

The Bristol Collegiate Research Society: A Historical Note

What is now the Bristol Collegiate Research Society, was established in 1899 as the University College Colston Society, complementing three existing philanthropic societies through which a great deal of public charitable activity in the city of Bristol was organised. All four explicitly aligned themselves with the philanthropic example said to have been exemplified by the seventeenth-century Bristol merchant, Edward Colston. From 1680 to 1692 Colston was a leading figure in the Royal African Society, which in that period alone transported over 84,000 enslaved Africans across the Atlantic, many whom died in transit. Colston's involvement was well known, and into the early twenty-first century the connection was not subject to much, if any, sustained critical reflection. Colston's 'pious memory' was toasted at the Society's annual public dinners, which were a prominent feature in the civic calendar until discontinued as a result of the Second World War; the image of his statue, erected in 1895, was used as the Society's logo into the 1990s; his name remained in the Society's title until 2019.

The Society had no direct connection with Colston himself, except in this use of his name, and the appeal to civic philanthropy that had become associated with it in later nineteenth century Bristol. It secured funds through an annual collection of donations from its subscribers, raising this way funds which made a sizeable contribution to the annual budget of the University College, which in 1909 became the University of Bristol. After 1910 the Society supported fellowships, large-scale projects, and publication grants through the university's Colston Research Fund, and in 1921 was renamed the Colston Research Society. A significant philanthropic gift in 1929 led to the establishment of an endowment fund from which its grants were thereafter drawn. As state funding for university research increased during and after the Second World War, the Society instead focused on supporting an annual symposium, starting in 1948 with a conference on Cosmic Radiation, and supporting the publication of the papers, as well as making small research grants to university researchers. Since 2013 it has also supported travel scholarships for postgraduate research students.

Like other institutions in Bristol which used the Colston name, the Society concluded in 2019 that this was no longer appropriate, and had become instead an active impediment to its achieving its charitable objectives and supporting the university community. From its foundation onwards, the Society has served as an important bridge between civic and university Bristol, and it retains that distinctive characteristic. Local philanthropy was vital to the survival of the University College, and the establishment of the University itself, and until the mid-twentieth century played an important role in funding the university's research endeavour. In more recent decades the Society helped the university publicise important new research initiatives -- and encourage philanthropic interest -- through social events during which academic researchers introduced their work and plans.

The Society's trustees are primarily drawn from public life in the city of Bristol, and have generously volunteered their time and experience. The ethos of the Society, and the conditions of funding of its annual symposium, continue to help support academic intellectual exchange, and to encourage university researchers to engage public audiences with important new developments in scholarly research.

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