Supporting Anti-racism

A case study from Judges' Lodgings, Lynda Jackson, Museum Manager

Judges' Lodgings Museum is Lancaster's oldest town house and has fine and decorative art collections dating to the 18th century when the city was the country's fourth largest slaving port.

The 2020 anti-racism protests made us reconsider these collections, in particular the Rawlinson portraits and other families who profited from the Transatlantic Slave Trade and West Indies Trade (trading goods grown/produced by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean). Alongside supporting a proposed slavery memorial in the nearby Priory Church, we worked with the newly formed Lancaster Black History group, the church and other local partners on an ACE-funded project 'Facing the Past'. This involved school art and history workshops onsite and a slavery resource pack for teachers alongside community art sessions.

This work is about improving research and interpretation to ensure visitors, staff and volunteers know the full story of our collections. Now the pilot project is complete, we are commissioning portraits of enslaved Africans to hang juxtaposed the existing slavery family portraits and redeveloping the Gillows furniture Gallery onsite. The new portraits are based on real 18th century Black Lancastrians as identified through the 'Runaway Slaves in Britain' database at Glasgow University. We are working in partnership with Lancaster Black History, Lancaster University and the University of Central Lancashire with support from Art Fund Uk, Association of Independent Museums and Regional Furniture Society.

There are a range of views locally and there has been some kickback on social media and questions from volunteers. Our response is that we are telling the full story of the collections based on accurate historic research. We are not removing any heritage – instead reflecting the historic Black presence in the city. My advice is to find brilliant partners and look at ways to bring people along with you through education rather than polarisation.