

Colston and slavery still obscured?

At last year's Merchant Venturers Charter Day service at the cathedral the Bishop of Bristol, stated that Edward Colston had:

'lived a life of significance' [and there] 'may be still some speculation on some of the circumstances around his business roots right here'

The Bishop of Bristol's clumsy attempt to rewrite history, effectively claiming that Colston's involvement in the business of the slave trade was 'speculation' is unsurprising. A similar kind of air brushing occurred during a BBC televised debate in 2007 (the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade) when a spokesperson for the Merchant Venturers, claimed that his organisation had **not** traded in slave-produced commodities! This produced a mixture of laughter and howls of derision from the assembled historians in the studio audience.

This is nothing new. Colston's extensive political and financial involvement in promoting slavery and the trade in human cargo has been obscured by the Merchant Venturers and their devotees for centuries. It took until the 1920s before his dealings in the 'vile trade' first began to be exposed. The problem for the Merchant Venturers and their ilk is simply this: if you set up one of your beneficent members as the 'father of Bristol', bang up statues¹ and name streets and buildings after him; then the *truth* becomes politically inconvenient.

So what are the myths and what is the truth about Edward Colston?

- Colston was held up in the Victorian period as an example of 'a self-made man'. This was far from true. Privately educated Colston was born into a wealthy merchant family in Bristol who were already embedded in the Merchant Venturers by the time he was born in 1636.
- In 1680 the profit-chasing Colston followed a number of his family into the Royal African Company (RAC), the premier slaving organisation in the British Empire. During the heyday of the RAC from 1672 to 1698 the organisation had a complete monopoly over the trade in human cargo from West Africa. Colston rose rapidly to the board of the company in this period becoming its deputy governor in 1689.

¹ In 1839 the Clifton elite proposed 'a colossal statue of Edward Colston overlooking the city' on Brandon Hill. Luckily (?) we got Cabot Tower instead! Poole, S. 'Till our liberties be secure' popular sovereignty and public space in Bristol, 1780-1850' in *Urban History* 26, 1 (1999).

- Between 1672 and 1689, Colston's company transported around 100,000 enslaved Africans to plantations in the West Indies and America. This included women and children as young as six – each slave was branded with company's initials, RAC, on their chest. To maximise profit, Colston's ships divided their hulls into holds with little headroom, so they could transport as many slaves as possible. Unhygienic conditions, dehydration, dysentery and scurvy killed more than 20,000 slaves during the crossings. Their bodies were thrown overboard.
- During this period Colston secretly accrued immense wealth which he then multiplied again by acting as a money lender. The bulk of this fortune, originally obtained from the exploitation of forced labour, became his passport to civic and political power in Bristol.
- Colston is often portrayed as a Christ-like figure giving without prejudice to the 'poor' of Bristol. In fact he was a Christian fundamentalist who hated Catholics and non-conformists; in fact anyone who wasn't part of the High Anglican church. For Colston, only the 'right-kind' of poor and orphans were due his charity and even then they had to be physically and ideologically disciplined into strict religious observance before they would be allowed to 'kiss the benefactors hand'.
- Colston was an old-school Tory loyalist who believed in the divine right of kings, despised Whigs and fought tooth and nail against 'dangerous' ideas such as 'democracy' and 'enfranchisement'.

History is full of profiteers, gangsters and exploiters who toss ill-gotten wealth from the high table downwards in order to appease their own egos or to gain civic pride and status. Colston fits neatly into a long line of British slavers, colonial warlords and drug dealers that profited from the misery of colonisation and forced labour, whilst building respectable identities through philanthropy in the 'mother country'.

The question is: For how much longer are school children expected to commemorate Colston in the city's cathedral whilst conveniently disregarding the memory of enslaved Africans whose lives were brutalised and cheapened by the trade in human cargo? The Bishop of Bristol needs to inform school children of the *truth*, to restore humanity dignity to the memory of those whose lives were commodified. After all it is he that presides over these commemorations. The ball is in his court.....

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