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Episode 1: Statues They Hide

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Statues they hide.  
But would they love you if they knew  
all the things that we know?  
Those Golden Boys are all a fraud.  
Don't believe their show.

So sang Res, in her 2001 debut single, *Golden Boys*. 'Golden Boys' is also the pet name given to Birmingham's most famous statue, that of Matthew Bolton, William Murdoch and James Watt, resplendent in gold. It is tempting as activists to make such statues one's focus. As Res puts it:

But then there's girls like me  
Who sit appalled at what we see  
We know the truth about you.

Thus during the freedom summer of 2020, James Watt, that unimpeachable father of the industrial revolution, was exposed as having been a human trafficker, of at the very least one human child.

But would they love you if they knew all the things that we know?

Yet, what about the statues that they don't love? What about the statues that are not so golden? What about the statues they hide? Such statues cast a shadow much shorter, they don't loom as large because they're hidden away, either out of the public realm in secret storage, or so awkwardly positioned in public space, so difficult to get to or in such an unloved location that it makes little sense to talk about them participating in, let alone shaping it.

While there may be a place for us with Res, exposing among dead white men fraudulent fools' gold, we ought not I think as activists to satisfy ourselves with the statues they show off. For our doing so lets them set the terms of the public conversation. It puts us on the back foot, always reacting to their puffed up self-glorification. And it's all too easy to get sucked into the stories of the statues they show off. Yet what more might we gain in our struggle to bring about a social world of truth and justice if proactively we put *them* on the back foot, by shifting our focus to their sources of red-

faced embarrassment, to the statues they hide? What are the stories of the statues they hide? This is what, as an experiment, I intend to ask.

The colossus of Churchill is a statue they show off. Indeed, facing Big Ben, at that key and most crucial of the four corners of Parliament Square, that hub of the Empire, and at that junction connecting our lawmakers in Westminster with our governors in Whitehall, it is perhaps the most 'shown-off' statue in Britain. This is a statue they want us to see, to labour under as it looms over us. Which is why, when during a Black Lives Matter protest on Sunday 7 June 2020, that person whom our Prime Minister regards as 'quite the greatest statesman that Britain has ever produced', got the gift of a new, impromptu spray-painted plaque - 'CHURCHILL... was a racist' - there was uproar.

To look beyond Churchill, we need only look behind him. A few paces behind him in fact, at the opposite corner of Parliament Square. For although from its erection in 1973 until today, Churchill's memorial has been the most imposing and the most important sculpture in Parliament Square, between 1865 and 1950 the most imposing sculpture in Parliament Square was situated some thirty metres behind the present statue of Churchill. It jutted out into the street, such that it could be seen even from Westminster Bridge. It was a fountain. For clean drinking water, the public would flock to and throng round it. But it is no longer there.

Behind the many statues all raised on high, and down low at shin height, round the back of a ramp for disabled access, in moss- and soot-covered engraved lettering that is barely legible, let alone locatable, is all that remains of what was once the most imposing sculpture in Parliament Square. A plaque, if your knees will even bend you down that low you might just make out the following:

From 1865 to 1950 there stood on this / site the memorial fountain in memory of / Sir  
Thomas Fowell Buxton Bar[one]t. M.P. and / others and in commemoration of the  
emancipation of slaves under the British / flag in the year 1834. The memorial now /  
stands in the Victoria Tower Gardens.

Ignominiously dismantled in 1949 because, according to the government of the day, it 'blocked the road', this 'pink rococo wedding cake', as the Liberal peer Lord Rea disparagingly described it, was dumped in a dungeon during the 1951 Festival of Britain. Clearly, abolition didn't show off Britain's best side. It remains to be seen whether, seventy years later, the 2021 Festival of Brexit will foreground abolition. Even the member of the House of Lords who in 1955 moved the vote that the

Buxton Memorial be resurrected from the vaults of the National Gallery, where it had lain for nearly a decade in the dark, admitted that, 'Much could be said for employing a sledgehammer and obliterating this monument once and for all from the eyes and the sight of the younger generation.' And when in 1959 it was finally decided to bring it back into public light, in Victoria Tower Gardens, just south of the Houses of Parliament, the Ministry of Works clarified that, 'The choice before us is where to site it so that it will cause the least mischief.'

This, dear listener, is a sculpture that they did not want you to see, and that from you they tried to hide. Little did they know that iconoclasm – statue smashing – isn't necessary to secure neglect and the ignorance of children. Just hide it in plain sight. Indeed, by 1980, the Department for the Environment was informing the Buxton family that, 'Vandalism has been a constant problem [...] to the extent that some of the statuettes on the memorial have been stolen in the past' and 'vagrants have used the bowls for toilets.'

The day after it was re-erected, 'The London Letter', a regular column in the *Birmingham Daily Post*, reported that, 'We have no other national memorial to the abolition of slavery.' And yet, we do. No, this isn't Marc Quinn's quickly turned around statue of Jen Reid replacing a toppled statue of slaver Edward Colston. No, this isn't Les Jonson's disappointingly patriarchal *Memorial 2007*, still in limbo as it is, thanks to Boris Johnson, who as mayor of London gave it the go-ahead but who, as Prime Minister, kicked it into the long grass. No, this isn't even a statue of Sam Sharpe, whose Emancipation War of December 1831 to May 1832 can be said to have launched Britain's first mainland Black Lives Matter movement. Wait, did you think that BLM washed up against the white cliffs of Dover only in 2015? Offering us a false dichotomy, the Baptist minister and abolitionist who brought news of Sam Sharpe's rebellion to Britain, William Knibb, once declared that 'instead of being considered a rebel, he deserved an imperishable monument.' But, no. Britain's other anti-slavery statue is none of these.

The *Birmingham Daily Post* should have known better, for that rebel in stone just so happens to be in... Birmingham. So while they may say that a man who is tired of London is tired of life, there is really very little left for us to see in the capital. But there is elsewhere. In order to show it to you, I need to go home. So let's leave London. Take a train home with me. Let's go back. Back to Birmingham.

Arrive like Tom Cruise at Birmingham's Grand Central Station, and you'll be greeted by our brand new, state of the art tram, which, if you hop on, will take you up, past the Town Hall, which hosted

oh-so-many an anti-slavery public meeting, and up, up, up, for our most important Brummie statues are not merely up on a pedestal, they're up on a hill. Easy Hill, as it used to be known. Your arrival at the summit is your arrival at the beginning of Broad Street: Birmingham's Golden Mile, as Professor Carl Chinn dubs it, 'regarded by many as the city's most important street'. At the gateway to this Golden Mile stand the Golden Boys. Or, they will soon stand. For, in the wake of Bristol's toppling of Edward Colston, Birmingham City Council is keeping the plinth empty, while it decides, unilaterally of course, how to rewrite the plaque so as to account for 'that African boy'.

Ride with your Golden Ticket a little longer, for the full length of that Golden Mile, past the headquarters of the 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games, and you'll eventually come to the Five Ways. This is where Britain's *other* national memorial to the abolition of slavery stands. But more than that, lost amid the Conservative War for Statues during this Coronavirus crisis, has been the fact that Britain actually has a statue to Black Lives Matter, surprising though that might be to some. Lost is not a metaphor, for although it was first erected, according to the *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, on a point commanding a view of many streets, this statue is no longer ostentatiously located like Churchill, next to our ancient seat of government, nor is it, like Rhodes, in the epicenter of Britain's ancient seat of learning. Rather it is hidden away, behind the foliage of several trees, and on the forgotten fringe of a major junction that was once almost a public square but is now little more than a concrete complex of subterranean pedestrian subways and a terrifyingly busy traffic roundabout.

At either end of Brum's Golden Mile, each gateway sculpture, the Golden Boys to the east, the Sturge statue to the west, stands outside a hotel. The Hyatt Hotel at one end, and the Marriott Hotel at the other. The Hyatt harnesses every opportunity to associate itself with, to catch the gold dust from, and to bathe in the golden glow of the Golden Boys. Its interior design represents how Birmingham broadcast itself, when, in 1998, the Hyatt was the temporary residence of the leaders of the world's eight wealthiest countries. Central to this design is the hotel bar which, elaborating on theme begun with the giant line-drawing portraits of the three Soho manufacturers looming authoritatively over the otherwise airy and sunlit glass atrium, is named 'The Gentleman and Scholar'.

Unsure exactly what a gentleman or a scholar looks like, the hotel's outdoor street sign, with its tall, top-hatted Victorians, rather like that legion of clones of Isambard Kingdom Brunel with which the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics swamped us, yields to interior showcase walls, one for

each Georgian Golden Boy, busy with several different frames of hanging art. One frame proclaims that 'In the late eighteenth century the meetings of a few fertile minds changed an age.'

In the far-most corner of the bar, and in one of the smallest frames of the collection, sits the hotel-cum-gallery-cum-memorial's only depiction of diversity: a reproduction of Josiah Wedgwood's design for a medallion, whose sales were to fund the anti-slave trade campaign. Kneeling, looking up, importuning, with clasped hands, either God or the white man, or – because they are one and the same – both, is a person racialised, aged and gendered as a black adult man.

Given the glorification of white manhood and the stigmatisation of blackness going on at the Hyatt, it is difficult to decide whether to greet the Marriott's disinterest in history with resentment or relief. For the Marriott, adjacent to the Sturge statue, makes no reference whatsoever to the memorial on its doorstep. When questioned, the hotel staff had no idea who he is.

Who was Sturge? Who was Buxton? What, if anything, did they abolish? And why are their memorial fountains so little known, so difficult to find and in such disrepair?

Some statues they show off. Some statues they hide. They hide statues of Dead White Men who don't quite fit the Brexit textbook. So it's really up to us, to write these people back into a history from which those who love chatting about Churchill have elided them. They hide the Buxton Memorial Fountain because Buxton got it wrong, and they know that. They hide the Sturge Memorial Fountain because Sturge got it right, and they know that. What Sturge got right was that the campaign against slavery was, and still is, a campaign against police.