



Welcome to the Library

In 1710 All Souls College received a legacy from a former fellow that allowed the building and provisioning of this library. The fellow was Christopher Codrington and his wealth derived largely from the West Indies, where he and his forebears owned plantations worked by enslaved people of African descent.

These displays are the first phase of a programme through which the college seeks to contextualize his statue, and promote research into, and understanding of, this contested legacy.

Christopher Codrington: statue and context



Why is the statue there?

The statue of Christopher Codrington (1668–1710) by Sir Henry Cheere that you will see when you enter the main library was completed in 1734.

It was meant to commemorate Codrington's bequest of his library of books and £10,000 (very roughly £1 million today) — £6,000 for the building of a new library, and £4,000 for the purchase of more books.

The statue, conceived on a grand scale, was commissioned by fellows of the college to commemorate Codrington as a benefactor in the heart of the library he had helped to create.

Who was Christopher Codrington?

Codrington was born on Barbados. His grandfather and father had developed sugar plantations in Antigua, Barbados, and Barbuda. These plantations were worked by hundreds of enslaved Africans.

The income from this form of agriculture dependent on the labour of enslaved persons, together with the profits of office-holding, made the family very wealthy.

Codrington was sent to England for his schooling at the age of 12. He was an undergraduate at Oxford, and became a fellow of All Souls in 1690. He had literary interests, and was a serious book-collector. Having volunteered for military service, he served with some distinction in William III's army in Flanders in the mid-1690s.

In 1699 he was appointed Governor-General of the Leeward Islands, and returned to the West Indies for the remainder of his life.

Codrington as 'owner' of enslaved persons

Codrington seems fully to have accepted the institution of slavery, and was not troubled by the thought of 'owning' human beings.

On some points, though, Codrington's views were not typical of the those of the planter class.

His most distinctive attitude was his interest in baptizing enslaved persons. His motives for this may have been partly religious, and partly worldly – an assumption that enslaved persons educated in Christian beliefs would be more resigned to their fate and more easily governed.

The statue and All Souls in the eighteenth century

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The decision to portray him as a Roman general was meant as a tribute to the military side of his career. The inscription on the plinth celebrated his achievements. The fellows who composed this were evidently as untroubled as he was by the role of slavery in his life and background.

The college and slavery today

Today we cannot fail to be profoundly troubled by the role of slavery in this life story. The college abhors slavery in all its forms.

The statue remains here for two reasons:

First, because it forms an intrinsic part of this exceptionally well-preserved eighteenth-century interior; it is part of the history (which cannot itself be changed) of the building and the college, and it is one of the most important of the artworks of which the college is custodian.

Secondly, because its presence creates a focus for serious reflection on the deeply problematic nature of the Codrington legacy, and, more generally, on the role of colonial power and the labour of enslaved persons in the development of the economy, society, and culture of Britain, from the eighteenth century to the present day.

The college's response to the legacy of slavery

<https://www.asc.ox.ac.uk/news/all-souls-college-and-codrington-legacy-0>

- In 2017 All Souls erected the plaque at the entrance to the Library in memory of those who worked in slavery on the Codrington plantations. The college also set up a programme, costing up to £150,000 annually, of fully funded graduate studentships at Oxford for students from the Caribbean, and made a five-year grant of financial support to Codrington College in Barbados.
- In November 2020 the college decided to cease to refer to the Library as 'the Codrington Library' and develop further forms of memorialisation and contextualisation, which will draw attention to the labour of enslaved people on the Codrington plantations, and express the college's abhorrence of slavery.
- This exhibition will continue to be expanded and developed to show historical, literary and artistic material as a means of contextualizing the statue.

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- In the main body of the Library, the statue will be contextualised by digital display stands and by technology allowing for the projection of words or images onto the statue itself.

Further academic initiatives include:

- A donation of £1 million over ten years to Oxford University's new Black Academic Futures Programme to support UK graduate students who are of Black or Mixed-Black ethnicity
- Further financial support to Codrington College in Barbados
- An annual lecture on the modern Atlantic World with reference to slavery and colonialism
- A programme of visiting fellowships and travel grants enabling Caribbean researchers to come to Oxford.