

NEWS RELEASE

Lottery Fund rejects Bristol application in support of a major exhibition to commemorate the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade

The regional committee of the Heritage Lottery Fund has rejected an application from the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum in Bristol for funding to support a £1million exhibition, scheduled for 2007, to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the passing of an Act of Parliament in 1807 to officially abolish the slave trade.

The Museum had responded to a national request from government departments for heritage and community-based organisations to apply for funding for projects inspired by the 1807 abolition.

The Director of the Museum, Dr Gareth Griffiths says: "We regard this decision as incomprehensible given that the Government and the Heritage Lottery Fund have consistently placed such importance on this anniversary. We remain committed to the exhibition and will fight this decision".

Bristol is now the only city in Britain with significant links to the transatlantic slave trade not to have major government funding to support plans to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade in 2007.

Paul Stephenson, Honorary President of Bristol's West Indian Parents and Friends Association: "The Heritage Lottery Fund is ignoring the huge educational value of the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum's plans to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. To many of the direct descendants of those involved in the trade, those of African/Caribbean origin living and working in Bristol, this will be seen as a betrayal of their history and that of their children yet unborn. The Lottery Fund should reconsider the negative impact of their decision to reject the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum's application".

Councillor Simon Cook, Deputy Leader of Bristol City Council, announced: "We are very disappointed by this decision. The 2007 commemoration of the abolition of slavery - and this exhibition in particular - is a key part of the 2008 promise that we made when we bid for Capital of Culture. We have delivered everything that we said that we would do so far. We are determined to continue, and the Bristol Cultural

Development Partnership will do all that it can to support this work, but it will be harder to do so without this lottery support.”

The Trade and the passing of the 1807 Abolition Act has had enormous consequences ever since for Bristol, Britain and the rest of the world.

- Between 1450 and 1850 over 10 million Africans were forcibly transported across the Atlantic Ocean – with another 10 million perishing in the process of capture.
- British ships carried over 3 million Africans to slavery in the Americas between 1662 and 1807.
- Over 2000 slave voyages left Bristol alone between 1698 and 1807, by which time over 60% of the city’s trade was directly related to slavery.
- Britain’s official involvement in the transatlantic slave trade was ended in 1807 after years of protest by the Abolitionist movement.

Working in partnership with local community groups, the £1million exhibition is scheduled to break new ground by focusing on the legacy of the slave trade and its abolition. It is also designed to show how black and white activists alike campaigned to abolish the trade in human beings, contributing to what became the world’s first major mass political movement.

The Trustees of the Museum are to appeal against the decision, both to the regional and national committees of the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Museum remains committed to securing support to enable delivery of its proposed exhibition, and an associated events’ programme, to provide an appropriate way of commemorating the 1807 abolition.

Leading academics such as Dr Richard Drayton of the University of Cambridge; Professor David Richardson, Director-Designate of the of Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation, University of Hull; Professor Stephen Howe of the University of Bristol; Dr Cecily Jones of the University of Warwick; Dr Jean Besson of the University of London; Madge Dresser of the University of the West of England and Professor Peter Marshall, Professor Emeritus of Kings College have condemned the lottery fund’s decision.

The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum is an independent museum which presents the history and legacy of Britain’s overseas’ empire. It was nominated as ‘European Museum of the Year’ in 2004.

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Notes to editor:

For further information contact the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum press office:

Feisal Khalif 0117 925 4980 ext. 204
Lucy Edwards 0117 925 4980 ext.230

feisal.khalif@empiremuseum.co.uk
lucy.edwards@empiremuseum.co.uk

Permission to use the following quotations:

“I am convinced, I am afraid, that the HLF's refusal to support this pioneering exhibition has to do with an attempt to suppress an embarrassing underside of Britain's modern history. For while remembering the humanity and energy of the abolitionists, the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum intended to address fearlessly England's preceding 250 years of slaving, and the persistence of coerced labour and racism after Slavery. If the South West committee of the HLF had African or Caribbean-British members, or indeed any serious historian of the British Empire, it could not have come to this decision.”

Dr Richard Drayton, Senior Lecturer in Imperial History at the University of Cambridge

“The Centre for Caribbean Studies at the University of Warwick is proud of our association with the British Empire & Commonwealth Museum and strongly support its plans to commemorate such an auspicious occasion as the 2007 exhibition. We are therefore shocked and deeply disappointed at the decision not to support the Museum's plans. This will also be of deep dismay to the people of Bristol who have given the plans their support, and we feel the decision will send a worrying message to Bristol's many communities. We believe this to be a wrong and unjust decision and would urge you to reconsider”.

Dr. Cecily Jones

Director of the Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Warwick

“Bristol was Europe's third largest slaving port. To mark the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade without an exhibit on slavery and empire in Bristol is unthinkable.”

Prof. David Richardson, Director-Designate, Wilberforce Institute for the study of Slavery and Emancipation, University of Hull.

“The decision to deny HLF funding to the Bristol British Empire & Commonwealth Museum's exhibition is not only deeply disappointing - it is shocking. It is potentially a disaster for the Museum itself, for all those concerned with history, heritage, public education and community relations in Bristol and the South West, and for the whole Country's plans to commemorate and to learn from this vital episode in our history. The decision is, moreover, angering - in that the reasons given for are it are so thin, so lacking in justification.

Bristol's part in the Atlantic slave trade, and in the battles over its abolition, was an absolutely central one. Slavery and Abolition in their turn are central aspects of the

history of Britain, of the Empire and of today's Commonwealth. Much more than a museum exhibition is at stake. I, with colleagues at the University of Bristol, the University of the West of England and many other educational bodies, had already - in close association with the BECM - been planning an ambitious programme of seminars, public lectures and publications linked to the proposed exhibition. Denial of government funding to the Museum would be a major blow to all these academic and educational efforts. It would also damage community relations in Bristol and beyond, in light of the particular significance these plans have for the region's black population.

There are strong and disturbing indications that a 'hidden' reason for rejection may be the publicly stated views of one of the Museum's major supporters and donors, Sir Jack Hayward. If this is so it is not only improper but also absurd. My own views on British and imperial history, as on political matters generally, are poles apart from Sir Jack's. The scholars and others who act as advisors to, or are active in the work of the Museum and the commemoration plans, span the entire spectrum of political views and of historical interpretation. There is no 'party line'. If anyone associated with the HLF decision thinks there is such a line, and has been influenced in their decision by so thinking, they are not only, again, acting improperly but making a ridiculous mistake."

Professor Stephen Howe

Professor of the history and Cultures of Colonialism

University of Bristol.

"I am dismayed to hear the disappointing and puzzling news that the application by the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol for financial support with their Exhibition planned for 2007 was turned down by the regional committee of the Heritage Lottery Fund. The exhibition planned by the BECM, to commemorate the bicentenary of the passing in 1807 of the Parliamentary Act to abolish the British transatlantic slave trade, is widely supported as part of a coherent national response to mark the anniversary.

In my view (both as an academic who has researched the impact of the slave trade and its abolition on the Caribbean region and as a Jamaican descended from both planters and slaves), the BECM's Draft Exhibition Brief is excellent. It also has sound potential for further development, in collaboration with an Academic Advisory Group, in tackling the complex and challenging issues surrounding the abolition and its legacy in the Americas, Africa and Europe. These issues include the role of the enslaved in effecting the abolition both of the slave trade in 1807 and of slavery itself in 1833-38, and the rebuilding of vibrant cultures that endure in transnational free villages and maroon societies in African-America and in overseas diaspora communities today.

It is inconceivable that Bristol, which was a leading city in Britain's slave trade, should now be placed in the position of reinforcing that history by non-participation of its renowned museum in a national commemoration of the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. I strongly support the BECM's decision to appeal to the HLF for a reconsideration of their important application for an Exhibition in 2007, which would have far-reaching implications for the future of multicultural Britain in the twenty-first century."

Dr Jean Besson

Senior Lecturer in Anthropology

Goldsmiths College, University of London

"The Empire and Commonwealth Museum's proposed 2007 exhibition on the abolition of the British slave trade caught the imagination and support of an unprecedented number of previously unrepresented voices from

Bristol's African-Caribbean and West African population. It also commanded the respect and support of a wide range of academic experts in the field and the interest of the city's wider population. It would be such a shame if Britain's second largest slaving port for much of the eighteenth century did not have an exhibition commemorating such a significant event. The silence would be portentous."

**Madge Dresser, FRHS,
Principal Lecturer,
School of History,
University of the West of England**

"I am deeply disappointed at the HLF's decision not to support the Museum's proposal for a commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. It seems to be based on crass ignorance of and gross insensitivity to what the Museum has achieved and what it stands for. The Museum has built bridges between the ethnic minority communities, especially those in Bristol, those with a proper pride in their own or their families' imperial service and academics who study the subject from many points of view. Through its work all sorts of people can come to an understanding of the role of empire in the past of all of us. Who do the HLF think is better qualified to tackle this issue than the Museum and where they suppose that it is more appropriate for it to be tackled than in Bristol?"

Professor Peter Marshall is Professor Emeritus at King's College, London University

The British Empire & Commonwealth Museum
Clock Tower Yard
Temple Meads
BS1 5QH
www.empiremuseum.co.uk
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