

Slavery, statues and memorialisation in Britain

What's the issue?

Recent protests and anti-racist activism have reopened discussions about Britain's history of slave trading, racism and colonialism, and the connections between past and current injustices.

While the slave trade was [abolished in 1807](#), its legacy in Britain continues. Britain's economy was transformed by the slave trade, and the wealth of many British cities was built on money from slavery. Links between the slave trade and British history and heritage sites, many of which were built from the profits of slavery, often [remain hidden or unrecognised](#). Racism, which legitimised and underpinned slavery, continues to impact and disadvantage the lives of black and ethnic minority people in Britain.

In 2020, extensive media coverage centred on the statue of Edward Colston, a 17th century merchant who made his fortune from the slave trade, which was toppled in June that year by demonstrators in Bristol. Activists had previously unsuccessfully campaigned for the statue to be [removed for decades](#).

Who was Edward Colston?

Edward Colston (b. 1636 – d. 1721) was a leading figure within the Royal African Company (RAC), which monopolised the British slave trading industry.

During Colston's involvement with the company, [84,000 Africans were transported into slavery](#). An estimated 19,000 of these people died en route.

After his retirement, Colston served as MP for Bristol from 1710-1713. During this time, he [defended](#) Bristol's 'right' to trade in slaves.

Due to large sums that Colston donated to charitable causes within Bristol, many streets, buildings and schools in the city bear his name, and a statue was erected for him in 1895.

The toppling of Colston's statue has led to widespread debate about how Britain's colonial past and historical racism can be more honestly and accurately portrayed, and the best way to approach statues that uncritically display similar figures.

Campaigners have argued that such statues act as an ongoing reminder of injustice and current racial inequality, and should therefore be removed. While statues to slavers remain in place, there is still no permanent memorial to victims of the transatlantic slave trade in the UK.

Questions to consider

- *Can you think of other examples from modern history where statues have been toppled?*
- *What is the purpose of statues and memorials?*

- *Have you been to a memorial or commemorative site? How did visiting it make you feel?*
- *Within the Jewish community, how have we commemorated our own persecution?*
- *Are there any people whose commemoration we would find unacceptable?*
- *Some people feel that statues of slavers should remain in place to educate about the past, while others, especially from communities who were victims of slavery, find them insulting and painful. What do you think?*
- *Are statues a useful way to remember and depict our history? What are their limitations?*
- *If statues of figures like slave traders are removed, what would you introduce in their place?*
- *What do you feel is the best way to educate about and commemorate past injustices like slavery?*
- *As Bristol came to terms with the toppling of Colston's statue, [historian David Olusoga wrote](#):*

“A storm that began in America crossed the Atlantic and made landfall in Bristol, at the base of a statue to a man who died 299 years ago. What followed the toppling of Colston was a purge, an act of civic purification.”

What do you think Olusoga means by this, and do you agree?

Get involved and take action

Activists have been [campaigning for a permanent memorial](#) to victims of the transatlantic slave trade for over a decade. Planning permission was granted in 2016 for a sculpture in Hyde Park, but lapsed in 2019 because the campaign didn't have the £4m needed to build it, and the government refused to provide the extra funds required.

Join the campaign and write to the Prime Minister, urging her to take action on this to ensure this important part of British history is recognised, and the statue used as an opportunity for education.

Did you know?

Although the [1833 Slavery Abolition Act](#) abolished slavery in most British colonies, the government then borrowed £20 million, 40% of the national budget, to [compensate slave owners](#). This debt was only paid off in 2015.

Further resources

Watch David Olusoga, 'Is this the end for colonial-era statues?'

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/jun/19/is-this-the-end-for-colonial-era-statues-racism-slavery-black-lives-matter-video>

Read David Olusoga, I shared my home with Edward Colston for more than 20 years. Good riddance. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/11/i-shared-my-home-with-edward-colston-for-more-than-20-years-good-riddance>