been over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces in recent years. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

Contested Histories is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon. Although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at the European Association for History Educators (EuroClio) in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

Contact information

Paula O'Donohoe
Program Director

Institute for Historical Justice & Reconciliation
contestedhistories.org

EuroClio - European Association of History Educators
Bankaplein 2, 2585 EV
The Hague, The Netherlands
+31 70 3817836
contestedhistories@euroclio.eu

To cite this publication:

Contested Histories, "Colston Statue in England", *Contested Histories Case Study* #173 (December 2023), Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) at the European Association of History Educators (EuroClio), retrieved from [link], CC BY 4.0.

Contested Histories is funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

IHJR

EuroClio
Inspiring History and Citizenship Educators

Funded by the European Union