



CHESTER
CATHEDRAL



University of
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Recommendations following the *Imperial Legacies, Sacred Space* research and exhibition

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Introduction

Imperial Legacies, Sacred Space (ILSS) was a pilot project jointly presented by Chester Cathedral and the University of Chester which explored the legacies of colonialism and slavery at Chester Cathedral. The exhibition and complimentary activities took place between 18-30 May 2023.

During this period, visitors to the Cathedral could visit an exhibition set up in the South Transept which explored two case studies connected to colonialism, slavery, and campaigns to abolish the trade in enslaved people and improve their conditions in the Caribbean. One of the case studies centred on a collection of memorials to Charles Napier and the Battles in Meanee and Sindh, the other focussed on Bishop Beilby Porteus and his connection to colonialism. The exhibition sought to contextualise both histories and their connections to Chester and the Cathedral; to explore multiple perspectives on them, including indigenous perspectives from Sindh and from African British abolitionists; and to consider their legacies. To support the research displayed in this exhibition, a series of student-composed performances, public lectures, and discussions were put on to encourage a variety of engagement opportunities and reach the broadest possible audience. Once the exhibition had closed, two reflection sessions were hosted at Chester Cathedral to provide an opportunity for further exploration and to share thoughts directly with the project leads.

ILSS built on the work started by Chester Cathedral in collaboration with the Diocese of Chester in our *Global Images of Christ* exhibition in 2021 which displayed art from around the country which depicted Christ and other Biblical figures as people of black and other global majority heritage identities. *Imperial Legacies* looked at this work through a research lens and sought to use specific items in the Cathedral and other local collections to interrogate and unpack the association of colonialism and slavery in the mother church of the Diocese of Chester.

To complete the pilot project, the recommendations outlined in this document were commissioned to guide Chester Cathedral and partners in the next steps for research, learning, and action. These recommendations draw together

- Learning about the colonial legacies of Chester and Chester Cathedral through the project;
- Learning from the creation of and feedback from the performances, lectures, and reflection sessions associated with the project;
- Chester Cathedral's desire to pursue this work as part of its mission

Recommendations are divided into four sections: Cultural Change; Continuing Research; Telling the Stories; and Reaching Out. Each recommendation is given an indicative time scale – short- mid- and long-term¹ – and many include indicators of change. At the end of the document is a list of resources that the Cathedral and readers of the recommendations may find useful.

We ask that the leadership of Chester Cathedral review the recommendations and consider how they can be meaningfully integrated into the Cathedral's strategic vision and priorities so that they receive the attention and investment they require to take root.

¹ The authors suggest that the time scales be understood as: short-term being six months; mid-term being up to twenty four months; and long-term being up to five years.

1.0 Cultural Change

1.1 Establishing a diversity advisory board: The entanglements of British institutions with the history and legacies of slavery, colonialism and white supremacy are complex and pervasive and interact with broader societal legacies of marginalisation, inequality and racism. Challenges in addressing apply to ecclesiastical institutions as much as to museums, universities, companies and charities. To help Chester Cathedral navigate them, and to create a structure of accountability for its Dean and Chapter, an Advisory Board should be established. Members should be appointed with appropriate expertise in community engagement, decolonisation, equality and diversity, public education, racial justice, sensitive heritage and the mission of Cathedrals, including members from communities negatively affected by these histories and other minority ethnic groups. We strongly recommend that the Diocesan Race and Equality Working Group be represented on the Board. This Board should receive annual reports from the Cathedral about the development and implementation of policy in these areas and should meet with the Dean and relevant staff at least annually, to discuss these matters and offer advice. This is a mid-term action that could be completed within a year.

1.2 Create an Equality and Diversity Policy: In keeping with its ethos and values, to help eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people in carrying out their activities in the Cathedral (Equality Act 2010), Chester Cathedral should put in place an Equality and Diversity Policy, informed by best practice in this area. This is a short-term action.

1.3 Training for staff and members of the Cathedral community: To promote a culture of engagement with the legacies of colonialism, slavery and white supremacy and of equality, diversity and inclusion amongst those who participate in the work and mission of the Cathedral, the Cathedral should make available to all staff, volunteers and community members appropriate training (a) in equality, diversity and inclusion; (b) in racial justice; (c) in sensitive heritage and the decolonisation of cultural institutions and sacred spaces. Consideration should be given to specific training and development for specialist staff involved in this area of work. This is a short to mid-term action.

1.4 Create accessible resources: Learning about the legacies of colonialism, slavery and white supremacy in relation to the Cathedral and its local, regional and national contexts, and about developments in sensitive heritage, decolonisation and racial justice, is a demanding and ongoing challenge. In addition to the training recommended above, Chester Cathedral should identify and make available and/or commission accessible resources and guides for its staff, volunteers and visitors. This is at the most a mid-term action which may require financial and other support to produce bespoke resources by Cathedral staff and/or external partners and experts.

2.0 Continuing Research

2.1 Funded post to list the memorials (collective Cathedral bid for Church of England [Racial Justice funding](#)): The research conducted into the 'origin stories' of some of the Cathedral's memorials, which took place as part of the *Imperial Legacies, Sacred Space* project, should act as an impetus for more comprehensive research into the hundreds of memorials within the building. The Cathedral should consider investing in a funded research post to ensure necessary rigor, depth and consistency is applied

in undertaking this important task. Given the necessity to seek funding together with the scale of the research needed, this should be considered a long-term action.

2.2 Continue collaboration with students as partners at the University of Chester: The role played by students from a variety of disciplinary and social backgrounds, together with the broad range of views they held regarding the ‘real world’ legacies of colonialism and slavery was a key asset to *ILSS*. Seeking out further opportunities for collaboration with students is strongly encouraged. This would allow for the soliciting of their views and perspectives, their creative and intellectual contributions, and to engage them as reciprocal learners, researchers, performers and creatives. This could be considered as a key element within several of the other actions outlined in this set of recommendations, including events and exhibitions, memorials listing, and visitor experience more broadly. This should be considered a mid-term action.

2.3 Continue collaboration with researchers at the University of Chester: Maintaining and strengthening opportunities for partnership work, collaborative research, and knowledge exchange with researchers from the University of Chester is strongly encouraged, in both the short and long term. Such a partnership should be considered as mutually beneficial and intellectually rewarding for both institutions, as well as a culturally enriching activity for the city of Chester and the wider region. This could be formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding between the University and the Cathedral which would help to focus the work that both organisations wish to undertake on the legacies of slavery and colonialism. This should be considered a mid-term action.

2.4 Opening up the archive and empowering researchers: Access to the Cathedral’s archival collections – physical, material or digital – should be offered freely and without prejudice to researchers regardless of their backgrounds. Indeed, researchers should be empowered and supported to access and use the archive. Equally, archival practices within the Cathedral (of cataloguing, storing, preserving and displaying) should be undertaken in such a way as to be mindful of the intentional and unintentional exclusions and omissions which can occur or may have occurred in the past as a result of prejudice. Undertaking the cataloguing of the collections should be considered a priority. Wherever possible, this work should be considered a form of “reparative” action intended to “correct” as much as to broaden the underpinning narrative of the archive. Given the enormity of this task, this may require a dedicated funded post. This is a long-term action.

3.0 Telling the Stories

3.1 Semi-permanent interpretation: Chester Cathedral is currently looking to develop its visitor interpretation across the building. The narratives researched as part of *Imperial Legacies, Sacred Space* should be represented in the scheme, and opportunities should be sought out to tell untold narratives in interpretation across the whole site. This is a mid-term action which might require funding and external support for existing staff and to represent communities not already represented by the Cathedral’s story telling. This relates to the recommendation on the visitor experience below.

3.2 Commission art: The commissioning of art was identified in the panel discussion for the exhibition in May 2023 as a key way to interpret and display the learnings from research. The Cathedral should make use of appropriate channels, including the Diversity Advisory Board, to commission art for display, which

explores legacies of colonialism and slavery, in its buildings and across the Cathedral site. Art might be permanently and/or temporarily displayed and might be generated through a partnership initiative as well as independently. Fundraising might be sought to support the financial necessities of commissioning art. Efforts should be made to ensure that art is representative of global majority communities in Chester, Cheshire, and further afield. This is a mid-term action.

3.3 Reframing the visitor experience: The Cathedral has a comprehensive series of tours available for the public to engage with as a way of learning about the history and heritage of the Abbey of St Werburgh and the Cathedral. The tour guides should be supported to engage with methods of telling sensitive and colonial narratives and the research uncovered by *ILSS* and future research should be incorporated into tour narratives. This could take the form of a specific tour about the legacies of slavery and colonialism at Chester Cathedral, but facts about the broader context of colonialism and its place in Chester and Cheshire should be included in some way in the more general tours. This is a mid-term action.

3.4 Include events/exhibitions around this theme in the Cathedral's programme: Visitors coming to the Cathedral are able to engage with a range of exciting and thought-provoking exhibitions and events throughout the year. In recent years, the Cathedral has committed internal resources to putting on exhibitions which explore sensitive issues. This should continue to include strategic explorations of the themes of *ILSS* including (but not limited to): race and racism, transatlantic slavery, modern slavery, colonialism, and social justice. This is a mid- to long-term action.

4.0 Reaching Out

4.1 Establish a community engagement officer post: Activities outlined in this report will have real impact and meaning within a Cathedral context and will help to achieve a range of aims as well as provide an opportunity for learning and growth. The establishment of a community engagement officer position on the Cathedral staff will ensure that approaches to undertaking the recommendations outlined here are supported and reflect the needs of the local community. A community engagement officer would work between the already established Education, Collections, missional, exhibitions, and programming roles at the Cathedral and be able to process advice from the Diversity Advisory Board. This is a mid- to long-term action.

4.2 Working to establish collaborative partnerships with minority groups: A key priority for the *ILSS* project was to communicate the message that the Cathedral is a space for all, regardless of faith, ethnicity, or background. It is contingent on the Cathedral leadership to carry this message forward by proactively developing links and building partnerships with religious and ethnic minority communities in Chester and the region, reflecting up and tackling together and through dialogue the legacies of colonialism and slavery that can be found within the building, its collections, and its historical associations. This should be considered a long-term action.

4.3 Engaging CWaC and Storyhouse: The themes and challenges of the *ILSS* project connect with broader themes and challenges arising from Britain's history; challenges also navigated by the city of Chester, its public bodies, and cultural and heritage organisations. There is an opportunity here for the Cathedral to help lead and encourage deeper and more intentional engagement with these issues across

relevant sectors in the city and the region, learning from good practice in other places. Building on its relationships with other bodies, Chester Cathedral should seek to develop its relationships with CWaC and Storyhouse (and other organisations) toward partnership in this area. This could be an area of work on which the community engagement officer leads (see above). This is a long-term action.

4.4 Widen engagement with global partners: As it explores its historic connections with sensitive histories, the Cathedral should also look beyond Chester and the region to build partnerships with other heritage and civic organisations, charitable bodies and ecclesial communities involved in this work nationally and globally. The USPG's *Codrington Reparations Project* might be one example of an organisation and initiative the Cathedral could engage with. This is a long-term action.

Conclusion

Through the **Imperial Legacies, Sacred Space** project, Chester Cathedral together with its partners at the University of Chester, has taken a significant step in beginning to engage with the Cathedral's relationship with the historical, material, and social legacies of Britain's imperial history and the issues they raise. The Cathedral now has an excellent opportunity to build on this beginning and help lead the way in engaging with these challenges locally and contribute to the development of policy and practice at a national level. The recommendations above, drawn from the experience of project members and the feedback of Cathedral staff, offer some concrete steps by which the Cathedral can continue on that journey.

Suggested Resources

Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery database <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>

DCMS, 'Guidance for custodians on how to deal with commemorative heritage assets that have become contested', 5 October 2023 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-custodians-on-how-to-deal-with-commemorative-heritage-assets-that-have-become-contested/guidance-for-custodians-on-how-to-deal-with-commemorative-heritage-assets-that-have-become-contested>

Historic England, 'Reinterpreting Contested Heritage', <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/planning/contested-heritage/reinterpreting-heritage/>

Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital. Foundations of British Abolitionism* (University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

Vincent Brown, *Tacky's Revolt. The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

Madge Dresser and Andrew Hann (eds.), *Slavery and the British Country House* (English Heritage, 2013): <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/slavery-and-british-country-house/slavery-british-country-house-web/>

Katharine Gerbner, *Christian Slavery. Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

Trevor Glasson, *Mastering Christianity: Missionary Anglicanism and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Corinne Fowler, *Green Unpleasant Land* (Peepal Tree Press, 2020).

Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums* (Pluto Press, 2020).

Historic England, 'The Transatlantic Slave Economy and England's Built Environment: A Research Audit (2020) .

Sally-Anne Huxtable and others (eds.), 'Interim Report on Connections between Colonialism and Properties now in the Care of the National Trust, including Links with Historic Slavery' (National Trust, 2020). <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/research/addressing-our-histories-of-colonialism-and-historic-slavery>

Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination. Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2011).

Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (Penguin, 2021).

Padraic X. Scanlan, *Slave Empire. How Slavery Built Modern Britain* (Robinson, 2020).