

Interview Date:	24-07-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Katie Finnegan-Clarke	Organisation:	Countering Colston
Position:	N/A		

## Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Katie Finnegan-Clarke of Countering Colston. 24-07-2020

Tom Crowley 0:03

Okay, so it's 24th of July 2020, Tom Crowley from Cambridge University, and Katie Finnegan-Clarke from Countering Colston. And obviously, Katie, you're speaking in part from the perspective of your organisation, but also what you say is going to be influenced by your own personal perspective.

Sorry this is going to be a slightly one-way interview because I don't want to interrupt that much. So, I'm just going to ask the questions and make encouraging facial expressions.

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 0:44

Okay, that's good to know, because then I'll just keep going.

Tom Crowley 0:51

Excellent. Yeah, so the first question: could you tell us a little bit about the history and formation of your organisation?

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 1:02

Yes. So, we're a loose network of activists and academics who are Bristol based and have individually come to the conclusion that Colston should not be celebrated in Bristol. So, we all came together, we were all doing our own bits of work around Colston. We decided to come together as more of a formalised network in 2015. We came up with the name 'Countering Colston' quite casually, in a meeting in a pub. And then I started to develop the website and asked a friend who's a graphic designer to create the logo.

Our first target was the Colston's Girls' School commemoration service as that was particularly pertinent for a number of us. I used to go to Colston's Girls' School and there's another ex-pupil in the group. The group is a network of about seven people; there's an ex-teacher, a Black artist who does lots of chalking and public art around anti-racism, reparations,

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Transcribed by: Tom Crowley

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## The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



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and the slave trade. There's a philosopher, a professional historian and a grassroots historian. My background is campaigning and communications.

We decided to go to the commemoration day service, which the pupils at Colston's Girls' School take part in every year. We held up signs that said you do not have to wear his favourite flower, you do not have to eat his buns. And we also did some chalking outside the Cathedral. Commemoration day is an annual celebration of Colston's life that the Colston's Girls' School pupils go to. It's organised by the Merchant Venturers. And as a pupil I wore his favourite flower, which is a golden chrysanthemum and you have to eat his favourite bun every year and you wear a funny little hat and you sing his favourite hymn. And you talk about how amazing this man called Colston was - an amazing philanthropist.

So, we stood outside the Cathedral which hosts the celebration and just held banners and just very, very peacefully stood there. And it really concerned the school and the Merchants. So that was our first kind of event. And it received a lot of national press coverage, actually it had a really big impact in terms of media coverage. And the following year, they made major changes to commemoration day service. They didn't make the girls wear the flowers; they didn't make them eat the buns. They didn't talk about Colston, they basically removed Colston from the service. So, that felt like a big win.

We continued to be in conversation with Colston's Girls through letters with the headmaster, talking about the name of the school and talking about the statue within the school. There's a statue of Colston within the school. It became clear that actually the Merchant Ventures who run the school were blocking any kind of meaningful consultation around the name. They talked about wanting to have the girls choose a name but that was blocked. Then— Is this too much detail?

Tom Crowley 4:50

No, it's excellent.

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 4:51

Okay, good. And then we decided to target the thanksgiving service, which happens every year in a different church, but also in central Bristol. And that it's just [for] the Merchant Ventures so the people don't have to go. And the Merchant Ventures have done this for about 300 years. They wear top hats and very, very formal dress. And they parade down Corn Street, which is an ancient part of the city. And they prayed to Colston's grave, which is in All Saints Church, which is right next to St. Stephen's Church. So, they do this big parade, it's a big birthday party for Colston and Colston's birthday is in November. And it's very jolly, and it's very, very elite. So, we went down to that, we had signage, we did some chalking and just did a little rally. And yeah, again, it was incredibly effective. And the following year the church refused to hold the service just because they felt like it wasn't— the service wasn't aligned to their values— they didn't feel like it was ethical.

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And they had been apparently having conversations about it for a number of years. But the rally just really helped bring some focus to the issue.

So that was really great. And I started a petition to get Colston Hall to change its name, so Colston Hall is like the premier kind of music venue for Bristol, it's very famous. I was working as a professional campaigner at the time for an organisation called 38 Degrees. So, I actually started a petition on the 38 Degrees platform and it kind of took off. Within quite a short space of time, Colston Hall made a big announcement and decided to change their name. It's hard to explain how significant that is because Colston Hall is such a big part of Bristol's cultural heritage. You know, Jimi Hendrix has played there and the Who. Everyone's played there; it's the big venue. Interestingly, Massive Attack have always refused to play at Colston Hall because of the name. So, I wrote that into the petition. I think that gave the petition some kind of history and strength.

So yeah, in 2017 the Colston Hall CEO, without talking to us, held an emergency press conference and said that they've decided to reopen the Hall, because it was being refurbished, the Hall would reopen with a new name. They said they wanted it to be an inclusive space. Rather than just say, oh, we're just going to sell the name rights, she really did make quite an impressive statement around how she wanted to create a kind of modern and diverse music venue for Bristol and how that it was inappropriate to have Colston's name on the front of the Hall. When they had done some earlier refurbishments a few years before it had gone from Colston Hall being very small name on the front of the building to this huge golden 'Colston' on the front of the building. And I think yeah, various members of the Black community in particular felt like it was a real insult. So much money was being pumped into Colston Hall and his name was kind of being even further memorialised in that way. So yeah, that was amazing. So yeah, we won that campaign. And then it kind of started to feel a bit like dominoes.

So then Colston Primary School decided to hold a consultation and we didn't have anything to do with that, but we knew it was linked to the Hall, so Colston primary school did a consultation with the parents and children and decided to rename to Cotton Garden Primary School. Colston Yard, which is a pub, decided to rename itself. In the meantime, we were kind of doing, research and lobbying. So, we've always been linked to the Bristol Radical History Group. So, they were regularly publishing new research, new pamphlets and doing lots of grassroots research around Colston because I think a lot of the history around Colston and the Merchant Ventures is kind of purposefully kept hidden.

We're also at this time in kind of letter conversations with the headmaster of Colston's Girls, and we were in conversation with the Council around the statue, we are kind of in an argument around the wording of the plaque on the statue, this new plaque. Also, one of our campaigners Cleo Lake has since become, became Lord Mayor. So, she removed one of the Colston portraits which is in the Lord Mayor's house— she removed the portrait when she became Lord Mayor, which was amazing and got lots of media coverage. So as a campaign, we were doing quite a lot of just general comms, you know, like creating the website, updating information, doing interviews, just building momentum doing social media posts. And then yeah, and then the Colston statue got removed, which we were all absolutely delighted about because we had spent about five years being ignored by the council. We were very frustrated and just felt like it wasn't going to be removed by the

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Council ever. So, we were very, very pleased that it was removed and during a Black Lives Matter demonstration because celebrating Colston is incredibly disrespectful to all of the people who were enslaved under his regime. And it is about showing that Black lives matter. So, it felt very appropriate for the statue to be removed in that way, even though we had nothing to do with the demonstration. It felt really positive that Black Lives Matter had taken it on in that way.

There are other things we were working on. So, Abolition Shed, a few members of our team have been working with some property developers down by the docks to try and get a kind of memorial museum together, a slavery museum for Bristol that's called the Abolition Shed. And another campaign that came out of Countering Colston - Justice for Judah. An elderly Rastafarian man who was a neighbour of mine and Cleo's, called Ras Judah was brutally attacked by the police and racially profiled just while he was walking his dog on a Saturday morning. So, we started a campaign called Justice for Judah. And that was something that kind of came out of Countering Colston in a way, we sort of built up a lot of relationships. And actually Justice for Judah was a really important and quite high profile campaign that got quite a lot of international coverage.

And we were also building relationships with the media at this time as well. For example, Tristan Cork at the Bristol Post, we really spent a lot of time kind of educating him, engaging him in the issues around Colston because it's something that you kind of have to do quite a lot of digging around to understand the history. The real history isn't kind of presented to people in most mainstream media or schools or anything. So yeah, I think that's a general rundown.

Tom Crowley 13:32

That's great. Thank you very much. So, I'm just being quite formulaic. I'm just going to go on to the next question, which is, um, has the recent Black Lives Matter movement of this summer— has that influenced your plans going forward?

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 14:00

Yeah, I mean, it's massively changed. there's a lot more energy around the campaign now. we're completely grassroots and we've never had any funding. We're all volunteers. And we're non-hierarchical. Um, so we don't have like a 12 month plan, we go where there's energy and interest. So, I suppose in terms of planning, Black Lives Matter is probably not going to change our plans, because we're too organic to have plans. You see what I mean, but I think Black Lives Matter in Bristol, and the toppling the statue was an incredibly important moment for the campaign, and I think it's brought a lot of interest to the campaign.

I think a lot of people are saying, it has helped to put context around the toppling of the statue because we had been campaigning for years, we had been trying to do things through the official routes for so many years that it gives credibility to the people who toppled the statue. Um, we have been speaking at rallies, and we've written two statements, which

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we've published since the statue was toppled. We definitely support the individuals who toppled the statue because we believe that they were enacting the people's will.

Um, the Bristol Post, which is the main newspaper for Bristol did a survey of over 10,000 people a few days after the statue was toppled and found that 63% of the people who completed the survey agreed with the statue being toppled in that way. Which for me, I think is very significant. I think the Council was completely out of touch with what people wanted. And I think there was this kind of built up frustration over a long, long, like years and years and years, that kind of led to the statue being toppled. The earliest documentation of people resisting the statue was like 1924. And so, there's been about 100 years-worth of resistance to the statue, you know, in the 1980s there were Rastafarians who used to go down weekly to protest at the statue. There's like a very long history, Massive Attack in the 90s have talked a lot about Colston and always refused to play at Colston Hall. So, the Council decided that they were going to deal with this tension by putting a new plaque onto the statue to recontextualise Colston and the Merchant Venturers just got involved basically, or tried to get involved in the wording and removing out key facts and I think the statue got taken down because you can only not listen for so long before the people will take the matter into their own hands. I feel like there was just so many years of built up frustration that it's not surprising the statue was removed by a protest.

in terms of what we're planning— I'm about to launch a mini project which is called Map the Merchants, because the Merchant Venturers or the Society of Merchant Venturers are so intertwined with Colston and the celebration of Colston across the city. Edward Colston was a Merchant Venturer. And they've been around since the 13th century, Cabot was a Merchant Venturer. Margaret Thatcher was the first ever female Merchant Venturer. Prince Philip is a Merchant Venturer. And so they're very influential. And they have both direct power and huge amounts of influence across Bristol and in most of Bristol's institutions. So, I think for me, we think about wanting to address institutional racism in Bristol, we need to think about who's setting the cultural tone within our institutions and what values are being brought into our institutions from this very ancient archaic, essentially white supremacist organisation that just doesn't seem to have a place in modern Bristol. And we would all love to see the Merchant Venturers disbanded or replaced with a kind of democratic organisation that's transparent and modern. And so, we're about to launch Map the Merchants where people are already sending us information. I suppose they've held onto power because they've been so invisible. They've had this kind of invisible presence.

People are sending us information already about, I don't know, their bosses being a Merchant, for example. And so, at the moment we've got like a huge spreadsheet with 1300 businesses that the Merchants are listed as company directors. So, we're kind of building up a picture around where actually, do they have direct power? How far— Where is their influence felt? And then we can kind of publish that information. And then hopefully that will be the start of a conversation in Bristol in the same way that like when we first started Countering Colston, um, people didn't even realise that Colston was celebrated to the extent that he is.

So, one of the first things we did was collect information about everywhere that Colston was celebrated, and published that information on our website. And then that was the kind of process of starting to collect that information, publish it,

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make it more visible, put it into the public sphere. I think that's been quite a powerful process and I think people can see the full picture a little bit more. And I think that's— our plan is to start to do that around the Merchant Venturers. Um, with the kind of long game plan of tackling institutional racism in the city, because Bristol has some of the worst institutional racism in the whole of the UK in terms of education and employment and housing outcomes for Black people.

So, the Runnymede Trust did a huge study in Bristol about institutional racism and found that we're basically the worst city in the UK for institutional racism. So, we're also the third richest city in the UK. So, you kind of start to think well, that's odd, because it was a very left leaning city and yeah, it's a very creative city. And it's an interesting city, I don't think it's a place that people necessarily think of having such racial segregation. But it really does show that Merchant Venturers', i.e. Colston's old associates, have continued influence and shape our city and we want to question whether that's appropriate anymore. So yeah, that's what we're going to be looking at with Map the Merchants.

Colston's Girls' School has announced that they are going to do a consultation on the name, since the statue came down. And as an old Colston's Girls' School girl that's very exciting for me and Cleo, who's also an ex Colston's Girls' School girl. Yeah, and it's changing every day. The Bristol Cathedral very quietly, almost secretly, removed the Colston stained glass window that was up in the cathedral. They had that removed two days after the statue was toppled. We're just trying to document everything and trying to publish as much as we can through our social media just to keep building the momentum because it does feel a little bit like dominoes. You know one thing that started off as just like a few people standing outside the Cathedral with a few banners saying to schoolgirls, you don't have to wear a slave trader's favourite flower has led to this kind of ever building movement. And it's really exciting. But I definitely think it's a long-term campaign— we're still going to be going in 5, 10, 15 years' time.

Tom Crowley 24:11

Thank you very much for— basically for adding the detail. You've kind of answered this but I'm just going through the questions. Maybe you do feel you have more to add. So, has the pulling down of the Colston statue, and the ensuing debate influenced your plans going forward?

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 24:38

I mean, I think the thing that we've always been a bit sensitive about the potential backlash. And so, there was kind of 100ish, mostly white men who went down to the Colston plinth the weekend after the statue was removed. And that was concerning for us, because we see Colston as someone who is the enemy of the people really, he was an elitist. You know, he also didn't care about white working-class Bristolians. And there's messaging that we are keen to develop around how to talk about Colston in terms of Black Lives Matter, but also how to talk about Colston in terms of classism and how he also didn't care about working class Bristolians. And so yeah—

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Tom Crowley 25:56

Would you say a bit more about that? That's really interesting.

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 26:55

I think the Bristol Post has been so key because it is the paper that everyone reads on the bus, you know, just everywhere. And the fact that they have really taken the Countering Colston campaign seriously has made such a huge difference in terms of persuading most normal Bristolians that Colston was an incredibly damaging figure for most Bristolians.

Tom Crowley 28:39

They've changed their— I don't know, their ethos, in recent years, is that right?

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 28:47

Yeah, so traditionally, they used to be owned by the Daily Mail Group. And now they're owned by the same group as the Daily Mirror. And so, there was a change in ownership. Maybe about— maybe in 2012. And the tone of the reporting changed. And also, I think they just had some really good journalists join. So, I think that was really important. I don't think we would be where we are without some really thorough reporting on a local level— we've always attracted a lot of national media coverage just because it makes an interesting story, I suppose. And I suppose there's a larger narrative around how does the UK, how does English society integrate the kind of past genocides that it's been involved in and profited from.

I mean, like it's, I don't know if you want to put this in, but personally like, none of my family were here. I'm from a family of immigrants. You know, we weren't here, we were all in Ireland and all of my family are from Ireland, that's probably what makes me feel so angry about Colston is that it feels very, very personal. I am English. I've also got Irish citizenship and an Irish passport and there's not a single part of my family that is from England. So, and, yeah, it's like, how does England's identity crisis kind of play out, especially within the context of Brexit? How do we integrate all of these dark, what feels like quite secret histories into our modern understanding of ourselves as a society? And I think that's why we've always got so much national press coverage, because it's like a space to discuss a broader issue. And I think for us, it's always been very, very Bristol focused. Because Colston doesn't pop up anywhere else. He just seems to be plastered across Bristol.

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Tom Crowley 31:30

Because he was only like born in Bristol or something. Is that correct? He didn't spend much of his life in Bristol at all?

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 31:37

He was born in Bristol. And then he went off to boarding school in London and then he was an MP in Bristol. And he spent his later years here and he was a very odd character. He never married. He was an evangelical Christian. Strange character.

When we first started, it felt like very uncool to talk about Colston, and people treated you like a conspiracy theorist. It's just, it's so embedded in the culture in Bristol, that to talk about Colston as a slave trader, it's like everyone will just roll their eyes and dismiss you. Well, five years later, you know, 63% of people are saying, yeah, he should have been toppled in that way. It is such a change in five years.

I think that's really important for that change to happen at a local level because Bristol, Bristolians are very proud, independently minded people who don't like being told, you know, from London, "right you need to do this". Bristol's got a very independent spirit. So, I think it's been important that we've had that conversation locally. Even though it feeds into a kind of national narrative.

I need to get some water. I'm not used to talking this much. Is that okay?

Tom Crowley 33:55

Yes of course.

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 33:56

One second.

Tom Crowley 34:43

I am going to ask the next question, which is the penultimate one. Has the website Topple the Racists influenced your actions?

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Katie Finnegan-Clarke 34:55

No.

Tom Crowley 34:58

Easy.

Tom Crowley 35:03

And then the final question, which is a question that we're asking everyone who we speak to, be it government or a national museum or, I don't know, the National Trust, and just to contextualise it: obviously you are, through the Radical History [Group], kind of conducting your own research. But I'm also speaking from the University of Cambridge, we launched this project because we think this is a, you know, a moment that we can, you know, understand— that by understanding this moment better, we can kind of plan heritage policy basically better in the future. But, so, yeah, we're interested doing research. And the question is: what would you like to understand better? If you could commission any research or if you could kind of gain any detailed understanding— yeah, what would you like to understand better in terms of making decisions around the legacy of slavery and colonialism in the UK or in Bristol?

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 36:14

I think I'd like to understand how external stakeholders impact cultural heritage decisions. I don't know if that makes sense but like basically it's obvious that the Merchant Venturers have— well they put the statue up and they protected it. But that's just one example. So, it's obvious that they hold a lot of influence across the city in terms of the Downs, they own most of the Downs but there's lots of stuff— like how does an organisation, it doesn't have to be the Merchant Venturers, but like how do these—.

Tom Crowley 37:00

Really quickly, what are the Downs?

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Katie Finnegan-Clarke 37:02

Oh, the Downs are like this huge green land, like space, in middle of Bristol. Um, it's like, it's kind of the — I don't know how big it is, it's like 20 miles squared. It's huge in the middle of Bristol. And they own most of it, and they've preserved it. So there's like really strict rules about what you can and can't do. You can't build on it. They've just blocked a cycle path that was going get put on it. There are very strict rules about what you can and can't do on the Downs.

So, I suppose what I would be interested in and I think other people as well is like, how do these kind of external forces that aren't necessarily like a formal part of the process — how do these external forces kind of shape what does and doesn't go ahead?

Tom Crowley 38:16

I think that yeah, that really fits in what you were saying before about your kind of — the upcoming project you're planning with regards to the legacy of the Merchant Venturers. You are giving very interesting answers to this question is very useful for us because obviously research institutions always trying to second guess what people want to know. So, it's very useful to have — yeah, people actually saying what they're interested in knowing.

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 38:42

Yeah. I suppose it's about rather than just like — because we're, with Map the Merchants we're going to actually just start with like mapping like the hard power, the power you know, like where — which companies are Merchants, like directors on? But it's almost like where's the soft power? Like where's like the realms of influence? How does that impact these kind of decisions around like, how the city's going to — who the city is going to celebrate or how it's going to tell its story about itself? And it'll be much, much harder to research. But I think that would be really interesting. And I think that's kind of at the core of a lot of these issues. You know, the kind of vested interests that aren't necessarily documented publicly.

Tom Crowley 39:52

So, I'm going to stop the recording, that doesn't mean this call will terminate. Um, so is there anything else you think is important?

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 40:13

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I mean, I think it's also really important to say that we've always tried to be like a Black-led campaign. And we're a closed group for that reason. So, we're kind of like a set closed group of activists who've worked together, who do try to— we're kind of like a racially mixed group.

Tom Crowley 40:38

Does that mean you won't take in any more members, is that correct?

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 40:40

Yeah. Because lots of white people have gotten in contact and been like, I want to get involved. And so, it's been quite important for us to kind of preserve the dynamics within the group and like, yeah, I suppose like, I do a lot of the media coordination. I spend a lot of my time passing the mic to the Black women within the group to have their voices heard as much as possible. Doesn't always work, obviously. But um, yeah, I suppose I feel like that's important to say, it's I think like, because we're sort of anonymous in a way. I don't think people realise that actually. We are primarily a Black-led group. And that feels important at the moment in particular, as well with Black Lives Matter. That's it.

Tom Crowley 41:37

Thank you very much.

[Recording is stopped and restarts]

Tom Crowley 0:01

Okay, so it's recording again.

Katie Finnegan-Clarke 0:04

Yeah, I think there was also frustration because Marvin Rees was elected in 2016. And he's the first elected Black mayor in Europe. And he's working class and he's Bristolian. And I think there was a lot of excitement when he was elected. And I think we were very excited as well, as a campaign, because we thought, oh, great, you know, he's going to take some

*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.*

Transcribed by: Tom Crowley

Participant permissions to record given



Date of transcription: 30-09-2020

Participant permission to archive given



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## The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



Interview Date:	24-07-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Katie Finnegan-Clarke	Organisation:	Countering Colston
Position:	N/A		

action around the celebration of Colston in the city and around racism in the city. Um, but he basically has refused to engage with the campaign. And he's kind of said, he's occasionally said in the press, yeah, you know, my ancestors were enslaved by this man and he has a kind of personal connection to it, but he— and he said that when Colston Hall decided to change its name, he said that publicly on TV. But he's also sort of refused to really engage with it in any meaningful way. So, we've been trying to get the Abolition Shed up and running. And he hasn't helped with that. And we've, yeah, tried to do other things around the city and he has kind of actively not engaged. And I think that was part of the story around the frustration around the statutes. I think people thought that there was something— something was going to change because we had the first elected Black mayor in Europe. But he didn't do anything. So yeah, I think, yeah, that's that.

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