

Question to Lancaster City Council

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The recent wave of anti-racism protests around the world, in support of black lives, has been an encouraging and welcome sign that communities are ready and willing to address the racial injustices that permeate every aspect of British society.

I came to Lancaster in 1988. My parents brought us here from South Sudan after my father, Leonzio Onek, won a scholarship to study bio-medical science at Lancaster University. I grew up here and have worked as a Primary School Teacher in some of the local schools. I love Lancaster and I am proud to raise my family here.

It must be stated, however, that Lancaster has historically had a key role in the suffering, oppression and murder of thousands of black men, women and children. In the 18th Century, Lancaster was the fourth largest slave-trading port in England. Historian, Melinda Elder writes about how young men from Lancaster worked as agents across the West-Indies and became wealthy slave owners. Lancaster born, Miles Barber, created one of the most significant commercial slaving hubs in British history, off the African coast of Guinea. Slave traders dominated political life in Lancaster for decades as aldermen, mayors and notably, as councillors.

We honour the names of the slave owners and the economic wealth they brought Lancaster throughout this city. Lindow Square is named after William Lindow; the Robert Gillow Pub, cotton court, Africa drive, the sugar house. All these pubs and street names speak to the financial benefits of slavery and speak nothing of the lives on which this financial wealth was built.

But we mustn't neglect to tell the stories of those lives and what they experienced. We need to tell the story of the 'Other Lancaster'. The 'Other Lancaster' was a cotton plantation in Guyana Lancaster, owned by Lancaster Mayor, John Bond, which was distinguished by its 'inhumane treatment of the slaves'. And in case you need any reminder of what that treatment would look like, the slaver Thomas Thistlewood, kept a diary recording the 3,852 acts of sexual intercourse he had with 136 enslaved women in his 37 years in Jamaica. He also described punishing a slave in the following manner: "Gave him a moderate whipping, pickled him well, made Hector defecate in his mouth, immediately put a gag in it whilst his mouth was full and made him wear it four or five hours."

Lancastrians and others were instrumental in the legacy of humans being sold as financial assets; they were the cause of Mothers being separated from children, husbands being separated from wives; people being raped, lynched, branded and mutilated.

And what is so upsetting is that the majority of Lancastrians today know little of this history. We talk of merchants and assets of gold, sugar and rum. But we absolutely must tell the full story. We cannot undo the human atrocities that have occurred. But we can start to acknowledge it. Acknowledgement is the first step to healing. We have to acknowledge the human rights abuses that took place on these streets. Abuses that were so enormous, British taxpayers were still paying for them through slavery reparations up until 2015. A lack of awareness of our history directly feeds into racism experienced today; ignorance is a key element of racism. Maybe if people in Lancaster were more aware of what Lancaster's role was in the suppression of black people, some members would recognize that their 'harmless racist jokes' aren't 'harmless' at all. Maybe people would begin to understand the contemporary impacts of historical injustices. Acknowledgement of racism, is the first step in being anti-racist.

I would like to ask the question: ***What steps will Lancaster City Council take to ensure the atrocities committed here in our district are brought to light and how will they honour those who lost their lives?***