



Interview Date:	30-09-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Ray Barnett	Organisation:	Bristol City Council's Culture and Creative Industries Team
Position:	Head of Collections and Archives		

## Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Ray Barnett, Head of Collections and Archives, Bristol City Council's Culture and Creative Industries Team. 24-07-2020

Tom Crowley 0:04

Yes, so this is the 24th of July 2020. I'm Tom Crowley from Cambridge University and speaking to Ray Barnett, from Bristol Council. Could you just briefly— I've forgotten your job title.

Ray Barnett 0:19

It's okay. My job title is the Head of Collections and Archives in the City Council's Culture and Creative Industries. So, I'm responsible for five museums, curators, and another museum staff across those museums and the Bristol archives team.

Tom Crowley 0:37

Excellent. Thank you very much. Yes, as we just discussed, you are obviously speaking in a professional capacity, but what you say will be inflected with your personal perspective, inevitably. Um, so I'm not going to speak very much, and I'm just going to ask the questions and make encouraging faces. I'm afraid it will feel a bit one way, but I'm trying to keep the transcription, you know, as useful as possible for future researchers.

Ray Barnett 1:04

That's fine.

Tom Crowley 1:04

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

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



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Ray Barnett 1:20

We have quite a long track record now of trying to represent Bristol's role in transatlantic slavery. In fact, it goes back— I've worked with the council for a long time. And the debate really started for us and for me in the mid-1990s. When the team really first started to talk about how it should address this legacy, and there was no permanent memorial there was no discussion really in the public domain about Bristol's role in that horrendous period of time. And the consequences of all that discussion was that we created our first temporary exhibition, which was called a Respectable Trade with the question mark, and which addressed this issue, was new to very many people in Bristol, and was extremely successful in raising that profile at that time. And it ran as a temporary exhibition to start with, but we recognised that it ought to be made permanent. And consequently, we transferred it from Bristol Museum and Art Gallery where it had run, down to what was then the Bristol Industrial Museum, which we have since changed into M Shed museum. And we made it a permanent part of those exhibitions and displays down there.

And then we were involved with further developments in the city. So, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum that existed in the city was also given Lottery funding to create an exhibition called Breaking the Chains. And we worked very closely with that organisation to help them put that exhibition on. We have a plaque on what is now M Shed museum, which commemorates the fact that ships— commemorates is probably the wrong word, but puts out the information that ships sailed from Bristol docks as part of that so called triangular trade. And we were also involved in the naming of Pero's Bridge in the city centre so that the name of Pero, who was the man servant, the slave to John Penny, who lived in our Georgian House Museum, was also mentioned and commemorated in the city.

And so that has meant that we have had particular expertise, particularly in one member of our team, who has worked long time for us as a curator. She actually retired on 31st March this year. So, we have sort of lost a bit of our resource, but we have been therefore known as part of the city that has expertise in this area. And of course, when we came to divert— change the Bristol industrial museum into M Shed museum, which opened in 2011 one of our big discussions was how to represent the slave trade— the representation of enslaved peoples in this new museum. And that took us a lot of time and discussion. And we tried to build upon our experience of the other exhibitions we've been involved in, and also to utilise the whole ethos that M Shed was created around. And just to explain that, the idea was that M Shed— until M Shed there was no single museum where you can see the history of Bristol in one place. It was sort of scattered around exhibitions and parts of museums.

So, M Shed was to be and is a museum, which tells the story of Bristol, both the history and reflects contemporary issues. It was very important that it wasn't just about the past, it was also about the present. And we try to be very democratic in our approach, we try to move away from the curatorial voice. So, the aim was to interpret themes and to start off with themes, a thematic approach to Bristol's history. And within that, to have individual voices from people who have

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experienced various parts of the story that you're telling, rather than it to be a curatorial voice, it would be the first person wherever we could possibly find it.

And then we would also try to reflect the many multiple ways of interpreting history through those voices. So, we don't have a huge museum in M Shed it's a relatively small space. And when you've got centuries and centuries of history to reflect, it's very hard to choose which stories to pick, and which themes to illustrate. But in one of our three galleries, one called Bristol People, we decided that the slave— the story of enslaved peoples and Bristol's role was so important that it should have its own section. And so, it is very much sort of a separate section in that gallery. The idea was to show the different roles of different people in that so called trade. And again, as I say, to give it in the first person if we could, to reflect the first person experience, so that the individual visiting could get a better understanding of how terrible it must have been to have been enslaved and taken on these terrible ships across the Atlantic, but also the experience of a Bristol sailor on one of the ships and the experience of the merchant. And so the visitor gets the feeling more what it was like at the time, perhaps with those people and to make their own judgments as much as us telling them: this is how it should be, this is how you should feel about it. And bringing it up to date we have a video of Miles Chambers, the Bristol Poet Laureate at the time, with his fantastic emotive poem, he talks to the camera and delivers as part of that. The Tony Forbes painting as you leave that part of the exhibition, which was painted for our first temporary exhibition, a Respectable Trade? and which is an expression of how current day Black people in Britain, Bristol, felt that they were being badly treated by the media, for example. And a part of the exhibition was also to give people as they leave it the opportunity to reflect and to record their views and thoughts, and put those down for other people visiting to see them.

So, that was our approach and M Shed now open nearly 10 years ago. So, it's nine years ago, since it actually opened last June. We had high hopes to continue to change and update those exhibitions in that museum. But it's always challenging to get the resources to continue to keep things up to date. So, I think it would be a fair criticism to say we have not perhaps moved on and improved it as much as we would have liked to. But that's not to say we weren't aware of the continuing debate in the city. And what has happened this year, I think, has again shown that there's always of course new generations coming through who obviously don't all visit museums, and who when they do visit museums, don't necessarily think of the effort and thought went into displays. They have new ideas and thoughts about how to talk about these issues. And that's something that we've— the we need now to take on board in a big way.

Tom Crowley 9:14

Very interesting. Thank you, um that leads quite well on to the next question, which is, has Black Lives Matter this summer, the movement, influenced your policy going forward? And if yes, which I think obviously it has, can you expand on why you've begun to make the decisions you're going to make?

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Ray Barnett 9:37

I think it's changed everybody hasn't it? It's had an international, worldwide impact and rightly so. And it's made us think very hard again, that we thought perhaps we were doing quite well in the past, but actually, we let the ball drop. Probably that's true, but we haven't been on the ball enough to keep things moving forward. Keeping these issues live in the citizens' viewpoint in terms of how we interact with the Bristol community. So, yes, we— I think we were a little slow to react to it in some ways. And we have had various different community groups that we work with and I think they were critical initially that we hadn't been publicly enough showing our support for Black Lives Matter. And we had an interesting— not a dilemma as such, but of course, we are part of the City Council. We are a local authority-run museum service, and the local authority took on the major response to BLM and we were left slightly in an awkward position where some other museum services across the country overtly expressed their support. But actually, our support was through the City Council. So, to some degree, and we were perhaps therefore— people don't understand that relationship, the fact that we are paid for run and owned by the City Council, they expected a bit more from us. And that's something we've learned from I think as well.

Tom Crowley 11:24

Very, very interesting. Thank you. Yeah, it's interesting speaking to different museums going through the same situation. Yeah, context obviously varies a lot. So, the next question is very similar to the one I just asked, but it's specifically the Colston statue coming down, has that had particular kind of ramifications in terms of your future plans?

Ray Barnett 11:49

Yes, and again, it's very closely related to my last answer in terms of— the lead again around all this happening in Bristol as a city has come through the Council and through particularly the Mayor, the elected Mayor, and the Mayor's Office, and that's quite right. That's how it should be. And we therefore have not been centre stage, but we've been very close to centre stage with regard to the statue. Because of course, the Mayor quite rightly decided that he should have it pulled out of the dock, and suggested in the media quite openly that perhaps the best place for this would be a Bristol museum.

And so yes, we've been involved directly, we are now holding the statue. We've assessed its condition; we have taken a decision which was in fact a decision of [unintelligible] city. But anyway, we took that position as well, that what we should do immediately would be to conserve it as it was just before it went into the river. So, take the mud off, dry it out, but actually what had happened to it in terms of the paint and graffiti that had been applied to it was now part of its history. And that we should preserve that. And actually, that's been a little bit challenging because these statues are occasionally waxed and therefore as it was drying out, potentially the paint that had been applied to it could just shell off because of

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this wax layer, preventing the paint actually getting ingrained into the actual statue. So, there's a bit, a little bit of a conservation challenge there. But our view was that we needed to do that. I mean, if at some point in the future, anybody decided that it should be fully restored, that's still possible. We haven't prevented that happening in any way. But we also assessed its condition and we can see that it's been damaged at the base where it's been pulled off, essentially. So you couldn't even set it up right as it was now anyway if you wanted to at the moment without some means of support or restoration. So, our view is that we are storing it and keeping it and potentially we'll display it lying down.

So, from our professional point of view [unintelligible] to tell the story of Bristol, what's happened this year, which has had international ramifications, let alone national ones, is a really important thing. And that if it's not going to go back in any way, we will want to reflect and tell that story. And again, we have our own sort of community interaction. And it's— the challenge we've had is that again, this is bigger than just the usual museum "let's talk to the local communities about what we intend to do". This is about the whole city, and therefore the consultation has to, even whether it's right to put it into a museum on display or not, has to be led from the Mayor's Office, from the Council. And it has to involve all different communities in the city. The mayor has been very clear about that. And again, I think quite rightly, and our role is to reflect again, the different opinions, we might have our own personal views about what's happened, but part of our role is to reflect the differing views there are in the city. The contrasting views they can be. And again, probably like we did in our approach to the slavery exhibit in M Shed, it's to present information -hopefully, it should be on display at some point in the future-, [for visitors] to make up their own minds about the issues involved, it's not for us to preach to people.

Tom Crowley 16:05

That's very interesting. Um, and the Mark Quinn intervention, did that end up in M Shed as well? Or is that that top secret? You don't have to answer if it is.

Ray Barnett 16:26

[Unintelligible] whether there's a more appropriate location for it. Again, that's still up for debate. And the way that the Mayor's Office is leading this debate is to— the Mayor has created a new history commission for the city. So, he's invited some of the top academic historians and others in the city to come together. And they're just establishing the terms of reference at the moment, but in effect, the challenge to them as to how do we review how the city sees itself, how it reflects its own history, how it has a conversation with its citizens. And that group is going to help decide and provide that interaction with the community as to where we go with all this.

So, when the Mark Quinn statue appeared, the Mayor decided it should come down. I think he was right. Personally, I think it was the right decision. Again, regardless what you think about it, in terms of what it says, or about it as a work of

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art, it would further complicate the discussion. [Recording interrupted] What the Mayor would like to see is an open discussion about the future of that space in the city and about the whole way that we interpret this story. So, that statue was immediately taken down and my understanding is that Mark Quinn will be taking it back and auctioning it for charity and charities that Jen Reid, the sitter, has identified. But there are other possible options about— maybe maquettes could come back? I don't know. But— so that's still very much in the open and in discussion. But yeah, the statue is owned by Mark Quinn. And there are also the legal reasons why it was best to take it down in terms of public liability, and those sorts of issues as well.

So, what happened now also— because the difficulty— the challenge for all this in the city, in some ways, is that it does take time to discuss these matters, to involve the right people, to involve the community and therefore to come away with a strategy which is the best fit, and that you can explain why you're going that way and hopefully take everybody with you, as many people as possible. And there's a real challenge here about keeping the momentum of the Black Lives movement going, the momentum about addressing issues like the Colston statue and not letting it drop and— there may be other interventions for all I know happening in that space because people want to see something happen quickly. And that's quite a difficult negotiation.

Tom Crowley 19:28

So, the next question is: has the website topple racists influenced your response?

Ray Barnett 19:39

No, we've not taken— we've not been researching those sorts of sites. And in terms of looking at this issue at the moment, we're much more concerned with how do we communicate, and consult local Bristol people about these issues. And so yes, we've not gone that far down that road.

Tom Crowley 20:07

You're kind of answering the answers to much of the questions that are coming up already, but I'm going to ask them anyway, just for consistency across these interviews. The next one is: do you plan to address the legacies of slavery / colonialism in displays or other public areas across your institutions? And when you do that -I mean, you are talking about it already, of course-, what resources do you draw on and who do you consult?

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Ray Barnett 20:37

So, the events this year made us think again, about our existing provision. And earlier in the interview I mentioned that we have a display about the whole transatlantic slave trade and Bristol's involvement in it in our M Shed museum. We also have the Georgian House Museum, which is displayed as a historic house. The National Trust type approach. And that house was owned by John Pinney, who was a sugar plantation owner and owned slaves. And to address that on the top floor of that building, we have a display about his role in slavery and enslavement. And we had an initial small display, which we changed last year and improved last year. And one of the ways we improved it was that we were actually fortunate to be able to get a complete list of the names of the enslaved people on his plantations, and they are now listed on the wall. And that's a really, really powerful way of bringing this message home. These are — this was not a commodity. These are real people that we're talking about. So, we think we've improved that display before this year anyway.

We are hoping that we'll be able to open up a bit — have more space next to that gallery to improve the area. We talked about Pinney's involvement, but we are aware that that's on the second floor of the building. And that one of the criticisms is that you go into that building and you don't know anything about that history until you've actually managed to get right to the very end of the displays in effect. So, again, before this year, we were still intending to introduce interpretation through new technology. That means as soon as you enter, you'll be able to access information about the history of the building and those connotations. So, that's one way we've already been looking to improve.

In terms of the M Shed display, we've got a considerable number of issues now about that — that whole building is now nearly 10 years old, and so it's starting to look a little ragged in places and we would like to try and upgrade some of those areas, but we hadn't, haven't planned to do much around the transatlantic slavery display at the moment, which we may have to revisit now and should revisit. The question is what do we do about the actual Colston statue. And which museum is best placed to display it. Logically it would seem that M Shed tells the history of Bristol so maybe should be there. And the Georgian House Museum is too small for it. And even if we did put it in that display and change the way the building is displayed, the fire regulations mean you can only have 65 people in at a time maximum. We would expect and hope that we're reaching more people than that.

Another possibility is actually Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, which could be a really nice juxtaposition between the sort of very imperialistic looking building and this story. So, we're discussing really how we do this and what are the ways to do it? And what themes that we've sort of touched upon in our M Shed displays, we could actually elaborate more about? And so one idea is around people's own histories. And doing more — we did a little bit about family history in M Shed. And we particularly pointed out a white Bristolian woman's family history where her — I forget, her grandfather, a great grandfather was a West Indian, came from the Caribbean. And that you wouldn't realise that from looking at her, and therefore trying to point out around the issues of race are very complex, not just straightforward about your — how you appear. You don't know looking at me what my background is, I don't know looking at you what your background is, and we need to be much more open. But we are all in this as one species. I'm a biologist by training so to me race doesn't exist.

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We're all one species, we all have the same thing, basically. And so yeah, it's making us reconsider very seriously, how we tackle this issue, and particularly how we involve the voices of those people who are most affected by this who need to have a stronger voice. And they have and that's been demonstrated by what's happened this year in the city and elsewhere.

Tom Crowley 25:34

That's very interesting. The next question. So, again, is the same subject but um, not so much about displays now, but outreach, education, the arts, recruitment, and so on. Any changes planned in those areas?

Ray Barnett 25:54

This is impacting upon all the work we do. I mean, we had already embarked upon a programme of decolonization, to use the jargon, to be frank. It started a year or two ago. And this is a movement in museums that has been happening for a while. So, we had started to review all our operations all that we do in the light off that sort of imperialistic past that we, we have. And this just emphasised the need to do more and to look at it in a broader way. So, every aspect of our operations, and we run five museums and the Bristol Archives, but we're also responsible for arts events, activities in the city as well as a culture team. So, all of that is being relooked at and it's already had a direct impact. And so we've had a donor come forward who wanted to give us a relatively small amount of money, but a very nice piece of money to commission a new piece of artwork as a consequence of what's happened in the city, for our museum collections, and we're in the process of doing that now and just getting the legal agreement that we can be looking for a Black artist to actually deliver that piece of work for us. So, you know, this is impacting.

Tom Crowley 27:19

Thank you. And this is the final question. And it's— yeah, it's from I guess, you know, we're a research organisation. Obviously we think that this is important thing that's happening, that's why we have launched this project. Um, and the question is, in terms of research, really in terms of commissioning research, perhaps, what would you like to understand better in terms of making decisions concerning the legacy of slavery and colonialism?

Ray Barnett 27:58

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Well it's a perennial problem within museums that we do not have the resources to fully interrogate our own collections. And what people perhaps don't appreciate from outside museums is how different it is in national museums, to local museums, independent museums. The word 'museum' covers a multitude of sins. So, we are in a fairly fortunate position of being a larger regional museum. But that means we're funded by council taxpayers. We get a grant from the Arts Council as well, as a non-profit organisation. But we also have to raise income to make our budgets meet. So our resources are actually very limited. And the whole COVID experience actually has been one of reemphasizing for us that to move a lot of our activity online is great. I think we've done a fantastic job this year to do a lot of that. But it also has shown again that you need to have the money to do the work on individual objects and groups of objects to open up and understand the stories that they can tell before you can actually then make that available to people.

So, that's a very practical answer. It's not so much a theoretical research issue. In terms of researching our— the assets that we hold, there are a lot of locked up stories that could be really interesting for people that we just have no means at the moment to open up. I'll give you one example, or two examples.

Actually, as I said, I'm a biologist. And in terms of these sorts of debates, everybody immediately starts to think about history collections, perhaps the art collections, but actually there are hidden histories everywhere. And we have the most amazing collection of pressed plants, which was put together by a chap called Dr. Arthur Broughton in the 1770s. And he was a physician in Bristol, but he actually went out to the Caribbean and to Jamaica. And while he was there, he pressed plants. And we have a large number of these pressed plants that were brought back and sit in our institution. And we had a project that we were able to fund through a grant where these could be conserved so that they are preserved, but also researched and understood and the information from those plants as to what they were where they were found, is going back to Jamaica now and can help them to understand their historic fauna and flora and how that has changed over time and help them potentially to rewild Jamaica, to a time before it was changed dramatically by crops that were brought in.

And those specimens and also the illustrations are also part of that collection demonstrate things like breadfruit that was particularly brought over to the Caribbean, to be a food for the enslaved peoples. So those stories can be really opened up. You know, we have a big Jamaican community in the city here. And that's part of their heritage that we sit upon, which will be great now to explain to that community and to get their feedback and information on.

And we're currently working on another grant bid— the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum I mentioned earlier on in this interview was an independent museum in the city, but it folded, it closed. And in 2012, we inherited what was left of their collections to look after. So, we're now looking for a grant— preparing a grant bid to use those collections, to look at how different parts of the world, which were part of the Empire at that time, have changed, and to link that actually to the climate emergency. So, it's linking two big issues together, the impact of Empire, colonialism, but also the changes that are happening to our planet at the moment as well. So, there's some really interesting possible routes and new research. But opening them up, finding the resource to do that is quite difficult. And at the moment, I think also— in terms of more general research, I think understanding what you're doing now with this project, what is happening in

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society, and what the best way forward is to open up these issues, for greater clarity and understanding between people is really, really important.

Tom Crowley 33:07

Thank you those examples were really good. They're really enlightening. I'm going to stop the recording now unless there's anything else you feel like it's important to add for the record?

Ray Barnett 33:18

No I think that's fine.

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