Steve Biko Statue - East London, South Africa



The city of East London in South Africa's Eastern Cape province carries the legacy of one of the most important figures in the struggle against the Apartheid regime. Steve Biko, the pioneer of the Black Consciousness Movement and one of Apartheid's most charismatic voices of opposition, was born on 18 December 1946 and lost his life at the hands of the Apartheid police on 12 September 1977, aged just 30. Today East London is home to a monument statue that keeps his name and struggle alive. This statue has become an unmissable stop for history enthusiasts and tourists visiting the region.

Construction and History of the Statue

Steve Biko's bronze statue was brought to life through the initiative of journalist and Biko's close friend Donald Woods. The cost of the statue was covered by donations from international figures including Denzel Washington, Kevin Kline, Peter Gabriel, Richard Attenborough and Richard Branson. Created by Johannesburg sculptor Naomi Jacobson, the statue was unveiled by Nelson Mandela on 12 September 1997 exactly 20 years to the day after Biko's death. At a ceremony attended by more than 10,000 people, Peter Gabriel performed his song "Biko" live. The statue was vandalised twice shortly after its unveiling, but over time has become an inseparable part of the city of East London.

Features and Artistic Details of the Statue

The larger-than-life bronze statue depicts Steve Biko in a natural and informal pose. Jacobson worked from only two photographs, yet described the finished work as "very informal, very pleasing." The sides of the plinth bear a list of the names of those who made financial contributions

to the statue. The statue stands on Oxford Street in front of the East London City Hall, in one of the city's busiest and most historic locations.

The Steve Biko Heritage Trail and Its Surroundings

The statue forms one of the most important stops on the Steve Biko Heritage Trail, a route covering six landmarks that trace Biko's footsteps. The trail encompasses Biko Bridge in East London, his birth house in King William's Town, the Memorial Garden, the Black Community Programmes office and Zanempilo Clinic. The area around East London City Hall is of significant historical importance; in front of the building stands a statue of Archbishop Desmond Tutu as well, making this precinct a notable open-air museum that gives tangible form to South Africa's anti-Apartheid heritage.

The Legacy of Steve Biko

Steve Biko was the founder of the Black Consciousness Movement, which sought to rebuild the self-confidence and identity of black people during the Apartheid era. Identified with the slogan "black is beautiful," Biko founded the South African Students' Organisation in 1968 and subsequently established the Black People's Convention. Subjected to severe repression and banning orders from 1973 onwards, Biko died on 12 September 1977 under suspicious circumstances while in police custody. His death caused profound outrage in the international community and proved a decisive factor in strengthening sanctions against the Apartheid regime. In 2025, the South African government reopened the investigation into his death.

Visitor Information

The Steve Biko Statue stands on Oxford Street in central East London, in front of the City Hall. East London is located in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, approximately 270 kilometres from Port Elizabeth. As the statue stands in a publicly accessible area, it can be visited free of charge throughout the year. Various commemorative events are held on 12 September, the anniversary of Biko's death.

Source URL: https://www.heykel.org/en/monument/steve-biko-statue-east-london-south-africa/
Workshop: Heykel.org - Publication Date: 2026-11-06 12:57:27 - PDF Date: 24/11/2026