

Bristol divided over its slavery legacy

There have been calls for the removal of the statue of Edward Colston, a benefactor of Bristol who profited through the slave trade. Is it a disgrace or a necessary reminder of the past?



At the heart of Bristol's city centre, among leafy trees and park benches, stands a grand 18ft-tall bronze statue of a man named Edward Colston, a wealthy entrepreneur who gave generously to charities, churches and schools in the city. Unveiled more than 120 years ago, the 17th-century merchant and MP is shown leaning on a walking stick, with an expression of kindly concern on his face. The plaque records his good deeds, describing him as 'one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city.'

But these kind words mask a sinister legacy. As deputy governor and senior partner of the Royal African Company (RAC), much of Colston's wealth was acquired through the company's monopoly on the trade of thousands of African slaves.

Colston's company brutally kidnapped over 100,000 men, women and children from West Africa, who were then shipped across the Atlantic and exchanged in the



Unwelcome reminder: Some Bristolians want Edward Colston's statue to be removed © PA

Americas for sugar and tobacco. As property of the RAC, the initials of Colston's company were branded on slaves with a red-hot iron.

For years, the contentious issue of how Bristol should come to terms with its history as a major slave trading hub has been hotly debated. This week, it resurfaced. In an article for the Bristol Post, former journalist Mike Gardner described Colston as 'one of the most evil men in English history' and urged the city's authorities to remove his statue.

Not everyone agrees. A newspaper poll of 1,100 Bristolians conducted in response to the article found that just over half (56%) want the statue to stay and only 44% want it gone. One councillor has accused Gardner of imposing today's moral standards on a man who lived over 300 years ago.

And it is not just the statue that bears Colston's name. Many prominent Bris-

tol landmarks, streets and schools are named after him. So too is a local delicacy: the Colston bread bun.

IN THE SHADOW OF HISTORY

It is impossible to escape from Britain's slavery past, say some. Cities including London, Liverpool, Manchester and Plymouth all have links with the trade, and some historians argue that modern Britain was built on slavery. Instead of sweeping history under the carpet, we must face up to the reality of this barbaric trade and allow statues and buildings to remind us of the horrors of the past.

But others argue that the statue brings shame to Bristol and should be taken down, or at least be given a new plaque explaining Colston's links with slavery. Some suggest a monument to the thousands of kidnapped Africans should be erected in its place. Colston's generosity to Bristol does not outweigh the terrible suffering his company inflicted on so many others.

Q & A

Q Slavery happened a long time ago. Why is this relevant now?

A Examples of how slavery transformed Britain are visible in many towns and cities, and it is a sobering thought that the Industrial Revolution, which transformed the country into an economic powerhouse,

relied on the products of this human trade. It is important we never forget this terrible legacy and remember that even today, slavery continues.

Q How involved was Britain in the slave trade?

A Britain was the second most important participant of the slave trade after Portugal. Between the mid-16th and 19th centuries, British ships carried over 2.5m

slaves across the Atlantic. Investors in the trade included members of the royal family, leading politicians and the Church of England, which used slaves on its Caribbean sugar plantations.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'The sins of the past helped forge the present.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

Trade – Bristol was a key port in the triangular slave trade. Arms, alcohol and textiles were shipped from the city to the west coast of Africa, where they were traded for slaves. The vessels then took the slaves across the Atlantic to plantations where they were sold

for sugar, molasses and tobacco to be brought back to Bristol. Few slaves passed through British ports.

Hub – Between 1697 and 1807, 108 known slave ships set sail from Bristol, and approximately 500,000 slaves were brought into slavery by these ships. This trade

transformed Bristol into a thriving, wealthy city. Yet between 1680 and 1688, the Royal African Company ‘lost’ 24% of the slaves it shipped, meaning they died or were killed on the transatlantic journey.

Colston bread bun – The bun is made of yeast dough, candied peel, dried fruit and spices.

YOU DECIDE

1. Should Bristol take down Edward Colston’s statue?
2. How should towns and cities with a historical link to slavery come to terms with their past?

ACTIVITIES

1. Draw a map that plots the journey slave ships made from Bristol and other British ports to West Africa and the Americas. Illustrate the map with facts and figures about the slave trade.
2. Research how this issue has affected or been dealt with in your local area or town. Prepare a presentation of your findings.

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 NOTES

