

A radical, rebel city: What is it about Bristol?

How a tradition of protest, activism, and dissent from history to Black Lives Matter, Kill the Bill or the new frontier of environmentalism continues to define Bristol and its people.

It is an intensely hot Saturday in July and Bristol's annual harbourside festival is in full swing. The city rings with music as thousands of people drink and dance their way through bunting-lined streets.

Not far from the celebrations, a peaceful demonstration is taking place at the site of an empty plinth where the statue of the 17th century slave trader Edward Colston once stood.

The significance of the meeting place doesn't seem to be lost on the crowd, nor on passers-by who stop to take photographs of the site that two years ago found itself at the epicentre of the BLM movement in the UK.

A four-year-old girl, aided by her father, grins as she adds a hand-painted sign with the words "refugees welcome" to the plinth, which is already heavily decorated with banners that read "Not in Our Name" and "Stop the flights to Rwanda".

The speakers fight to be heard over the noise of the festival, which is its 50th celebration of Bristol's maritime heritage - evidence of the city's complex relationship with its colonial past and role in the slave trade.

"This is a city of sanctuary," shouts City Councillor Mohammed Makawi, who came to the UK as a refugee himself in the 1990s. "Let us make the UK a place of sanctuary and show that you are welcome here." The crowd cheers.



Councillor Makawi with Rowland Dye preparing to address the crowd next to the Colston's empty plinth.

Bristol, a historic port city with beautiful cathedrals, Georgian mansions, and an energetic arts and culture scene, has spent the last few years seemingly embroiled in protests, riots and debates concerning racial politics, police powers, and climate justice.

A “buzzing multicultural university city”, with a population of 465,900, according to its tourism website. It was ranked one of the [best places to live in Britain in 2017](#), and in the same year, the [most divided and unequal major city](#) in England and Wales.

These paradoxes have been highlighted under the harsh glare of the media spotlight focused on the city as a place of disorder and intrigue as it struggles to come to terms with its colonial past, alongside an unleashed force of social resistance.

Division has been felt within the city’s social fabric in times of political unrest, yet its population has also come together in times of solidarity. The legacy of this lingers all over the city. Placards lie by walls abandoned from protests past, Extinction Rebellion’s symbol is everywhere, and benches, lampposts, and bins are plastered with graffiti stickers with diverse political agendas.

The cult of Colston

It would also be difficult to ignore Edward Colston’s legacy in the city. A merchant, benefactor of the city and whose role in the Royal African Company ties him to the transportation and enslavement of an estimated 80,000 African people.

His name still lines streets, pubs and schools, even after the recent wave of swift removals of it from buildings and institutions. The Merchant Venturers Society, to which he belonged, still exists and runs schools, parks and charities in the city.

The statue of the controversial figure, erected 174 years after his death, was accompanied by a plaque that reads: “a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city.” A persistent symbol of the Bristol’s troublesome connection to race, it stood high in the centre of the city for 125 years. But not without opposition.

“Frustration and anger had been brewing for a long time,” says Colin Thomas, who traces the first direct confrontation against Colston’s presence in the city to the 1980s. Decades of campaigns and petitions then followed “and still nothing happened”.

Thomas is part of Bristol’s Radical History Group (BRHG), an independent collective that defines itself as a “wider network of footballers, artists, techies, drunks, rioters, publicans, ranters, ravers, academics, Cancan dancers, anarchists, stoners and other ne’r do wells.”

They engage in “history from below” – challenging established narratives and retelling the facets of Bristol’s history long forgotten or ignored by textbooks. Campaigning against Colston for over a decade, they have often fought against the Merchant Venturers Society “who still have an enormous amount of power,” says Thomas, “and have long

defended his legacy in the city". The Society of Merchant Venturers did not respond to a request for an interview.

What acknowledgement is there of Bristol's role in the slave trade? "There's one tiny little plaque commemorating the slave trade and a bridge in memory of a slave who became a servant. But there's virtually nothing," explains Thomas.

"In terms of what's been achieved, it seemed we were making no progress whatsoever," he adds. "And then, suddenly, a dramatic shift happened in public opinion, largely through demonstrations and protests, that finally achieved significant change."

A summer of protest

As anti-racism protests and riots rocked American cities in the summer of 2020 sparked by the murder of George Floyd, it was Bristol that led the charge for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in the UK.

On 7 June 2020, as was typical for generations of protestors before them, the demonstrators gathered on College Green. This time was less typical, as in the distinct moment of a nation-wide lockdown over 10,000 people came out to denounce racism.

"It was such a powerful and moving experience to be there with all those people, coming together for the cause," says Arthur Cauty, a Bristol-based filmmaker who documented the event and went on to achieve critical acclaim with his film *The Felling of Colston*.

"I couldn't have predicted what happened on that day or the significance those actions would wind up having in Bristol and around the world," Cauty adds.

The crowd marched to the city centre where Colston's statue stood, tied ropes around its head and brought it down. From there, they dragged the statue - now covered in eggs, paint and graffiti - a third of a mile to the harbourside and threw it in the water.

The footage of this moment has been seen all over the world, the symbolic act now firmly etched into the memory of many Bristolians. It began a ripple effect of cities questioning why statues, like Colston, had remained standing for so long and re-assessing how we memorialise the past, in what historian David Olusoga has coined the "statue wars".

"I don't think it would have come down any other way."

- Arthur Cauty

For activists, campaigners and history groups like BRHG, this was the end of a long struggle, and yet equally, it was specific to the context in which it came down.

“The catalyst was the BLM protests and all the emotion that comes with it, and probably some amount of frustration at being stuck indoors with lockdown for months, people took matters into their own hands,” explains Cauty.

He believes there was a spontaneity and unpredictability to it. “I don’t think it would have come down any other way.”



*The aftermath of 7 June 2020 BLM protest. The placards were later collected and placed in the Bristol Museum to become part of its ongoing history.
(Wikimedia Commons)*

This is a sentiment echoed by Mike Manson, a local historian and leading member of the Bristol Civic Society. “This is what happens in Bristol when people don’t feel like they’re being listened to. There is a tradition of taking to the streets,” he adds.

Colston fell because the formal routes had been exhausted, and the frustration erupted, Manson explains. “People just thought well this is amazing, this is what needs to be done. It was an illegal act, a desecration of property, but it just felt right.”

Westminster disagreed. Home Secretary Priti Patel referred to the event as “utterly disgraceful” and ordered that “police follow up on that and make sure justice is undertaken”.

Four people out of the 10,000 were prosecuted – they became known as the “Colston Four”. Three men and one woman, aged between 22-33, some of whom were first time activists, were charged with criminal damage over the toppling of the statue.

For months individuals and groups campaigned and fundraised in defence of the group, who came to occupy a complex place in the public’s imagination as both heroes to some and vandals to others.

On 5 January 2022, the Colston Four were acquitted by a jury. Outside the court, elated, they told reporters: “we are proud to be among the many hundreds of Bristolians who removed a slave trader from our streets.”

The verdict was significant and surprising, says Geoffrey Bennet, who covered the trial for the city’s main newspaper, *Bristol Live*. “I personally felt they were guilty of criminal damage but the jury sided with their motives and cleared them of that charge.”

“Their acquittal sparked jubilation from packed onlookers in the public gallery. Their view was: yes, we damaged the statue but we did it with right on our side,” Bennet says.

A divisive case for the city, he explains, its reaction exposing a fragmentation of opinions in the city over what is considered ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and how Bristol defines itself post-Colston.

#WETOPPLEDCOLSTON



**#SupportTheColston4
Statue Topplers On Trial
From Monday 13 December
At Bristol Crown Court**

**Solidarity pickets:
On The 1st Day 8.30 – 10am
...And On Jury Verdict Day
Bring Banners, Placards & Love
Bring Everyone – Bring Solidarity!**

*A poster in support of the Colston Four that was widely circulated before their trial.
(The Bristol Activist)*

Roots of radicalism

Long before the summer of 2020, Bristol was put on the map for its dissent and radicalism. To understand Bristol today, historian Manson explains, you need to appreciate its history.

“The thing about Bristol is that it’s not London. We don’t look to London, we do see ourselves as different,” says Manson. “I think we have that kind of tradition of just pushing the boundaries a little bit. You know the West Country has always had a bit of a hippie vibe, and with that comes a kind of anarchic culture.”

Looking into the city’s past it is easy to find a long and celebrated tradition of protest, even “going back to 1793,” he adds.

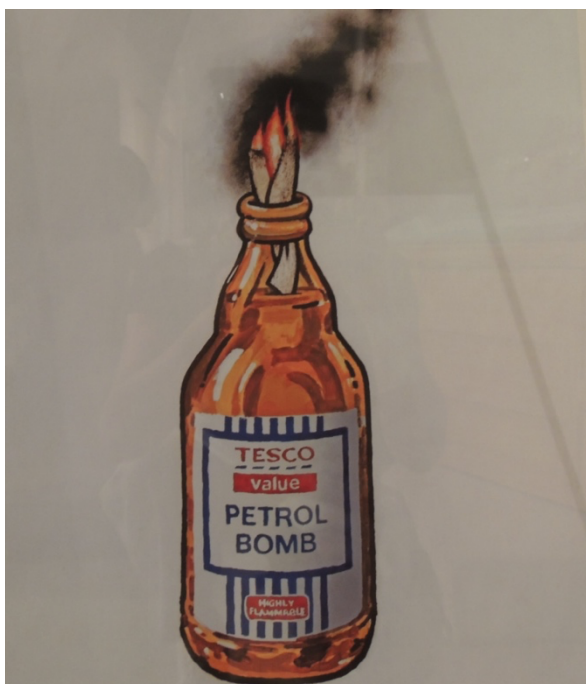
The Bristol Bus Boycott of 1963, led against the Bristol Omnibus Company for their refusal to hire a black bus conductor, started a city-wide boycott of buses by the black community. It was the first demonstration for civil rights in the UK, and is credited with paving the way for the introduction of anti-discrimination laws later in 1968.

“A will to rebel. A will to opposition.”

– Steve Poole

Less than twenty years later and Bristol was back in the spotlight with the St Pauls riots of 1980. One year before the notorious Brixton riots of 1981, a police raid on a black-owned café saw the area erupt into days of rioting against police harassment of black communities.

More recently, the city has faced the infamous Tesco riots of 2011 in Stokes Croft, Occupy Bristol camped out on College Green through the winter of 2011-12, and in 2019 became one of the main battlegrounds of Extinction Rebellion’s ‘summer uprising’.



A print displayed in the Bristol Museum, created by Bristol-raised artist Banksy to raise funds for those arrested after the Tesco riots of 2011.

There is a proudness in the city's display of all these parts of its history at the Bristol M-Shed museum exhibit called "Bristol People". It gives half the room to protests - past and present - celebrating Bristolians predisposition to challenge and dissent.

"I can't say whether it's all connected," says Steve Poole, professor of history at University of West England and director of the Regional History Centre. "But you could argue that Bristol has a long tradition for opposition politics, even going back to the eighteenth century."

The uprisings throughout history have often been class struggles, Poole says, "against the sense that the city has long been controlled by a tightly-knit elite."

Startling divisions and inequality are still seen still in Bristol today. Areas among the 10 per cent most deprived in England border the 10 per cent least deprived, ethnic minorities experience [greater disadvantage than the national average in employment and education](#), and black communities in Bristol face the third highest level of educational inequality across England and Wales.

Those that fight against this and "stand against the mainstream have always become the heroes in Bristol," says Poole. There is an admiration of the "individual maverick that cuts through the shit", reminiscent of the Colston Four today.

This, he believes, is the longer, historical roots of Bristol's rebellious and radical spirit - a kind of "inherited psyche" that has been cultivated and ingrained into the social structure.

"A will to rebel, a will to opposition."

Anger, disorder and riots

On the night of 21 March 2021, the global news agenda turned once again to Bristol. A "Kill the Bill" protest against the introduction of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill (PCSC) had turned violent.

Two parts of the bill were particularly distressing for the protestors - special police powers to stop protests, and with the very recent history of Colston's toppling in mind, sentences of up to 10 years for damage of monuments or statues.

"It began massively peacefully, but it was also really, really busy," says Simon White, a documentary filmmaker covering protests in Bristol. "It became really scary - I'm not going to downplay that. I can't imagine a worse situation to be filming in."

A police van was burned, fireworks set off, windows smashed, and protestors and police injured.



A graffitied police car left in the wake of the first Kill the Bill protest.

Mainstream media told only one story, according to White, “it was painted as some violent hooligans down in Bristol, beating up policeman”. The truth, he says, was far more muddled. “It was a very violent evening on both sides.”

A few days after the event, statements were retracted by police and national newspapers over the scale of injuries officers suffered, “but by that point, the story of what happened that night was already told, and the media cycle had moved on,” says White.

The police were later found by a parliamentary inquiry to have breached “fundamental rights” in their handling of the protest.

Three more Kill the Bill protests followed that week – two of which also turned violent. Small demonstrations then continued on, but “eventually the energy just petered out,” says White. “I know a lot of people that were sort of were like I’m too exhausted to carry on with this you know, it takes a lot out of you.”

Seventeen months later, that effect is still ongoing. “Every time someone goes down, it’s like a ripple through the community here,” says White. “I think it is making people angrier and more likely to dissent as they are seeing the real effects of what the bill is doing.”

As of the end of July, 47 have been charged with offences and 19 jailed for a total of 74 years and 9 months in trials that continue. This includes sentences for riot, the most serious public order offence. According to the [UK Sentencing Council](#), only 40 people were sentenced with ‘riot’ in the decade between 2006-2016.

Geoffrey Bennet, who has been covering the Kill the Bill trials for *Bristol Live*, referred to the sentences imposed for riot as “draconian”, seeing the increasingly punitive measures as a way to send a message to the wider public.

The message was heard strongly and painfully by Tomo Light, who has friends that have been imprisoned or are awaiting trial. His closest friend was sentenced to two and a half years, “obviously I am biased,” he concedes, “but for the amount of violence he

committed – kicking a bottle and hitting a riot shield – it’s a very over the top sentence that will change his whole life.”

Yet, the largest lasting impact of that night, Light says, has been the sensationalism and attention paid to the violence, instead of the reasons behind the protest. “It has turned a lot of people against it, and now there isn’t much support for those convicted,” he says sadly.

“Stand with the Kill the Bill protestors” protests and campaigns – small, but active – continue on, the most recent on 6 August.

The collision of experience and youth

“The action that happened with Kill the Bill, I don’t condemn it. But it was ineffective,” says Jo Benefield, who has been involved in political activism in Bristol since she moved to the city in 1974.

Deeply ingrained in the activist infrastructure of Bristol, Benefield is part of a network that has been building “oh, probably since the miner’s strike of 1984-5”. From then it has been about dedicated and consistent action.

“We don’t have boundaries between different campaigns and struggles. We can see it’s all one struggle.”

– Jo Benefield

By attending protests in Bristol, you might begin to see familiar faces. A collection of diverse, highly experienced, older characters are often seen moving on the outside of the crowd, handing out leaflets, carrying equipment and talking intensely with one another.

Through their interactions, it seems this is a well-established network that has been hard-fought for and nurtured. A connected web of trusted activists whose central causes might differ, but often overlap, spanning from socialism to climate justice or disarmament.

“People have their feet in different campaigns, but we work together, we keep in touch with each other, it’s very important to support each other,” says Benefield. “We don’t have boundaries between different campaigns and struggles. We can see that it’s all one struggle.”

Yet, she is quick to acknowledge that it isn’t perfect, and even with extensive networks, they struggle to engage with all parts of society. However, she says, “it does work in a way that strengthens and embraces many parts of the community.”

The young, however, are not difficult to engage. Bristol’s activism scene recently has been characterised by a “new sense of urgency,” says Benefield, led by an “uprising of the young”. She references how the strength of this new politically engaged and powerful

youth network was on full display at the June 2020 BLM protest, which was organised and led by five students aged 16-21.

“I think it’s great,” Benefield adds. “People say, oh, young people these days are very apathetic. Look what happens, people that you would never have expected are out protesting about racism, or about the policing bill or Extinction Rebellion. All those young people on the streets, people care, they really care, and they want to do something.”

Bristol has a youthful population – the median age of the city is 32.4 years, which is eight years younger than the England and Wales average, with a third of its population aged between 20-34. An active and growing student population contributes to this, with its two main universities totalling 58,100 students in 2020 and growing.

What do these demographics mean for activism? Different voices, different aspirations, different tactics – which sometimes clash, according to Benefield. How they express dissent might be different but activists must common ground, she says. “You have to be very open to new ideas and to learn things and to respect young people.”

The new frontier of environmentalism

Bristol was the Green Capital of Europe in 2015, and the first UK city to declare a climate emergency in 2018. It also has the largest Extinction Rebellion (XR) branch outside of London, which is energetic, divisive and prone to disruptive protests and attention-grabbing civil disobedience, typical of XR’s global style.

“That’s what people sitting down on the M25, blocking roads, waving flags are doing, we’re trying to raise the alarm and the powers that be are not listening,” says Rowland Dye, a long-time climate activist, peace campaigner and key figure in the invisible strata of the XR Bristol movement.

“It’s all about building people’s awareness. I’ve got a PhD in Nuclear Physics, and I wasn’t aware of that all this when I was young. I’m really shocked.”

However, it is young people now that Dye is most inspired by as he watches them mobilise and readily take up campaigns in the city, like that of XR Youth Bristol or the Colston Four – “what an inspiration, so young and so articulate”.

Alex Collins and Ellen Bradley, both 21, are environmental activists working in national and global youth organisations aimed at conservation, rewilding and climate justice.

They were both were drawn to Bristol to study and inspired by what they found to be “a whole community of people of a similar age and similar stage in life that are so passionate about the environment,” says Collins.

“But, it needs that sort of naïve ambitiousness to push it forward.”

- Alex Collins

“I was the only one from my friends at school who seemed remotely interested in wildlife conservation or that sort of stuff. But then going into Bristol, it just felt more normal in a way,” he adds.

Bradley also found a new kind of acceptance in Bristol. “It’s difficult not to get sucked in, the vibe of Bristol is progressive, and that’s ingrained into student body.” This causes a fast domino effect, she says, of students inspiring other students to also get involved.

They also both recognize the importance of young people driving the environment movement. According to Collins, “there isn’t an element of fear and holding back that many of the older generations have in their approach to tackling the climate and biodiversity crisis, it is often a lot bolder and braver.

“We might be naïve in what we expect, or over-ambitious. But, it needs that sort of naïve ambitiousness to push things forward.”

Bradley agrees. The youth voice is “a niche, you can tap into in order to be more creative and pushy – organisations want to engage with you.”

A different kind of radicalism

The city’s young climate activists are at the forefront of what history professor Poole calls “youthful radicalism”, but there is also another side of Bristol’s contemporary radicalism. “Bohemian, slightly anarchistic – it’s got that autonomy about it, like that idea that Stokes Croft is a people’s republic, people gravitate towards it. I guess, it’s a kind of eco-anarchist republic.”

The Guardian in 2011 called Stokes Croft “a melting pot of counterculture, innovation, art and enterprise, set amid an ever-changing landscape of graffiti”. A decade later, and it’s still a home of creatives, artists, and activists, but more attention is now paid to its transient community of homeless people and refugees, its Afro-Caribbean influences and the fact it remains in the 10 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods in Bristol.

Stokes Croft suffered from post-war dilapidation, and its disused buildings came to be occupied by local homeless, followed by artists, and then activist squatters in the 1990s. A lot has changed since then, but its old revolutionary atmosphere still seems to still be kicking.

The area remains famous for its radical politics and loud resistance towards gentrification, corporatisation and regulation. Graffiti slogans like “we make our own future”, “think local: boycott Tesco” or “property is theft, nobody owns anything” line the walls of the neighbourhood that reads like an eccentric picture book.



Unconventional, colourful and fiercely independent, the area of Stokes Croft has long stood out in Bristol. (Wikimedia commons)

People's Republic of Stokes Croft (PRSC) is behind much of the artwork and campaigns that challenge established power in the city. The group, set up in 2006, has radical, slightly anarchic ideals and specialises in “creative dissent”, which is all about “doing something which is beautiful and activism,” says Benoît Bennet, the co-director and community arts coordinator.

Their role in the community is multifaceted. “I do stuff like picking up needles and human shit of the street as much as I do painting, murals and organising.” Police have taken to seeing them as “dangerous radicals”, whilst their work with street drinkers and the local homeless population angers some in the city - “who see it all as a mess,” explains Bennet.

“But they are *all* part of our community,” he says passionately. “We are trying to create more of a cohesive community that could work to build yourself up rather than just be gentrified. It’s always been very much about localism, a kind of local economy, and certainly social economy.”

PRSC are trying to build “a new commons” by establishing and protecting cooperatively run spaces for the community to work on projects, for artists to create and activists to meet.

It is a different kind of activism all together, that is not trying to resist change, but to create an alternative approach to space in Bristol - one that they see as more beautiful, more democratic - led by people, not politics.

Is Bristol's "will to rebel" different to other cities?

"It was like this when I came to Bristol 25 years ago, says Councillor Mohammed Makawi, "it's always been an activist city. That's the way it has always been, not only the last two years.... A city of freedom, of artists, of difference."

[A 2020 study by Leiden University](#) seems to confirm this by comparing active resistance in Manchester and Bristol, which it considers to be traditional hubs for radical social movements. Looking at the city now, it found that Bristol continues to foster better conditions for sustained political mobilisation, against depoliticising factors, such as austerity, anti-squatting and activist disillusion.

Spatial characteristics were key – Bristol is compact, with activists located centrally in a small, "radical neighbourhoods". These village-like conditions better support mobilisation and community networks.

Beyond just the physical aspects of the city, social infrastructure and dynamics were said to be central to Bristol's success. According to the study, deep activist infrastructures and networks exist, whilst a "reputational snowball" attracts a stream of activist energy. Activists in Bristol also were successful in appropriating space by squatting or building communal activist spaces, and imposing their activism *onto* space, through protest and art – reminiscent of the tactics used by the PRSC.

"Is it really that different? Or is it being turned into something different?"

- Steve Poole

Yet, history professor Poole is more cynical in his view. "Bristol since the 1960s has produced an enviable number of protests, however there's an expectation now that if there's anything now, it will happen in Bristol first.

"That's the thing, people perform to the script in a kind of self-perpetuating mythology... Is it really that different? Or is it being turned into something different?"

Although difficult to quantify how different Bristol really is, Poole believes, "what is demonstrable is the way that Bristol is treated and the way Bristolians feel." This, he says, can be very powerful for activism, yet also for the 'brand' it produces for the city.

The "activists, artists, vagabonds and weirdos of the city," says Poole, have worked to create the counter-cultural and politically active brand Bristol has now. Yet, these people become the first casualties of gentrification pressures amplified by the reputation they built.

Chronicled in Henry Palmer *Voices of Bristol: Gentrification & Us*, Bristol is an increasingly unaffordable city – homelessness is multiplying, and original communities are being displaced from the traditionally poor neighbourhoods now considered 'up and coming'. As more middle class creatives or privileged students are drawn to Bristol, Palmer depicts

how its social fabric is altered and accompanied by the alienation and segregation of communities considered less on 'brand'.

For *The Bristolian*, an independent, anarchic newspaper, it is a war: "Homeless, renting, squatting, boating or whatever your situation, STAND UP NOW! Stand up to neoliberal New Labour politicians, stand up to developers taking a slice of OUR city."

A process certainly not exclusive to Bristol, but in terms of activism in the city, it is troubling for the fractures and vulnerabilities it opens. The Leiden University study details how gentrification is increasingly pushing Bristol's activists out of their spaces, making it more difficult to sustain the energy for collective resistance, and forcing them fight a battle on a new front.

A restless city, a new kind of city?



"A new song for Bristol": the music venue Bristol Beacon, formerly Colston Hall, is now decorated with a BLM mural by a local artist.

In the wake of the social unrest and resistance of the last two years, and the media scrutiny that has followed it, power structures in the city have been challenged, societal fractures exposed, and new possibilities for social collectivism revealed.

For long-time activist Jo Benefield, it has been a wake-up call the city's potential. "I am very proud of Bristol. I think it has made us more confident, I think it's renewed our

energy, and given people the confidence to think ‘yes, we can do it’. I think it’s a great time for activism. I haven’t experienced that in other cities.”

The statue of Edward Colston now lies in the backrooms of the Bristol museum with other artefacts of city’s past, whilst Bristolians collectively decide its fate. Buildings, pubs and schools have been re-named, Colston’s legacy slowly reconstructed and contextualised in the city – hinting at a more open and democratic approach to shaping memory in the city.



The ‘We are Bristol’ History Commission was set up by the council following Colston’s toppling. They found 80% of Bristolians would like to see the statue lie horizontal, with the graffiti from the protest on display. For now, he remains in the backrooms as shown.

Trials for the Kill the Bill protestors continue, Bristol XR is currently fighting against the expansion of the city airport, and Defend Asylum Seekers will continue to stage demonstrations until the Rwanda deportations have stopped.

Bristol’s activism is not entirely unique, nor is it happening in isolation. Historically and today, it often rides on the political currents and social movements of the times – catching onto diverse national and global struggles, as well as local battles.

Yet, perhaps there is a uniqueness to Bristol. In its restlessness inspired by the deep, grassroots networks in place and a renewed energy from the youth uprising. And, in its untiring desire for rebellion and creativity, particularly against established power structures in the city.

“People will always resist,” says Benefield mischievously, “and it’s just making sure our resistance is as strong as it can be.”

It’s all part of an ongoing, alternative story of the city being told by activists, filmmakers, community groups, anarchists, radical historians, and artists all fighting to be heard above the noise.

[ENDS]

