

Planning consent to remove slavery plaque granted

Plans have been approved to remove a slavery information plaque under Edinburgh's Melville Monument dedicated to Henry Dundas after a battle from his descendants to get rid of it. But the plaque will remain in place.

The brass plate, which was added following Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations claimed that delays to the abolition of slavery advocated by the lawyer and politician resulted in "more than half a million enslaved Africans crossing the Atlantic".

A group which includes members of the Dundas family said the plaque's wording is "cartoonishly inaccurate" and added it was "hurtful to our family".

They lodged a planning application with the council in a bid to get rid of it – which was approved by councillors today.

BUT, they need to get the go-ahead from owners of the buildings around St Andrew Square – who have ownership of the monument – before the plaque can be taken down.

Cllr Chas Booth, Edinburgh Greens spokesperson on planning, said the development management sub-committee was unable to refuse the plan as "there were no valid planning reasons to refuse this application".

He said: "The planning system cannot take a view on the wording of the plaque, and only looks at the preservation of the historic structure.

"This decision does not mean the plaque will be removed, nor should it be."

Cllr Booth described the move by the Melville Monument Committee, which is led by Bobby Dundas, a direct descendant of the 1st Viscount Melville, as an "attempt to whitewash".

He added: "It's vital that the city acknowledges and addresses our role in slavery and racism in our colonial past."

The wording of the plaque was agreed by city councillors in 2020 following protests sparked by the BLM movement against the controversial statue which sits atop a 150ft column in the city centre square.

Planning permission to add it to the monument's base was granted the following year and proprietors also approved the change.

Since then Mr Dundas has publicly defended his ancestor's record as a "politician of vision and integrity" who had "no personal involvement in the slave trade".

He is also chair of the 'Henry Dundas Committee for Public Education on Historic Scotland'.

A spokesperson for the committee said after listed building consent was granted: "We are very relieved at this decision."

She said the plaque was "cartoonishly inaccurate" and that "even the most anti-Dundas historians do not hold him responsible for the trafficking of more than 500,000 Africans and a 15-year delay in abolition" .

She added: "It was unfair to the public and hurtful to our family for it to remain in place.

"The plaque never should have been fixed directly onto the monument. The city leases the square. It doesn't own it, or the monument. It was not the city's monument to deface and damage, with bolts piercing the outer surface to attach a metal plate. It was obviously the right decision to remove it.

"Henry Dundas was a remarkable politician for many reasons, some of which would surprise his modern critics. Few people know, for example, that he convinced King George III to fire the governor of the Cape, George Yonge, for engaging in an illegal scheme to smuggle slaves, or that he blocked a plan to send Christian missionaries to convert and 'civilize' the people of India.

"Even fewer seem to know that he appointed an abolitionist to be Upper Canada's first lieutenant-governor, with the result that Upper Canada became the first territory in the British Empire to abolish slavery. A plaque that was fair and balanced would recognize such facts."

Cllr Booth said: "The wording of this plaque was agreed by all progressive parties on the council in 2020. That decision should be respected, not reversed.

"Perhaps perversely, the planning system allows two contradictory permissions to both be valid at the same time. This removal can only be carried out with the permission of the owner.

"The owners of the Melville monument approved the installation of this plaque, and the council, who are responsible for the maintenance of the monument, clearly supported the plaque, so it should remain."

by Donald Turvill, Local Democracy Reporter.

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Henry Dundas, plaque. Photo: Martin P. McAdam
www.martinmcadam.com



Henry Dundas

1st Viscount, Lord Melville (1742-1811)



A new plaque has been commissioned for the Melville Monument to explain Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount, Lord Melville's history, his impact on society and to acknowledge his role in delaying the abolition of the slave trade.

The new plaque will read:

HENRY DUNDAS

1st Viscount Melville (1742-1811)

At the top of this neoclassical column stands a statue of Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville (1742-1811). He was the Scottish Lord Advocate, an MP for Edinburgh and Midlothian, and the First Lord of the Admiralty. Dundas was a contentious figure, provoking controversies that resonate to this day. While Home Secretary in 1792, and first Secretary of State for War in 1796 he was instrumental in deferring the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Slave trading by British ships was not abolished until 1807. As a result of this delay, more than half a million enslaved Africans crossed the Atlantic. Dundas also curbed democratic dissent in Scotland, and both defended and expanded the British empire, imposing colonial rule on indigenous peoples. He was impeached in the United Kingdom for misappropriation of public money, and, although acquitted, he never held public office again. Despite this, the monument before you was funded by voluntary contributions from British naval officers, petty officers, seamen, and marines and was erected in 1821, with the statue placed on top in 1827.

In 2020 this plaque was dedicated to the memory of the more than half-a-million Africans whose enslavement was a consequence of Henry Dundas's actions.

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A further explanatory plaque has been added next to the monument. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com



Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville