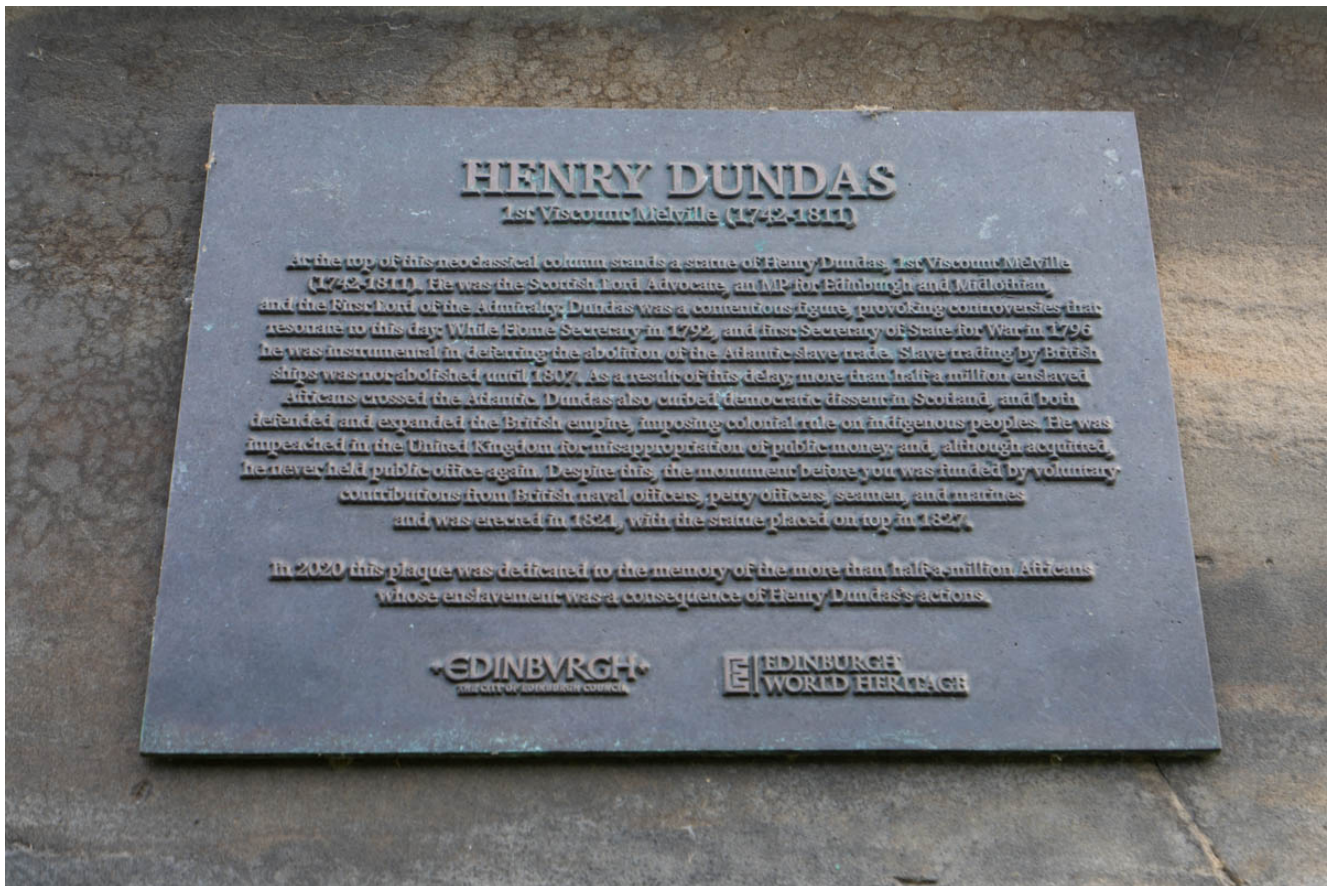


Council threatens action over removal of Dundas plaque

The City of Edinburgh Council has said it will take legal action against descendants of Henry Dundas if they do not return a stolen plaque which claimed the controversial 18th century politician was responsible for the enslavement of half a million Africans.

The brass plate was removed from the base of the Melville Monument last month, with a group led by a member of the Dundas family since claiming responsibility – arguing the council had “no authority” to install it in 2020.



The plaque which has gone missing from St Andrew Square PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

City leader Cammy Day said the matter had been reported to the police during a City Chambers meeting at the end of September, however Police Scotland said this week that “no criminality was established” following an initial investigation.

The council is now “in legal correspondence” with Bobby Dundas and the Melville Monument Committee who have “been instructed to return the plaque and present a proposal to make good any damage to the Monument caused by removal”.

It said it “may consider legal action or further involving Police Scotland” if the demands are not met.

Mr Dundas said in a statement the Committee acted “completely within the law” and claimed it obtained “all the necessary permits” and ensured the owners of St Andrew Square “had no objection”.

The group hopes to salvage Henry Dundas’ reputation after it

was marred by accusations that over half a million Africans were enslaved as a direct result of his support for deferring abolition, which came to prominence following 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in St Andrew Square.

The plaque, installed by the council following the demonstrations, states the 1st Viscount Melville – the most powerful politician in Scotland in the late 18th century – was “a contentious figure, provoking controversies that resonate to this day”. It adds: “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.”

But Mr Dundas has slammed the inscription as being written by “non-historians at the height of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020”.

He said: “It is the height of hypocrisy for the city to object to removal of the plaque. The city should be concerned about its own unlawful acts.

“It had no authority to install the plaque without consent of the owners in the first place, and continues to defy an order to remove the large signs about the plaque in St Andrew Square. It is in no position to object to the removal of the plaque, which we have done in complete compliance with our legal obligations.”

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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The temporary plaque which was replaced by a small bronze one.
PHOTO Martin P McAdam