

Bristol Area Quaker Meeting

Apology for Quaker Complicity in the Economy of Trafficking and Enslaving Africans

We acknowledge that Bristol Quakers contributed to the suffering endured by more than 13 million African men, women and children who were forcibly removed from their homes and brutally transported across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and the Americas. The unpaid forced labour of enslaved African people was the cornerstone of the 'economy of enslavement' which made our city and our country wealthy and opened the way for three centuries of colonial exploitation. We recognise that the ruthless plunder of people and nature, and the gross inequalities of the current global economy, are rooted in this shameful history.

The racism which was used both to enable and to attempt to justify enslavement has continued to traumatise and disadvantage people of African descent, wherever they are in the world. Racism has also created a space in which those of African descent, in the past and up to the present day, can be treated with disrespect and a total denial of human rights. This has had and can still have lethal consequences for people of African descent.

The economy of trafficking and enslaving Africans and its appalling consequences have been recognised by the United Nations General Assembly as the gravest crime against humanity. As Quakers, we acknowledge that enslavement was a moral as well as a humanitarian catastrophe. Quaker complicity was an offence against our core belief in the sacredness of every person's life. Our failure to admit Quaker complicity, whilst often celebrating our role in 'slavery abolition', has been a grave offence against our religious testimony to truthfulness, equality and peace.

In the early 18th century Bristol was Britain's leading slave port and Quakers were an integral part of the city's 'economy of enslavement'. Our research has shown that influential Quaker families enriched themselves over several generations and helped to fund their Quaker Meetings through activities as merchants, manufacturers and financiers which involved them directly or indirectly in enslavement. More than 70 Bristol enslaving voyages were wholly or partly funded by Quakers, trafficking more than 21,000 people across the Atlantic. At least four Bristol Quaker families 'owned' overseas plantations and their enslaved workers. In some cases Quakers brought African children back to serve them in Bristol. We remember the African children named as 'Ned', 'Billy' and 'Champayne'.

Bristol Quaker merchants imported plantation produce such as sugar, cocoa, rice, tobacco, indigo and timber and exported the trade goods used to 'buy' captive African people. Bristol Quakers were particularly prominent as investors and entrepreneurs in the local metal industries which provided copper, brass, iron and steel goods for slave ships and for the plantations. Wealth from shipping, trade and manufacturing linked to enslavement enabled Quakers to help establish three local banks, as well as to invest heavily in enslavement through the South Seas Company.

Bristol Quaker Meeting was slow to respond to mounting condemnation of enslavement from Quakers in Britain and America. Local enquiries into Quaker complicity in the trafficking of enslaved people were held in 1761 and 1785, producing bland responses. Some Quakers were expelled for rule-breaking, but there is no recorded incident of any Bristol Quaker being disowned by Bristol Quaker Meeting because of complicity in enslavement.

Bristol Quakers today are deeply shocked to discover the harms which Bristol Quakers inflicted upon thousands of African people between the late 17th and early 19th centuries. We apologise to all those who were harmed and to their descendants, in sorrow and humility and with the knowledge that these harms have not yet ended.

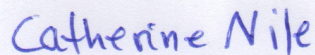
An apology can only be meaningful if we take action to make amends and do no more harm. As Bristol Quakers, we commit ourselves to working towards repair and healing of relationships in the future, and we strive to become 'an actively anti-racist faith community' (Britain Yearly Meeting 2021, minute 17). This commitment aligns Bristol Quakers with the radical atonement and reparation motion passed by Bristol City Council in March 2021.

In 2022, Britain Yearly Meeting discerned that 'Love and justice require us to tell the truth, as best we can, about historical and contemporary injustices... love and justice also require us to consider deeply how the Society of Friends in Britain might make financial and other reparations for our part in the wrongs of the transatlantic slave trade' (Britain Yearly Meeting 2022, minute 27). As Bristol Quakers, we accept our share of responsibility for fulfilling these pledges.

Bristol Quakers understand that our apology for complicity in enslavement is one small part of a worldwide reparation movement initiated by people of African descent and indigenous people in the Caribbean and the Americas. We undertake to work towards reparatory justice in partnership with those who have been most deeply hurt by the sins of the past.

Further information about Bristol Quakers' ongoing work towards reparation can be found on our website: <https://bristolquakers.org.uk/reparations>.

Signed by



Catherine Nile
Clerk, Bristol Area Quaker Meeting
July 12th 2026