

Bristol Black Archives Partnership text – Our Museum

Me, We – Making History

When I joined Bristol Record Office in 2004, there was just one set of images featuring an African-Caribbean family despite the treasure trove of archival material spanning over 800 years. For years the history of black and minority ethnic people in the city had been under-recorded and was even in danger of being lost forever. These images were striking with interesting stories behind them so they attracted interest. African-Caribbean people wanted to explore their history and not exclusively the transatlantic slave trade, while others came across this aspect of the city's shared history too infrequently. Paul Stephenson, a well-known activist and key spokesperson for the successful black-led Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963 (which lifted the colour bar to employment on Bristol buses), deposited his own personal archives for safekeeping in 2005 and was galvanised to collect material relating to the African-Caribbean community. Working with Paul enhanced an invitation to community groups and individuals, the two Universities, Bristol City Council and the Lord Lieutenant to discuss the feasibility of working together at a meeting in November 2005 and as a result the Bristol Black Archives Partnership (BBAP) was born.

This meeting set up a steering group for Jan 2006, brilliantly chaired by Rob Mitchell a dynamic filmmaker from the community, which continued to meet monthly until late 2008 and then sporadically afterwards. Rob's role as Chair, Paul's role as Patron (to use his own words) and the inclusion of other African-Caribbean people from the outset created a sense of ownership and empowerment and fostered trust at an early stage. Key to the success of the partnership was the strong communication links (lots of emails were exchanged between meetings and minutes were sent to those unable to attend meetings), the transparency and opportunities for people to express their views and to feel informed. No major decisions were acted upon without the consent of the steering group.

To gauge how much support there was in the wider community before applying for funding we created a calendar to celebrate local African-Caribbean achievers, past and present, which would promote the initiative, act as an educational tool and inspire collecting. A panel group nominated and selected people from different walks of life such as politics, education and science, so it was a useful vehicle for breaking stereotypes. We called the calendar "Me, We" (boxer Muhammad Ali's shortest poem) to show how every person has a unique identity but is connected to a community, a locality and the wider community. We didn't want to ghettoize Black history but to create an integrated resource at the Record Office to protect and make accessible a more inclusive history. With sponsorship, we distributed 6,000 copies for free and people emailed to say how proud they were to see such positive representation. We took a couple of irate calls from people disappointed certain people were not featured but took this as a positive sign that people were engaging and a chance to involve them in future. Due to popular demand, we produced a second for 2008, and the community, completely under their own initiative, produced a third and fourth for 2009 and 2010.

Obtaining £50,000 from Heritage Lottery, we were able to develop the initiative and to recruit a project officer (who was from the community) to work with me to coordinate the project. My role was chosen and supported by the steering group and they even decided that I should be given the title 'project manager' after originally being described as 'joint convenor' with Paul. Following the official launch by veteran politician Tony Benn, former Bristol East MP who supported the Bristol Bus Boycott, BBAP (pronounced B-Bap) teamed up with Bristol's Children and Young People's Services to create a learning resource for every school in Bristol, *Black Bristolians: People Who Make a Difference*. This was based on consultation with young people who wanted to learn about history that was relevant to them and people they could look up to as role models. Hyacinth Hall MBE, Bristol's first black headteacher and a steering group member said, "I think BBAP is absolutely fantastic. I see that we are at last doing something, which will be of tremendous help to the young generation. They are able to learn about what happened in the past and what their parents and grandparents have done".

In addition to the core mission of collecting material from individuals and organisations like St Paul's Carnival, Bristol West Indian Cricket Club and the legendary Bamboo Club, BBAP hosted a *My Legacy Event* at the Malcolm X Centre in St Paul's facilitated by DJ Lioness (a local D.J) and our chair Rob for people to explore their family history. This event launched a *My Legacy Journal* for people to record their own personal histories and later we created a *Guide to African-Caribbean Sources in Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives* to help people with their research. We also set up an exhibition *The Black Presence in Bristol* and a touring exhibition while the collected material supported other local ventures e.g. by community filmmakers, Operation Black Vote and Job Centre Plus, as well as national exhibitions by the V & A, Imperial War Museum and Central Government. Trevor Phillips (then Chair of the Commission for Equalities & Human Rights) was so impressed by his own visit to the Bristol Black Archives Partnership that he deposited tapes and scripts produced for the TV series *Windrush* and then made a follow-up visit a year later. BBAP also presented to Lord Boateng (first black cabinet minister who had worked in Bristol) and David Lammy M.P. (then Culture Minister) and visited 10 Downing Street as part of the commemorations for the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 2007. This was largely helped because of Paul Stephenson's role as BBAP Patron and a hero to many.

Working together meant that communities, archives/museums and other sectors were able to share our experiences, ideas, energy and skills to make a lasting difference. From the archives/museum perspective, we were flexible in terms of what times and venues were convenient for the steering group to meet. We also encouraged democratic decision-making because people should be treated with respect and their contribution recognised and valued. We constantly have to think, What is it for? Who is it for? Museums can lose the trust and cooperation of people if they dictate or patronise, and we'll end up not being able to produce anything meaningful and relevant for people. The material proved to be a unique bank of resources for the development of Bristol's newest museum, M Shed, and the BBAP initiative was certainly helped by having the support of service managers from the beginning.

As a grassroots initiative supported by Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives service and others, the final word should go to Paul Stephenson who has since become an OBE and first black freeman of the city:

"Our work ensures that the achievements and experiences of people of African descent are not only fully recognised but also preserved as a legacy for future generations. We owe it to our children."