

Colston Statue, Colston Avenue New plaque proposal



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1 Introduction

Summary

In recent years Edward Colston has become a recognised figurehead of the role Bristol merchants played in the enslavement and transportation of Africans from the late 17th to 19th century. As such the statue of Colston erected in 1895 has become a target for the understandable public reaction to this distasteful past. The statue has been the subject of several ‘art’ attacks such as his face being painted white, hand cuffs and a woollen ball and chain being added. One recent ‘attack’ involved an ‘unauthorised’ plaque being added to the statues stone plinth. Although the sentiments of the plaque are understandable the content was factually inaccurate and the resin glue used to apply the plaque has discoloured and damaged the stonework.

Given this context and in light of the current discussions about the commemoration of these type of figures in the modern world it is proposed that a new plaque be added to the stone plinth that covers the damaged stonework and provides some factual context to Edward Colston and his role in the transatlantic slave trade during the late 17th to early 18th century.

It is argued that by providing this revised context within the public realm in addition to any museum and literature content helps to maintain a dialogue about this contentious issue and promotes a culture of respect and understanding between all citizens of Bristol and beyond.

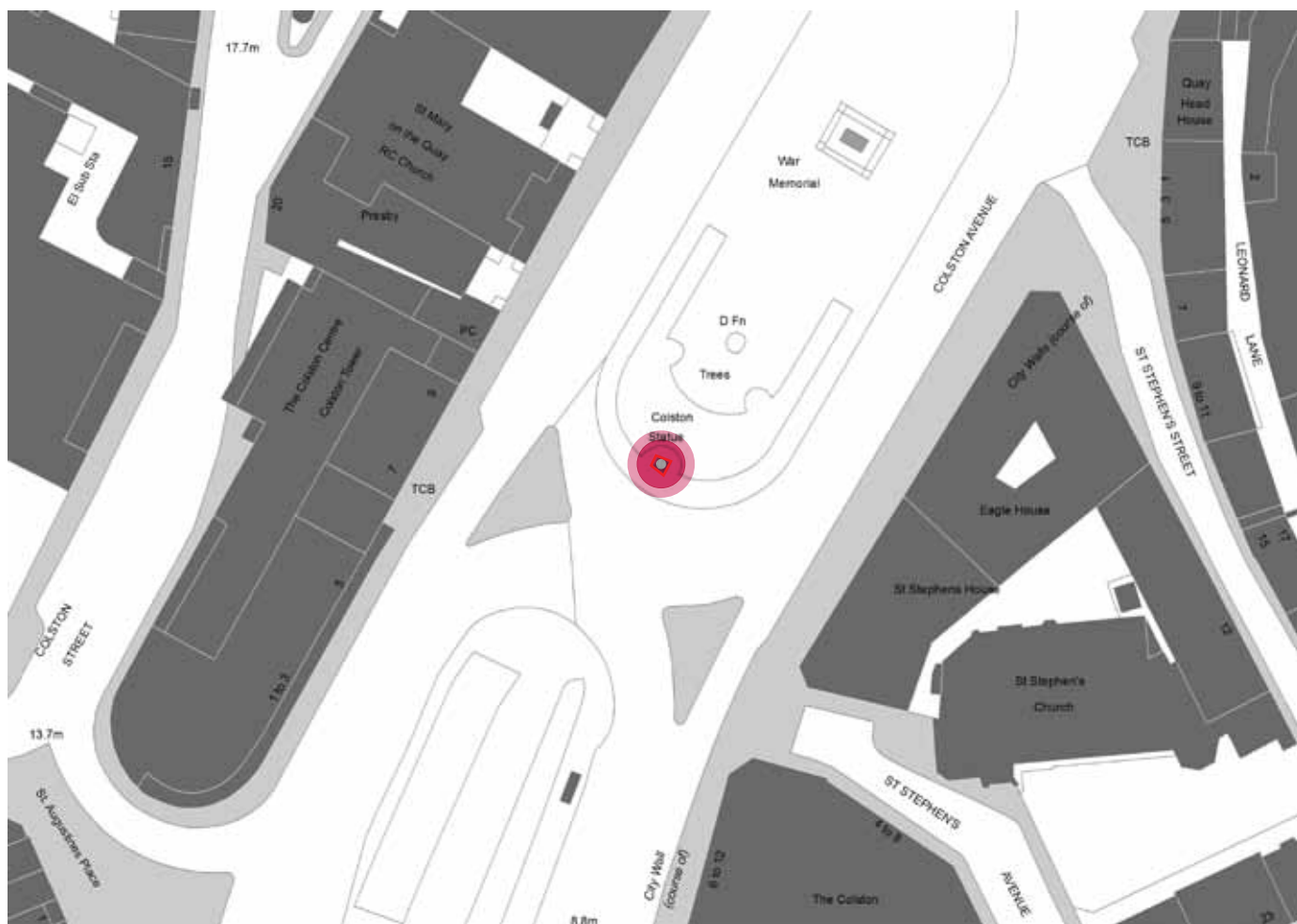
Planning policy context

The statue of Edward Colston is a grade II listed heritage asset. Consequently any works that have an impact on the special interest of the asset will require listed building consent in accordance with the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

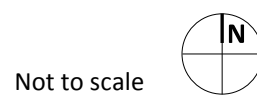
Other relevant planning policies and guidance include:

- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), Section 12
- Bristol Local Plan, policies BCS21 and DM31

In accordance with paragraph 128 of the NPPF this document aims to provide a statement of significance for the asset and set the background and rationale for the project.



Location plan



2 Historic significance

Edward Colston

Edward Colston was born in 1636 within the Temple area of Bristol. He was the son of a wealthy merchant and became a member of the Society of Merchant Venturers, an alderman of Bristol and later in life represented the city as a Tory MP in Parliament, although he lived most of his life in London, dying in Mortlake in 1721.

He gave enormous sums from his wealth to charitable causes establishing Colston's Almshouse on St Michael's Hill in 1691 and founding the Colston's Hospital boys school in 1710.

Despite this benevolence Colston was selective about who could receive the benefits of his charity restricting beneficiaries to those from similar religious (Anglican) and political (Tory) backgrounds.

There is also little doubt about the source of the majority of Colston's wealth. As an investor in the sugar trade Colston will have directly contributed from profits derived from the production of slave produced goods and as a member of the Royal African Company his connection with the enslavement of Africans is even more explicit.

The statue

Following the creation of a fixed bridge, St Augustine's Bridge to replace the earlier Drawbridge in 1890, the northern end of the Floating Harbour became inaccessible to shipping. Consequently between 1892 and 1893 the River Frome was culverted from the Stone Bridge at the Quay Head, near to the present Electricity House, and St Augustine's Bridge close to the end of Clare Street.

The space that resulted from this work was used as a venue for the temporary Bristol Industrial and Fine Art Exhibition in 1893 before becoming Magpie Park.

After the exhibition there were proposals for commemorative statues to be erected in the new park. The first of these was a statue of Edmund Burke, former Whig MP for Bristol, by the sculptor James Haverd Thomas. This sculpture was a gift to the city from William Henry Wills and was erected in 1894.

At the same time as the statue of Burke was being proposed and designed there were calls, mainly from the printer J.W. Arrowsmith, for a statue of Colston to be added to the park. Fund raising for this statue had limited success and it is generally believed that the costs were covered by Arrowsmith himself.

The bronze statue was created by John Cassidy and erected in 1895. It was cast at Coalbrookdale and is consequently one of the last examples of this connection, Abraham Darby the founder of the Coalbrookdale works and Thomas Goldney a key investor in the company both being Bristolians.

The grade II listed bronze statue stands on a Hopton Wood stone pedestal with further bronze plaques and bronze figurative 'dolphins' fixed to the four sides and corners of the pedestal.

Dimensions:

Statue - 2.6m high with 800mm square base

Stone pedestal - 3.15m high

Four relief plaques - 950mm high, 650mm wide

The principle relief plaque states:

"ERECTED : BY : / CITIZENS of
BRISTOL / AS A MEMORIAL/ OF
ONE OF THE MOST / VIRTUOUS :
AND / WISE : SONS OF / THEIR :
CITY / A.D. 1895"



Statue of Edward Colston, c.1900

Recent vandalism/artist interventions

As with any aspect of contested heritage Colston has attracted increasing amounts of attention resulting in Colston Hall and Colston Primary School deciding to change their name and calls for the statue of Colston to be removed.

The statue has been a regular victim of attacks that have seen various additions to the monument including:

- 1 The face of the statue has been painted white and shackles added to its wrists
- 2 A yarn bombing ball and chain addition
- 3 The regular traffic cone head dress
- 4 The “unauthorised” plaque that has left
- 5 damage to the stone plinth

The latter example is the only instance where physical damage has been caused to the monument and although the sentiment is being endorsed by our proposed plaque the information on the plaque was factually inaccurate.





3 The proposal

Design process

Given the attention around the statue and the strong, often opposing views about its presence in the city the concept of a new plaque needed careful consideration.

The decision to add a new plaque was in part driven by the need to address the damage caused to the stone plinth by the “unauthorised” plaque. However, the over-riding need is to provide a better historic context for the statue that explains some of the background to the man and his business interests so the Bristolians and visitors can view the statue with more understanding.

There have been calls to remove the statue to a museum that can provide this historic context. The view of the council is that keeping the statue in the public realm with the additional context provided by a plaque encourages further debate about these important issues concerning Bristol’s heritage.

To create the plaque Professor Madge Dressor was commissioned to create the text for the plaque. With funding from Historic England’s Heritage Schools programme Myers-Insole Local Learning CIC had already been commissioned to work with Colston Primary School on their 70th anniversary project. As the school had recently gone through a consultation process on a proposed name change it was decided to take the opportunity to include a series of workshops about Edward Colston and a potential new plaque within the Local Learning programme.

The concept for the project and the school’s involvement was to undertake workshops with the Year 6 pupils led by MILL. During the workshops pupils interviewed a series of ‘experts’ to explore the themes around Colston, connections to slavery and the role of the statue in the modern city. The results of these interviews were then used to define the type of content should appear on the new plaque.

MILL contacted and invited representatives from some of the key organisations that have previously expressed views about the statue such as the Society of Merchant Venturers and Countering Colston.

The experts who were interviewed by groups of pupils were:

- Professor Madge Dressor, author of *Slavery Obscured* and chair of Journey to Justice
- Dr Marie-Annick Gournet, inclusivity and diversity advisor
- Edson Burton, writer and historian
- Francis Greenacre, art historian and member of the Society of Merchant Venturers
- Sarah Robertson, Communications and Special Projects Director, Colston Hall
- Katie Swainson Price, Chair of Governors, Colston primary School
- Pete Insole, Principal Historic Environment Officer, Bristol City Council

Each interview consisted of a series of questions that aimed to investigate the issues of the statue and identify themes for the proposed plaque.

Each interviewee was asked the following questions:

- Name:
- Organisation to which you belongs (if relevant):
- Are you here today to represent the views of your organisation or are they your own personal views?
- What are your thoughts about changing names of places or monuments?
- What themes do you think are important to convey on the new plaque for Colston's statue?
- What 3 words would best sum up your themes?



Edward Colston Statue Plaque Project

As part of their heritage project Year 6 pupils discussed plaque ideas with a panel made up of key figures involved in the Bristol wide discussions about how Bristol should best remember its past today.



Myers-Insole Local Learning CIC
www.locallearning.org.uk

Image from the Colston Primary School newsletter about the project

The key messages to emerge from this work was agreement from all participants; interviewees, pupils and staff that a new plaque was a positive initiative and that this plaque should provide better balance in terms of factual historic context. The pupils also agreed that having dates and statistics was important to include in the text. This was used as a basis of a brief for a draft of the text for the plaque.

Given the proposed size of the plaque and that the letters had to be a minimum of 25mm in height for the casting the plaque design could only accommodate 100 words.

Madge worked on the text in consultation with Ruth Myers (MILL), Pete Insole and Roger Ball of the Countering Colston group who has undertaken extensive research into Colston's trade dealings.

The resulting text aims to cover details of Edward Colston's role in the Royal African Company in terms of dates and numbers of people enslaved during his tenure followed by his political role and the restrictions he placed on his charitable projects.

As a high official of the Royal African Company from 1680 to 1692, Edward Colston played an active role in the enslavement of over 84,000 Africans (including 12,000 children) of whom over 19,000 died en route to the Caribbean and America.

Colston also invested in the Spanish slave trade and in slave-produced sugar. As Tory MP for Bristol (1710-1713), he defended the city's 'right' to trade in enslaved Africans.

Bristolians who did not subscribe to his religious and political beliefs were not permitted to benefit from his charities.

Text for the plaque

Statement of community involvement

The decision to add a plaque to the statue of Edward Colston was agreed by Cllr Nicola Beech at a cabinet member briefing on 8th January 2018.

Historic England have provided an informal view that “... we would probably be supportive of the principle of the plaque as a reasoned response to the statue of a “contested” historic figure...”

Throughout the process the participants in the project (workshop interviewees detailed above, pupils and staff) have been very supportive of the idea.

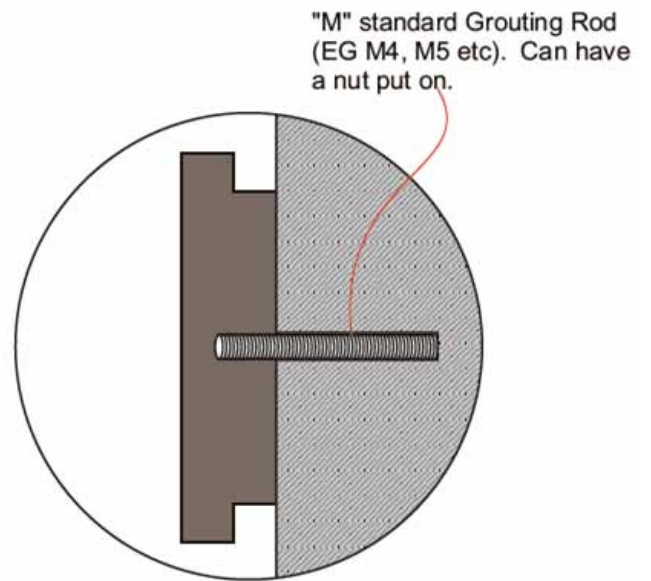
Madge Dresser and Pete Insole led two Architecture Centre public walks for 20 people on each occasion that explored the city’s sugar trade heritage entitled Sweet History. Both walks culminated at the statue of Colston where the concept of the plaque was discussed. On both occasions the overwhelming opinion was that a new plaque along the lines prosed would be a positive response to this contested heritage issue.



Sweet History walk,
courtesy Chris Wilkins
Photography

Design Specification

The plaque will be cast in bronze and measure 600mm wide by 400mm high and fixed to the pedestal using grouting rods set within mortar joints as shown.



Mortar joints on pedestal

Assessment of harm

As this proposed plaque will impact on the character and appearance of this grade II listed asset it will cause a level of harm to the asset.

The size of the plaque has been kept to the minimum required to neatly cover the existing damage to the stonework and the materials have been chosen to complement the aesthetic of the statue and its pedestal. However, the design particularly in the use of a sans serif font is intended to appear as a modern addition to this historic monument.

Consequently we have assessed this harm to be less than substantial and feel that the public benefits of providing an improved historic contextual balance to the statue that addresses this sensitive contested heritage issue outweighs this harm.