

Council to resume discussions on plaque for Melville Monument

The Melville Monument towers 150 feet above St Andrew Square, and the Category A listed column has a statue of Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville on top of it.

Dundas lived from 1742 to 1811 and he was both an advocate at the Scottish bar, ascending to the position of Dean of the Faculty of Advocates, and a Conservative politician.



Henry Dundas graffiti cleaning 8 June 2020. Photo: Martin P.

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On Monday, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protest held in Holyrood Park on Sunday, some graffiti was added to the base of the column, but council workers worked to remove it fairly quickly. This focus of attention on the monument designed by William Burn with a figure of Dundas sculpted by Robert Forrest, is not new. There has been discussion before now on the removal of the monument, or indeed the addition of a plaque which correctly refers to the role of Dundas in the slave trade.

Dundas is called a 'gradual abolitionist' by Professor Sir Geoff Palmer in our podcast with him which you can listen to below. He explains the story of Joseph Knight and Dundas's involvement with it.

The fact that Dundas did not agree to the immediate stopping of slavery may have led to the trading of another 600,000 or so slaves.

A plaque committee was formed in recent years, but the committee could not agree the wording for it. Sir Geoff explained this to us – that he was essentially up against the opposition from another member, Michael Fry.

Now Council Leader, Adam McVey, has stepped in. He said: "When we scratch beneath the surface of our city's long history – the sweeping streets of the New Town, some of the statues in our squares – we must face an uncomfortable truth. Edinburgh was, in part, built on wealth created by the slave trade. For too long this part of our City's history has been hidden but we are starting to confront our past and need to go further.

"The Council has already begun to address this gap, for example through the powerful work by Kayus Bankole from Young Fathers, which was projected on the front of the City Chambers

in January. In it, he called out those who profited from the 18th century slave trade, whose names still define our maps via landmarks and street names.

“A huge part of the global Black Lives Matter movement is calling for people to speak up and call out inequality. The stirring scenes we witnessed this weekend of thousands of people taking part in peaceful protests up and down the UK, including in Edinburgh, prove the power of collective action.

“We need to take action as a city now to tackle racism and that includes acknowledging the involvement of some of our city’s historical figures in the slave trade and the failure to abolish it sooner. The statue of Henry Dundas in St Andrew Square at the very least requires a more representative story to be told on-site and, although the statue doesn’t belong to the Council, we’ve previously done what we can to facilitate discussions around how this might look.

“While a consensus wasn’t achieved with a previous approach, we need a resolution now to make a change and I have called a meeting of Edinburgh World Heritage, Prof Geoffrey Palmer and an expert from the University of Edinburgh with a view to agreeing a new form of words as quickly as possible.”

There are other mentions of Dundas in the city and surrounding areas including Dundas Street and Melville Castle as well as Dundas Avenue in South Queensferry and various streets and islands in Canada.

