

## Significant anniversaries

# The Bristol Bus Boycott, 1963

Stuart Boydell

Bristol bus on Park Row, Bristol in the 1960s



*It is sixty years since the Bristol Bus Boycott highlighted race inequalities and discrimination in the workplace. In this article, Stuart Boydell revisits this watershed moment and considers how the Bristol Bus Boycott could be incorporated into the curriculum today.*

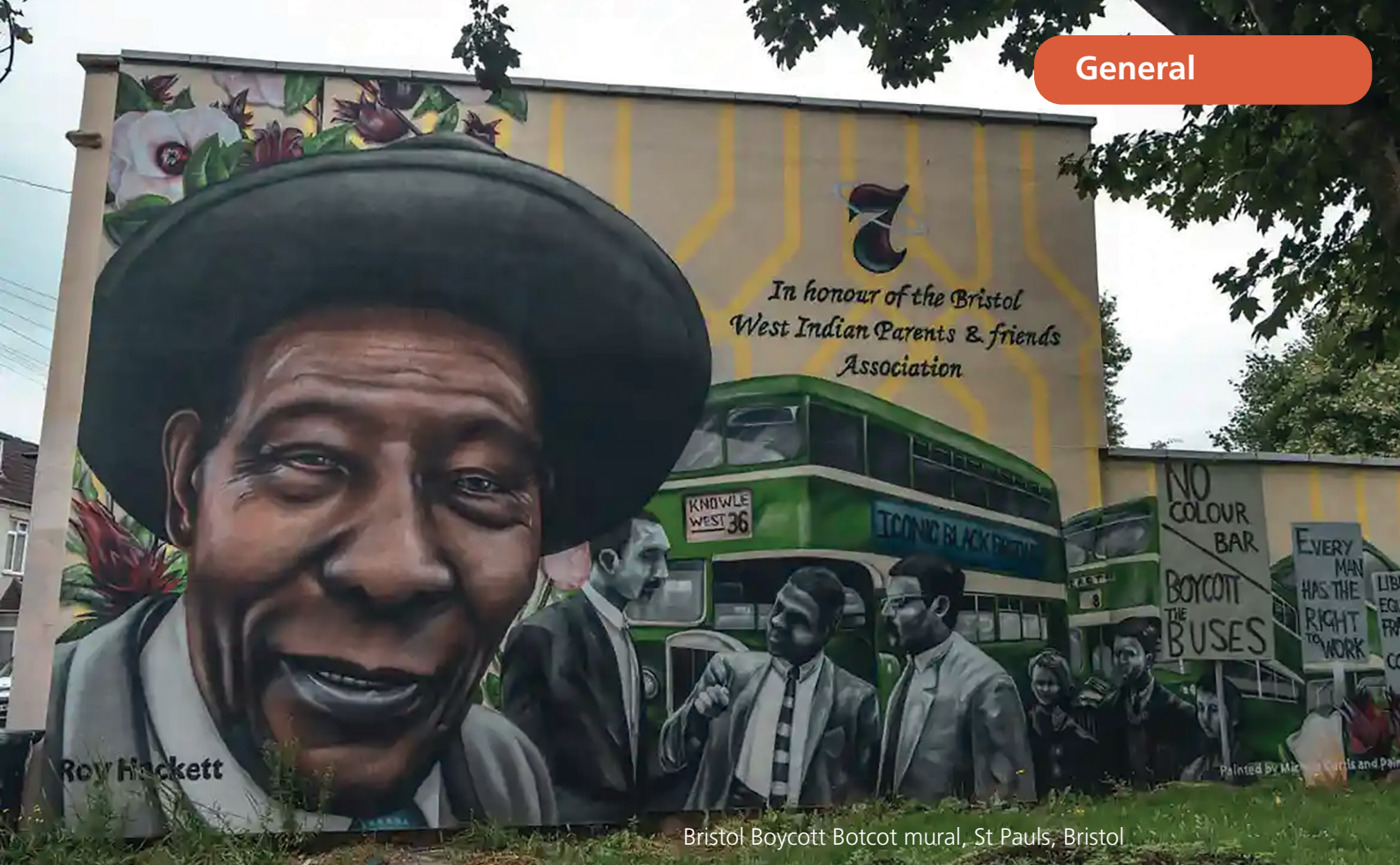
### **What was the Bristol Bus Boycott and why did it happen?**

Sixty years ago, Bristol was at the centre of a race row that would become a watershed moment for equality in the workplace. Although the events of 1963 are largely forgotten, at the time the Bristol Bus Boycott grabbed the nation's attention as the press pored over what was being seen as Britain's version of the 1955 Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott.

The arrival in Britain of migrant workers from the former colonies during the 1950s and '60s was largely driven by post-war economic necessity. The macroeconomics, however was not easily reconcilable with prejudices and fears about domestic incomes which was felt by many Britons at that time and was partly compounded by Harold Macmillan's much-debated 1962 immigration legislation.

In Bristol in the spring of 1963, an 18-year-old Guy Bailey with dual west African and British heritage, arrived at the offices of the local council-controlled Bristol Omnibus Company for a job interview. Dressed to impress, Bailey was convinced he would realise his ambition to be a bus driver on the fleet of buses criss-crossing Bristol's streets. Instead, what confronted Bailey was an embarrassing rejection of his application before he entered the interview room. It was a single personal moment in Bailey's life which would have a profound impact on working practices across the country.





Bristol Boycott Botcot mural, St Pauls, Bristol

On seeing Bailey, the receptionist informed the interviewing manager that his 'two o'clock appointment' had arrived 'and he's black'. The response from within the office rang loud and clear: 'Tell him the vacancies are full.' The advert for new drivers had only appeared in the local press the day before. Bailey tried to argue his case but he was silenced temporarily when the company manager told him: 'There's no point having an interview... [w]e don't employ black people.'

Unlike today, with the absence of equality laws the company was acting legally and could not be sued on legal grounds. Consequently, discrimination in and out of the workplace was a common feature in British society. Bristol, therefore, was not particularly unusual but with its 3,000+ migrant population, tensions were often higher than in many other locations.

### Fighting discrimination with the Bristol Bus Boycott

A leading campaigner, Roy Hackett, who had personal experience of workplace discrimination in Bristol, formed the West Indian Development Council with other residents in the St Pauls area of the city to lobby for fairer treatment for black employees. Initially, its impact was limited but in 1962 its lobbying power was greatly enhanced with the arrival of Paul Stephenson, a youth worker with a determination to shake up the status quo.

Stephenson and Hackett saw Bailey's experience as an opportunity for change. Stephenson, recalling the

legacy of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott, called for a city-wide boycott of the Bristol Omnibus Company.

### A point to note when teaching the Bristol Bus Boycott

Although the Bristol Bus Boycott was inspired by the Montgomery Bus Boycott in the United States, and both fought racism and discrimination, the contexts for the respective bus boycotts differed.

The Montgomery Bus Boycott was a protest against the policy of racial segregation on Montgomery Alabama's public transit system, and the Bristol Bus Boycott was a protest against racial discrimination, after Guy Bailey was refused an interview for a job as a bus driver because of the colour of his skin. Such discrimination, now illegal, was widespread at the time, and not just specific to the Bristol Omnibus Company.

### Support for the Bristol Bus Boycott

Support for the bus boycott was not limited to Bristol's black community. In solidarity with their fellow Bristolians, groups of politically-active students at the University of Bristol and members of the local and national Labour Party including Tony Benn – then known as Anthony Wedgwood Benn – added their voices to the boycott. Its impact reached the High Commissioner for Trinidad & Tobago, Learie Constantine, who was visiting Bristol on a trade mission. In his capacity as a leading black diplomat,

## Where can the Bristol Bus Boycott be included in the Primary History National Curriculum?

### Key Stage 1:

- **Significant individuals:** Guy Bailey, Roy Hackett and Paul Stephenson.
- **A local history study:**
  - ▶ Significant historical events and people in their own locality.

### Key Stage 2:

- A local history study:
  - ▶ A study of an aspect of history from a period beyond 1066 that is significant in the locality.
- A study of an aspect or theme in British history that extends pupils' chronological knowledge beyond 1066 – changes in an aspect of social history:
  - ▶ Migration in the twentieth century – how did the Windrush Generation help change Britain?
  - ▶ Civil rights movements in the UK and their impact.

### Examples of enquiry questions that teachers could use to frame learning about the Bristol Bus Boycott and its significance:

- How did the Bristol Bus Boycott help change Britain?
- Why is it important to remember the Bristol Bus Boycott?
- What does the Bristol Bus Boycott tell us about people's attitudes to race in the 1960s?
- In what ways is the Bristol Bus Boycott similar and different from the Montgomery bus boycott?

Constantine was quick to add his influence to the condemnation of the Bristol Omnibus Company's colour bar policy.

### Fighting institutional racism – who supported the Bristol Bus Boycott and who opposed it?

As early as November 1961, the *Bristol Evening Post* ran an article discussing racial tensions within the city and publicly disagreed with the 'Bristol Omnibus Company's failure to employ coloured labour'. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Stephenson claimed Bailey knew the company's refusal to employ black drivers would prevent him from securing a job. Bailey, stuck rigidly to his claim that he was convinced he would be employed. Yet, despite the difference in the two leading campaigners' recollections, both agreed that institutional racism at all levels within both the Bristol Omnibus Company and the Bristol-based Transport & General Workers' Union prevented Bailey from even getting an interview.

Attempts to mediate between the different factions reached Parliament and the Church. As a leading anti-apartheid campaigner and as one of the local MPs with close links to the Transport & General Workers' Union, Tony Benn was approached by Stephenson. Benn spoke directly to the Bishop of Bristol, who



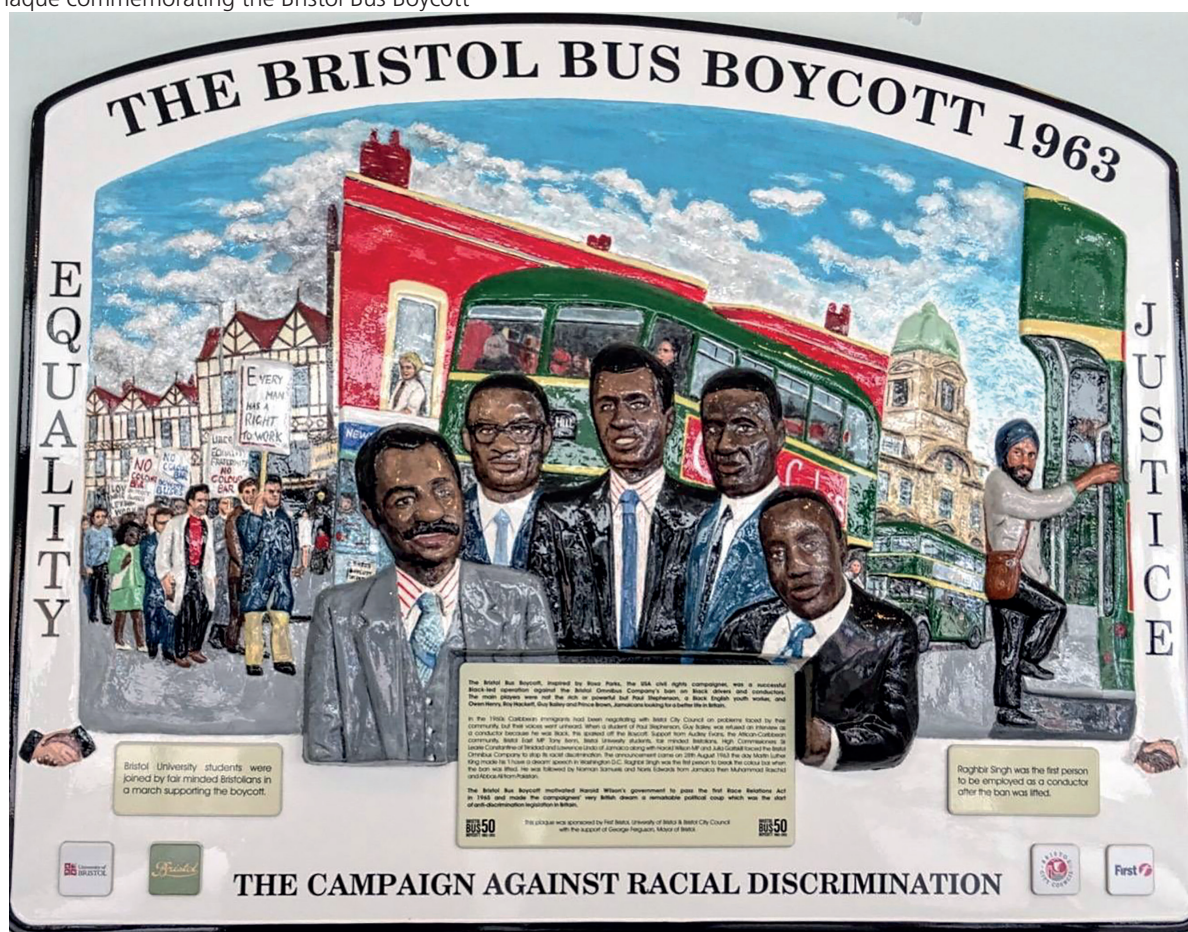
Plaque commemorating the Bristol Bus Boycott

had volunteered to mediate between the company and the local black community to circumnavigate what the bishop considered to be the 'trouble maker' Stephenson. Benn took the case to the Labour leader, Harold Wilson. In his diary entry for 2 May 1963, Benn, wrote of the colour bar: 'It is monstrous that this should go on and I am sure we shall soon have it licked.' The next day Benn wrote: 'Harold's speech last night referring to the colour bar in Bristol got good publicity in the local papers.'

In comparison to the American Civil Rights movement, the Bristol Bus Boycott was a relatively small, local response to the prejudice experienced by black people across the country. But, in this anniversary year Stephenson's, Hackett's and Bailey's leadership of the boycott again resonates within a city that continues to grapple with how to best represent its multicultural heritage. Memories of the toppling of Edward Colston's statue into Bristol Harbour in June 2020 still loom large in the collective mind of many Bristolians. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that David Olusoga makes the point that these three men had to wait until the twenty-first century before they received recognition for their part in the fight to establish workplace equality for everyone.

## References

- 'What was behind the Bristol bus boycott?' – BBC News [www.bbc.com/news/magazine-23795655](http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-23795655)
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- British Newspaper Archive [www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)
- Olusoga, D. (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2021) *Black and British: a forgotten history*, London: Picador.
- Stephenson, P. and Morrison, L. (2011) *Memoirs of a Black Englishman*, Bristol: Tangent Books.
- 'What was behind the Bristol bus boycott of 1963?' – Black History Month 2023 [www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/real-stories/what-was-behind-the-bristol-bus-boycott-of-1963/](http://www.blackhistorymonth.org.uk/article/section/real-stories/what-was-behind-the-bristol-bus-boycott-of-1963/)



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## Resources

- Black British Stories: Vernon Samuels – The Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963 [www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/history-ks2-black-british-stories-the-bristol-bus-boycott-of-1963/z9k4g7h](http://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/class-clips-video/history-ks2-black-british-stories-the-bristol-bus-boycott-of-1963/z9k4g7h)
- The Bristol Bus Boycott: a watershed moment for Black Britain <https://collections.bristolmuseums.org.uk/stories/bristols-black-history/bristol-bus-boycott/>
- Bracey, P. (2020) 'George Floyd protest in Bristol – Colston statue toppled', *Primary History* 86, autumn 2020, pp. 10–13.