Perhaps the most compelling argument, in the last six years, for keeping statues up, is that taking them down (a peg or two) would hamper our ability to learn history. If this supposed relationship between statues standing and understanding history holds true, then the opponents of Rhodes Must Fall really do have a point.

But how, exactly, is this argument supposed to work? This argument might be the stronger argument that the statue itself, aesthetically, teaches us history. If we can admire it artistically, we can, somehow, make sense of the past. ‘Look and learn!’ Yet that does sound a little far-fetched: a lesson in beauty is not a lesson in history. So, among those who disagree with the assertion that Rhodes Must Fall, few folks are so crass as to suggest that statues themselves teach us; most folks want us to go ‘Back to Plaque’. Perhaps their more moderate argument is that the statue aesthetically attracts one’s attention, an attention which is then drawn somehow to the plaque, which then helps us somehow to understand.

There seems to be both a conservative and a revisionist ‘Back to Plaque’ argument. The conservative argument is that colonial plaques, which accompany or somehow annotate colonial statues, act as school textbooks. Yet colonial plaques are partial statements made by the powerful, and for that reason, suspect. Consequently, the revisionist argument is that, although colonial plaques don’t accurately teach us, post-colonial plaques do. So we should, they say, ‘retain and explain’, with the addition of a supposedly post-colonial plaque.

Yet, I think we need to stop being so reliant on a little piece of writing that sits like a stain on a rotting tooth. For, be they colonial or post-colonial, plaques don’t solve the problem. And our problem is, and always has been, the pedestal in public space. No amount of contextualisation will detract from glorification. The unequal relationship between a statue on high, looming over us, who labour under it, down below, cannot be critically analysed by the mere addition of a plaque, post-colonial or no, that leaves the unequal relationship intact. This is, I take it, part of what Rhodes Must Fall in Oxford meant when, in 2015, it taught us that *Critical Analysis Ain’t Written On Plaques*.

How do we take this lesson that Rhodes Must Fall has taught us and apply it to Britain’s Anti-Slavery Statues? Frustratingly, when it comes to explaining Britain’s Anti-Slavery Statues, plaques
are all we have—at least in public space. And, when it comes to the plaques on these national memorials to abolition, Rhodes Must Fall was right. These plaques are unreliable and their unreliability is a key counter-example to the ‘Back to Plaque’ argument. Let’s, together, read those plaques to try to understand the hidden histories these hidden statues hide.

In addition to the plaque that now marks the spot on which it used to stand in Parliament Square, the Buxton Memorial Fountain has been explained by as many as four plaques: an original plaque, which has been removed, and then, since the sculpture’s re-erection in Victoria Tower Gardens, three additional plaques: two in the twentieth century, one more in the twenty first. Consider the two plaques of the Twentieth Century. The 1957 plaque reads as follows:

Erected in 1835 / by Charles Buxton M.P. / in commemoration of / the emancipation of slaves in 1834 / and in memory of his father / Sir T. Fowell Buxton / and those associated with him / Wilberforce, Clarkson, Macaulay, Brougham / Dr Lushington and others.

Now take the 1990 plaque; it reads as follows: ‘This plaque / commemorates the / 150th anniversary of / The Anti-Slavery Society / 1839-1989’. There are two things to comment upon, in relation to these two plaques: the Lie and the Gap.

First, the Lie. The Buxton Memorial was not erected in 1835. That is a barefaced lie. The correct date was engraved on the original plaque, which read as follows:

This fountain is intended as a memorial of those members of Parliament who, with Mr. Wilberforce, advocated the abolition of the British slave trade, achieved in 1807; and of those members of Parliament who, with Sir T. Fowell Buxton, advocated the emancipation of the slaves throughout the British dominions, achieved in 1834. It was designed and built, by Charles Buxton, M.P., in 1865, the year of the final extinction of the slave trade and of the abolition of slavery in the United States.

Presumably, they knew, in 1957, when they engraved the lie on the plaque, that the sculpture was erected in 1865. So why backdate the plaque thirty years? Why lie? This retrospective rewriting of history was a deliberate attempt, I argue, to make this monument appear to be the immediate and, therefore, the most important monument to British Anti-Slavery. Indeed to make it appear to be the only monument to British Anti-Slavery. That this is so, is clear from The Gap. The two twentieth century plaques, taken together, constitute a gap, 1835 to 1839: what exactly happened between
1835, the latest date on the 1957 plaque, and 1839, the earliest date on the 1990 plaque? Together, these two plaques on the Buxton Memorial Fountain, set up, establish, constitute a Gap in official British memory of Anti-Slavery. If we want to know what Britain’s Anti-Slavery statues are hiding, we have to uncover, recover, reconstruct the truth of what happened during That Gap.

What happened was British Negro Apprenticeship. “British Negro what?” I hear you say? And you could be forgiven for your ignorance. For this is that part of British Anti-Slavery that didn’t make it into the 2007 WilberFarce celebrations. Funny that. The unique invention of Britain, this is that part of Slavery on which even Tony Sewell wouldn’t dare put a positive spin. The practical purpose of The Gap is to erase from British collective consciousness any memory either of British Negro Apprenticeship or of its Abolition.

Let’s begin our demystification of The Gap, by examining its upper limit. 1839. This is the year, we are told, by the 1990 plaque, that the Anti-Slavery Society began. But which Anti-Slavery Society? A lot of very different organisations have gone by the name ‘Anti-Slavery Society’ and, most of the time, this hasn’t been the organisation’s real name, but rather a handy shorthand used to refer quickly and easily to the organisation, either by members of the organisation itself, or by historians who later write about it.

The full name of the Anti-Slavery Society that was founded in 1839 was the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. Despite the fact that a plaque commemorating its 150th anniversary is now cemented onto the Buxton Memorial, the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society had nothing to do with Thomas Fowell Buxton. Disgracefully, even the website of Antislavery International, which is what the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society is called today, erroneously attributes the 1839 organisation to Thomas Fowell Buxton. How can an organisation know where it’s going, if it doesn’t even know where it’s coming from? It came from Joseph Sturge.

In what follows, to make my argument clearer, more compelling, and because the monuments themselves are stated in these terms, I shall talk about two men. Thomas Fowell Buxton and Joseph Sturge. However, please hold in mind, that always, what I am really talking about, is two movements: both of which taking place during the British revolutionary decade of the 1830s. These two men merely represent these two movements.

The Buxton Movement began in 1823 with a so-called Anti-Slavery Society, which was, in reality, called the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British
Dominions. That gradualist organisation scaled back its activities after 1834 and was dissolved entirely in March 1839. In June 1839, Buxton set up a new organisation, which was never referred to as the Anti-Slavery Society. Its shorthand name was the Africa Civilization Society and its longer, official name was The Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and for the Civilization of Africa. The object of Buxton’s organisation, which some have argued lit the match of the fire that colonised the continent of Africa, was ‘To make the Africans acquainted with the inexhaustible riches of their own soil [and] convince them, moreover, of the immeasurable superiority of agriculture and innocent commerce, even in point of profit, over the Slave Trade […]’.

The Sturge Movement was different. It began in 1831 as an offshoot of the Buxton organisation and was called the Agency Committee. Upon gaining its independence from the Buxton organisation in 1832, it renamed itself the Agency Anti-Slavery Society, and, in 1834, renamed itself again as the British and Foreign Society for the Universal Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade. This Universal Abolition Society, as it was known for short, fell apart in 1836, but, in 1837, Sturge reorganised what was left of it as the Central Negro Emancipation Committee, and, Sturge reorganised that, in April 1839, as the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society—the very Anti-Slavery Society whose 150th anniversary is commemorated on the Buxton Memorial plaque. Yet, unlike Buxton’s Africa Civilisation Society, which was focused on mobilising the military to stop the so-called Slave-Trade, and to support making profits, by civilising savages, the ‘fundamental principle’ of Sturge’s Anti-Slavery Society was ‘That so long as slavery exists there is no reasonable prospect of the annihilation of the slave-trade’.

Sturge was about abolishing slavery, not the so-called slave-trade, which was, at best secondary and dependent upon a primary and prior abolition of slavery. Buxton so disagreed with this approach, that, in 1839, he kept his Africa Civilisation Society separate from Sturge’s Anti-Slavery Society. ‘Our friend Joseph Sturge is somewhat restive about my Slave Trade views; won’t go along with me,’ said Buxton arrogantly, ‘No matter; he’ll take his own line, and nevertheless the truth is preached, and therein I will rejoice’. Sturge attributed the distinctiveness of their two approaches to a longstanding argument among white British activists that had waged since the 1780s. Take a look at Benjamin Robert Haydon’s 1841 painting, hanging in the National Portrait Gallery in London, of the first-ever World Anti-Slavery Convention, organised, of course, by Sturge’s 1839 Anti-Slavery Society. It depicts Thomas Clarkson, the so-called father of the anti-slave-trade campaign, anointing Joseph Sturge as his successor. Yet, Sturge himself, in 1839, publicly claimed a different inheritance. While he was too diplomatic to disparage Clarkson personally, he nevertheless claimed that his anti-slavery campaign came, in fact, from Granville Sharp.
Sturge explained his position in a letter to the *British Emancipator*—the newspaper that his Central Negro Emancipation Committee had set up:

In Clarkson’s *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* it is stated that, at a meeting of the first committee which was formed, it was a matter discussed, whether the abolition of slavery or the slave-trade should be first attempted. The conclusion by the majority appears to have been, that, if the slave-trade could be destroyed, slavery would ultimately become extinct. Granville Sharp is understood to have differed from this view of the subject, and to have thought that the abolition of slavery itself should have been the direct object attempted. I believe he held this opinion till the time of his death, and that two or three of his distinguished co-adjutors afterwards admitted the correctness of his views. [...] The contemplation of these facts may induce us to consider whether the course we have been pursuing is the right one, and if we have not hitherto been attacking the system by attempting to cut off some of its branches, rather than by laying the axe to its root. For my own part, I am strongly persuaded of the correctness of the conclusion to which Granville Sharp so early arrived, that to destroy slavery is the only means to extinguish the slave-trade.

Thus spoke Sturge. So it is strange indeed, not merely that a plaque commemorating the truly Anti-Slavery Society of 1839 is attached not to the anti-slavery Sturge Memorial, but rather to the anti-slave-trade Buxton Memorial, but moreover, more startlingly, that the most well publicised way in which the Sturge Memorial has been used to teach history, in recent years, has associated Sturge with the very anti-slave trade campaign that he rejected and repudiated. Following the restoration and rededication of the Sturge Memorial in Spring 2007, the following announcement about a ‘March for Justice and Family Discovery Day’ was made on the webpages of Birmingham City Council, by an organisation calling itself A Shared History, A Shared Future:

On 1 August 1838, Joseph Sturge led a march against slavery from the Town Hall. On 1 August 2007 we marched from St Martin’s Church, [in the] Bullring to the Town Hall, led by an actor playing Olaudah Equiano and Joseph Sturge, the great, great nephew of the Joseph who had also campaigned in Birmingham against slavery 200 years ago.

The website goes on to declare, oh so proudly, that ‘This was the best event in the year of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slave trading’.
Both the 2007 Birmingham Children’s March and the 1838 Birmingham Children’s March boasted and brought onto the streets, several thousands of children. A veritable education in political demonstration. But that’s where the similarity ends. As an educational re-enactment, the 2007 March was a failure: occurring, as it did, on the wrong date, in the wrong direction, and towards the wrong destination. I’ll return to the direction and destination, towards the end. But, for now, reflect on the fact that, in 2007, Birmingham hosted a 200th year anniversary of an event that occurred in 1838. This was not just an ignorance of maths, but a denial of history. And reflect further on the fact that, not only did Sturge fundamentally disagree with the movement that resulted in the 1807 abolition of the so-called slave trade, an abolition whose bicentenary the 2007 Birmingham Children’s March commemorates, but also that, in 1807, Joseph Sturge was fourteen years old. He was a mere child himself! What sort of learning outcomes, what critical analyses, what lessons in history, did the expensive restoration and rededication of the statue of Sturge lead to, for children in 2007? Academic curiosity and politicised memory have been exhausted by our collective fixation on the twenty-year-long British campaign of 1787 to 1807. Why are we so obsessed with the British abolition of the so-called slave trade? Why is that what we teach to our children, when Sturge taught us that what really mattered was the British abolition of slavery?

So, now we see how Buxton and Sturge differed at the end of The Gap, in 1839, how did they differ during the Gap, between 1835 and 1838? As Professor Catherine Hall puts it, ‘The campaign over apprenticeship between 1835–[ and 183]8 was effectively led from Birmingham, with the longtime activist Joseph Sturge in the forefront’.

‘Both Negroes & Planters are in 1836’, pronounced Buxton over-confidently, ‘in much better humour than in 1834 & 1835’. Thus, when Buxton’s 1836 Parliamentary Select Committee failed to find any fault, whatsoever, with British Negro Apprenticeship, Sturge, who disagreed, personally funded, for him and three Quaker Friends, an unofficial fact-finding tour of the British Caribbean. In his letter to Sturge, a week before Sturge’s departure, Buxton wrote, ‘I have thought, I confess, that both of you took rather too gloomy a view of the state of things in the Colonies & that, tho’ many of the Negroes are greatly oppressed, the mass of them are much better off than during the time of Slavery’. After six months in the British West Indies, most of it spent touring Jamaica, Sturge returned to Britain, in May 1837, with evidence condemning the System: testimonies taken from British Negro Apprentices, which Sturge harnessed, to bypass Parliament, launching a public, popular, grass-roots campaign. Buxton did not join the new movement: ‘I cannot perceive it my duty to join you in [...] the efforts you are making this day’.
This did not bode well and, by November 1837, there was a monumental showdown between Buxton and Sturge, what Buxton described as ‘a grand rumpus on the Anti-Slavery Body’, with recriminations about what Buxton, as principal parliamentary representative of the movement, had wrongly agreed to, on the movement’s behalf. On this occasion, Sturge ‘picked out every point & every occasion in which [Buxton] had acted against [Sturge’s] views & the will of the Delegates & and called this a history of [Buxton’s] Anti-Slavery Course’. Sturge said to Buxton ‘you acted against the recorded pledge of the Delegates that they would grant no compensation & if you had stood firm they [the enslavers] would have got none’. ‘What right had they’, Buxton replied, ‘to expect that I would follow their opinion when I thought it wrong. I protest I would rather sweep the streets than enter Parliament pledged to do just what they bid me’.

Remember that Civil Service tweet about a debt so large the British taxpayer only paid it all off in 2015? That, the debt, not the tweet, was Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton. It was he who sold us down the river, he who made a deal with the devil, he who put a price on our heads. A loan of £15 million pounds at the start of the negotiation. A grant of £20 million pounds when Buxton closed the deal. Buxton thought he’d got a bargain: ‘Were they not cheap at the price of 20 millions’. Sturge said ‘No’. In his letter of resignation from Buxton’s Anti-Slavery Society, Sturge accused Buxton of ‘sacrific[ing] principle to worldly expediency’. ‘I can no longer [declared Sturge] satisfactorily cooperate with those [and he meant Buxton] who appear to me to act upon the principle that the end sanctifies the means’. As late as 19 February 1838, in a letter yet again politely refusing an invitation to participate in Sturge’s anti-apprenticeship campaign, Buxton criticised what he called ‘the peculiar prominence that is given to the abolition of the apprenticeship’. Buxton just didn’t get it. But by May 20 of 1838, in another private letter, Buxton finally admitted ‘that Sturge and that party, whom we thought all in the wrong, are proved to be all in the right’.

So far we’ve seen that The Gap hides how Buxton was on the wrong side of the great question whether to abolish the so-called slave trade or abolish slavery. The Gap hides how Buxton was on the wrong side of the great question whether to compensate enslavers or abolish British Negro Apprenticeship. But, dear listener, The Gap hides something even more explosive. The Gap hides how Buxton was on the wrong side of the great question whether to abolish the police. Buxton wouldn’t free us without them; Sturge thought our freedom was precisely our freedom from them.

According to his son, Charles, Thomas Fowell Buxton ‘believed that a good police and kind treatment would suffice to prevent those “frightful calamities,” (the result of such an act [of
abolition) which Sir Robert Peel “shuddered to contemplate”. As is clear from this statement, Buxton, in his arguments in Parliament, saw himself as in conversation with, as in debate with, Peel. As responding, principally, to Peel. This is not surprising, for, during The Gap, Peel was the Leader of the Opposition, by which, yes, I mean he was the leader in Parliament of Her Majesty’s Official Opposition to the Government, but also that he led, during The Gap, the opposition to abolition. And this should be no surprise, because what, during The Gap, was on the agenda for abolition, was British Negro Apprenticeship. And because British Negro Apprenticeship was nothing more than a set of regulations designed to Police.

In order to avoid accusations from Peel that he was encouraging enslaved people to rise up in insurrection, Buxton aligned himself with the inventor of the Metropolitan Police: ‘The object which I hold distinctly in view is this,’ announced Buxton, in 1832, ‘Emancipation as immediate as can be made compatible with the personal safety of all classes,’ by which Buxton meant ‘the instant adoption of those Police Regulations which are necessary to secure a peaceable liberation of our slaves’. Buxton summed up his position as follows: ‘If the emancipation of slaves were in my power, I could not dare to accomplish it without previous Police Regulations’.

By contrast, Sturge and his fellow activists had, since the Compensation Act negotiated by Buxton, devoted themselves to the project of building homes and communities for what William Knibb had described as ‘the houseless negro’. By 1839, the ‘free negro 26 villages’ they had established were, they thought, a success. According to the Baptist Missionary Herald, speaking of Sligoville, a village situated between Spanish Town and Kingston, in Jamaica, ‘peace is so well preserved that policemen and constables are unknown to the community.’ Similarly, according to the final page, indeed, according to the index, of Sturge’s newspaper, the British Emancipator, (a rival newspaper had been set up by Buxton) ‘Police, we have none, and need none, in Jamaica’. There was no need of police, in post-emancipation communities, set up by Sturge. Joseph Sturge dared to dream of a world without state police. That is why they hide his statue. That is why you’ve probably never heard, before now, of his name.

Buxton eventually came round to Sturge’s opinion of Police Regulations, just as he eventually came round to Sturge’s opinion of Apprenticeship (but not to Sturge’s opinion of Compensation). But he lagged behind. And, because, as principle representative of the anti-slavery campaign in parliament, he had the power to direct the course of the campaign, his decisions delayed our liberation. By 1835, Buxton now believed that Police Regulations were the greatest threat to post-emancipation freedom. But, by then, it was too late. Because Buxton had used his power to
negotiate a deal that imposed upon African-descended people in the British Empire the most extraordinary of all Police Regulations. These were the regulations that policed behaviour in the post-emancipation workplace.

Towards the end of The Gap, Robert Peel commented that ‘He did not think the Imperial Parliament ought to legislate on all the details connected with the Government of the colonies, the details ought to be left to the Colonial Legislatures’. This is how it was with British Negro Apprenticeship. For Apprenticeship, made law by the Imperial Parliament in London, was like the straight-edged pieces of a jigsaw: when fitted together, they give a frame, an outline, a border to the finished product. But the rest of the jigsaw was left to the Colonial Governments, like the Jamaica House of Assembly, to fill in. They filled the Apprenticeship jigsaw in with Police Regulations. The Imperial lawmakers created the skeleton status of ‘British Negro Apprentice’, but deliberately left it to the Colonial lawmakers to add flesh to the bare bones. And that flesh was Police Regulations.

In doing this, the Colonial Governments were merely doing what they had been told. For the so-called Emancipation Act that Buxton negotiated specified that ‘nothing, in this Act contained, doth or shall extend to exempt any apprenticed Labourer, in any of the said Colonies, from the Operation of any Law or Police Regulation’ and that ‘it is also necessary, for the Preservation of Peace throughout the said Colonies, that proper Regulations [read: police regulations] should be framed and established for the Maintenance of Order and good Discipline amongst the said apprenticed Labourers’. The so-called 1833 British Abolition Act was in fact a Licence to Police. So it was a bit rich, for the Johnny-cum-lately Buxton, to start positioning himself against Police Regulations, for it was his deal that ushered in a new post-emancipation Police order.

In May 1838, when it really mattered, and when the power to abolish was in his hands, the Leader of the Opposition, Robert Peel refused ‘to put an abrupt and immediate termination to the state of apprenticeship without any preparatory measures’. By ‘preparatory measures’, Peel meant ‘police regulations’ and it is these preparatory police regulations that, two months later, even on the day Apprenticeship was abolished, 1st August 1838, a day supposedly for celebration, that the Sturge Movement warned were the new faces of slavery. ‘[W]e would carefully warn our friends’, cautioned the Dublin Anti-Slavery Society

against the belief that all which is necessary to be done has been already accomplished for the freedom of the negro; on the contrary, we have reason to fear that attempts will be
made by the enactment of oppressive vagrant and police laws, and by other insidious means, to drag back the negroes into a state of bondage, under the semblance of liberty.

Less than a month after ‘Full Freedom’ had been won, the Birmingham Anti-Slavery Society announced that it had ‘heard with the greatest alarm that some of the Local Legislatures in the West India Colonies have simultaneously with the Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship, enacted various Police and Vagrant Laws, which in effect perpetuate Slavery’.

So not only on Slavery and Slave Trade, not only on Compensation and Apprenticeship, but also, most crucially, on Police Regulations, Buxton and Sturge stood apart, stood for different principles, one stood for the Establishment; the other stood for us. And this is what the National Curriculum in History failed to teach you, that there were two, very different, white British Anti-Slavery Movements, and, Buxton and Sturge stand as two, very different, models of wealthy white male ally. Even though—because on some issues they could, or had to—they worked together, they were working for very different things, and this took them in diverging directions. In 1835, Sturge told Buxton ‘It is evident our views so widely differ[,] it is not probable a farther correspondence would lead to a satisfactory result’.

In fact, there was little love lost, between Buxton and Sturge. According to the British Emancipator, ‘The first of August 1838 will be handed down to posterity as being marked by events, perhaps, more important, and more deeply interesting, than any that have yet been recorded in the pages of colonial history’. But Buxton ‘received no invitation to attend the Meeting at Birmingham’, which was, observes Professor Alex Tyrrell, ‘[t]he principal celebration in Britain’ of the end of the Apprenticeship. Sturge said ‘he believed it was owing to the misdirection of a letter they had been deprived of [Buxton’s] company’. Was Buxton uninvited, or was he too embarrassed to show his face? In letters to his family, Buxton bemoaned ‘the ingratitude and vanity of the Sturgeites towards me’. Jealously, Buxton claimed Sturge ‘had a dash of ambition to be the Anti-Slavery Party’ and, in these egotistic efforts to oust Buxton from his imagined throne, Sturge had, Buxton said, ‘blackened my character’. And, consequently, the Buxton children did not like Sturge: they hated his guts. Edward Buxton had condemned the things Sturge had ‘said against my father’ as ‘dissembling’, remarking ‘how shabby he thought [Sturge’s] conduct’. Priscilla, Buxton’s eldest child and, according to a family friend, ‘his secretary, his librarian, his comforter, and often ... his adviser and guide’, had been less discreet: denouncing Sturge as ‘that obstinate good little Dog’. This is the frame of mind Charles Buxton brought to commissioning a memorial to the memory of his father.
Although the Buxton Memorial was constructed between 1865 and 1866, it was not conceived, as the website of Historic England suggests, ‘in connection with the abolition of slavery in America at that date’. For the 1865 Thirteenth Amendment and 1863 Emancipation Proclamation were unexpected events, wholly unrelated to the reasons why those who had commissioned the sculpture had done so. No: it was conceived nearly eight years prior, in August 1859, in the wake of the death, that May, of Joseph Sturge. Thomas Fowell Buxton had died back in 1845, but no-one had suggested, then, or since, that a memorial be erected in his honour. Doubtless it is partly for this reason that his son, Charles, published his father’s memoirs, in 1848, and a defence of his father’s abolitionist work, in 1859.

Imagine, then, his shock, when he received, in July 1859, from the newly formed Sturge Memorial Committee, one of several ‘communications […] addressed to such persons in the metropolis and in the provinces as may be likely join the movement’, to erect a statue to his father’s enemy. It was on. This was a Race. A race to write the history of British Anti-Slavery. And to write it in stone. Charles immediately began to put pressure upon the recently established Drinking Fountain Association to front his approach to the Government for a new national monument. In August 1859, the Secretary of the Drinking Fountain Association reported an initial interview

with C[harles] Buxton Esq[u]re M.P. and to having inspected the proposed site for [a] Fountain near the houses of Parliament, and further that the architect engaged by Mr. Buxton was directed to forward the plans to the Secretary, who, on receipt of which was required to make application to the authorities having control over the site.

The Drinking Fountain Association was a supposedly public and democratic front, for Buxton’s private and personal desire to glorify his father. For, whereas the Sturge Memorial would be paid for by public subscription, demonstrating Sturge’s broad, diverse, and popular appeal, ‘the entire expense of [the Buxton Memorial would be] defrayed by’ Buxton’s son. Clearly, the public didn’t know what was what. Clearly, they needed to be taught exactly whom they should be celebrating, as the emancipator of the British slave. And Charles Buxton was single-handedly going to teach them. So he ploughed the profits from the memoirs he had published into a cherry on the cake of his devotion to Daddy.

But if we have reason to suspect the sincerity of the motivations of those who commissioned the Buxton Memorial, we also have reasons to criticise the motivations of those who commissioned
the Memorial to Sturge. The fact of the matter is that Sturge would likely have disapproved of the actions of the Sturge Memorial Committee. Even as he unveiled the statue, in June 1862, George Dawson remarked that ‘The result was one of the first statues that was ever erected to a Quaker. Whether George Fox, looking down [...] would approve of a statue raised to a Quaker was another thing’. Dawson was referring to Fox, the founder of the Society of Friends, who, in 1670, had written a pamphlet, entitled ‘A Hammer To Break Down All Invented Images’. In this work, Fox had instructed all Quakers to ‘pluck down your Images’. Whether Sturge would have agreed with Fox, that Quakers should ‘pluck them out of your Houses’ is another question. For Harriet Beecher Stowe, who visited Birmingham, tells us that, when she dined at the home of Sturge’s brother, she ‘noticed a full-length engraving of Joseph Sturge[...] represented as standing with his hand placed protectingly on the head of a black child’.

But it is this reference to his relationship with Black children that reveals to us what Joseph Sturge would have wanted. When, on 24 August 1859, the Sturge Memorial Committee formally chose to erect a statue, they did so in response to a speech by the Reverend John Angel James, who argued that, ‘As to the way in which they should express their regard for the memory of Mr. Sturge, he [Rev. James] should certainly on the whole prefer the erection of a public institution which would be the means of instructing the ignorant, reclaiming the vicious, feeding the hungry, or healing the sick’. The commissioners knew full well that a school, a half-way house, a soup kitchen, or a hospital would be a memorial more in keeping with Sturge’s principles. Indeed, ‘some gentlemen not present [at the meeting] had urged upon the provisional committee [...] the suggestion that the memorial should assume the shape of an additional wing to the General Hospital’. Disappointingly, we are told that the Committee ‘carefully considered the question and finding that, to carry out this proposal would involve about £4,000 [came] to the conclusion that it would be impossible to raise so large a sum, and therefore decided upon a statue and fountain, the cost of which would be about £2,000’.

But the commissioners of the statue were incorrect to assume that they would have to go to the great expense of erecting an entire building from scratch. For Sturge had already built his own memorial in Birmingham. In September 1837, to underpin his Anti-Apprenticeship campaign, Sturge embarked on a project ‘to erect school-houses’ around Jamaica. The Jamaica Education Society went hand in hand with his local Birmingham project, the following year, to memorialise the abolition of British Negro Apprenticeship.
Which brings me back to the Birmingham Children’s March. I said 2007 was the wrong date, but the children were also led in the wrong direction, to the wrong destination. The 2007 Birmingham Children’s March went westward, past High Street shops, culminating at Birmingham Town Hall, where Sturge had held most of his anti-slavery public meetings. By contrast, the 1838 Birmingham Children’s March had begun at the Town Hall and gone eastward, through the Gun-making Quarter, upon which the city’s wealth had been built, and acknowledging the full meaning of the old saying that ‘the price of a Negro was one Birmingham gun’, towards the foundation stone that Sturge would lay of what was to be, and was to endure, as Britain’s first memorial for the abolition of slavery: Birmingham’s Negro Emancipation School-rooms. A brass plaque, now lost or destroyed, once read as follows: ‘The foundation-stone of these School-rooms was laid on Wednesday, the 1st of August, 1838, in commemoration of the abolition of Negro Apprenticeship in the Colonies, by the friend of the negro, the friend of children, and the friend of man, JOSEPH STURGE’.

Britain’s memorial to Black Lives Matter was not a statue, it was a school. But, in the year of the 1951 Festival of Britain, they demolished that school, and the plaque that went with it. Britain’s demolition of Birmingham’s Negro Emancipation School-rooms stands as an ironic metaphor for our collective failure to remember, our wilful failure to teach children, the grounds on which (i.e. the places where, the peoples by whom, and the premises with which) our ancestors actually abolished—to the extent that they did abolish—colonial slavery. Will the 2021 Festival of Brexit similarly suppress this story of abolition? What do you call a society that props up statues, yet topples schools? We can’t simply go ‘Back to Plaque’, because Plaques don’t stay. Plaques lead astray. We need not statues, but schools. Schools, not statues, should be the destination of children’s journeys. Statues get in the way, block out the light. Joseph Sturge would have agreed with Audre Lorde that ‘we do not want great marble statues between our children’s eyes and their sun’.