

6.5 How should we remember Bristol's slaving past?

The process of memorialisation, the way we remember the past, can be complicated. Societies use public spaces to memorialise people and events in history that are important to them, but there is rarely full agreement on who or what is appropriate and people's feelings about this

change over time. The past doesn't change, but what and who we choose to memorialise from it does.

Bristol, like other cities, has struggled to agree about how we should remember its involvement in transatlantic slavery.

Commemorating Colston

When we discuss remembering transatlantic slavery in Bristol, it is important to remember that memorials to some of the people involved already exist.

Colston's statue was erected in 1895, more than 170 years after he died.

In the early 19th century, Colston was not particularly well-known or popular in Bristol. However, there were at least four societies dedicated to doing charitable works in his memory. They began to raise funds for a Colston statue by asking for public donations. They admired Colston because he was a successful businessman who had spent a lot of money improving the city. They believed that how he spent his money was more important than how he made it (see 19th century view, opposite). They did not consider that, by commemorating Colston, they might also be **condoning** his slave trading past.

In the 1920s, a historian, H.J. Wilkins, wrote a biography of Colston that made public just how involved Colston was with transatlantic slavery. He wrote, 'We cannot picture him justly except against his historical background' - pointing out

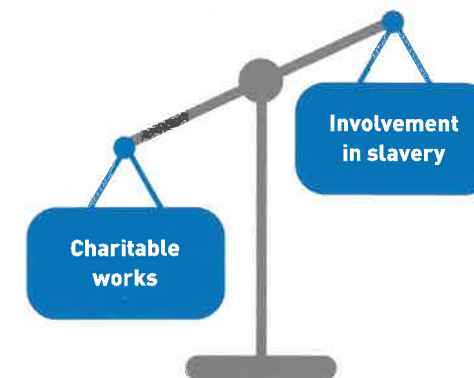
that it was important to remember how he made his money, as well as how he spent it.

Throughout the 20th century, individuals and groups in Bristol lobbied to have the statue removed. As the time of transatlantic slavery moved further away and ideas about equality moved forward, fuelled by wider debates about civil rights and race relations, more people became uncomfortable with the commemoration of Colston (see 20th century view, opposite). Instead, there was increasing support for a monument to the victims of transatlantic slavery.

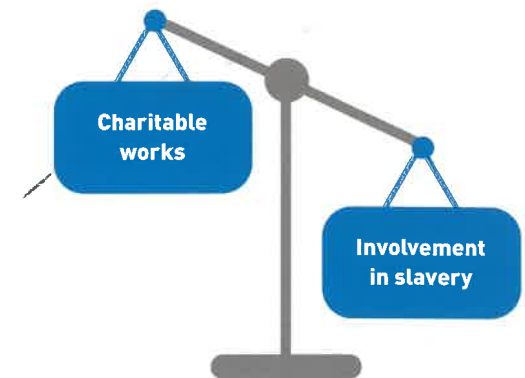
When Colston's statue was pulled down in June 2020, Bristol made international headlines. Elsewhere, people felt empowered to criticise public monuments in their own cities that they felt no longer represented their values.

Although tearing down the statue was controversial, very few people have argued that the statue should be put back in its place. Most people now recognise that, if being a slave trader doesn't cancel out Colston's charitable works, then Colston's charitable works cannot cancel out his work as a slave trader.

19th century view of Colston



20th century view of Colston



What other Bristol memorials are connected to slavery?



■ In 1999, Bristol City Council named a new bridge after Pero Jones. Over the last few years, people have started fixing padlocks or 'love locks' to the bridge, a trend that started in Paris. This addition of locks to a bridge named after an enslaved person may seem shocking. However, it demonstrates that most Bristolians are unaware that this is a memorial to enslaved people. © James Cameron



■ In 1997, a plaque was unveiled at L Shed (next to M Shed) to commemorate the victims of transatlantic slavery. © James Cameron

How do other places remember their slavery past?

In 2018, a Legacy Museum opened in Alabama, USA, to address the country's past involvement with slavery. Its founder, Bryan Stevenson, argues that history has to be acknowledged and its destructive legacy faced, even though this can be controversial and hard. 'I'm not interested in talking about America's history because I want to punish America,' he says, 'I want to liberate America.'