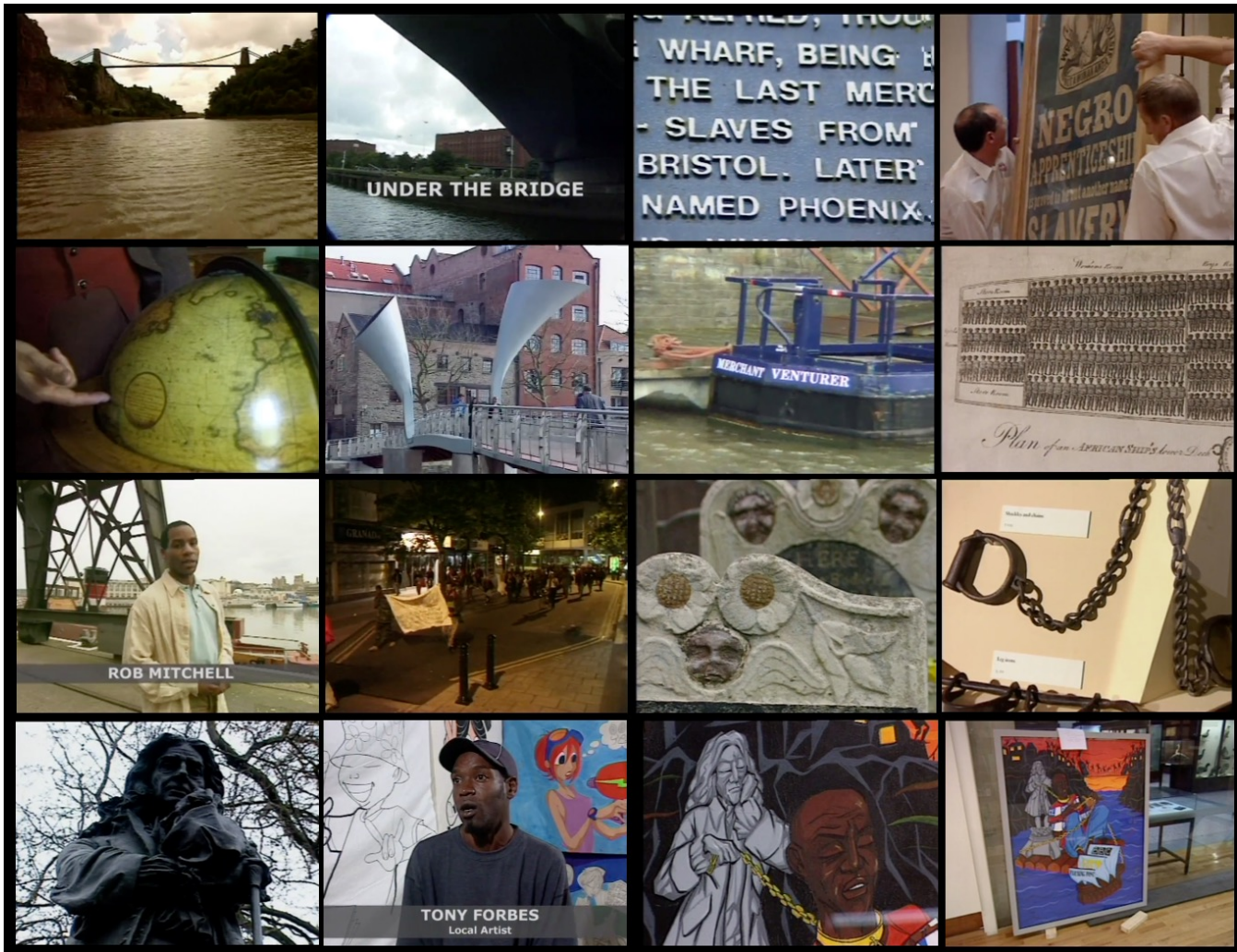


# Contested culture as change-maker: The collaborative approach to displaying the toppled statue of Edward Colston.

*Professor Shawn Sobers, We are Bristol History Commission & University of the West of England.*

*Ray Barnett, Bristol City Council - Culture & Creative Industries*





## *A Respectable Trade?* exhibition

Bristol Museum & Art Gallery, 1999



Tony Forbes  
*Sold Down the River*  
1999

“ I wanted to truthfully address the problems what I went through in Bristol, and I looked at a time when I felt really angry and ashamed with the city in the issue of race ... In the painting you see me on a raft floating down a river, with Colston statue behind me holding me with chains ... I'm being dragged under the Suspension Bridge, and you see the silhouette of people dancing on the bridge, councillors, people in the media organisations (whose logos are represented on the sails of the boat), having a party whilst I'm being dragged into an oblivion.”

Tony  
Forbes  
artist  
1999



Interview from Under the Bridge. ITV. 2000. Director, Shawn Sobers. Producer, Rob Mitchell

M Shed museum, Bristol 1<sup>st</sup> floor



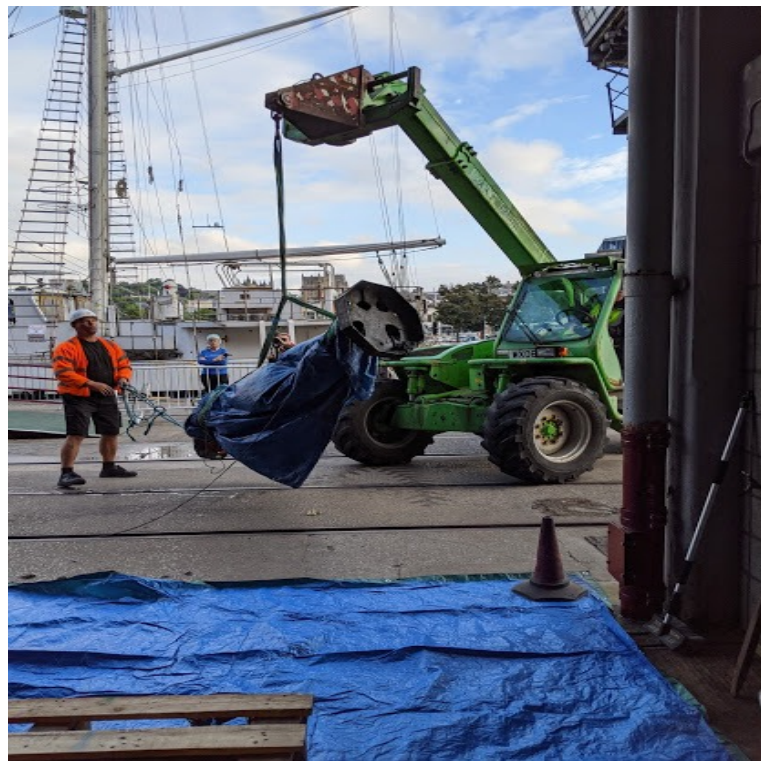
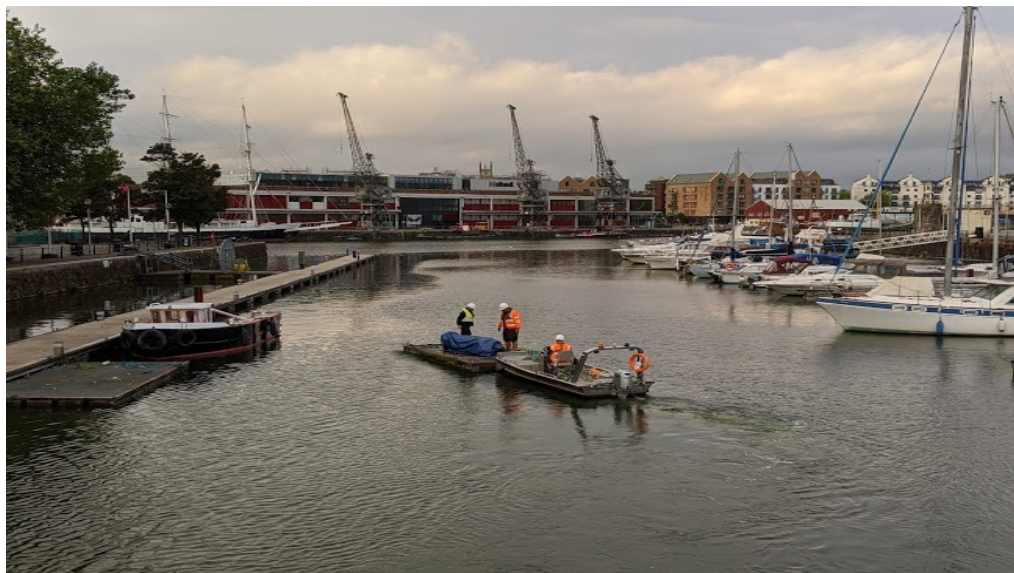
07 June 2020





## Retrieval





# Stabilisation





## *The Colston Statue: What next?* display

- Vision:- .....engage the city in discussing what the statue means to them to inform decisions about its future. The physical display itself will support a wider consultation process promoted by M-Shed across the city through a wide range of accessible response platforms to support the work of Bristol City Council's History Commission.
- This display of the statue is not an exhibition it is a vehicle to promote conversations and should not be seen as the final word on its history and wider context.
- Design team of museum curators, designers, conservators, participation staff along with Professor Shawn Sobers and Councillor Helen Godwin from the We Are Bristol History Commission.



## Location and brief



Located in 'The Window on Bristol' 1<sup>st</sup> floor M Shed

Visitors directed to the online survey

Virtual tours for schools

Engagement at sites/events around the city

Key to the city  
© notsoul media - used under licence

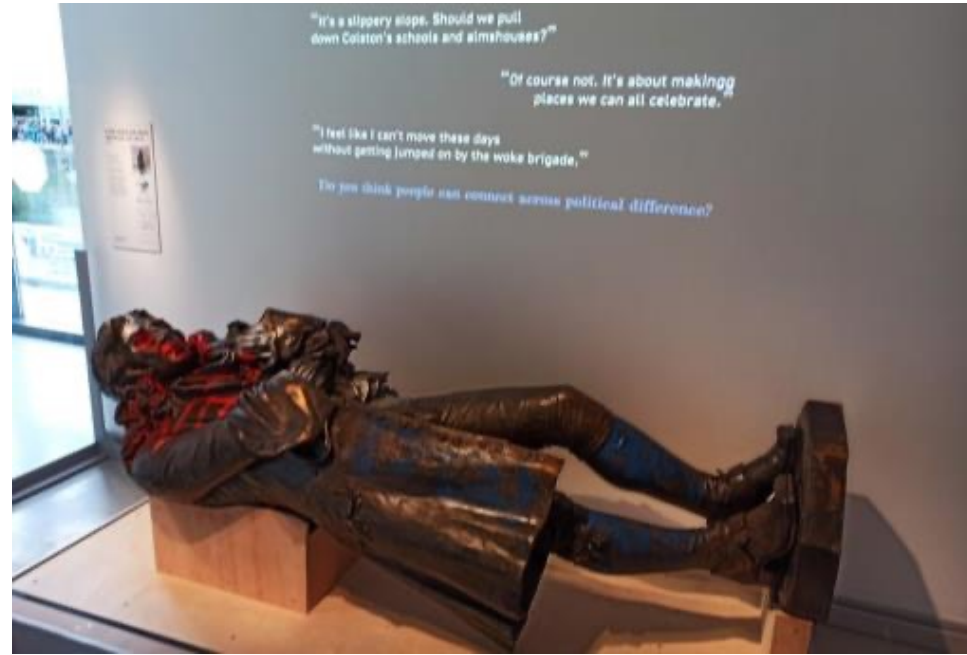
## Displaying the statue

- Initial ideas presented for clarification by the Mayor and History commission.
- First decision - how and where in the gallery to display the statue?



## Protecting the statue

- Simple but robust barrier, designed to be unseen
- Calm environment to encourage considered thought, white and blue primary colours.



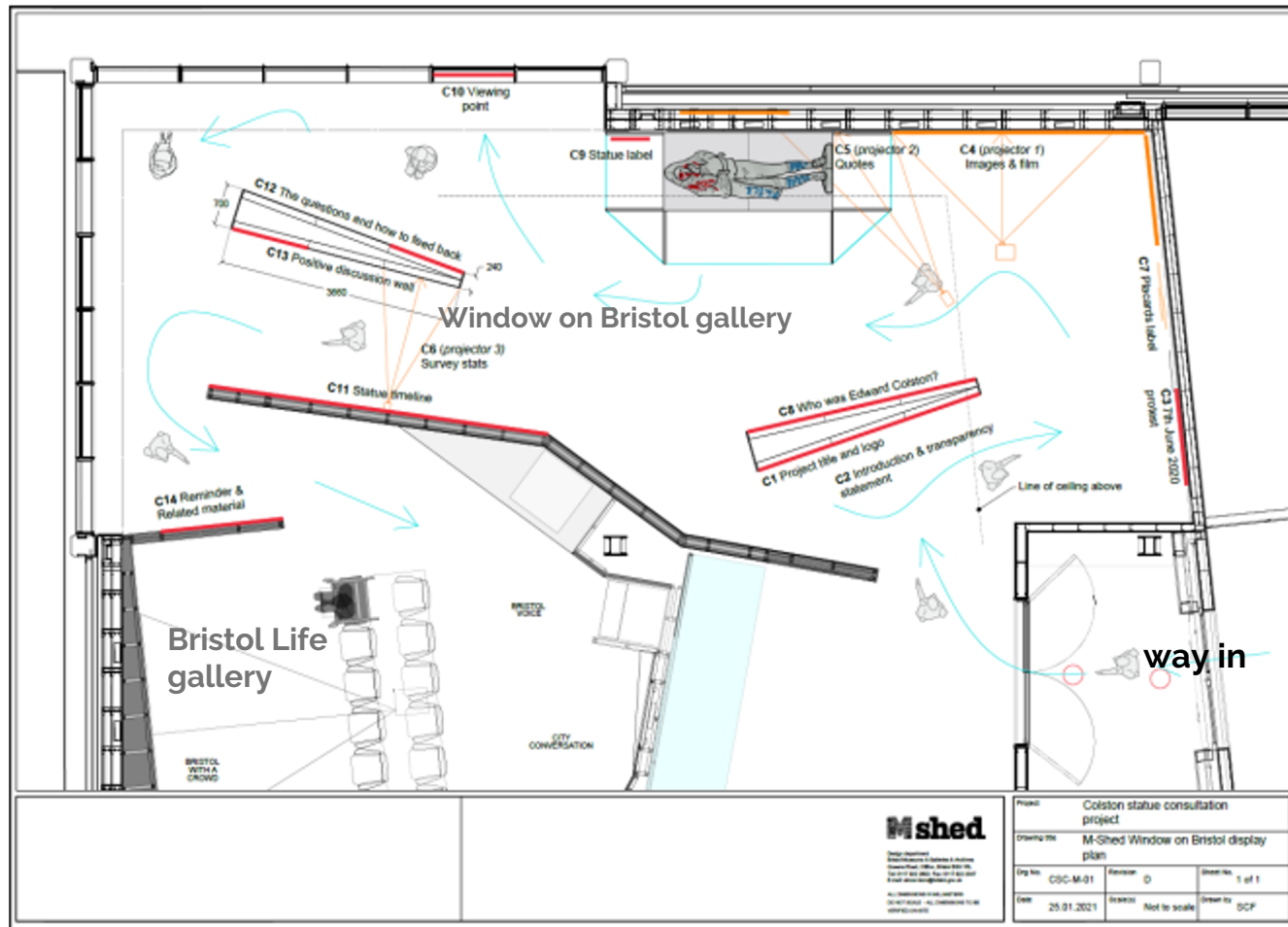
# The visual identity for both online & in-gallery

- The identity aims to state the facts that the statue was toppled but that's not the end of the story
- The sketchy font and graph paper backdrop suggest that this is work in progress
- The colour blue promotes calm reflection
- The octagon shape mimics the statue base and the overlaps suggest debate, discussion and movement.
- All combine to promote inclusive constructive debate



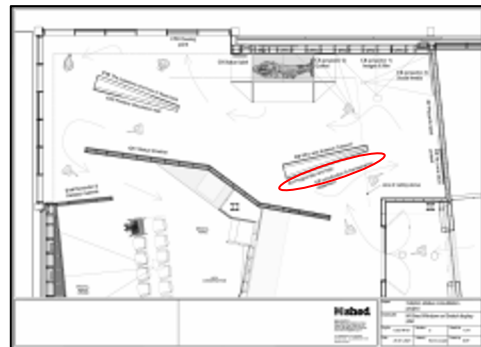
# The gallery plan

- Tried to keep it simple and low cost recyclable materials mixed with digital to create some movement in the space
- Space is invigilated with security on the door
- Covid: Max 20 people allowed into gallery at a time with traffic light system at the door



Description: logo & transparency statement – imagery linked to wording for clarity

Location: Applied to entrance wall



There were protests around the world after the filmed murder of George Floyd, whilst being arrested in America. All Black Lives Bristol organised a protest against police brutality and racial inequality. On 7 June 2020, an estimated 10,000 people gathered in Bristol.

Protesters pulled down a statue of Edward Colston, graffitied it and threw it into the harbour. Four days later, Bristol City Council retrieved it. Museum conservators stabilised the condition and preserved the graffiti.

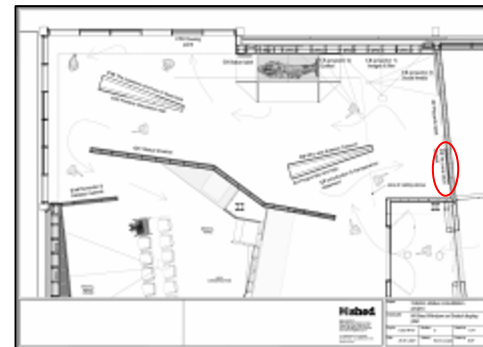
The Mayor of Bristol then established the We are Bristol History Commission. Their role is to build an improved shared understanding of the city's story. This is their first advisory project as a group.

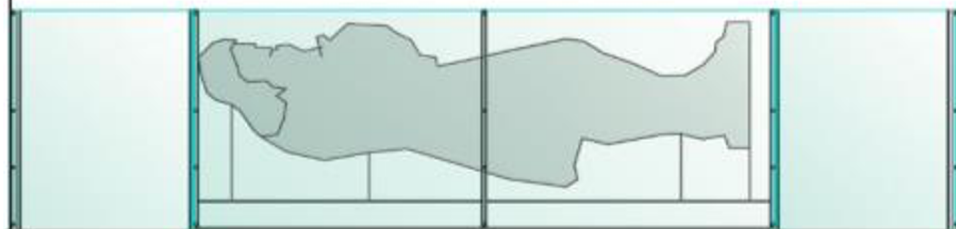
This temporary display is the start of a conversation, not a complete exhibition. We want to hear your views to help decide what happens to the statue next. Let's sketch-out a plan for Bristol's future. **All voices will be heard.**

Shape future plans here



**Location:** right hand gallery wall





## Examples of imagined dialogue and questions posed behind statue

“I was euphoric when the statue came down.”

“Really? I was horrified!”

“It was poetic justice, seeing it go in  
the harbour where those ships sailed.”

How did you feel when Colston's statue was toppled?

“Everybody knows slavery is wrong.  
But you can't change history”

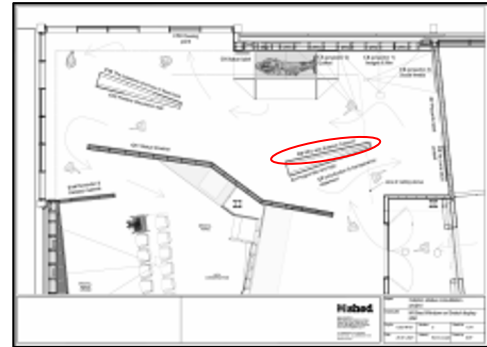
“Statues don't teach history. They honour people.”

“Colston's statue *\*has\** taught me history.  
When I see it, I reflect on the bad things  
and feel grateful for the good.”

What is the purpose of statues and memorials?

Description: Colston panel

Location: Mounted to wall opposite statue



EDWARD COLSTON  
1696-1703

Portrait by Jonathan Richardson  
c. 1700

## Who was Colston and why did he have a statue?

**Edward Colston's family had longstanding links with Bristol, though they moved to London when he was only six. He was engaged in international trade and became a high official of the London-based Royal African Company (1689-1692).**

They had the monopoly on the Transatlantic Traffic in Enslaved Africans until 1698. As such, Colston played an active role in the trading of over 84,000 enslaved African people (including 12,000 children) of whom over 19,000 died on their way across the Atlantic. As a Bristol MP late in life, he campaigned to keep the slave trade legal and on favourable terms for traders.

When Colston died, he left about £71,000 to charity (comparable to over £16 million today). He had given money to schools, almshouses, hospitals and Anglican churches whilst alive too.

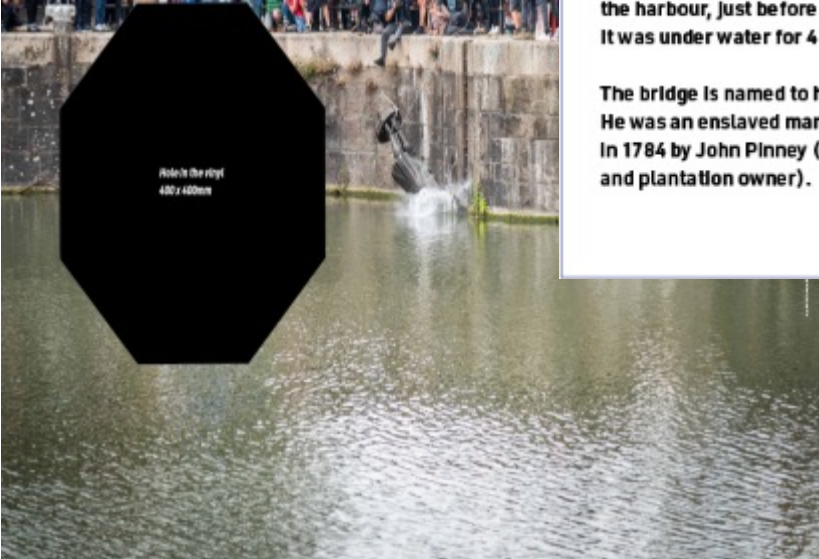
In response to increasing class divisions the city's elite reinvented him as a patriarchal role model and an emblem of charity, 170 years after he died. His statue was proposed as a symbol of civic pride, but it was also part of rivalry between the rich merchants of Bristol. Sir W. H. Wills donated a statue of MP Edward Burke around the same time. The Colston statue attracted little financial support and was largely funded by a small number of anonymous donors.

Though Colston's role in the slave and sugar trade was widely known in some circles, popular histories and public narratives downplayed it. They highlighted his philanthropy instead.



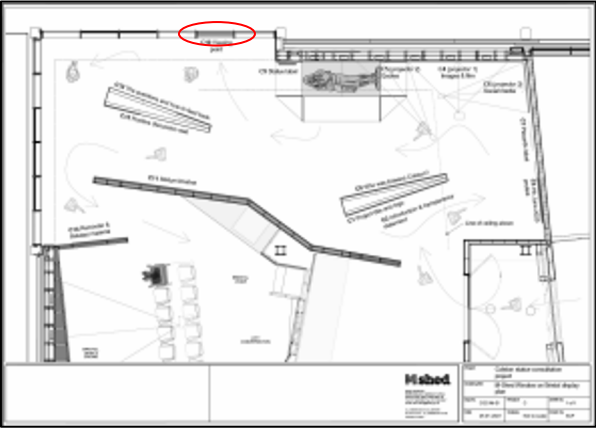
Description: Graphic showing where the statue was thrown into the docks

Location: Vinyl graphic mounted to window nearest the statue



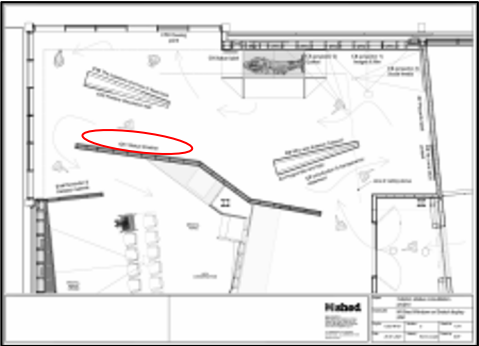
From where you are now standing, the statue was thrown into the harbour by protestors on the opposite side of the harbour, just before Pero's Bridge. It was under water for 4 days.

The bridge is named to honour Pero Jones. He was an enslaved man brought to Bristol in 1784 by John Pinney (a sugar merchant and plantation owner).



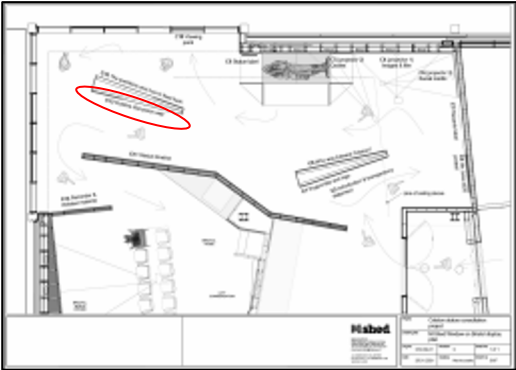
Description: Statue timeline

Location: Wall opposite window



Description: Consultation questions & discussion wall

Location: On freestanding triangular wall in top left corner of gallery



The conversation so far

This is a sample of some of the anonymous answers people have been giving to the survey

Shape future plans here



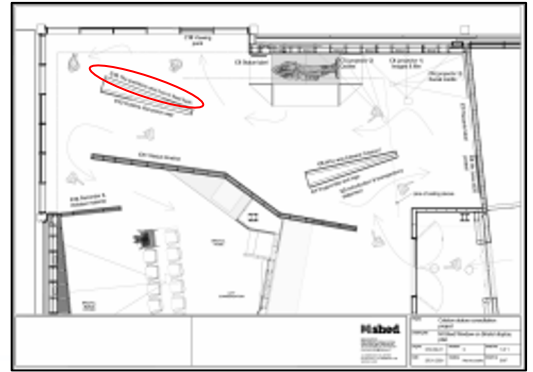
Fill out the short survey at [bristolmuseum.co.uk/m-shed](http://bristolmuseum.co.uk/m-shed)

**What will happen to your answers?**  
The Museum is committed to transparency and openness in its operations. Your answers will be used to inform the future plans of the Museum and will be shared with the public. Your answers will be kept for a period of 12 months and then deleted.

Live survey statistic projected here

Description: Space for reflection

Location: Opposite main window



How would you  
bring Bristol together?



Description: Related material at M-Shed

Location: On wall on way out of space



Don't forget to fill in the online survey!  
We look forward to hearing your views on  
planning what should happen to the statue next

Find out more about **Bristol's  
relationship with the Transatlantic  
Traffic In Enslaved Africans**,  
at M Shed's Bristol People gallery,  
the Georgian House Museum, and  
the Museum at the New Room.

For additional information visit:  
[bristolmuseums.org.uk/stories](http://bristolmuseums.org.uk/stories)

We have free Wi-Fi, share your visit with us\*



\*Photograph our collection for your personal use and post it to us



Sold Down the River by Tony Farbes  
here at M Shed



Protest display here at M Shed



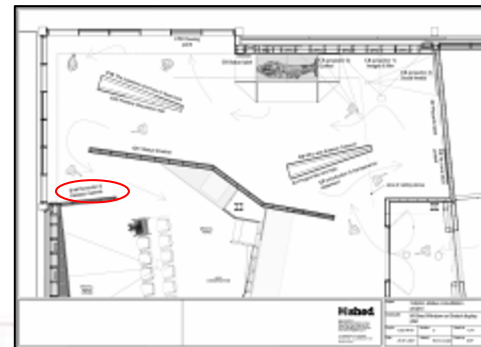
Transatlantic Slave Trade display  
here at M Shed



Anti-slavery room,  
Museum at the New Room



Some of the names of enslaved people,  
John Pinney's plantation, the island  
of Nevis, Georgian House Museum





The conversation is for

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the future of the  
city of London

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or call 020 7625 6000





W. J. G. M. J.

BLACK JEFFREY MAYER

WE GOTTA  
CARRY  
ON WITH

BLANK



...the ...



BRISTOL HISTORY  
COMMISSION REPORT

# The Colston Statue

## What Next?



# WHAT DO PEOPLE WANT?



4 OUT OF 5  
Bristol residents think the  
statue should be displayed  
in a Bristol museum

**80% of Bristol respondents wanted the statue to be displayed in a museum.**

## 1. Most people wish to see the Colston statue on display in a Bristol museum.

3 out of 4 people said to put the statue in a Bristol museum (74 per cent).

Bristol residents agreed with this option even more strongly, with **4 out of 5 people from Bristol saying the statue should be on display in a Bristol museum (80 per cent).**

Around 1 in 6 people from Bristol (16 per cent) did not want the statue on display in a Bristol museum. Of this 16 per cent, around three-quarters wanted it returned to the plinth and around one quarter wanted it destroyed or not on display.

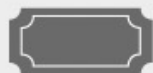
4% of Bristol respondents did not have a strong opinion on the matter.

In our sample, for every 1 person from Bristol who said they would like the statue displayed vertically and cleaned up, 5 said to present it in its current state. The most common view was that it should be horizontal and with graffiti intact. Many people said they liked how it appeared in the temporary display.

## 2. A majority of people support adding a plaque in the vicinity of the plinth to reflect the events of 7 June 2020.

More than 5 out of 8 people (65 per cent) support adding a plaque. Around 3 out of 10 people (29 per cent) disagree with adding a plaque. **Support for a plaque is even stronger in Bristol, where 7 out of 10 Bristol residents (71 per cent) agree with adding a plaque to reflect the events of 7 June 2020.**

58% of Bristol respondents wanted the empty plinth to be used for temporary artworks.



7 OUT OF 10  
Bristol residents are in favour of  
adding a plaque to the plinth to  
reflect events of 7 June 2020



6 OUT OF 10  
Bristol residents agree with  
using the plinth for temporary  
artworks or sculptures



5 OUT OF 8  
Bristol residents said they feel  
positive about the statue  
being pulled down

**3. Nearly 6 out of 10 Bristol respondents (58 per cent) support using the plinth for temporary artworks or sculptures, and another 15% neither agreed nor disagreed, suggesting a total of 7 out of 10 are open to this option (72 per cent).**

Opinion was mixed on what to do with the plinth, but a clear majority either support or are open to using the plinth for temporary artworks. Across the survey as a whole, nearly 5 in 8 either agreed with (49 per cent) or neither agreed nor disagreed (15 per cent) with using the plinth in this way. Fewer people were in favour of using the plinth for a permanent artwork (supported by fewer than 4 out of 10) or leaving the plinth empty (supported by 3 out of 10). Smaller numbers wished to see the Colston statue put back up on the plinth (supported by 1 in 10 in the city) or for the plinth to be removed entirely.

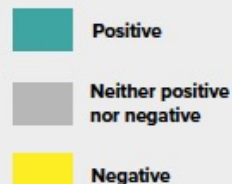
**4. More than 5 out of 8 Bristol residents (65 per cent) said they feel either very positive (50 per cent) or positive (15 per cent) about the statue being pulled down.**

Across the survey as a whole, over half (56 per cent) said they feel positive about the statue being pulled down. Just over 1 in 3 people (36 per cent) reported feeling negative about this, with the manner of removal the number one explanation for feeling this way.

# HOW DO DIFFERENT GROUPS FEEL ABOUT THE STATUE COMING DOWN?

## Attitudes by ethnicity

Broadly speaking, people from different ethnic groups felt similarly about the statue coming down, and gave similar reasons for their feelings.<sup>4</sup>



<sup>4</sup> Based on 6152 Bristol residents who reported ethnicity and stated how they feel about the statue being pulled down. Respondents answered on a Likert scale: very positive, positive, neither positive nor negative, negative or very negative. Results simplified here into positive, neither, or negative.



FOR EVERY 20 MIXED ETHNICITY / MULTIPLE HERITAGE Bristol residents, 15 felt positively, 1½ felt neither positively nor negatively, and 3½ felt negatively



FOR EVERY 20 WHITE BRITISH Bristol residents, 13 said they felt positively, 2 felt neither positively nor negatively, and 5 felt negatively.



FOR EVERY 20 ASIAN / ASIAN BRITISH Bristol residents, 12½ felt positively, 3¼ felt neither positively nor negatively, and 4¼ felt negatively.

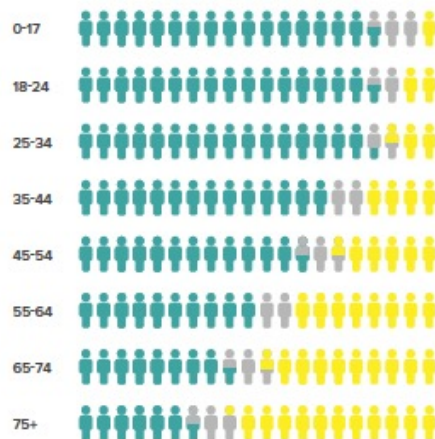


FOR EVERY 20 BLACK / AFRICAN / CARIBBEAN / BLACK BRITISH Bristol residents, 12 felt positively, 2 felt neither positively nor negatively and 6 felt negatively.



## Attitudes by age

Age appeared to make the biggest difference in how people felt about the statue being pulled down.<sup>5</sup> Younger people reported more positive feelings about the statue coming down.



<sup>5</sup> Based on 6489 Bristol residents who reported age and stated how they feel about the statue being pulled down.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FUTURE OF THE COLSTON STATUE

### Recommendation 1

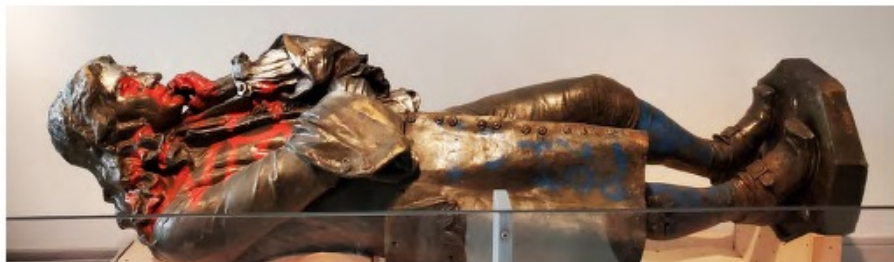
We recommend that the Colston statue enters the permanent collection of the Bristol City Council Museums service.

### Recommendation 2

We recommend that the statue is preserved in its current state and the opportunity to reflect this in the listing description is explored with Historic England.

### Recommendation 3

We recommend that the statue be exhibited, drawing on the principles and practice of the temporary M Shed display where the statue was lying horizontally. We recommend that attention is paid to presenting the history in a nuanced, contextualised and engaging way, including information on the broader history of the enslavement of people of African descent.



## FUTURE OF THE EMPTY PLINTH

**Recommendation 4**

We recommend that the former Colston statue plinth, along with the original plaques, remain in place and that a new plaque is installed that briefly and factually explains when and why the statue was put up and taken down. We suggest the following wording for the new plaque:

'On 13 November 1895, a statue of Edward Colston (1636 - 1721) was unveiled here celebrating him as a city benefactor. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the celebration of Colston was increasingly challenged given his prominent role in the enslavement of African people. On 7 June 2020, the statue was pulled down during Black Lives Matter protests and rolled into the harbour. Following consultation with the city in 2021, the statue entered the collections of Bristol City Council's museums.'

**Recommendation 5**

We recommend that the Conservation Area Character Appraisal is updated to include a) the events of 7 June 2020, b) this process of public engagement and c) the decision to locate the statue within Bristol City Council Museums service. We recommend that the opportunity to reflect the current state of the plinth in the National List description is explored.

**Recommendation 6**

We recommend that the city think creatively about the empty plinth and its immediate vicinity. We recommend that funding is sought from public and private sources to commission temporary artworks and activities. These might take a digital or physical form, on and around the plinth. We recommend that two principles guide future use of the plinth:

- that there are periods of intentional emptiness and presence;
- that this is a space for dialogue and conversation about things that matter in and for the city, including the legacy of transatlantic slavery.



## BROADER ISSUES EMERGING FROM THE CONSULTATION



- ▶ We see the need for a city-wide commitment to creating opportunities for younger and older generations to interact, share experiences and perspectives and develop greater empathy and mutual understanding, including sharing views on the city's past, present and future.
- ▶ We see the need to develop processes and practices, both locally and nationally, that encourage active engagement in creating more representative public space. When making decisions around contested heritage, public bodies should develop and follow processes that are fair and transparent, inclusive, participatory, evidence-based and committed to justice.<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ The history of the city's involvement with the transatlantic enslavement of African people is not an issue that can or should be consigned to the past, but rather remains embedded in present-day concerns. Strong feelings remain on this topic, and the toppling of the Colston statue has opened the opportunity for the history to be addressed urgently, appropriately and sensitively. We recognise the leadership of the Legacy Steering Group on the question of how Bristol might best memorialise and respond to the transatlantic trafficking and enslavement of African people.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Further guidance on possible processes can be found at Ben Stephenson, Marie-Annick Gourmet and Joanna Burch-Brown, 'Reviewing contested statues, memorials and place names: Guidance for public bodies', University of Bristol, 2021 available at [www.bridginghistories.com/heritage-resources](http://www.bridginghistories.com/heritage-resources)

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see the Project TRUTH report, by the Legacy Steering Group and Black South West Network: [www.blacksouthwestnetwork.org/acc](http://www.blacksouthwestnetwork.org/acc)

# PROJECT T.R.U.T.H

Telling, Restoring,  
Understanding (OUR)  
Tapestry (AND) History

---

**A report commissioned  
by Bristol City Council  
and the Bristol Legacy  
Steering Group. Produced  
by Black South West  
Network in partnership  
with Afrikan ConneXions  
Consortium.**

Recommendations by Afrikan  
heritage communities on how  
the ramifications and legacies  
of Bristol's involvement in the  
Transatlantic Trafficking and  
Enslavement of Afrikans (TTEA),  
should be recognised in the city.

PROJECT  
TRUTH



What next for Bristol:

- City Council to accept the recommendations
- Agree where and how to create a 'permanent' exhibit of the statue *involving the community*
- Agree how to manage a 'Listed' artefact
- Agree who and how to create a programme of temporary artworks on the plinth.

*A core principle of democracy is not simply tolerating but valuing differences in opinion. The world – and our city – would be all the poorer without differences in the ways we think about the past, present and future.*

