

History Topic of the Month

Bristol Bus Boycott 1963

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One of the most important things in any just society is equal opportunities for everyone. Sadly, this hasn't always been the case in Britain. In the years after the Second World War, Britain was changing, slowly but surely, into a multicultural society. However, many people found this uncomfortable.

In Bristol, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) thought Black people were here "to take their jobs". They announced no "coloured person" could work as bus driver or conductor in the city. The Bristol Omnibus Company agreed to support their decision. They thought no one would notice or care. They were very wrong. The protest against this would help change the city – and the country – forever.



Bristol after the war

As a busy and successful port, Bristol had been connected to the world for centuries. Traders from Bristol had sailed goods around the world. Sailors from across the globe regularly arrived in the city. Migrants from across the world had made a home there for their families.

After the Second World War, Britain was desperate for workers to support key industries such as transport and the newly created NHS. The Nationality Act of 1948 gave British citizenship and the right to live in Britain for as long as they wanted to millions of people living in British colonies around the world. Over the next few years, thousands accepted the invitation from the government to find work in Britain. (Although, the government had hoped to attract mainly white migrants from places like Canada and Australia.)

Coloured people – The language used to discuss race has changed a lot over time. During this period many people – including members of the Black community – used words like "coloured" that we would consider offensive today. While we condemn racism today we think it is important to report these attitudes when studying history today.

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Bristol and the Slave Trade

Bristol's history of trade also meant it was closely connected with the Transatlantic slave trade. You may have heard of Edward Colston, one of the city's leading businessmen in the 17th century. He donated huge sums of money to charities and public buildings in the city – but his money came from the slave trade. Many streets and buildings in the city have names linked to the slave trade. Bristol's Black community in the 20th and 21st century saw all around them reminders of how profits from slavery had helped shape the city. Many in Bristol, including its mayor, Marvin Rees (whose father was a Jamaican migrant), have worked hard to acknowledge and address this difficult legacy today.

The Black community in Bristol

Bristol's black community had grown to over 3,000 by 1961. Many had served in the British armed forces during the Second World War. Despite this there was suspicion of migrant communities. Words like "coloured" and worse were used to describe people. Many wrongly made the racist claim migrants were here to take jobs and opportunities that should be given to white British people.

Caribbean migrants struggled to find homes in the city. Many landlords were unwilling to rent properties to Black families. They were forced to find homes in parts of the city that few people wanted to live in. Many lived in the still bomb-damaged area of St Paul's. Houses there were in poor condition but rented at high prices. Many Black people had no choice but to pay this, as these were the only landlords willing to rent to them. By the start of the 1960s most of Bristol's 3,000 Caribbean migrant population lived within a few streets of each other.

Facing prejudice

Life wasn't always easy. Many in the community felt safer living closer together. In 1961, housewife Lisset Simpson told a local reporter, "There is still so much prejudice that we prefer to stay together". Many were worried about the danger of racist violence.

Opportunities for jobs were as difficult as for housing. In 1958, a report for the Committee of Welfare of Colonial Workers in Bristol (sponsored by the Lord Mayor and the Bishop of Bristol) wrote that "fear of increasing unemployment has made many more conscious of the presence of coloured people. Many white people... are now asking why coloured people should be allowed to come into this country".

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Hostility encouraged the Black community to fight for its own rights. In November 1962, Owen Henry and Roy Hackett helped found the West Indian Development Council (WIDC) to campaign against racism and build better opportunities for jobs, housing and education. One of their first battles would be against the Bristol Omnibus Company.

Bristol's buses close their doors

Across Britain, Black bus drivers and conductors were common. Not in Bristol. Despite a job shortage in drivers and conductors, the Bristol Omnibus Company had quietly introduced a "colour bar". No matter what their qualifications or experience, no Black person would be given a job by the company. They did this to support the TGWU in Bristol who had announced in 1955 that no "coloured people would be allowed to work as bus drivers or conductors". A TGWU member said, "if one black man steps on the platform as a conductor, every wheel will stop".

A "colour bar" is when an organisation or government denies ethnic minority people access to the same rights and opportunities as white people. In Bristol this meant not employing Black people as drivers and conductors because they were Black.

Although everyone knew this "colour bar" existed, no one would say so publicly. In October 1961, the *Bristol Evening Post* ran a story exposing the bar. The manager of the Bristol Omnibus Company agreed there was a colour bar. But he argued his staff would never agree to work with Black people – and that the Black people in Bristol were not good enough to work for his company.

Racism is proved

The community refused to accept this outrageous racist policy. The WIDC decided to take action. Owen Henry had met a man called Paul Stephenson. Stephenson was the first Black man in Bristol to be hired as a youth officer and he was determined to expose the racism behind this policy.

He suggested the best way to do this was to find a job applicant so well qualified, that the only possible reason the bus company could turn him down would be racism. He found Guy Bailey. Bailey was dedicated student with excellent grades, a Boys Brigade officer and an amateur cricketer. On paper he was exactly the sort of candidate the company was looking for and they offered him an interview. Stephenson then rang the company and told them Bailey was Black. Immediately the interview was cancelled. They had all the proof they needed.

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Anger turns to campaign

But how to change things? Stephenson, Henry, Hackett and the WIDC decided to hit the bus company where it hurt: their profits. Inspired by Rosa Park's refusal to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott that followed, they planned to boycott all bus services offered by the Bristol Omnibus Company.

They announced their campaign at a press conference in April 1963. They were asking a lot of their community: boycotting the buses would make it harder for many to get to work or school. But everyone knew this was a cause worth fighting for. If it was accepted one company would not hire a person solely because they were Black, how many other companies would do the same? How many already were?

The boycott takes effect

In days, Stephenson – who was a brilliant organiser and leader – told the media they had the support of the entire Black community in Bristol. Not only that: they also had the support of many people in the white community as well, especially the students and lecturers at Bristol University.

As Stephenson later said in 1986 “this [was] an employment issue, if the Unions don't like it they can go to hell. What matters is the employer should say ‘we're not accepting this kind of racism’ and tell the workers if they don't like it, they can lump it... it was a moral obligation for the management!”

Stephenson and the WIDC organised a march of over 200 people through Bristol on 6 May 1963. It was one of the very first Black-led protest marches against racial discrimination in Britain. Later Roy Hackett led a protest to block buses from using one of the main roads into town.

The boycott caused the Bristol Omnibus Company a huge loss in ticket sales – as well as a huge amount of negative publicity.

Support grows for the struggle

The campaign gained a lot of national interest. Local MP Tony Benn and Labour leader Harold Wilson spoke in favour of the boycott.

Sir Learie Constantine, a famous ex-cricketer from the Caribbean and now the Trinidad and Tobago High Commissioner, wrote to the bus company to support the boycott. The High Commissioner (a senior ambassador) for the newly independent Commonwealth country said the bus company “prefers to have an inadequate service rather than employable and qualified Commonwealth workers”.

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Some groups in Bristol criticised the protest. The TGWU attacked the protesters in the press. In particular, they criticised Paul Stephenson. The head of the TGWU in Bristol, Ron Nethercott, called Stephenson dishonest and irresponsible. Stephenson later sued him for libel and won – the first libel victory by a Black man in British history.

Victory!

Eventually the pressure (and the loss of earnings) was too much for the company. Sir Learie Constantine met with the company and made them agree to negotiate with the union to end the colour bar.

The colour bar was scrapped on 28 August 1963. A month later the company hired a Sikh graduate, Raghbir Singh, as a bus conductor. He was the first non-white bus conductor in Britain. A few days later, two Jamaican men and a Pakistani man were also hired.

Short-term slow change?

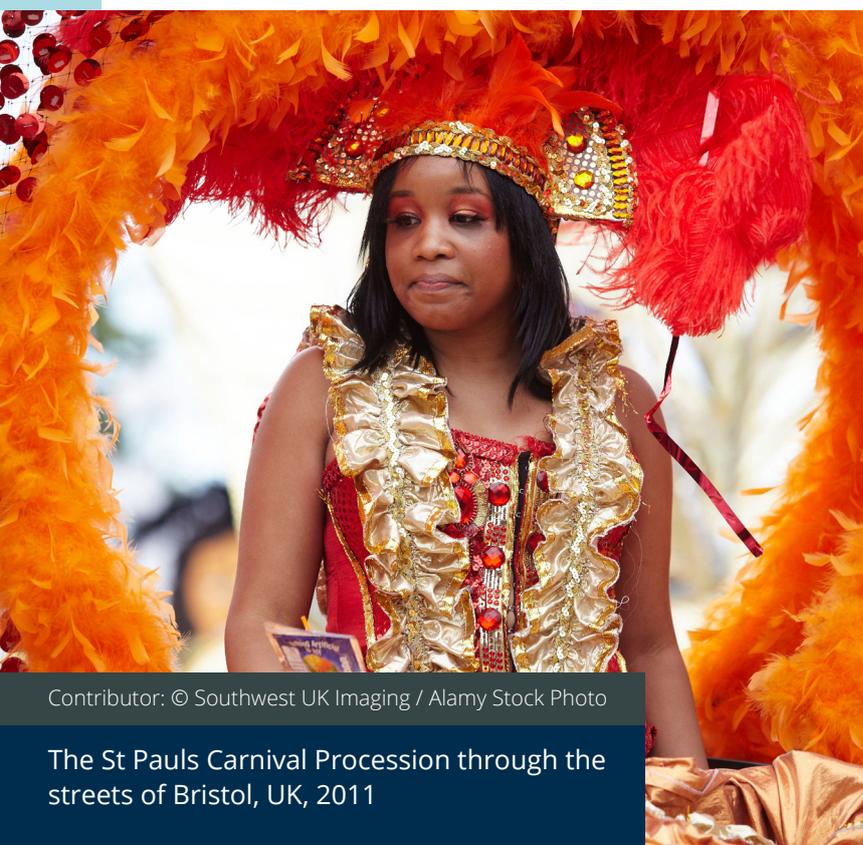
In 1965, the British Government passed the Race Relations Act. This made it illegal for anyone to discriminate against a person because of their race. The Bristol Omnibus Company colour bar could never happen again. The Bristol Bus Boycott had been vital in building support for this Act.

But in Bristol, progress was slow. The colour bar may have gone – but the attitudes that caused it hadn't changed. By 1966 there were only four ethnic minority bus drivers and 39 bus conductors – this was less than 2.5% of the total. Many people felt the colour bar continued – but unspoken and it was hard to prove otherwise.

The long-term impact

But over time, the Bristol Bus Boycott had a huge impact on the city. The Black community had shown that actions to combat racism could have success. Bristol became one of the first cities in the country to have its own Race Equality Council. Roy Hackett served on this for over 40 years, from 1965 to 2005.

The council worked to improve housing and education for the ethnic minority communities in Bristol. It built on the passionate and successful campaign work the boycott had started.



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The St Pauls Carnival Procession through the streets of Bristol, UK, 2011



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In 1968, Roy Hackett bought together local residents for the St Pauls Festival. People opened their homes and gardens to play music and sell homemade food. This street festival grew into an event that today attracts thousands of people a year to Bristol. From 1991 it was known as the St Pauls Carnival, showcasing African and Caribbean musical artists and campaigning on anti-racism.



Contributor: © Southwest UK Imaging / Alamy Stock Photo

Mural of Owen Henry on the end wall of a row of terraced houses on the Seven Saints of St Pauls trail in Bristol UK

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The Bristol Bus Boycott today

The boycott is now remembered as a turning point in Bristol's history. In 2009, Paul Stephenson received an OBE. He had continued to work against racism across Britain.

In 2013, Unite (who had replaced the TGWU) publicly apologised for the union's actions in 1963. In 2015, a series of murals appeared across the city to celebrate the 'seven saints of St Pauls' - the campaigners who had done so much to help defend the rights of ethnic minorities in the city. Among them were Roy Hackett and Owen Henry.

The Bristol Bus Boycott left a hugely important legacy. It was the first time the Black community had successfully led a campaign to force a change in the UK. It helped change the city and influenced a change in the law that made lives better for people across the country.



Roy Hackett

Contributor: © Steve Taylor ARPS / Alamy Stock Photo

Mural of Lorel 'Roy' Hackett of Bristol Boycott fame on the end wall of a row of terraced houses on the Seven Saints of St Pauls trail in Bristol UK

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Discussion points

- Why do you think it was important to the Black community in Bristol that they led the boycott campaign themselves?
- How do you think Bristol's historical connection to slavery may have made members of the Black community feel about the city?
- What can you find out about the campaign against the Colston statue in Bristol?
- Why do you think the bus boycott was so effective at getting national attention and support?
- The bus boycott wanted to end the colour bar and racism in job applications. How far do you think it succeeded in achieving these goals in the short and long term?
- What else can you find out about the life of Learie Constantine? What happened in the legal case Constantine v Imperial London Hotels?
- The boycott is an example of peaceful protest. Why do you think this kind of protest can be effective? Can you think of any other examples of peaceful protest both historically and today?
- The St Pauls Carnival is important event every year in Bristol. Why do you think events like this are important? Can you think of any other similar events in other cities?
- Unite apologised for the actions of the TGWU in the past. Why do you think Unite felt it was important to make this apology? Do you think it is important for modern people and organisations to apologise for events in the past?
- What work have museums in Bristol been doing in recent years to review the legacy of their collections? Why is this work important and why is it complicated?

About the author

Alistair Nunn is the Senior Product Manager for History at Pearson and has a degree in History from Cambridge University, focused on Modern British and European History. He grew up in Bristol. He wrote the section of Pearson's GCSE Migrants in Britain, c800-present on the Bristol Bus Boycott, which he has expanded into this article.



Further reading and resources

Books and articles



[Black and White on the Buses](#) – Madge Dresser (new edition, 2013) is a definitive account of the bus boycott

[The Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963](#) – blackhistorymonth.org.uk

[The Bristol Bus Boycott: A watershed moment for Black Britain](#)
– Bristol Museums Collections

[How the Bristol Bus Boycott changed employment laws forever](#)
– Sky History

[The Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963](#) – Black Past

<https://news.sky.com/story/bristol-bus-boycott-meet-the-faces-behind-the-uks-own-1963-civil-rights-movement-12086127> – Sky News

[The Story of Bristol Bus Boycotts](#) - The Black Curriculum

[Decolonisation](#) – Bristol's Free Museums and Historic Houses

<https://bristolbusboycott.uk/> – bristolbusboycott.uk

[Roy Hackett was a civil rights hero – everyone in Britain should know his name](#) – The Guardian

[Roy Hackett funeral: Hundreds of guests attended](#) – BBC News