

The Bristol Bus Boycott 50 Years On - What's Changed?

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The Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963 was a seminal moment in the struggle for racial justice in the UK. Organised by Bristol's African-Caribbean community, the campaign successfully overturned the refusal of the Bristol Omnibus Company to employ Black and Asian crews on their buses and later contributed to the first Race Relations Act of 1965. Fifty years on, Bristol Museums has been working in partnership with veteran campaigners and others to mark this special anniversary and to stimulate discussion about racial harmony and equality in the city today. This collaboration marks a change in culture as museums increasingly give a voice to communities and participate in contemporary social justice campaigns as well as highlighting the past. Bristol Museums is one of nine museums sponsored by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to explore how communities and museums work democratically together, sharing and nurturing new skills and experiences.

Meeting each month to exchange ideas on how to promote the anniversary, the BBB50 team launched a programme of events and activities at M Shed, Bristol's people museum, in April 2013 to coincide with the start of the boycott 50 years earlier. This was before the backdrop of one of our iconic objects: a Lodekka bus, the type used in Bristol during the 1960s and the period of the boycott. The 28 August marked the anniversary of the lifting of the colour bar on Bristol buses and, remarkably, the very day that Martin Luther King gave his legendary 'I had a Dream' speech. Celebrating the success of the Bristol campaign in 1963, key organisers gave speeches at M Shed and paid tribute to Martin Luther King's dream, citing Rosa Parks' defiant struggle and the Montgomery Bus Boycott campaign as their source of inspiration. Paul Stephenson OBE, the key spokesperson, told the audience that 'racism never dies, it only slumbers' which supported the anniversary theme to promote social justice today. Tributes from the Mayor, Lord Mayor (Bristol's first Muslim Lord Mayor) and Bristol's first Somali Councillor were followed by specially commissioned poems from local black writers and a film featuring archival footage compiled by one of the museum's own volunteers.

Continuing with the theme of the boycott legacy, M Shed also hosted a lively and stimulating debate on 16 October in association with BBB50 entitled 'Bristol Bus Boycott 50 Years On - What's Changed?' Lord Boateng, Britain's first black cabinet minister, sent warm words of support prior to the debate, "I am so sorry I can't be with you all to participate in this welcome initiative. Paul Stephenson is a towering figure in the history of the struggle for racial justice in the UK. Please give him my warmest best wishes for the discussion tonight..."

The museum provided a dynamic space for dialogue and debate on issues of immigration, racism and equal opportunities, which were broadcast live by Ujima Radio, a community interest radio based in inner-city St Paul's, and recorded by BBC Radio Bristol for later

transmission. The Bristol Evening Post also covered the event where Paul Stephenson's words stirred further debate amongst readers in the paper and online. The debate highlights how museums can play a role in bringing different people together physically and intellectually to discuss historical and contemporary issues and in becoming a catalyst for sparking discussion throughout the wider community. The museum also participated with community members in the selection process for panel members and questions to the panel, which proved to be a mini debate itself in a positive and trustful way. The process was both democratic and collaborative: the museum did not dominate the coordination of the event but it did not relinquish all responsibility either. As one of the community members who chaired the debate remarked: 'There was good team play.'

The BBB50 team was convened by Paul Stephenson in part through relationships established with the setting up the Bristol Black Archives Partnership (BBAP) a few years earlier. Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, BBAP was an alliance of African-Caribbean community members; Bristol Museums, Galleries & Archives; the University of the West of England's Regional History Centre and others committed to collecting, promoting and making accessible African-Caribbean heritage in the city. The BBAP patron (Paul Stephenson), chair, project manager (museum officer), project officer and other community members realigned to promote the anniversary of the Bristol Bus Boycott in 2013. BBAP was launched in 2007 by Tony Benn, former Bristol East MP and cabinet minister, who had supported the Bristol Bus Boycott campaign and brought it to the attention of Prime Minister Harold Wilson in 1963.

In addition to collecting archives and objects from community members and organisations such as Bristol's first Black ward sister and the St Paul's Carnival, BBAP created calendars profiling positive role models and achievements, compiled biographies and images for an education pack 'Black Bristolians – People Who Make a Difference,' organised a 'My Legacy Event' and My Legacy booklets for searching and recording personal history, and generated an exhibition and touring displays, and so much more. A movement is gathering to have the Bristol Bus Boycott placed on the local curriculum and the material placed in the care of Bristol Museums and Archives and resources already identified and generated will be at the heart of this.

BBAP and the material collected proved to be invaluable in sourcing stories and contacts about social justice for the newly opened M Shed in 2010, including the 'No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish' struggles for accommodation and of course the Bristol Bus Boycott itself. Museums provoke people to think about the world today, the way it was and how it might be different in the future. In addition to the stories and objects that showcase the struggles and achievements of diverse people in the city, the debate at M Shed brought different people together to have a dialogue about equality and to champion justice. It will be interesting to see how communities continue to work in partnership with the museum and how the museum engages with social justice campaigns in the next fifty years. We might even ask ourselves, 'Bristol Bus Boycott 100 Years On – What's Changed?'



Bristol Black Archives Partnership, 2008 (Dr Madge Dresser is not present. Dr Dresser wrote 'Black & White on the Buses', the pioneering account of the Bristol Bus Boycott)



Dr Paul Stephenson OBE and Dareece James at the BBB 50th anniversary, M Shed



BBB campaigners with Sir Learie Constantine, 1963