

JAMES WATT

STATUES AND SLAVERY

Francis Leggatt Chantrey (1781-1841)

Monument to James Watt

1830, Marble

Across the world in the summer of 2020, statues that seemed permanent and secure are being re-evaluated.

This statue of Scottish engineer James Watt (1736 - 1819) was given to The Hunterian by Watt's son in 1833. Statues always make an argument. This statue helped create an image of Watt as commanding, scholarly, just: a hero.

What the statue does not tell us is that James Watt's expensive apprenticeship in London was paid for with profits from his father's trade in North American and Caribbean sugar and tobacco. Watt's first employment by the University was to repair astronomical instruments donated by Alexander Macfarlane, a wealthy slaveowner who died in Kingston, Jamaica in 1755. James Watt and his brother John were directly involved, on at least one occasion, in buying and selling an enslaved black child in Scotland.

Donated by James Watt Junior, 1833
GLAHA:44337

What do you think about this statue? Does it belong here? Is a statue in a museum different to a statue in a street or square? Does it need a better label, or to be displayed differently? Do statues help us understand the past, or do they sometimes prevent us from understanding the past?

We'd love to hear what you think.
Scan this code to let us know via our website.

