

We have to talk about the past... for the sake of the future **A letter from Bristol Post Editor, Mike Norton**

Last week, I decided to walk to a meeting in Clifton from the Post's offices on Temple Way. It was a bright, November morning and the city looked beautiful in the long shadows of the golden winter sunlight.

My route took me across Castle Park, past Corn Street, down Broad Street, over Nelson Street, up Christmas Steps and on to Park Row. The stroll became a sort of impromptu history walk, a pilgrimage through streets paved with centuries of significance, past buildings whose stones could tell fascinating tales.

Oh yes, Bristol has history all right.

Except that the problem with Bristol's history is that much of it has been reduced to just that. History. The past. It's all about the buildings now. The spires, the domes, the high windows and the trading halls. We Bristolians don't like to talk about the human history of those buildings. Why is that? Is it because it's history, irrelevant to today? Or is it because we'd rather not talk about it? Do we prefer to agree with L P Hartley, that the past was a foreign country and they did things differently there?

I want to challenge that view. I'm a Bristolian who wants to talk about my city's past.

Of course, I can imagine many of my fellow Bristolians reading this starting to roll their eyes. Is he on about the slave trade? Why can't we move on? You could say that about any building, couldn't you? What about modern-day slavery, why isn't he talking about that?

Well, Bristol, prepare to roll your eyes. Because, yes, I am talking about the slave trade. But I am also talking about modern-day Bristol.

The harsh reality is that, culturally, Bristol is a bit of an embarrassment. Our city is one of the most ethnically diverse in the UK. Yet, according to a "dissimilarity index" report this year, its schools are also the most ethnically divided. Not AMONG the most divided. THE most divided.

Division, it would appear, starts at an early age here.

And beyond that lack of integration, black and minority ethnic (BME) people are still not properly represented in the city's leadership.

Before you say it, I know we have a black elected mayor. But how many black Merchant Venturers do you think there are? Here's a clue... it's none.

Let me give you one small example of how Bristol can let itself down culturally. On Friday night, I was at a fabulous dinner in town to celebrate 800 years of the Lord Mayor of Bristol. The banquet hall of the Harbour hotel was packed to its painted rafters with hundreds of Bristol's so-called great and good. Yet I counted just two black people in the room. And one of them was the Lord Lieutenant.

The Post is no better. Too few of my staff are from the BME community and neither black writers nor black communities are well represented in the paper or on our website. And, over the years, the Post has undoubtedly contributed to the cultural divide that plagues our city.

Now, of course, this wasn't intentional exclusion. None of it happened by design. But that doesn't make it acceptable.

So why aren't BME people properly represented in Bristol? Why is our city so culturally divided? Why don't we want to talk about the legacy of the slave trade, even though hundreds of white Bristolians were also exploited by it? Why do we want to distance ourselves from our history?

I don't know the answer to these questions. But I do know that this situation is unhealthy and unsustainable. And I want this newspaper to be part of the movement that is seeking to change it.

That is why the Bristol Post is supporting an initiative conceived by Roger Griffith, the founder of Bristol's community radio station Ujima Radio. Roger wants 2018 to be a Year of Change and we're joining forces with him and Tom Morris, Artistic Director of the Bristol Old Vic - which itself is undergoing huge change next year - to try to make that happen.

Roger is quietly passionate about bringing the city together and conceived the idea of a Year of Change after being inspired by the anniversaries of some powerful and significant change advocates - the fiftieth anniversaries of the assassination of Martin Luther King and Olympic Black Power salute and the seventieth anniversary of the voyage of Windrush.

Roger wants to see his city properly acknowledge its role in the transatlantic slave trade. Like Germany acknowledges its role in the Second World War or the Holocaust. He is not recriminatory or accusative. He is measured and dignified and his ambition does not seem unreasonable to me.

At the core of the Year of Change will be a series of city conversations - public meetings to discuss how we as a city should recognise Bristol's role in the slave trade, or remember Edward Colston, or address our cultural divides. They will take place around the city, with a final conversation at Bristol Old Vic itself.

This is not a cue for trite, municipal apologies or for Bristol to beat itself up about its past. It's about a desire to find agreement in voices from across the city, from Knowle West to Easton. The conversations will undoubtedly be awkward at times. But they will hopefully help us all to better understand and integrate with each other.

The Year of Change was launched last night at the Bristol Old Vic, itself in the midst of great change. The façade of Bristol's stunning Georgian theatre is undergoing a once-in-a-generation transformation. If you walk down King Street, you will see the huge wooden framework already in place ready to support a new glass front, allowing - for the first time - a view across its internal courtyard to the original theatre entrance.

But next year is about more than a new building for the theatre. Tom Morris has put together a powerful programme of plays and events for 2018. And central to that will be a major new production about the slave trade, *The Meaning of Zong*, by Giles Terera.

The *Zong* was a slave ship and its story speaks volumes about how slaves were viewed and treated. In 1781, the ship was the setting for the massacre of 133 slaves. They were killed because the *Zong* was running out of drinking water, partly to save water for the other passengers but also because the slaves were insured and the crew knew they could cash in on the insurance.

But the plan backfired. The insurance company refused to pay out and the argument went to court, where the judge again ruled against the slave's Liverpoolian "owners".

The terrible events and ensuing publicity around the case are said to have become a catalyst for the abolitionist movement. The play is being developed with other theatres in Liverpool, London and Glasgow.

I sincerely hope that this play, our city conversations and Roger's Year of Change will help Bristol to find a way of properly recognising and moving on from its difficult past.

But this is about Bristol's future, too.

Let's make history show 2018 as the year when we took the first steps together towards creating a truly united city.

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