

Four plead not guilty in case of toppled slave trader statue in UK

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Years of calls by anti-racism campaigners for Colston's statue to be removed had met with fierce local resistance. (Photo: Giulia Spadafora/NurPhoto)

Bristol, March 3 (RHC)-- Three men and a woman pleaded not guilty on Tuesday to a charge of criminal damage over their alleged role in the toppling of a statue of 17th-century slave trade magnate Edward Colston in Bristol in southwest England last year.

The statue was pulled down and tossed into Bristol Harbour during an anti-racism demonstration on June 7th that was part of a global wave of Black Lives Matter protests.

The toppling of the statue led to other memorials of figures linked to the slave trade being taken down or their future being debated, triggering a backlash from government ministers who said this amounted to censoring history.

Rhian Graham, Milo Ponsford, Jake Skuse and Sage Willoughby -- all in their 20s or 30s -- were charged with criminal damage in December and appeared at Bristol Crown Court on Tuesday. After hearing their pleas of not guilty, Judge Peter Blair set December 13th as the start date for their trial, which is expected to last seven or eight days.

Noting that defence lawyers had indicated they would be invoking the European Convention on Human Rights, the judge said he was “puzzled” by that. “I’m struggling to see how the Criminal Damage Act might be said to be interfering with someone’s right to free assembly or expression or freedom of thought,” he said, adding that the defendants risked extra costs if they were found to have run “wholly unmeritorious” arguments.

Colston has long been a subject of heated debate in his home city of Bristol, where he donated lavishly to charitable causes, using the fortune he made investing in the slave-trading Royal African Company.

Years of calls by anti-racism campaigners for his statue to be removed had met with fierce local resistance, until protesters took matters into their own hands last June.

After a few days at the bottom of the harbour, the statue was retrieved by city authorities and put into storage. It is expected to eventually be exhibited in a museum.

In September, a concert hall that was named after Colston renamed itself the Bristol Beacon.

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