

# Adding context to Colston

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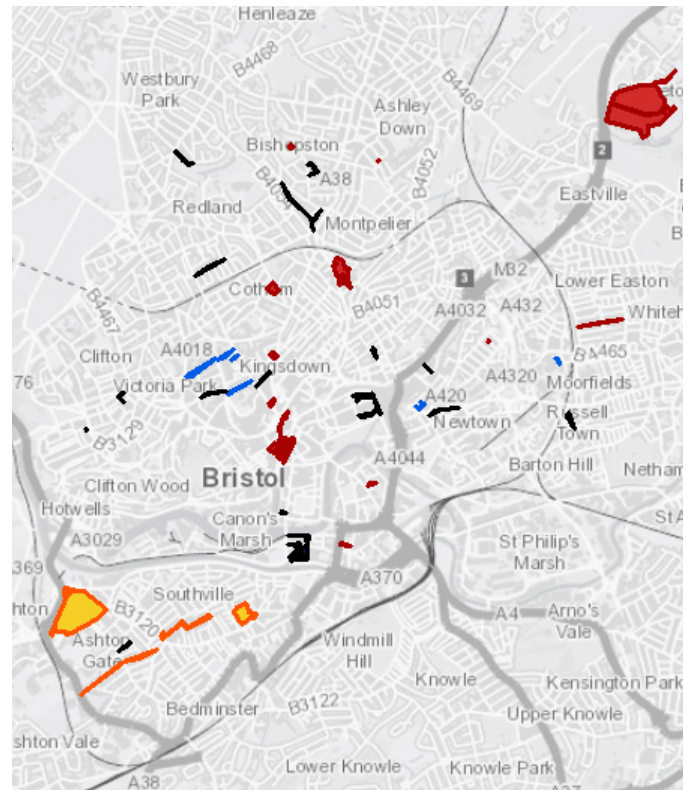
## Giving a contentious statue a new plaque

Edward Colston, particularly in recent years, has become a contentious historical figure and his statue in Bristol's City Centre has attracted a lot of attention in terms of 'artistic' interventions that aim to draw attention to Colston's connections with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. This attention has resulted in discussions about changing the names of schools (Colston's Primary, now to be called Cotham Gardens, Colston Girls elected to keep their name), Colston Hall (now awaiting a new name) and the decision to keep members of the public from viewing Colston's tomb in All Saints Church for fear of vandalism.

How the city addresses its Trans-Atlantic trade related past has become a key issue and one that goes well beyond the decision to add a new plaque to the Colston statue. One factor that gets lost in this focus on Colston is that he was just one of thousands of people who benefitted both directly and indirectly from the trade. Many streets and places in Bristol bear the name of merchants who had business interests in the Caribbean, American colonies or the enforced movement and enslavement of people; Tyndall's Road/Avenue, Smyth Road, Farr's Lane, Southwell Street, Elton Road, Cave Street etc (for a map of these places visit <http://arcg.is/1qCvLe>).

These places were not always named in the 18th or 19th century, some places have been named after Colston or Tyndall relatively recently (for example Colston Court in the 1990s) because they are names associated with Bristol.

Beyond the naming of places, the physical city has been shaped by the economic prosperity that resulted from its involvement in the slave trade. Many buildings including the well-known landmarks like the Theatre Royal can trace some of their original investment back to slavery related profits. Even the Clifton Suspension Bridge, Temple Meads and the great houses like Blaise and Ashton Court benefitted from investment made possible either directly through money from slavery or from compensation paid to slave owners after the abolition of slavery in British colonies in 1833.



The decision to add a new plaque to the statue of Edward Colston is an attempt to shed light on these associations.

Criticism of the plaque and its wording has ranged around the issues of:

- Colston as a charitable benefactor
- Factual accuracy
- The focus on Colston
- The nature of the content

One aspect to bear in mind that relates to all these issues is the outcomes from the project with the school children that suggested the new plaque and its content provide **truthful balance** to the statue of Colston.

- The text has been amended to reference Colston's benefaction
- The words presented are factual and the result of academic research into the subject. The inclusion of the fact that Colston was a Tory MP raised many criticisms and this has been removed
- The plaque only addresses Colston's role because it can only be 100 words and is intended to be placed on his statue

As discussed, many people were involved in the Trans-Atlantic trade and as some people have pointed out it was legal to buy and sell people in Colston's time. Slavery has always been and will always be ethically and morally wrong, but slavery remains a problem today .

Colston was a significant beneficiary to charities and good causes in Bristol. Many Bristolians benefitted from his wealth, although there is debate about how universal this charity was. However, research shows that much of his wealth stemmed from the exploitation of others. Given that he is commemorated in place names, street names and statues around Bristol we believe that the addition of a plaque that states some additional facts about the man and his wealth goes a small way to add some balance to this commemoration of the man. The existence of the statue is a statement in itself with visitors to the city assuming this commemorates a 'wise and virtuous' man. Without any additional information people would be unaware of the deeper issues.

Moving forward the key concern is what, who or how we want our city represented. Do we want a figure with known associations with the trafficking and enslavement of humans to represent Bristol or do we want something that represents the inclusive city we want Bristol to be? Removing the statue would not adequately address this issue. It is hoped that the new plaque makes a small contribution to what should become a wider discussion, particularly with younger generations, about the city's culture. As recently stated, "How this is resolved will say a lot about where we are as a city."



Colston's name remains prevalent in the modern city and is used as a Bristol identifier.