



Interview Date:	28-07-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Sarah Robertson	Organisation:	Colston Hall
Position:	Communications and Special Projects Director		

Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Sarah Robertson, Communications and Special Projects Director at Colston Hall, Bristol. 28-07-2020

Tom Crowley 0:01

Okay, so this is Tom Crowley from University of Cambridge. Um, and um, Sarah Robertson. Sorry I just had a mental blank from Colston Hall. What's your position again at Colston Hall Sarah?

Sarah Robertson 0:22

Communications and Special Projects Director.

Tom Crowley 0:25

Thank you. And the date is the 28th of July 2020. And Sarah as we just discussed, obviously you are speaking in your professional capacity as an employee of Colston Hall, but obviously, of course, much of what you say will inevitably be inflected with your personal perspective, as well.

Sarah Robertson 0:53

Yeah.

Tom Crowley 0:55

So, the first question: has your organisation done anything which engages with the legacy of slavery or colonialism in recent years, and that is prior to this summer's Black Lives Matter movement.

Sarah Robertson 1:12

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The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



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Yes. And we've been heavily involved with it from an arts and culture perspective. And I'll give you the context. Colston Hall is a concert hall, we're the largest concert hall in the South West, we present about 500 shows a year. We have about 2000 capacity. Our programme is diverse, loads of different genres. So, we're an established major concert hall in the South West and we are named after the slave trader Edward Colston.

The building itself is actually owned by Bristol City Council. In 2011 Bristol Music Trust, which is the organisation that I work for, was given the job of looking after Colston Hall, and helping to promote music in Bristol. And ever since I've worked at Colston Hall— I've worked there since the end of 2007. Ever since I've been there we have known that we need to do something about the name. And there has always been low level protests in Bristol with some kind of more organised protests, and often there would be stories in the press about us and sometimes musicians would protest about performing at the Hall. Massive Attack who are Bristol's kind of biggest music export very famously won't play at our venue because of the name.

So when the trust took over in 2011, we knew that we had to do something about the name. And the moment in time that we pinpointed that would be most sensible to do something around it was around our redevelopment project. And we're currently in the middle of a circa 50 million pound transformation of the main hall and historic areas. The Hall was built in 1867 and it was rebuilt in the early 1950s and hasn't really been touched since. So we decided that the time to deal with this issue was around the time that we might reopen the building. Which was due to reopen this year actually, but we've been delayed. It's not going to happen for a while yet.

But our plans changed in 2017 when an organisation called Countering Colston started to be really vocal in the city about wanting to relook at and readdress the way that Colston is represented and celebrated in the city. And Bristol is a city that hasn't really talked very much about its slaving past, cities like Liverpool have got museums and you know that you're in a city with history when you're in somewhere like Liverpool, but Bristol's not really like that. There's a section in the museum that talks about slavery, but it's kind of hidden away and Bristol hasn't ever really talked very openly as a city to its people about slavery and Countering Colston wanted to change that. And because we are called Colston Hall, we've historically been the lightning rod for these kinds of conversations. The interesting thing is that the Colston Hall was built 150 years after Edward Colston died. We were built in 1867. And there was none of his money in the building. The building is on Colston Street. There's lots of places in Bristol that are named after him. He was a great philanthropist in the city. So he founded things like almshouses and schools. Colston Hall's building is on land that was previously owned by Edward Colston as a boys' school. But subsequently it was bought by an organisation called the Colston Hall Company who built this Hall in 1867.

So, the Hall was built 150 years after Edward Colston died. It was named by powerful people in the Victorian era who— this is one of the things that I'm going to talk a bit more about, because I could be clearer about the history of it. But there were political reasons at the time why the Victorian political leaders wanted to name the city after a famous benefactor. So, they put his name on the building. So, we were called Colston Hall. And so, in 2017, Countering Colston were organised

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and they started protesting outside our building and gathering momentum. And really stepping up their opposition to us being called this. The historian David Olusoga wrote an article in The Guardian saying the fact that Bristol is still called after Colston is one of the city's biggest shames.

And we knew that we needed to do something about it and quickly. It was taking up a lot of time and a lot of a lot of stress of us dealing with this. And as an organisation, we did want to do something about it. And we just, it's fair to say that we kind of weren't quite ready for it. We were scared of having to deal with something like this as an organisation that isn't historians, and we're not teachers, and we're not politicians. We're just ordinary people, putting on concerts and generally making people happy. So, this whole thing was a bit of a shock for us. And even though we knew we had to do something about it, we were still scared about making the first moves to address it.

But in April 2017, we did it. We held a press conference and announced that we were going to change our name. And this led to a wave of upset and negative social media posts coming into us. And it was quite extraordinary. I've never experienced anything like it before then. Our social feeds were constantly scrolling with people telling us that we that we were doing the wrong thing and we were rewriting history. The majority of this stuff was negative. People were telling us that we were doing the wrong thing, and we were erasing their history and we were taking away a part of themselves, and didn't we know that Black people owned slaves as well? And why can't we just leave the past in the past? And why do we have to make white people feel guilty about it all the time? And the resounding narrative was that we were totally wrong to be doing this. We didn't hear many people speak up and say we are doing the right thing, including other organisations in the city. We were the ones dealing with it from the city's point of view, even though it's not just our problem to deal with. It's a city-wide thing.

So, we had to deal with a lot of this. And we did get some positive comments. David Olusoga wrote another article in The Guardian about how we were one of the first people to make this change, and how significant it was. And so we received praise from those areas, but most of the stuff we heard was that we were doing the wrong thing, and a lot of the people in Bristol thought that we were doing the wrong thing.

And so, what we had to do in that time was we had work on artistic plan to open this conversation out more and talk to the city about it. It wasn't that easy because structurally at that time we were a different kind of organisation. We're not like theatres that regularly commissions work. We are a music venue, we put on things like big rock and pop gigs alongside a more curated programme of work. So, although we have an incredibly diverse and high-quality programme creating art to deal with this isn't really our natural way of doing things, but we felt that it was important to address this.

Sarah Robertson 11:24

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We did things like, we worked with the Bristol Old Vic Theatre to commission a walking trail about Frederick Douglass the abolitionist who came to Bristol and did a lot of talks around the city, talking about how slavery was wrong and kind of drawing attention to it. And we got some famous actors Kwame Kwei-Armah, the Chaplain to the Queen Rose Hudson-Wilkin came and our mayor Marvin Rees, who is the first Black mayor in Europe did a speech as well. And we worked with the theatre to hold this walking tour throughout the city looking at speeches that Frederick Douglass had made. We commissioned a project called the Pineapple Project, which was run by an artist called Savinder Bual. There's information on our website about it, but she makes instruments out of pineapples, and refers back to them as being a colonial symbol. And we created a community orchestra of diverse people in the city to come together and play these pineapple instruments. And it was like a long running project and performance of it in the end, and we talked about the kind of colonial meanings of the pineapple, how it fits with the work that we're doing. And that was quite high-profile thing that we did.

We took part a lot of consultations, because obviously we were quite high profile in this. We were the first organisation in Bristol to take a stand on this issue and one of the first organisations in the country to take a stand on it. So, we took part in a lot of consultations around the city, with people who were thinking about doing the same thing. So, we helped a primary school in Bristol called Colston's Primary that had the same thing as us, they weren't founded by him. They just had his name, and did a programme of work with their kids looking at what a name means, and did they really want to be named after a slave trader? And we took part in these conversations with them and they eventually changed their name.

And we did a lot of kind of talking— I spoke at an Arts Council diversity conference in early 2018 about our experience. We did a lot of talking around open days in the city.

And we have a really thriving education department which primarily brings music education into practically every school in the city. We're the city's music hub, but we've worked really closely with partners ever since our name change announcement to help come up with something called the One Bristol Curriculum, which is a project working with local artists and historians to create a curriculum for the city that integrates the full history and influence of Black people in the UK. So looking at the history of how African, Caribbean and Asian communities have created our history alongside white people in the city. And that's happening in Bristol at the moment. This Bristol Curriculum is working in schools to show young people the impact that people of colour have had on this country's history. And we've helped to start that. We've helped to bring those issues to the fore a bit more. So, after our announcement we've been working on different projects and different ways of kind of telling the story and kind of explaining it all a bit more.

Tom Crowley 15:42

No, that was that was great. The more detail we have the better, the more useful this archive will be. That's really interesting to hear. Sorry, as I said, I'm going to be quiet, we can talk a bit more afterwards, I'm going to be quite brief. So,

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the next question is: has Black Lives Matter influenced policy going forward? And by that, I mean just the current summer's protests. And can you expand? If you did make— if it did influence your policy, can you expand on why the decisions you've made were made?

Sarah Robertson 16:17

Yes. So, Black Lives Matter came at a really interesting time for us. Most of our staff were furloughed. As soon as COVID hit, we furloughed about 90% of our staff. So, there was barely any staff members doing work. And just before COVID hit, we were almost ready to announce our new name. We've been working on it since we announced in 2017 and doing a really thorough job, looking at our brand values, talking to stakeholders, talking to groups in the city, talking to diverse groups in the city, and really doing a proper, decent thorough job on what our new name might be. Something that might last for the next 150 years of Colston Hall.

We were getting really close and then COVID hit and we kind of have to store those conversations up a bit. So when the Black Lives Matter protests started there weren't very many staff working, and the toppling of Colston statue really put the focus back on us with people who might not have heard about what we were doing the first time around. So in Bristol, we are the obvious target. As soon as the statue came down, people started to look for the next thing and that was us. So we had to act quickly— we issued a statement around supporting Black Lives Matter and another statement reiterating our commitment to changing our name. We're quite used to social media storms – and this time round we got much more criticism than in 2017 but this time it was from the other side, about how we weren't acting quickly enough. So even though we reiterated that we were going to change our name and that we were doing it and we were nearly there, we got a fair amount of criticism on social media for not acting quickly enough. We were also receiving letters about how we were still doing the wrong thing by changing, but the loudest voices were the more liberal ones now asking why we couldn't do it more quickly.

Tom Crowley 18:27

Just really quickly, sorry to interrupt but um, so the, something that was taking the time was with coming up with a new name. Is that right?

Sarah Robertson 18:37

Yes. We've done a huge solid piece of work looking at a new brand and a new name. And so, it was so interesting around Black Lives Matter because the narrative around us almost completely flipped. From us in 2017 changing the name being *This interview was recorded for the project 'Recording Decisions and Actions connected with Claims for the Removal/Protection of Statues in UK Civic Spaces' carried out between June and September 2020 by the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre (CHRC) and funded by the University of Cambridge School of Humanities and Social Science, the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, the Vice Chancellor's Office and CHRC.*

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wrong to, in 2020, why haven't you done it already, and why are you being so slow about it? And why can't you just change the name now? And surely you can just change your Twitter handle straightaway and get rid of it. So we were kind of being criticised from the other side, which was kind of a bit of a shock because we were in the process of doing it. And the spotlight wasn't really on us until the statue came down. No one was really asking about our process until that statue came down and then all of a sudden, we were the focus again, and we weren't being quick enough.

So I'm telling you this because what it is made us realise is that we need to move more quickly. Black Lives Matter has made us realise that we need to talk about what we're doing more openly and that we need to move more quickly. The feeling in the arts world at the moment is that you kind of just need to get on and make change. I suppose it took us a while to get comfortable with the fact that this was our issue to deal with at the beginning. And we've been trying to do our best to do the best job that we can on finding a new name and get it right. But I think Black Lives Matter has shown that, that sometimes people just want change to happen, and it doesn't need to be 100% considered and it doesn't have to necessarily be absolutely the right answer, that people in movements like this, just want to see change happen. So we are after all of this, we knew that we had to pick up our naming process again. And we have and we had a board meeting this Friday, where we agreed on a new name.

Tom Crowley 20:59

I was going to ask what it was.

Sarah Robertson 21:01

I can't tell you that I'm afraid.

Tom Crowley 21:03

Sure. That's exciting. Um— sorry. So, the next question, and you may feel that you've covered this already, but I'm just going through them. Yes. Is: has the pulling down of the Colston statue and the ensuing debate influenced your plans going forward? If yes, why?

Sarah Robertson 21:26

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Yes. So, as well as making us realise that we just need to get on with it, we have thought carefully about the process of the name change. We're working with some of the best kind of art, creative designers in the country to help us come up with this new name, and come up with a new brand and identity. And one of the things that the toppling of the statue in Bristol showed us and the subsequent new statue that was put up by Mark Quinn, there was a lot of conversation about how is Mark Quinn the right person to represent these voices? Should he have put that statue up and couldn't he have commissioned a Black artist to do the same job and why was he a privileged white man imposing his views on a city that he doesn't live in or understand?

So, we want to make sure that we have had the widest views and widest voices influencing our name change process. We've consulted really widely with Bristol's communities, our audiences and our board who come from a wide variety of backgrounds about what the name and our values should be, but we're working with designers from London who could be more diverse. We had an incredibly robust process to find our brand designers but they were the ones that came out as being the best for the job. So, we're going to work up the visual identity away from the name. We're going to announce the name in September and we're going to work with some young emerging diverse creatives in the city to work alongside our brand designers to help us develop our visual identity. There's plenty of people in Bristol who are kind of young and diverse and have big ideas. So, we think that that's a really good way including some multiplicity of voices within our project. We're going to open up the conversations and make sure that there's diverse voices being heard in that and our renewed scrutiny of our process is a direct consequence of Black Lives Matter. But, away from the Black Lives Matter movement, this would be the right thing to do anyway – getting different perspectives and giving over our power more fully.

We are also focusing really more heavily on inclusion and diversity in our organisation. The spotlight is on us now. It always has been always on us. But because we've got this name and because we're seen as a big organisation in the city we are under a lot of scrutiny about the work that we do and the artists that we work with, in the way that we spend our money and how diverse our organisation is and where our education programmes reach. So we are really looking carefully about our inclusion and diversity policies. I've got a meeting about it at two o'clock today actually, to really look at how we can become more inclusive and more diverse.

We're not bad. The Arts Council have a rating called the Creative Case for Diversity where they're looking at— if you're a funded organisation, they want to know how many diverse artists you put on your stages and how many diverse artists you help develop their careers and we've got a rating of 'strong' for the Creative Case for Diversity because we've got a diverse programme and work hard in this area. We also work with a lot with artists with special educational needs and disabilities. But we are in the spotlight now. And whatever we do, it can't just be good, it has to be bloody good. So, we are making sure that we have got some really strong and clear inclusion and diversity plans. And we're going to announce those alongside the new name. And we're thinking about how we can include diverse voices within the announcement. Because Bristol's kind of at a turning point where the world is watching it. And we're part of that. And so, we kind of want a poem that puts our name and the position of the city well, into context, I suppose. Does that make sense?

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Tom Crowley 25:40

It certainly does. Thank you very much. So, the next question: has the website Toppole the Racists influenced your response?

Sarah Robertson 26:14

I didn't even know existed until I read the question.

Tom Crowley 26:18

Good answer.

Tom Crowley 26:22

So, and this question again, you have, of course, already answered some of it, but I'll ask it anyway. Do you plan to address the legacies of slavery or colonialism in displays or other public areas in your institution? What resources do you draw on? And who do you consult when you do this?

Sarah Robertson 26:47

Yes, so we're currently doing a circa 50 million pound redevelopment of our building. As part of that redevelopment we've got about four and a half million from the National Lottery Heritage Fund focused around the really old parts of our building. And as part of that money, we are working on interpretation designs to sit within the new building. And we're working with our creative producer, and she is being really influenced by the stuff that's been that's happening recently. Obviously, she knows about the context of the name. And we always knew that we were going to have to explain how we got to where we are with the name in that interpretation design.

But lots of stuff, lots of issues around protest and those kind of conversations within Bristol's communities have been really coming to the fore since Black Lives Matter. And Colston Hall is— it used to be the kind of city's civic hall where they used to hold rallies, there were big, big meetings with people like the suffragettes. Oswald Mosley held a rally at the hall. It was it was kind of the meeting place for big political events and stuff. So— and we've recently found quite a lot of archive

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materials that are based around protest. So, I think that there's a strong theme there that we can draw on for our interpretation designs.

We've taken the letters down off the side of our building, and we're going to save some of them to use within the interpretation design. And our creative producer is really keen to work closely with Bristol's diverse communities on some of these stories. We're going to interview people and make sure that we get oral histories from a wide range of people and we've already done an oral history project, talking to people of all different communities in Bristol who've used the Hall and loved the Hall. So, yeah, we're absolutely going to be talking about this clearly and prominently in the interpretation in our new building.

Tom Crowley 29:12

Thank you.

So yeah, again, you've touched on this. But the question is, do you have any current or future plans relating to colonialism or the legacy of slavery that do not relate to the built environment? For example, education, the arts, recruitment, and again, what resources to draw on, who do you consult?

Sarah Robertson 29:42

Yeah. And so, I talked a bit before about a One Bristol Curriculum programme, which is gaining momentum and is going to continue and there's loads of different voices in there, there's Bristol diverse artists, there's teachers. Even Massive Attack are doing something that's related to it now, actually, which is quite interesting. So that's going to continue, and we are hopefully going to be looking at a programme, an artistic programme, looking at the themes of kind of debate and reconciliation in schools.

And one of the things that we found throughout the whole of this right from the beginning in 2017, is that this issue has been very binary for people. And I think it's a thing at the moment with call out culture and people thinking that they just need to have an opinion and state that opinion. So, when we announced in 2017, it was around the time of Brexit, and it was very in or out, yes or no, this is the right thing to do, or this is the wrong thing to do. And I feel like it's even more entrenched this time around. Instead of having people saying that we're doing the wrong thing, we just have people now saying that we're not doing it quick enough. And they're not interested in nuance, and they're not really interested in looking at the other side of the story. And especially the stuff around the debate around the Mark Quinn statue for the city. It's so complicated.

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For me, it's a beautiful piece of art and an amazing statue. But is he the right person to do that and put it there? I think with this kind of polarisation of opinion society is becoming a little bit less inclined to debate and look at different sides of the story. And we've absolutely been the focus of this, our actions either being right or wrong. There's no in between. And we feel like, I'm kind of straying into the personal opinion part of this now, but I kind of feel like whatever we do, we're going to be wrong in some quarters, we kind of can't get it right. What we've got to do is focus on what's right for us and our organisation and music in the city.

So, I think it's worth thinking about how art can help this, kind of opening young people's eyes a bit more to how to debate and how issues aren't just one sided. There are multiplicities of debate of voices and views. And I think that music and art can play a really strong role in in kind of promoting that. So I'm hoping that we might be able to do a programme that looks at debate and reconciliation and talking about it in schools and also obviously looking how we become more diverse across all areas of our organisation in terms of recruitment and our artistic programme and the kind of people we put on our stages is much, much more important to us now. I mean, it was anyway but the focus is on us, people are watching what we do, we have to be exemplary at this now otherwise we'll be called out.

Tom Crowley 33:29

Thank you. So, the last question. Um, yeah, so this is kind of from the perspective of Cambridge University. And we do a lot of research you obviously doing— you talked about all the research you've done as well, a huge amount. But we're kind of interested in— you know, if you could commission some research from some academics. What would you like to understand better in terms of making decisions concerning the legacy of slavery and colonialism?

Sarah Robertson 34:01

Yes. So, I've talked before a bit about this about how we have felt quite alone on this issue. And we feel kind of alone with it intellectually to a degree as well. We are a team of arts managers dealing with something that is massive for the city. So, I said before, that we didn't really get a lot, a lot of support from other organisations when we announced that we were going to change and we were receiving a lot of criticism.

We're not historians, and we're not university professors and, I kind of know quite a lot of the history about it, but I would love to know more and be 100% happy with this knowledge when I'm taking part in debates and conversations around this.

So, what I'm saying is that it feels really overwhelming trying to deal with all of this in a heightened environment and with a lot of criticism when we're not historians and we don't have the academic rigour behind us. So, we would have really

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loved I think, I would still love to have a bit more academic support around it. I have become quite close with a philosophy professor at Bristol University who was a founding member of Countering Colston but has turned into a support to us in managing the criticism and situation we are in from an academic point of view. And she has been very open and talking to me about her research and thinking. She has talked to me about how families pass down opinion. And she thought that older generations in the city might be influencing younger generations about how what we were doing was wrong and that might reflect negatively on us.

I want to be 100% clear that her help and support has been invaluable and I want it to continue. But when she put our situation into such a big, societal context, it made us worry about it as well feel reassured that she has our back. And she told us that what we were doing could have massive cultural implications for the city. As you can imagine, we are people who were just sat at our desks trying to do their best and put music concerts on, to hear this kind of thing was like, oh wow. And you kind of get sucked into levels of worrying about this and levels of detail and levels of bigness - when it's that big when you worry that you don't have the facts and you're not an academic and you don't understand the whole picture.

So, what we could do with having is more positive support from organisations with wider knowledge than us. Helping us to put it in context and helping us get the facts right and maybe holding our hand through some of the more difficult stuff and taking some of the pressure away rather than just piling it on to one group of people.

I feel like we could have had more support from other organisations in the city in the past and certainly in the future now that people are more aware of the systemic racism at play in this issue. And I can see that it's a difficult issue for people like the city's politicians to engage with. But it means that we're quite isolated on the issue still. And so, some kind of academic positive hand holding support would have been nice. Would be nice.

Tom Crowley 40:22

Thank you very much. That's an excellent answer. I like it— a few times people have knocked the ball back into the University's court with that question. That's the last question but is there anything else you want to add?

Sarah Robertson 40:39

Um, not really. I think I probably ended up finding— a lot of it is quite personal because we're dealing with it. And we're dealing with it personally and especially at the moment with COVID. We're dealing with it individually in our own homes on reduced hours. When this stuff is— in 2017, all the social media stuff was coming into the office. And we could deal with it as a team working together and protecting each other. But this time round, we're doing it separately. And it's coming into your own home into your phone. I've talked quite personally about it because it feels personal at the moment,

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Transcribed by: Tom Crowley

Participant permissions to record given



Date of transcription: 30-09-2020

Participant permission to archive given



The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



Interview Date:	28-07-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Sarah Robertson	Organisation:	Colston Hall
Position:	Communications and Special Projects Director		

it feels like what we're dealing with is, is huge, and we're kind of still quite isolated on it. So, maybe if you ask me again in a year's time or something how it's going or how I feel I might talk about it in a different way.

Tom Crowley 41:46

Yeah, I mean, that's exactly why we want to have— why we're doing these interviews and this research now. Yeah. To try and capture that moment. I'll stop the recording. If that if That's good?

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