

Soham at the Time of the Abolition
'Olaudah'



The Life Story of Olaudah Equiano
Donna Martin

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Cover picture: *Olaudah Equiano alias Gustavus Vassa, a slave, 1789* (mezzotint), engraved by Daniel Orme for the original frontispiece of *The Interesting Narrative...*

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'OLAUDAH'

The Interesting Life of Gustavus Vassa, The African
Written and Researched by Donna Martin



This is the true story of an African slave who survived the Atlantic slave trade, and lived a life of high adventure. When he eventually settled in England at the end of the eighteenth century, Olaudah Equiano, known as Gustavus Vassa made a success of his life by campaigning for the abolition of slavery, a cause that he championed until his death in 1797. He married a spinster of the parish of Soham in Cambridgeshire, called Susannah Cullen, with whom he had two daughters. Only his daughter, Joanna Vassa would outlive him.

Introduction

This retelling of the story of Olaudah Equiano, known for most of his life as Gustavus Vassa 'The African' has been adapted from the 9th edition of his own book, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, (1794), first published in March 1789. This edition has been compiled using the revised Penguin edition (2003), with notes by his biographer Vincent Carretta (2005), and the author's own research. According to his own account, Olaudah Equiano was born in the Igbo (Eboe) region of what we now call Nigeria, in 1745. He was renamed Gustavus Vassa by Officer Michael Henry Pascal of the British Navy who purchased him as a slave from a planter in Virginia circa 1754.

The transatlantic voyage made by slave ships from the African Slave Coast to the America's was known as the Middle Passage. It formed part of a triangular trade route, which started from one of the many European trading ports with ships heading to the coast of Africa where they took on cargoes often in excess of 600 slaves. The slaves endured appalling conditions for the duration of their voyage to either the 'cotton belt' in the southern states of America, or the East Coast of South America and the West Indies. The 'crossing' could take up to three months. Slaves spent the entire journey in cramped and squalid conditions in 'stowage' below the decks. Sanitary arrangements were primitive and there was very little food or water. Other black writers had avoided describing the Middle Passage in detail because the truth was too horrible to contemplate. The freed slave, Quobna Ottobah Cogoano stated in his manuscript, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), that 'a description of all the horrible scenes we saw, and the (awful) treatment (we endured)...' was already known to the thousands of African's who had suffered it. He called it the 'infernal traffic' of captives. But because Cogoano did not record his experience of the middle passage, he failed to stir the public's imagination to the misery suffered by slaves. Olaudah, anticipating that people would respond to a tale of real human suffering was careful to include every sordid detail in his own account of life in slavery, referring to himself as a survivor.

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, raised awareness of the human cost of slavery and encouraged people to take a public stand against what they believed to be an inhuman trade. Olaudah launched a publicity campaign ahead of the publication of his book, writing numerous letters to the national press. By 1787 he was already recognised as Britain's leading black abolitionist. Frequently attacking newspaper articles in favour of the slave trade, he defended the white abolitionists, or those people fighting to end the slave trade, and

exposed devastating truths about the industry, such as the deliberate drowning of 132 African slaves from the cargo of *The Zong*, to enable the ship's owner to claim insurance monies.

In the eighteenth century, writing books, pamphlets and newspaper articles was seen as a way of communicating information to the general public. Many people wrote pamphlets and books on general subjects or topical issues. Olaudah sold copies of his books through the popular booksellers of the day, but he also undertook book tours, speaking out for the cause of abolition and promoting his book throughout Britain, selling his own as well as other notable works by abolitionists. The first edition of his book was published in two volumes by subscription. This meant that people signed up to buy the book in advance, giving Olaudah the opportunity to list his influential subscribers at the front of the book so that people could see who his supporters were. At the top of the page, readers of the first edition saw 'His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, His Royal Highness Duke of York, and His Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland', names which would have persuaded others to buy the book. The list of subscribers also acted as a form of petition, reflecting the amount of influential support that existed for the abolition movement. It proved highly popular and had run to nine editions by 1794, all published by subscription, with the names of virtually every subscriber being included in every edition. Since then it has been reprinted many times and remains one of the few examples of 18th century literature still in print today.

Olaudah considered himself an English subject and was fiercely loyal to his adoptive country. He accepted his path in life and undertook any challenge that met him with the greatest faith. He became a religious man, an evangelical convert, spreading the word of God and teaching people about Methodism and the plight of African slaves. His noble, intelligent and obviously likeable characteristics helped him to influence some of the highest ranking members of British society, and ultimately play a significant role in the abolition of the slave trade. I have attempted to stay faithful to Olaudah's own account of his adventures. The original text has been simplified but I have tried to reflect the 18th century feel of the story, often using the same spellings that Olaudah used himself, although sometimes it has been necessary to use modern spellings for consistency. The book's title is a tribute to Olaudah's African identity, and takes the name given to him when miraculously as an infant, a poisonous snake passed between his feet and did not strike him. Olaudah means 'favoured one'. It was the name by which his own people knew him.

Donna Martin

2008

Chapter 1: An Eboe Village

According to Olaudah, he was born in 1745 in the region of the Igbo people in a fertile valley he knew as Essaka, in the kingdom of Benin. This area is part of modern Nigeria, but the native people are still known as Eboe. Situated in the unmapped interior of Africa, Olaudah's homeland had its own laws, customs, and rituals, which the inhabitants followed on a daily basis. These ancient practices were overseen by the village elders or wise men, who were marked with an 'embrenché'. This was a sign of rank, made by cutting a slash across the forehead and pulling the skin down and rubbing it into a weal, which left a thick roll of skin above the eyebrows. Both men and women wore loose robes made of cotton, dyed with berries that turned it bright blue, which they decorated with gold jewellery and bracelets.

The men were hunters and farmers. The staple crops were maize, cotton, tobacco, pineapples, spices, gum, and honey. The women would help on the land but they were



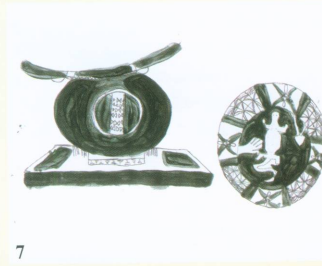
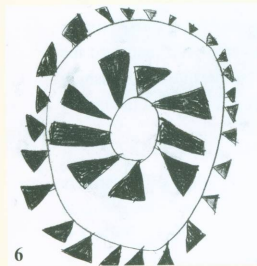
Eboe man and woman in traditional costume, by Joyce Ingram

also occupied with weaving and dyeing cotton, and making clothes or moulding clay into earthenware pots and tobacco pipes. The village kept bullocks, goats and chickens, their diet being mostly stewed meat, seasoned with spices, pepper, and salt made of wood ash. The only vegetables eaten were plantains, yams, beans, maize, and a tuber root called 'eada' but they also ate palm nuts and oil. The traditional drink was a sweet palm wine, obtained by tapping the trees and collecting liquid from them in large gourds. There was little use for money in such a remote place. Olaudah often attended the local market with his mother where they would barter for goods including hats, beads, and dried fish, with perfumed wood and earth, and wood ash salt that they had prepared for sale. The main trade however was in slaves, some of which were travelling through their country to the coast, others which the villagers themselves sold to the traders. Olaudah explained that these were criminals and prisoners of war, and that it was customary for African villagers to take prisoners in order to sell or keep as slaves. Few people strayed far from their village, and Olaudah stated that he had never heard of the sea, or white men or Europeans before his own experience of them.

Each family occupied a square enclosure of land protected by a ditch, fence, or earth wall. Inside this was the masters lodge, which consisted of a family room, a meeting place for guests, and a sleeping apartment for the master and his sons. This was surrounded by houses for the extended family, including separate sleeping quarters for the women, and huts where work was carried out during the day. The slaves and their families occupied more basic dwelling huts within the enclosure. All the buildings were timber framed with wattle walls and thatched roofs. Day rooms were open at the sides, and enclosed rooms were plastered with cow dung. The walls and floors were covered with mats and the furniture was made from logs. Before eating, the family would perform a hand washing ritual and make an offering of food to the ancestors. Traditionally, the head of the family ate alone, and his wives and slaves ate at separate tables.

Olaudah recorded that the village farmland was a long way from the village. The farmers did not use animals to work the land. Their tools were hoes, axes and spades made from iron. Their main enemy was locusts, which could destroy the annual harvest if they swarmed, leading to famine. The threat of tribal war was also ever present. The villagers would never go out into the fields without weapons which included guns, bows, broadswords and javelins. Everyone knew how to fight including the women. Olaudah recalled that he once witnessed his own mother wielding a broadsword in a local uprising. It was customary to celebrate the return from battle or a successful hunting trip with music, dancing and poetry. A naturally perfumed wood and sweet smelling earth would be burned on the fire. The wood was ground into powder and mixed with palm oil to make perfume which revellers would smear over their bodies.

MONTAGE -TRIBAL ART





Traditional Eboe Artwork

- 1 The centre of the panel is dominated by a traditional Benin mask. The border shows traditional motifs symbolising life and healing. The four lobed leaf has medicinal properties and represents healing or a healer such as a medicine man.
- 2 The lizard and the snake demonstrate the significance of animal symbolism in traditional Nigerian art. Here, the snake or serpent represents life and fertility, and the lizard, divine wisdom. The lizard is amongst the most common motifs used in native African art.
- 3 The use of the serpent and the four lobed leaf together represents life and healing and can be read as a symbol for good health.
- 4 An example of a ceremonial mask used for dancing and festivals.
- 5 A traditional symbol showing a fertility god and a lizard. The presence of the divine lizard perhaps reinforcing the potency of the fertility God.
- 6 A geometric pattern. The use of geometric patterns in native African art has ancient origins, dating back to before the Roman occupation of North Africa in the second century BC.
- 7 Left: A wooden 'chieftan' stool, so called because some stools were especially designed for the chief and could not be copied without his permission.
Right: A calabash bowl, made from a hollowed out gourd, with a finely engraved pattern of a lizard and a geometric border. The decoration on this type of bowl traditionally has a background decorated in fine cross-hatching.
- 8 A traditional 'chieftan' fan made from dyed animal skin with applied decoration in a variety of coloured skins.
- 9 A djembe drum, common along the Ghana, Gambia, and Senegalese slave routes. The drum was used to beat out the rhythm of life. Most traditional instruments were derived from hollowed out gourds. There were at least ten different kinds of drum, which could be combined to make up a variety of sets unique to different areas. These were used with bells and primitive xylophones to produce distinctive sounds and rhythms.
- 10 The central design of this panel shows a chekere, a traditional type of shaker made from a hollowed out gourd onto which a net sewn with dried seeds or shells was fastened, producing a rhythmic sound when shaken.



The children were named from an event or circumstance at the time of their birth. Oludah recalled that when he was a child, a poisonous snake passed between his feet without striking him. This was seen as an omen that he was favoured. In celebration of the event, he was given the name Oludah meaning 'favoured one'. Young males were circumcised and celebrated in the same way that Jews celebrate bar mitzvah at their coming of age. The children of Oludah's village were promised to each other for marriage while they were still quite young. The village held a feast to celebrate the betrothal, where the couple would stand amidst their friends and the boy would declare his promised wife out of bounds to other males. The girl left the feast after the announcement. She would be delivered to her husband later during a private feast for the two families, when she had a cord tied around her waist to show that she was married and belonged only to her husband. A dowry would be offered by the bride, which might include land, cattle, household items, and slaves. On the night of the marriage, the whole village would join in a festival of fire, music and dancing.

The people of the region held many traditional beliefs and superstitions. The Elders calculated the time and foretold the future making all the important decisions for the villagers. Their position in the community was hereditary, and when they died, their sons succeeded them. We might call them shamens. They could heal wounds and cure infections, but they also sought out and punished criminals. The people of Oludah's village believed in a single creator who lived in the sun, but who was unable to eat or drink, although he smoked a pipe. They believed that some of their ancestors spirits lived in the village and watched over them. They made offerings of food and drink to the spirits, they practiced daily purification and washing rituals, and they sacrificed animals at the tombs of their ancestors. Oludah remembered attending ceremonial sacrifices at his grandmother's tomb. Special ceremonies celebrating the sun god were held at the full moon and harvest, but the setting of the sun was celebrated everyday.

Chapter 2: Kidnapped by Slavers

Oludah was the youngest of six sons, but he had a sister whom he adored. The children were used to staying in the village while the adults were away working on the land but as this was slave trading country, the village was always on guard during the vulnerable hours that the men were away. There was an ever-present threat that kidnappers would come to take children into slavery. On one occasion, the eleven-year-old Oludah raised the alarm when a kidnapper crept into the yard of a nearby family. The man was captured and tied up, and no doubt sold on as a slave himself. Few slaves however, were kidnapped. The vast majority were prisoners of war, some were children born to domestic slaves, and a few sold themselves into slavery during times of famine and hardship so that their

families might buy food. It wasn't unheard of in similar circumstances that the youngest children were sold into slavery by their own parents or even traded by the village chief.

It was perhaps unlucky that one day when Olaudah and his sister, having been left alone in their hut, that two men and a woman climbed over the enclosure walls and kidnapped them. Olaudah recalled that they didn't have time to scream before their mouths were covered. They were taken to a nearby wood where they were tied up and then spent two days travelling, mostly through woodland, staying in rough huts at night. On the second day, Olaudah called out to some people he saw on the road, but to no avail. He was put in a sack for the rest of the journey. The children were so distressed that they could not eat. They spent every night wrapped in each other's arms, hoping for their nightmare to be over.

On the third day Olaudah's sister was taken away. His grief was such that he did not eat for several days and had to be force-fed. By now he was many days away from his native village and had been sold on through many traders. His first 'master' was an African who had two wives and some children who treated him very well. In a country where many languages were spoken Olaudah was glad to find that his master's family spoke the same language as his village. The master was a goldsmith, and Olaudah was tasked to work the bellows in the forge where fine gold jewellery was made. He carried water from the well and helped an elderly woman who worked as a slave in the kitchens.

As he became more trusted and was allowed to wander about the homestead on his own, Olaudah began to plan his escape. One morning, as he was feeding the chickens and entertaining himself by playing a game that involved throwing stones, he accidentally killed a chicken. Being honest, he explained the accident to the elderly woman who flew into a rage and threatened him with punishment. Scared for his life and seizing his chance when the old woman went to tell his mistress, Olaudah fled into the nearby woods to hide. Thinking it likely that he would be caught during the day, he prepared to wait until nightfall to make his escape. He was however only a young boy, and all the time he could hear his master's family searching for him and talking about the dangerous countryside he would have to cross if he travelled towards his own village – he might be lost in the woods, seized by kidnappers, or even worse, eaten by wild animals. Darkness finally fell, and with it came the noises of the night. Hungry and thirsty, and fearing that at any minute he would be struck by a poisonous snake, Olaudah crept back to his masters kitchen and fell asleep. He was reprimanded for his crime but not punished. A short time afterwards, he was sold back to the slave traders.



An Eboe boy and girl representing Olaudah and his sister to whom he never gave a name

Olaudah now found himself travelling an established trade route, which was lined with accommodation for travellers and merchants. He learnt words in two or three different languages as he was moved across Africa towards the coast. One evening a curious thing happened. A young slave girl was brought into the hut where Olaudah was resting with his owners. Immediately seeing that he was her brother, she ran to him, and the two held each other and wept. That night, as they slept in the small shelter, they held hands, blissfully unaware that in the morning they would be parted forever. Olaudah was distraught at this second separation, fearing his sister's fate, knowing that even at this age female slaves were more vulnerable to abuse. He recalled however that during his time in the hands of African slave traders he was treated well and saw no other slaves harmed, but he feared that on nearing the coast attitudes towards the captured slaves would change.

After many weeks, the slave train reached Timmah, the most beautiful town Olaudah had ever seen. Well-kept houses lined the streets, and there were coconut trees and streams for irrigation. Here Olaudah was sold to a wealthy African widow and her son for the price of 172 cowry shells, which were common currency in Africa. He wrote that her home was the finest he had ever seen in Africa. He was washed and sprinkled with perfumes, and on the first morning permitted to eat with his mistress and her son, to whom he felt he had been taken on as a companion. Like the son he was attended by slaves and eventually began to believe that he had been adopted into the family. Sadly he was wrong. Olaudah mentions that he was one of many young boys living at this woman's house. It appears that she was probably a slave trader preparing her wares for market. After two months, Olaudah was taken from his bed in the middle of the night. This time the slavers he found himself amongst were much rougher people, whose behaviour and customs he didn't understand. These traders travelled by canoe making camp on the riverbank at night and living with the boat people by day. The broad river Olaudah described was probably the Niger, taking him and many others in a long caravan of canoes to the edge of Africa and the seacoast, where the first thing he would set eyes on was a slave ship at anchor.



In 1789, Thomas Clarkson and his supporters shocked the public by producing a plan of the interior of a slave ship. It illustrated how 482 slaves could be packed on board a ship called *The Brookes* of Liverpool, for the 6-8 week voyage to the West Indies. *The Brookes* actually carried 609 slaves on one voyage. The plan showed how 292 slaves could be packed into the lower deck, 130 of which would be stowed beneath shelves or 'platforms' around the sides. The platforms, which are said to have been similar in style to a gallery in a church, provided stowage for additional slaves. The slaves stowed here and those stowed beneath them had a head height of only 2 feet 2 inches between the beams and far less under them. Clarkson produced further similar images in his *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of Human Species*, 1789. This year marked the peak of the slave trade and, despite the outbreak of revolution in France, the port of Bordeaux alone was responsible for 34 expeditions to Africa.

Chapter 3: The Middle Passage

Olaudah recorded that he arrived at the seacoast between six to seven months after he was kidnapped. He had travelled through a fertile countryside where local crops grew in abundance, so we might assume that the slavers route followed the Niger valley. In the first instance his captors may well have been natives, but as he was traded on, it is likely that he passed through the hands of the Moors – the Moors being singly responsible for the continuation of the slave trade in the African interior. The slave ship must have been awaiting the caravan's arrival because the captives were immediately loaded on board.

This was the first time Olaudah had seen Europeans. He described them as 'white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair...' he thought they looked like murderers and that they would kill him. Despite his initial terror, the crew and their ship of sails, which Olaudah believed had magical powers, fascinated him. On boarding the ship, he realised that he would not see his native country again. He observed that there were many black people chained together on the deck, and that there was also a large copper cauldron. Olaudah may have equated this to cannibalism, as he recalled, at this point he fainted. He was taken down into the hold, where he was met by an evil smell and the incessant cries of his fellow captives. In this environment, it did not take long for the young boy to become so ill that he could not eat, and so low that he would have preferred to die than to continue to suffer. Eventually, his refusal to eat meant that he was taken up on deck, along with all the slaves that refused food, and flogged. The poor wretches who became so desperate in their grief, that they tried to throw themselves overboard, were cut as a punishment. The slavers were merciless, not only to their captives but to their

crew. Olaudah recalled witnessing one of the mates flogged to death, by his shipmates. His body was callously thrown into the sea.



Slaves Arriving at the Seacoast by Brenda May

Inspired by *The Southwell Frigate 'Trading on ye Coast of Africa'*, Nicholas Pocock, c.1760. The original painting of a Bristol slave ship shows her at anchor off a sandy beach, while her captain negotiates with an African trader for a cargo of slaves, which are shown being loaded into a rowing boat. Here the artist has created a cameo portraying the captain as he persuades his cargo to join the ship. The slave shown in the rowing boat is overcome with grief, knowing that he will probably never see his homeland again.

Once the ship was under sail, the captives were confined to the hold. Olaudah recorded the stench below deck as 'loathsome', believing it to be dangerous to stay there for very long. Conditions worsened as the voyage progressed across the middle passage. The slaves were chained and crammed tightly together, and the smell and heat of the tropical climate made the atmosphere suffocating, causing sickness to spread through what was now considered to be a human cargo. Even on this single voyage, many Africans died. Buckets were used as latrines, and shared by everyone. The children being smaller and in a weakened state would often fall in. Eventually Olaudah became so ill that he was taken up on deck, but for those that remained below, the constant crying and groaning of the sick, dying, and grief stricken, added to the misery of their terrible ordeal. There was little or no food, though the crew were able to discard their surplus into the sea. Starving men who tried to steal a morsel for themselves were flogged, and those who successfully jumped overboard, hauled in and, if they were still alive, were flogged for preferring death to slavery. Two slaves drowned in one attempt, and once again Olaudah found

himself confined below deck, this time with the hatches closed. There was no fresh air in the hold for days, and the death toll rose.



Eventually, the ship made port in Bridge Town, Barbados. Although it was evening, the captives were assembled in a group on deck, and immediately inspected by prospective owners. Slaves were brought on board to explain in their native language that they would soon be put to work on the land, where they would meet many more of their own countrymen. Olaudah recalled his amazement at seeing tall buildings built of brick, and people riding on horseback, and all the many things he had never experienced before. The captives were held for a time in a merchants yard, from where they were to be auctioned in lots. Olaudah records the excitement of the auction, of the buyers, both planters and merchants, and the anguish of friends, countrymen and brothers, sold in separate lots, never to see each other again.

Chapter 4: A Life at Sea

Olaudah and some of the other slaves who had appeared distressed at the sale were not sold. Two weeks later they were loaded onto a two masted boat, which Oludah called the 'African Snow', destined for America. During the voyage, they were fed on rice and fatty pork, which suggests that they were sickly or undernourished. Oludah was named and addressed as 'Michael' for the entire journey. The boat landed them at Virginia where they were put to work weeding and stone picking on a plantation. After a few weeks, Oludah's companions had been employed on the plantation, but he remained in the employment of the plantation owner, doing odd jobs around the estate. One day he was sent for to attend the owner, Mr Ian Campbell, by fanning him while he lay sick in bed. On coming into the house, Oludah was disturbed to see the cook, a black woman, restrained in an 'iron muzzle' and other metal contraptions. The muzzle fastened her mouth so that she could not speak, eat or drink. Slaves could be restrained like this for a number of reasons, but most likely it was to prevent them from speaking out about the abuse they received from their master and his family.

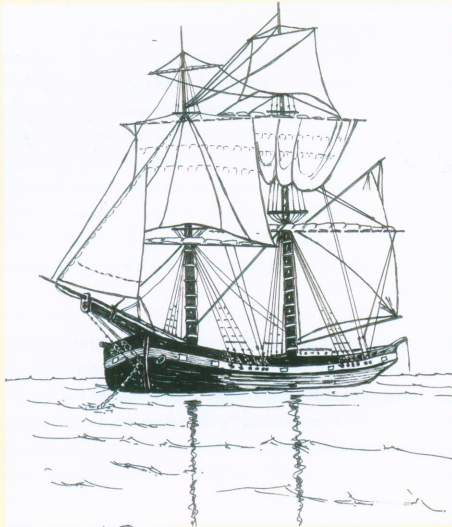


Illustration of a 'Snow' by Graham Wright. These small boats, renowned for their manoeuvrability were used to navigate the sea passage between the West Indies and the American coast.

As Olaudah looked about the master's room, he reflected on the magical powers of the white people. His own people worshipped spirits and believed in magic, so naturally everything he saw that he couldn't explain, he believed was operated by magic. The sailing of the ship, the navigation equipment, and now a watch, which made a strange noise (ticking) were all magic. In this place, he was called 'Jacob'. There was no one here who could speak his language, and he felt lonely and frightened. His saviour arrived in the form of a Lieutenant of the Royal Navy, Captain Michael Henry Pascal, of the merchant ship, *The Industrious Bee*. Pascal saw Olaudah on a visit to Campbell's estate and purchased him for £30 as a gift for some friends in England. Olaudah was taken to his ship on horseback, and when he arrived, was loaded along with tobacco and the rest of the cargo. Conditions aboard were much different to those he had experienced previously. He was given sails to sleep on, and plenty of good food. The sailors were friendly, and gradually through their constant attempts to communicate with him, he began to learn to speak English.

It was during the voyage to England that Olaudah was given the name 'Gustavus Vassa'. He initially refused to be called this, and insisted that he remained 'Jacob', but it seems that Pascal meant the name to cover up Olaudah's identity as a slave, and after a few 'cuffs' round the ear, Olaudah accepted his new name and resigned himself once again to the fact that he would not be returning to his native country. At least he had reason to be happy aboard *The Industrious Bee*. Accompanying him on the long voyage to England was a well educated young American boy called Richard Baker, known as Dick. Although he was slightly older than Olaudah, the two spent much of their time together, and Dick quickly became both his friend and teacher. Pascal had lodged with Dick's family in America and perhaps taken him on as a cabin boy, although Olaudah remarked that, he was always invited to dine at the captain's table. The two friends became inseparable, with Baker acting as both his interpreter and instructor over a two-year period. Richard Baker died aged fifteen on a voyage to the Mediterranean in 1759 on board *HMS Preston*.

The Industrious Bee docked at Falmouth, England, early in the spring of 1757, after thirteen weeks at sea. Olaudah believed himself to be almost twelve years old at the time. This had been an unusually long voyage and provisions had dwindled to the point of crisis. The crew celebrated their arrival by taking on supplies at the port and holding a huge feast. Olaudah was fascinated by almost everything he saw; the strange buildings, the people, and the hustle and bustle of the place. On going up on deck one morning, he saw to his amazement that everything was covered in what he thought to be salt. On reporting the incident he was asked to collect a sample, which he did, finding it cold to the touch. This was his first experience of snow. Later he would experience the magic of a heavy snowfall, 'the air filled with it' sent by a God of whom he had no knowledge.

The day must have been Sunday, because on the same day, Olaudah was taken to church for the first time. He found himself full of questions about the white people's God, but the one thing that struck him above anything else, was that the English people were good. He remarked that they 'did not sell one another' like the African people, nor did they make sacrificial offerings, or hold on to superstitions. He found the white people full of wisdom, and he had a craving to 'talk to the books' as he saw the white people do.

After a short stay in Falmouth the ship was made ready for St. Peter Port, Guernsey, the home of her part owner, Nicholas Dubree. Here Olaudah was given lodgings with one of the crew's families, where he was treated like one of the family. He stayed there until the summer of 1757 when he was once more called into Pascal's service. By now Pascal had been appointed First Lieutenant of *HMS Roebuck*, which the crew met on the 'Nore' at the mouth of the Thames. The *Roebuck* was a 'man of war' fitted out to Navy specifications and complimented by a full crew, amongst which, to Olaudah's delight, were a number of young boys with whom he could talk and play - although they were often pitched against one another in staged fights, for the amusement of those on board. The *Roebuck* mainly patrolled the coast of France, but ventured as far as Holland, Scotland, and the Orkney Islands. She took seventeen enemy ships as prizes, and Olaudah states that even he fired guns during several skirmishes.

Eventually the *Roebuck* returned to England, docking at Portsmouth, where Dick and Olaudah were loaned to a sloop of war named *The Savage*. On disembarking at Deal in Kent, Pascal sent for them from London, to whence they travelled by cart. By this time, Olaudah was suffering from severe chilblains, and had become quite ill. He was sent to St. George's hospital where there was some discussion as to whether his leg, which was so severely infected that it presented the possibility of gangrene setting in, should be amputated. Thankfully he recovered without such drastic measures, but almost immediately fell victim to an outbreak of smallpox.

Having miraculously survived two life threatening conditions, Olaudah returned to sea, and found that his master, Pascal, had been promoted to First Lieutenant of *The Preston*, a man of war. He and Dick went aboard at Deptford, spending almost a year at sea, as servants to Pascal and the other officers, after which they accompanied Pascal on a brief transfer to *The Jason*. Records show that this was the year 1757. In December, they were returned to *The Preston*, which was due to sail for Turkey. Olaudah was requested to stay on but refused to be parted from Pascal who had taken up a post as sixth Lieutenant on *The Royal George*. His protest was such that it was arranged for Dick to take his place aboard *The Preston*. Leaving his best friend with an embrace, Olaudah now found himself aboard the largest vessel in the Royal Navy, with over 1,000 people on board, including women and children. He described it in port as having the atmosphere of a market place,

with stalls set up on deck and people shouting for business. Pascal and Olaudah were however not destined to sail with her. After a few weeks they were transferred to *The Namur* to be part of a war fleet and 'expedition against Louisbourg', and the French colony in Canada.

Olaudah recalled his excitement at the prospect of a sea-battle. He remarked on the great fleet of which *The Namur* was a part, that sailed into Halifax, Nova Scotia, on 10th May, 1758, where it was met by reinforcements and soldiers before sailing for Cape Breton. Pascal oversaw some of the landing, which was ambushed by enemy forces lying in wait. The bloody exchange of fire lasted for some time before the British forced a retreat. Olaudah remarked that, after the battle, he was handed the scalp of an 'Indian King', which had been removed by a Highlander. He was particularly taken with the feather headdress. Louisbourg was eventually taken after a short siege, the British fleet having destroyed her ships, leaving her enemy stranded. Olaudah was allowed ashore briefly after the defeat, but the fleet returned to England as winter approached.

As they reached the English coast, they came across a fleet of ships, which in the dark appeared to be British, but to their surprise, as the ships came upon each other, the fleet found itself in the middle of a French ambush. Apart from *The Royal William*, bringing up the rear of the fleet, none of the British ships were prepared for battle. She managed a broadside of a French ship, by which time the fleet began to retaliate. Olaudah observed that they chased the French ships all night, but that the following day, they were distracted by an East Indiaman (trading ship) the French used as a decoy, and their enemy escaped. It was November, and *The Namur* headed for the Channel Islands but ran aground. Thankfully she was barely damaged, and eventually sailed into Portsmouth from where Pascal travelled for London, Olaudah following on at the head of a press-gang.

Olaudah had now been amongst the English people for around three years and had learnt to speak their language well. He was fascinated with English society and manners, and took the opportunity to learn whatever he could. His stay in London was to prove life changing. Not only was he sent to school by Pascal's cousins, the Miss Guerin's, whom he had been acquainted with in a previous visit, but he was baptised at St Margaret's Church, Westminster, in the February of 1759. The parish register records the baptism of 'Gustavus Vassa, a Black, born in Carolina, 12 years old'. Olaudah was careful to note that this was the identity given to him by Pascal during their first voyage. Miss Guerin and her brother stood as Godparents, indicating their attachment to the young Olaudah. He would often accompany them on their errands and shopping trips in London, and was grateful for the opportunity it gave him to see the city. At other times, he was with his master at the rendezvous house at Westminster Bridge, assembling a crew for *The Namur*. This was probably a seaman's inn on the banks of the Thames.

Olaudah spent much of his time playing on the bridge, or on the wherry boats that the watermen used to navigate the busy shipping canal. On one occasion, having taken a boat out on the river with another boy, he was pushed into the water, and not being able to swim feared himself drowned. Thankfully he was hauled out by some passing watermen and taken to safety. In the days to come Oludah bid a reluctant farewell to his friends in London. His schoolmaster and the Miss Guerin's had taken a great deal of trouble to teach him to read and instil in him the principles of Christian religion. But he was given an affectionate send-off and received 'some valuable presents'.

The Namur lay at Spithead with a large fleet, ready for a tour of the Mediterranean. Leaving England, she made for Gibraltar where she remained for a number of days. While she was there, to Oludah's delight, *The Preston* came into port, and along with it, the prospect of him being reunited with his dear friend Dick, who had taken his place on that same ship. Sadly he learnt that Dick had died during the voyage. Pascal later took him aside and presented him with Dick's chest of belongings as a keepsake and reminder of his friend.

The English fleet cruised the Mediterranean looking for a fleet of French ships, which they were determined to capture or destroy. They stopped only once for a few days in Barcelona, Spain, where they made a camp in the bay. The local people brought them fruit and wine, which they sold very cheaply. There seems to have been a fair like atmosphere in the camp. Oludah recalled that the Spanish used to visit his master frequently and took great delight in amusing themselves by tying him on to a horse, which they forced to gallop off at great speed. Oludah could not ride, and his attempts to control his mount caused the men much laughter.

Once back at sea, the fleet cruised for several days before it came upon two French frigates lying inshore. Immediately, the Captain sent two English vessels to rout them, but the French were covered by artillery on the shore, and a great battle ensued during which, one of the frigates sunk, and the other was destroyed. The two English ships were so damaged, that they had to be towed back to the fleet, which then made for the safety of Gibraltar, to refit, and make ready for England. One night as they lay at rest, a cry went up that the French fleet was in the Strait of Gibraltar, and headed for open sea. All at once, the English ships came alive, making ready to chase the enemy. The fleet pursued the French in darkness, and at first light saw seven ships some miles ahead. The chase continued all day, and at four o'clock, the ships engaged one another in a furious battle. Oludah reported casualties in great numbers, remarking that he saw many of his crewmates 'dashed to pieces' and killed. He and another boy had been ordered to supply powder to the 'aftermost gun', and spent the entire battle running up and down the deck, gunfire, shot, and splinters flying past them at every step, with buckets of powder. The

noise of the 'thunderous guns' was terrifying.

At length, the English claimed a victory. Three French ships were taken as prizes, and two ran aground on the coast of Portugal as the remainder of the enemy fleet fled. The English blew these up where they lay stranded. Olaudah recalled that he had never experienced a more awful scene. The crew of *The Namur* looked on as the explosives took hold, and the blazing ships turned the night sky red. *The Namur* was too badly damaged to follow the straggling French fleet. She made running repairs and headed for England. Pascal, who had been injured during the battle, was transferred to *The Aetna* on his recovery, and Olaudah accompanied him as Captain's Steward. In October 1760, *The Aetna* was docked in Portsmouth for a refit. She was intended to sail for Havannah, Cuba, but the death of George II prevented the expedition. Instead, they were stationed at Cowes on the Isle of Wight.

Whilst staying on the island, Olaudah was happily surprised when a black servant boy of about his own age, embraced him as his 'countryman', and befriended him. They were able to see each other many times before the ship eventually sailed on 29th March 1761. The fleet was destined for Belle Isle, a small island off the coast of Newfoundland. They had been at sea for about ten days when *The Aetna* was rammed by *The Lynne*, leaving her in an unseaworthy state. Many of the crew boarded *The Lynne*, although running repairs on *The Aetna* ensured she was sound for the voyage. Even so, support vessels stayed close at hand. The fleet intended to land soldiers on Belle Isle, which was currently held by the French. *The Aetna* lost her Lieutenant on the first attempted landing on 8th April, but on 21st, the English fleet managed a successful attempt, and the infantry rapidly overcame the French, besieging the island fort for almost two months before the French eventually surrendered. Olaudah remarked that there were many skirmishes at sea and on land, and that the English fleet overwintered there.

Once the weather improved, *The Aetna* was made ready for St. Sebastian, Spain, following which she was sent as a 'cartel' to Bayonne in France. This was an important duty, which required an unarmed ship to enter enemy waters for the sole purpose of exchanging prisoners. *The Aetna* returned to Bell Isle in February 1762, leaving for Portsmouth a few months later. It was during this tour of duty that Olaudah recalled, he not only improved his reading and writing, and learnt basic mathematics, but that a man named Daniel Quin taught him to shave and dress hair. Olaudah's recollection of detail improves so radically from this point forward, that we might assume he had begun to keep a journal.

The ship made ready for Guernsey where Olaudah was reunited with his former landlady. But within a few months, he was to sail for London where the crew were to be paid off. Olaudah now believed that he would be set free and be able to earn a living for himself,

but as the ship sailed along the Thames, Pascal ordered for the boat to be manned and forced Olaudah aboard with him. In an uncharacteristic display, he drew out a dagger and announced to Olaudah that he was going to be sold. There was no time for him to collect his possessions, and Pascal immediately attempted to sell him to any vessel which approached. The reason for Pascal's change of heart may have been Olaudah's new status, since September 1762 he had been recognised aboard as able seaman Gustavus Vassa. Perhaps Pascal thought the false identity he had given him would be discovered. Olaudah however believed it to be the influence of his new mistress whom he thought to be jealous. At length, Pascal met with Captain James Doran of *The Charming Sally*, bound for the West Indies, and a deal was struck. Pascal left the ship having exclaimed harshly to Olaudah, 'If your prize money had been £10,000, I had a right to it all'. Olaudah, betrayed, threw himself upon the deck, 'ready to burst with sorrow and anguish'. Pascal did not know that his enterprising servant had concealed nine guineas in savings about his person.

Chapter 5: A Change of Ownership

The Charming Sally was bound for Portsmouth to join a fleet destined for the West Indies. Olaudah still hoped that some of his old shipmates would rescue him, but they came only to give him a good send off and bring him presents of oranges and necessary things for the voyage. He now felt he had no choice but to resign himself to a life of slavery – that which he feared most of all. At length, the fleet embarked for Montserrat. Olaudah remarked that two ships in the fleet collided during the voyage, one of which sank to the depths, mirroring his own despair. By the time they reached port it was February. The slaves were tasked with unloading the cargo, even though the sea was too rough. Olaudah stated that he now knew hard work for the first time. He was cut and bruised and tossed about, and to add to his misery, two of the sailors robbed him of all his money, and jumped ship. He found himself with nothing and nobody.

By May 1763, the ship was made ready for England, and Olaudah had renewed hopes of reaching her friendly shores. Instead, Doran took him ashore and revealed the true purpose of his being taken there. The deal Pascal had struck was for Doran to find Olaudah a deserving master, praising him as 'a very deserving boy'. So with excellent recommendations, Olaudah was sold to the Quaker merchant, Mr Robert King. King was a native of Philadelphia, and the owner of a prosperous shipping business. He was a kind man, and understood the value of Olaudah's education. His intention was to train him to work as a clerk once they returned to America. Whilst still in the West Indies, Olaudah worked on King's small boats or sloops, carrying cargoes of rum and sugar to various local ports. He observed how badly off the other slaves were, and began to consider himself fortunate to have such a good master. Olaudah was a quick learner, and

was soon trusted to carry out a variety of duties when called upon, most significantly that of clerk, receiving a delivering cargoes and managing the stores. In this way he made himself valuable to his master. Olaudah often found himself having to deal with what were termed 'live cargoes'. He was however, powerless to assist the slaves he witnessed enduring similar deprivations to those he had experienced. His resolve to fight for the cause of abolition may have already been present, but the events he witnessed and would record in his *Interesting Narrative*, ensured that the plight of slaves was ultimately known to those who could make a difference. Amongst these were graphic observations of torture, beatings, rape and child abuse.

Olaudah was careful to note that the English owners of estates in the West Indies were probably unaware of the inhuman behaviour of their estate managers. This was a truly diplomatic statement in order to protect the reputation of those social figures whose support the abolition movement would eventually secure. At the hands of such managers, slaves were punished severely for the slightest mistake and often tortured until they died, in order to set an example to the other slaves. Conditions were so poor on these estates that disease was rife and life expectancy was very low. On St. Kitts, Olaudah observed the common practice of applying the iron muzzle and neck braces loaded with hooks as instruments of torture. He saw slaves sold by bodyweight, at as little as three pence per pound, but took great pains to defend his master who, commanding his own affairs sold slaves as seen. All the islands in the West Indies shared a similar story. The treatment of mankind being so poor, that it had hardened the hearts of the traders. In contrast, on the estates that were managed by their owners, slaves received much better treatment, and in some cases had developed into healthy Negro colonies. It is interesting to note that although King is said to have treated his slaves well, Olaudah concedes that he often went hungry.

Annapolis, Sept. 29, 1767.

JUST IMPORTED

*In the Ship LORD LICONIER, Capt. DAVIES,
from the River GAMBIA, in AFRICA, and to
be sold by the Subscribers, in ANNAPOLIS, for
Cash, or good Bills of Exchange, on Wednesday
the 7th of October next,*

A CARGO of CHOICE HEALTHY SLAVES.

**The said Ship will take TOBACCO to
LONDON, on Liberty, at 6l. Sterling per Ton.**

Adapted from a newspaper announcement advertising the sale of a cargo of slaves purchased from the Gambia delta. The correspondents being John Ridout and Daniel of St. Tho'. Jenifer.

Chapter 6: The West Indies

Olaudah recorded that he experienced two mild earthquakes during his time on Montserrat. It was here that he became steward to King's man, Captain Farmer, on numerous trips between the islands. During the frequent voyages, Olaudah paid the mate to teach him to navigate, and occasionally Farmer would join in. Olaudah now resolved that his options were either to run away or to trade a few goods himself in order to make some money. He decided to trade and began by buying a glass with all of the money he had. He managed to sell this on the next island for twice as much as he had paid. On the return trip, he used the profit to buy two glasses, which earned him enough to buy four on the following trip. Just as he began to find success, he and another slave were robbed of the sacks of fruit they had intended to sell on one of the islands. They complained to the commanding officer of the local fort whose response was to take a horsewhip to them forcing them to run for their lives. Eventually they came across the thieves who had stolen their fruit and pleaded for them to return the source of their livelihood. The thieves gave them back two sacks of fruit, which they sold at the market for an excellent profit.

In the space of four years, Olaudah's schemes had earned him a few pounds with which he hoped to buy his freedom. But even freedom for black people was precarious. Olaudah had witnessed many freeborn black men being taken by slavers to crew their ships, or to sell on the other islands. Justice in the West Indies was prejudiced in favour of the white man's word, and no protesting freeborn black man could change his fate if the slave traders decided to take him. Olaudah used some of the money he made to buy a Bible, although they were rarely for sale in the islands. This was so that the principles of Christianity were not passed on to the slaves - the teachings of the Bible being contrary to the slave trade and the principle that all men are equal in the eyes of God.

Late in the year 1764, Olaudah had sailed with Farmer and a cargo of slaves for Georgia and Charles Town, aboard the *Providence* and on their return to Montserrat was overjoyed to hear that the ship was to be refitted and made ready for Philadelphia, where Olaudah hoped he could earn his freedom. As the ship was made ready he was called to a meeting with his master, Robert King and Captain Farmer, where King told him that one of his shipmates had informed him that Olaudah would run away once they reached Philadelphia. Olaudah argued that as long as his master treated him kindly he would continue to serve him well, but was hopeful that one day he might earn his freedom. After some discussion Farmer vouched for his good character and revealed to King that the matter had only come about because Olaudah had informed on the particular shipmate for stealing, the mate having lied to get his own back. The matter was resolved but King, being a good man, stated that he was aware that Olaudah had been given the opportunity to make some of his own money, adding that he was prepared to give him further opportunities to do so, and that if he ever raised the forty pounds sterling, which was the sum originally paid

for him, he could buy his freedom, but that he was never to discuss the matter further. Olaudah agreed and left to board ship with a full heart, now certain that one day he would be a free man.

The ship reached Philadelphia in 1765. During his stay Olaudah had a strange experience with a fortuneteller who was able to relate much of his life story to him. She told him that he would not be a slave for much longer and that within a few months his life would be in danger twice. If he survived these misfortunes, he would be successful. Olaudah saw these predictions as a prophecy that he would soon be a free man. Not long afterwards the ship returned to Montserrat to take on a cargo of slaves for St. Eustatia, heading on to Georgia, where Olaudah was struck down with Malaria. He spent eleven days in a fever and came very close to death. Fortunately, he was so well thought of, he was attended by a good Doctor, and recovered in time for the return journey to Montserrat. Olaudah made several voyages from Montserrat to Georgia and Charlestown, with cargoes of African slaves, termed 'live cargo', during the year 1765. On one occasion at Savannah, Georgia, he was talking to some slaves in their masters' yard when the master and his man came in drunk. He recorded that they took offence to him because he was a stranger, and although the master was well acquainted with Captain Farmer, he and his man saw fit to enter into a violent attack on him. They did not stop beating him until he couldn't move, leaving him wounded and bleeding profusely. He was left in this condition and exposed to the elements for a number of hours, after which the hostile master had him taken to jail. Farmer realising that Olaudah had not returned to the ship, began a search for him, eventually finding him in a squalid cell. When he saw the state of him he broke down. Even the best Doctor's feared he would not recover from his wounds. He did so however, only by the skill and perseverance of one Dr Brady, although he was unable to work for almost a month.

The Prudence set sail and safely reached Montserrat at the end of 1765. Here the crew were transferred to a new sloop called *The Nancy*. Olaudah was secretly pleased because *The Nancy* was a larger vessel, and he would have more space for his own cargo, which was earning him increasing amounts of money. He mainly sold to Quakers where he could, as he felt them to be more honest than some of the traders he dealt with. One Sunday morning as Olaudah was on his way to church, he happened to pass a Quaker meeting house, and as the doors were open, he saw that the room was full of people. A little further down the street, he was similarly impressed by crowds of people who had gathered in and around a church where the Reverend George Whitefield was preaching. This enthusiasm for religion made a huge impression on him.

Once their cargo had been off loaded and the new boat laden with cargo, they set sail for Montserrat. Olaudah calculated that this trip would ensure him enough profit to purchase

his freedom, but on arrival, their master redirected them to St. Eustatia, where they were to take on a 'live cargo' of slaves destined for Savannah, Georgia. By the time they returned to Montserrat, Olaudah's fortune amounted to about forty-seven pounds. He went to his master the following morning as he breakfasted with Captain Farmer. King was outraged that Olaudah should have taken the offer of purchasing his freedom so seriously, but being a fair man, he acknowledged the honesty and hard work that Olaudah had put into saving the money. Captain Farmer spoke out in defence of his bid for freedom, and eventually King took the money, directing him to acquire his 'manumission' from the secretary at the Register Office. Olaudah was overcome with joy and having regained his composure raced to the office where the Registrar congratulated him and drew up the certificate which set him free from bondage. The manumission of Gustavus Vasa [sic] was signed by Robert King on 11th July 1766. Olaudah was now a free man. Although he desired to make his way to London, he remained loyal to those who had set him free and was entered on the crew of *The Nancy* as an able-bodied seaman at a wage of thirty-six shillings per month.

The Nancy arrived in Savannah, Georgia in August 1766. During her time in port, a slave belonging to a Mr Read began to shout abuse at Olaudah. There followed a fight whereby Olaudah gave the slave a sound beating. The next morning, Mr Read went aboard and demanded that Olaudah be flogged. Despite Farmer's pleas on his behalf, the slave owner threatened to bring constables aboard to deal with him, and he was forced into hiding for nearly a week whilst the matter was sufficiently resolved to enable him to return to the boat. Olaudah was made to settle the costs in the matter, and then found himself facing an argument about a cargo of bullocks they were taking to Montserrat. Olaudah had been promised two for his own profit, but he was told he must take turkeys instead. He was extremely unhappy that Captain Farmer was acting in such an awkward way and resolved to leave the crew on their arrival in port. However, the Captain and the mate, who had complained of sickness when they set sail, became so ill that they could not perform their duties. It was November and the seas were stormy. Several of the bullocks had died, and the remainder were near to being drowned. *The Nancy* was no longer watertight and had to be constantly pumped out. Olaudah found himself in charge of the vessel, navigating only by his former experience and the few lessons he had had. After only a few days, the Captain died. Olaudah reflected that he owed this man his freedom and was saddened to lose such a loyal friend. By the time the sloop made port in Montserrat, all the bullocks had died, but Olaudah's cargo of turkeys, although they had remained on the open deck throughout the storms they had encountered, fetched a three hundred percent profit.

As a consequence of his brining *The Nancy* safely into port, Olaudah was styled a Captain, much to his own amusement. The death of Captain Farmer left him once again to his own devices. He thought of returning to England, but King persuaded him to undertake another voyage to Georgia. The mate was still sick, so a new Captain, William Phillips

was appointed. The sloop steered for Georgia with a cargo of about 20 slaves on 30th January 1767 from St. Eustatia. Phillips was boastful of his navigational skills but Olaudah who had travelled the route many times observed that he took a strange course. By 4th February, Olaudah had started to have reoccurring premonitions of a shipwreck whereby he found himself the only man who could save the crew. A few days afterwards during the hours of darkness, while Olaudah took the Captain's watch, the sloop's course took it close to a rocky outcrop where it became caught in a strong cross-current, and was dragged towards the rock. Olaudah's attempts to warn the sleeping Captain were initially ignored so that by the time he took control the sloop was already amongst the rocks and could not be steered out. Olaudah saw his life flash before him. He recalled himself cursing that same vessel only days before, and called out to God for forgiveness. In his panic, Phillips ordered that the hatches above the hold where the slaves were, must be nailed down as there was not enough room in the small boat for more than the ten crew. Olaudah flew into a rage at him and reminded him that his mistakes alone had led them to this point.

Olaudah saw to it that the hatches were left open, and the small boat, which had been damaged, was repaired and made ready for the morning. It would have been fatal to leave the sloop during darkness. Most of the crew spent the night drinking in order to allay their fears. When daylight broke, they saw that they were marooned on the reef of a small island about six miles away. In order to save every one of the thirty-two on board, including the slaves, most of their provisions and possessions were left behind. Olaudah stated that the white crewmen were so drunk they had to be carried to the boat, and were unable to help in the rescue. He does not mention of Phillips, the Captain. They set out, carrying the small boat over the reef where it broke the surface of the water, and rowing across the tracts of sea between the reefs where the water was deep enough for the boat. Olaudah stated that only five people; three black men, a Dutch Creole sailor and himself, took the oars. It took a long time, but eventually they reached the island shore and all the men were saved.

Phillips' course had taken them to the keys of the Bahamas, where dangerous reefs claimed many vessels. The island was uninhabited, but the reef was full of fish and there was a pool of fresh water on the beach, so that the crew and the slaves were able to eat and drink. For shelter, they made tents from sailcloth, which they had brought with them. It took eleven days to repair the hull of the small boat, which had been further damaged through hauling it across the reef. Once it was seaworthy, Olaudah accompanied the Captain and five crew, taking with them only the barest provisions, in search of help to rescue those left on shore. They rowed by day, stopping off at islands in search of fresh water by night, but they were unlucky. Unable to eat the salt beef they had taken with them without water, they became increasingly weak. On about the fourth day at sea, they spotted a vessel in the distance. It was a sloop, known as a 'wrecker', a boat with a crew that scoured the islands

for shipwrecks, rescuing the crews, but profiting from all that remained aboard the wreck. There were about forty people on board the wrecker, including the crew of a whaling schooner that was wrecked two days before *The Nancy* had run onto the reef. A deal was struck with regard to their own wreck, provided that the sloop sailed for the little island to rescue those who remained stranded. It took only two days to reach them.

The crew of the whaling schooner were left on the island and employed to work on the wreck of *The Nancy*. Phillips crew, and the cargo of slaves were taken aboard the wrecker, which set sail for New Providence. With so many people on board, provisions were low, so the sloop was forced to stop to take on fresh water and whatever shellfish could be caught. The following evening they were caught in a storm and forced to cut away the mast. The anchor had become caught on some rocks, and the sloop was in danger of being smashed on the reef. The sea was crashing all around them, but two men from the wrecker's crew rowed out into the swell in order to free the anchor. Miraculously, they did so and were able to return without being swallowed by the storm. The sloop and all onboard were saved. Olaudah stated that three weeks had elapsed since the shipwreck and that none of them expected to survive. The storm lasted for two days, by the end of which they found that they had somehow cheated fate.

After running repairs, the sloop took three days to reach New Providence, where they were well received. The free men of the crew, now safely ashore had no money with which to buy passage to return to Georgia, and some were tricked into the service of a merchant vessel destined for Jamaica. The remainder stayed the three weeks it took for Phillips to hire a sloop and make ready for Georgia. The same morning that their sloop sailed, a gale blew up and her sails were lost. She grounded on the reef but luckily the water was deep and she freed herself. Olaudah saw this as yet another clash with death. They returned to New Providence for repairs where the local people swore they were cursed, or that one of the slaves on board was a witch. Olaudah stated that he alone was not afraid of such superstition and put his trust in God. After seven days they arrived safely in Georgia.

Olaudah's previous experiences of Georgia had not been good, and he determined to get back to Montserrat as soon as he could. During the few days he spent there; he was imprisoned by the nightwatch who sentenced him to a flogging, from which he only managed to escape by using the influence of his friend Dr Brady; he endured an attempted kidnap by white slavers, which he was able to talk himself out of, his understanding of English being too good for the rogues to pass him off as a slave; and he presided over the funeral of a black infant, at the wishes of a desperate mother who seeing him to be a good Christian man implored him to take the service, as she could not find any white man willing to give her child a Christian burial.

Finally Olaudah was able to buy himself passage on the sloop *Speedwell* destined for Martinico, under Captain John Bunton. He determined never to return to Georgia and to get a ship back to England as soon as he could. Sadly, Olaudah loaned Bunton the money which he needed to get to Montserrat, although he pleaded for the Captain to return his money, Bunton was evasive, and he was forced to accompany him on a second journey. At length however, Olaudah managed to persuade Bunton to return his money, which he did so begrudgingly, and he took the first vessel he could find to St. Eustatia. He remarked that all the ships destined for England must leave the islands by 26th July and that it was already late in the month. He travelled to St. Kitts in the hope of finding a vessel to Montserrat but he could not secure a place because black men were not permitted to leave the island without first advertising their 'notice of leave'. This measure was put in place to prevent slaves from escaping, but Olaudah was a free man. Eventually he found some gentlemen he knew from Montserrat who could testify to his freedom. He finally arrived at Montserrat after six months of absence on 23rd July. He immediately sought out Robert King in order to relate the fate of *The Nancy*, and ask his leave to return to England. He learnt that King has lost his house and possessions, and almost his life when his property was engulfed in a landslide. King attempted to persuade Olaudah to stay in Montserrat where he was certain of making his fortune, but Olaudah declined. On 26th July, he embarked for London on the ship *The Andromache* together with a letter of reference from King, under the Captaincy of John Hamer, at the price of seven guineas.

Chapter 7: England and Back Again

After seven weeks at sea, *The Andromache* docked at Cherry Garden Stairs, on the south bank of The Thames, four miles down river from Westminster. Olaudah must have crewed on the ship as he received wages enough to cover his journey. He left, his own master, with thirty-seven guineas in his pocket, and immediately went to find the Miss Guerin's, Pascal's cousins, who had been so kind to him when he was last in London. He found them in Greenwich. Having been separated for more than three years, they were delighted to see him again, but Olaudah's meeting with Pascal, which took place at Greenwich Park, was less successful. It seemed to Olaudah that, even after so many years of loyal service, Pascal did not regret his rough treatment of him. When Olaudah asked after the prize money that had been rightfully due to him, Pascal suggested that he took him to court. Olaudah declined out of respect of his friends, the Miss Guerin's and never mentioned the matter again. A court case would have destroyed their reputation in society. Pascal it seems had pocketed Olaudah's share of the prize money from *The Aetna*, which he assumed ran into thousands of pounds. By September, the Miss Guerin's had found Olaudah employment with one Captain O'Hara as a hairdresser in Coventry Court, Haymarket. Whilst living there, Olaudah took advantage of his various neighbours

talents, learning the French Horn from one, and arithmetic from another who ran an evening school. He was able to keep up his education later when he secured himself a position with Dr. Charles Irving of Pall Mall.

Although he was able to make a trade out of hairdressing, the wages at £12 per year were too low to support the cost of living in the city. Once more, Olaudah's thoughts turned to making a living at sea. He resolved to see Turkey, and was fortunate enough, in May 1768, to secure a place as hairdresser onboard the ship *Delaware*, bound for Italy and Turkey under Captain John Jolly. The ship was fitted out in luxury and they ate nothing but the best food and drank the best wine. They docked in Villa France, Nice, and Leghorn, where Olaudah was able to explore the fine buildings he saw. During the journey, the mate helped him to improve his navigational skills, for which it seems he had some talent. Their final destination was the ancient port of Smyrna in Turkey. Olaudah was fascinated by the customs of these people, especially the fact that the women were 'covered' – by this he meant that they wore the traditional burkha. They stayed in port for five months before returning to London via Oporto, Portugal, where their landing coincided with carnival time. Here the ship was searched and all Bibles were confiscated. Anyone found in possession of a Bible on shore would be flogged and sentenced to ten years of slavery.

Olaudah recorded that during the visit they saw 'The Garden of Eden', which may have been the famous gardens of the Alhambra. After Oporto, the ship returned to London laden with wine and 'other commodities'. It was then refitted and made for Genoa, one of the finest cities Olaudah had ever seen, although he felt his experience was spoilt by the deplorable state of the salves he saw there. These were 'galley-slaves' whose manpower was used to row boats throughout the Mediterranean. They took on a cargo at very little cost and headed for the bay of Naples. Whilst they were in port, Mount Vesuvius erupted. Olaudah had a perfect view from the ship, and commented that they were so close, the deck was covered in ash. They quickly concluded their business and set sail for Smyrna, arriving in December. Olaudah remarked that people travelled in caravans from as far away as India in order to trade at the markets there. On this occasion however, a plague broke out and they were confined on board ship until it was safe to take on goods. The *Delaware* arrived back in London in March 1770 laden with a valuable cargo. During the following voyage, the ship's cook almost set fire to her. This would be Olaudah's last voyage into the extraordinary world of eastern trading on *The Delaware* as the crew were afterwards discharged.

Once again, Olaudah found himself being pulled in the direction of the West Indies. It is probable that as a stranger, and a black man, he could not establish sufficient business contacts to support him in London. He secured a position as steward on the ship *Grenada*

Planter with Captain William Robertson, taking some goods with him on the voyage to sell in the Grenada's. Unfortunately, he sold most of them to a white man on credit, whom he later discovered could not pay. Several other sailors had fallen for the same trick, and although they managed to find the culprit, he had very little money to give, even under the threat of cutting off his ears. So Olaudah returned to England with less profit than he anticipated. His account states that during the return voyage he almost blew the ship up, when going below decks to undertake some form of business he absent-mindedly stood his lighted candle in a barrel of gunpowder. Thankfully he realised before a catastrophe occurred. They reached England after twenty-eight days, and Olaudah almost immediately secured a position as steward on a fine ship named *The Jamaica* under Captain David Watt. It sailed for Nevis, Jamaica, in December 1771.

Although he thought Nevis very fine, Olaudah was astonished at the treatment of the slaves, especially that black people sought employment to flog, punish, or torture, their own race. One might consider the desperation of these people forced by white men into such a degrading position, but as Olaudah had previously remarked, the people of the islands had become hardened by the trade. He was particularly disturbed to see a black man held up by his wrists, some distance from the ground, with his ankles weighted down 'in which position he was flogged most unmercifully'. As punishment here, the slaves were staked out on the ground until they were killed by poisonous snakes, and some were even burned alive. It was the case in Jamaica as in all the islands that a black man's word counted for nothing against that of a white man. The slaves had no right to justice - they actually had no rights at all.

Whilst in Jamaica, Olaudah was fortunate enough to sell £25 of his own goods to a white man of seemingly gentleman status. On receiving the goods however, the man refused to pay, and everywhere Olaudah asked for the money, he received threats of the accusations that the so called gentleman would make against him in court. Although the claims were false and ridiculous, Olaudah found himself in no position to argue. Once again, he was obliged to submit to the folly of the white man. At Kingston, Olaudah was surprised to see that on a Sunday all the black people gathered together to meet and dance according to the culture of their own country. He commented that these people still retained many of their traditional customs, including the burial of their dead with grave goods.

Olaudah returned to England, and having tired of life at sea for the time being, looked up Dr. Irving, who was happy to take him back. He stayed with Irving, assisting him in his scientific work until May 1773 when they learnt of an expedition being mounted to the North Pole in search of the north-east passage to India.

Chapter 8: Voyage to the North Pole

The expedition was to be led by the Honourable Constantine John Phipps on *HMS The Racehorse*. Dr. Irving, who was famous for his desalination experiments, was keen to associate himself with the voyage and Olaudah was asked to accompany him in order to assist Irving with the work he had been perfecting to turn salt water into drinking water. They sailed with Phipps on *The Racehorse* from Sheerness in the company of *HMS Carcass* under Captain Skeffington Lutwidge on 4th June 1773. Careful attention had been paid to the preparation of both ships, which were small manoeuvrable 'bomb ketches'. Their hulls had been reinforced with seasoned oak to protect them from the crushing weight of the sheet ice they would encounter on their voyage. They had stocked abundant good quality provisions and clothes for the expedition, and each had a compliment of ninety men, although *The Carcass* reduced her number to eighty, the extra weight making her sit too low in the water. Amongst the crew of *The Carcass* was to be found a fourteen year old mid-shipman listed as coxswain, Horatio Nelson, whose family connections, and experience in navigating coastal waters, had secured him a place in charge of one of the small boats.

Olaudah recorded that *The Racehorse* was so crammed full of provisions that there was very little room for anyone. He took to sleeping in the Doctors storeroom, where all manner of things were stored including explosives. Olaudah persisted in his resolve to keep a journal of the voyage but once again he found his carelessness with a candle at the heart of a near disaster. One evening, he removed his candle from its protective lantern to get a better light, perhaps because the lantern glass had become sooty or the candle was burning low. The candle sent out a spark that set fire to everything inside the store, including Olaudah's clothes. The alarm was quickly raised, and after some commotion, the flames were smothered. Although severely reprimanded for his actions, within a few weeks Olaudah returned to the same storeroom to continue writing his journal as this was the only private place available to him, but he vowed to take more care with his candles.

On 20th June, Dr. Irving, set up his distilling apparatus, which Olaudah operated, purifying up to forty gallons of water a day for use as drinking water on the ship. They reached Greenland on 28th June and experienced twenty-four hour daylight for the first time. The weather had become extremely cold, and they began to pass icebergs. Large whales, and walrus, which they believed to be sea-horses frequently came to the ship, but they found they did not have the skill to harpoon them. On 30th June, the Captain of a local ship boarded *The Racehorse* to warn them of the dangerous waters ahead, telling them that there were already three ships lost in the ice. The expedition continued in spite of the well meant warning, following an easterly course until 11th July when they were forced to change direction by an 'unimpenetrable body of ice'. They skirted this until

the 29th or 30th July when they were prevented from sailing any further by a plane of ice which stretched unbroken to the horizon. Olaudah remarked on the beauty of the landscape. The sun was generally shining and constant daylight gave the party an odd sense of cheerfulness. Food was plentiful. They killed many different kinds of animals, including nine polar bears, but the walrus evaded them. They once managed to wound one from a small boat, only to have it return with others, which set about a vicious attack on the vessel, almost pitching them into the freezing sea.

On 1st August, both ships became stuck fast in the ice. By the 7th, there was some concern that the pressure of the ice would shatter their hulls and leave them stranded. The decision was taken to saw out the ice from around the ships, which was up to twelve feet deep, in order to save them from destruction. It was difficult and dangerous work, Olaudah recalled that he slipped into a pond that they had made, and was lucky to be saved from drowning. The decision was then made for some of the crew, led by Phipps, to haul the small boats across the ice, which had closed in behind them, out into the open sea. He left Lutwidge in charge of the ships and the remainder of the crew, in case an opening in the ice should appear. After two or three days, the boats had made very little progress across the ice. Once again, Olaudah found himself in the hands of fate, knowing that they could not exist on the ice for long in the freezing temperatures. The ships were now some miles behind them and out of sight. Such was their despair at this desperate situation that the men began to cry out to God to save them from peril. Miraculously, as if in answer to their prayers, the wind changed direction and with it came a mild current, which thawed the ice. Now, the ships, and the small boats, taking advantage of the temporary thaw, came together across the ice by means of signals. It took nearly two days to reach the open sea. The expedition left the Arctic on the 19th August, with Olaudah concluding that this was an inhospitable and desolate place. There must have been huge disappointment that the expedition had failed.

On 10th September, they ran into a terrible storm that washed their small boats and many of the interesting things they had collected in Greenland into the sea and laid them down in the water so that they were close to capsizing. *The Racehorse* took on so much water that some of her guns had to be thrown overboard. They passed another ship in considerable distress, she had lost her masts and was listing, but they were unable to assist. They also lost sight of *The Carcass* during the storm, and did not see her again for two weeks. The two ships reunited off Orfordness and sailed for London, reaching Deptford on 30th September.

Chapter 9: Christian Acts

Olaudah remained in Dr Irving's service for a short time but eventually left him to find his own lodgings back at Coventry Court. Here he reflected on his life so far, and the hand which fate had dealt him. He resolved above anything to become a good Christian, after which, he set about finding a faith that would instruct him according to his own perception of the Bible. He went to many churches and spoke to many people, but all he discovered was that in general, Christians did not practice what they preached, and that English people were not so honest as those he had dealt with elsewhere. He decided that he would be better off returning to Turkey where he had found the people more honest in their dealings than practically anywhere else in those parts of the world he had seen.

In the spring of 1774, Olaudah secured himself as steward on board the *Anglicania* under Captain John Hughes, which would take him back to Smyrna, Turkey. He also secured an acquaintance, John Annis, a black man, a position as ships cook. After only two months of service on the vessel, Annis' former master, William Kirkpatrick, boarded the ship and forcibly took Annis away. To Olaudah's surprise, the Captain and his mate seemed to have conspired in this act, perhaps receiving a reward from Kirkpatrick. Annis had been shipped off to the West Indies at the first opportunity, but Olaudah claimed to have arranged a writ of *habeas corpus* to be served on Kirkpatrick. The event was reported in the London Chronicle of 27th April 1774. The philanthropist, Granville Sharp was able to instruct Olaudah as to the action he should take, but although he paid for his services, his attorney failed to comply with his wishes. Olaudah later discovered that on reaching St. Kitts, Annis was staked out and flogged, and was kept in chains for the remainder of his life, which was thankfully short.

It seems that this event plunged Olaudah into a deep depression, and he turned to the Bible for comfort. One day as he wandered London's backstreets, he was invited into the home of an old sea-faring man, who was happy to discuss the Bible with him. Soon a 'Dissenting Minister' arrived at the house and joined in the discussion. When they were done, Olaudah was invited to a meeting that evening at the Minister's church feast. When he arrived, it being named a feast, Olaudah expected to find food and entertainment. Instead, there were prayers and singing, and towards the end of the meeting, bread and water was shared between the congregation. Olaudah was overwhelmed at this act of sharing and felt that at last he had found his place with God. The next day saw him return to his new friend to discuss the meeting. At last feeling a sense of belonging, he revelled in this new faith, which would sustain him throughout his future life.

Olaudah's search for new employment led him to one Captain Richard Strange with whom he secured a position as steward on *The Hope* bound for Cadiz, Spain. He wrote that it

was a 'delightful voyage' but that he was tormented by his study of the scriptures. On the evening of the 6th October, as he sat alone trying to decipher the meaning of his new faith, he had a vision of Jesus on the cross, and truly believed that God had reached out to him. The ship returned to London in December, and Olaudah immediately reacquainted himself with his Christian friends. About this time he wrote a poem, *Reflections on the State of my Mind...*, in which he poured out all the feelings of grief and misery he had felt during his lifetime. Significant to this was a persistent feeling of being alone in the world. He strongly felt that his new faith had delivered him from his past experiences and given him the chance of a new life.

In March 1775, Olaudah once again embarked for Cadiz on *The Hope*. The outward voyage was uneventful but as they were entering the port, the ship struck a rock called 'The Porpus' which ripped through the keel. They were rapidly taking on water and there was a great deal of confusion as to what to do. Passenger boats in the vicinity came alongside, and the ship was unloaded at sea. Enough water was pumped to re-float her and she was beached on the nearest shore due to her being no longer seaworthy. After a few days, repairs had been made, and having conducted their business at Cadiz, they continued first to Gibraltar and then to Malaga. Olaudah remarked on the beauty of the new Cathedral, which was not quite finished, but was shocked to find the custom of bull-baiting and other entertainments carried out on a Sunday evening, at odds with his new Christian beliefs.

The ship returned with a cargo to Cadiz, leaving for London in June. During the voyage the ship sailed against the wind and made very little progress. One night, Olaudah dreamt of seeing a little boat in distress off the starboard at around midday. The following day, the wind had abated and around noon a cry went up that a boat had been seen off the starboard. The sea remained rough, and the ship was brought to a halt so that the little boat might have a chance of reaching her. At length the boat came alongside. It contained eleven men who, without provisions or a usable oar found themselves at the mercy of the sea. They were soaked to the skin and Olaudah believed close to death. As they were brought on deck, they fell to their knees in thanks. They were the crew of a Portuguese boat carrying corn that had sank without warning due to her load shifting, earlier that day. Two men went down with the boat, but somehow the little boat was saved along with these men.

Chapter 10: The Musquito Shore

In November 1775, Olaudah was invited to accompany Dr. Irving on an adventure to Jamaica. Irving had purchased a fine 150 ton sloop *The Morning Star*, and had it in mind to cultivate a plantation on the Musquito Shore. On board were four Musquito natives

who had been brought to England by slave traders, one of whom was the King's son, although Olaudah believed all four to be chiefs. Olaudah took great trouble to teach the Prince about Christianity, but his work was undone by the crew, who made a mockery of his efforts. On reaching the coast of Martinico, a great storm blew up and the main mast crashed over the side, bringing the sails and rigging down with it. Olaudah remarked that although he saw men narrowly escape with their lives, not one person on board was hurt. They arrived at Jamaica on 14th January 1776 and stayed in port to buy what they needed for their adventure. Olaudah went with Irving to buy some slaves for the plantation, recording that he deliberately chose African slaves. They arrived on the Musquito Shore at Dupeupy on 12th February, where the native Musquito's who had travelled with them immediately disembarked and were met by the Musquito King.

Irving was obviously speculating for land. The sloop sailed southwards until it came to a place called Cape Gracias a Dios, where there was a large lagoon at the convergence of three rivers. They were shown the landscape by native people who seemed pleased that they intended to settle there, and it was decided to cultivate the plantation on the rich soil close to one of the rivers. Whilst the slaves began to clear the vegetation, the sloop was sent to trade at Black River, where she was captured by the Spanish Colonial Coastguard, leaving the adventurers stranded at the plantation. They worked during the day, lighting fires at night to keep away the wild animals. Dr. Irving quickly became accustomed to curing snakebites, for which he recommended half a glass of strong rum mixed with cayenne pepper.

They regularly traded goods and services with the natives, who paid them in silver. Although the natives refused to work for them, they sold them fish, and helped them to cut down trees to build houses. Olaudah remarked that they worked in the same way as the native Africans, and thought they were the most simple and honest people he had come across, their only vice being a liking for strong liquor. They would come to the plantation to share rum made by the planters from pineapples and would not leave.

The native 'governor' took a regular tour of all his land, which now included the plantation. Being quite unruly, the governors' party was received with some reluctance. Olaudah wrote that the governor became very drunk and abusive to the local Musquito's, at which point Dr. Irving intervened. He was however no match for the governor and fearing for his own safety hid in the forest, leaving Olaudah to deal with the situation. After a short while, Olaudah brought the governor's people together and pointed to the stars, explaining that they had awoken the wrath of his God who would punish them. At this, the governor and his people bid a hasty farewell, believing there to be some kind of magic at work.

As a consequence of this act in their defence, the Musquito's held a feast in the Europeans honour. This took some days to prepare because the drink was made especially for the occasion. On the day of the feast the planters joined in the dancing and some feasted on tortoise and alligator meat, although Olaudah recalled that he could not bring himself to eat any of it. When night fell huge fires were lit and the elders danced in what were perceived to be terrifying costumes. Olaudah believed it to be wonderful that such merrymaking could occur between 'different nations and complexions' and that the natives and Europeans mixed so happily.

The rainy season lasted from May to August and flood waters washed away much of the crops they had planted. By now Olaudah longed to return to Europe and in June, Dr. Irving regretfully gave him permission to leave. The Doctor accompanied him by canoe to a port where he was secured a place on a sloop bound for Jamaica. But during his first night, a schooner, also belonging to the same owners, pulled up alongside in need of crew. Olaudah was asked if he would go aboard as a sailor. He refused, and the owner flew into a rage, denying Olaudah of his free status claiming that the sloop was bound for 'Carthagena' where he would be sold. He then had him bound, tied, and hoisted to a mast. When Olaudah cried out in pain, this owner, one Hughes, brought out a gun and threatened to shoot him.

The next morning Olaudah was 'let down', due to him being in the way of getting the sails up. As he went about the ship, he found a carpenter, a Mr. Cox with whom he was previously acquainted, and who also knew Dr. Irving. Mr. Cox was at last able to explain Olaudah's situation to the Captain and pointed out that his good friend Dr. Irving would seek justice should he ever discover how his steward had been treated. It was agreed that Olaudah should be allowed off the vessel in a small canoe rowed by a boy. On hearing this Olaudah hastily left the boat, but he hadn't got far before the owner came on deck and threatened to shoot him if he did not return to the ship. Olaudah knew that he meant this and began to return to the boat. He was close enough that the young boy instructed to take him back to shore could climb back onto the sloop, but now an argument broke out between the owner and the Captain. The boat was sailing quite fast, so Olaudah took his opportunity and headed for shore.

The other owner lived close by, and Olaudah was able to report the disgraceful treatment he had received as a free man, having agreed and paid for his passage. The owner directed him to a Musquito camp across the lagoon where he might get help to find another ship. He was able to agree terms with these kind people, and five natives escorted him in a canoe the fifty miles along the coast, across difficult terrain and through high seas to where they thought they could find a vessel for him. After three days they came across a sloop commanded by a Captain Jennings who agreed to allow Olaudah to work his passage to Jamaica. Once again

Olaudah had been tricked. The sloop wasn't heading for Jamaica at all, but worked its way along the Musquito Shore collecting a cargo of mahogany as she went. Olaudah and some other men were given the task of cutting down the trees for the cargo. After sixteen days, they came across a sloop commanded by John Baker, called *The Indian Queen*. Baker was an Englishman, he told Olaudah that if he could secure two more crew, he would set sail for Jamaica at once, and offered him good wages for his services.

Olaudah gave Jennings notice of his pending departure on the other sloop. In response, Jennings immediately set sail, with Olaudah aboard. In his desperation Olaudah called out to a boat belonging to the other sloop, which pulled up alongside, and with some help from the crew who were sympathetic of his treatment, Olaudah and his possessions made it safely to *The Indian Queen*. It was almost July 1776, and Olaudah was again disappointed. Instead of heading for Jamaica, the vessel skirted the Musquito coast. Baker turned out to be a loathsome man, and was very cruel, even to his white crew, often beating them as severely as he did the black crew. When the sloop stopped to trade, often Olaudah, being a virtual prisoner, was the only man who remained on board with the Captain. If the crew did not return as anticipated, Baker would beat and abuse Olaudah in the cruellest manner. Once, after hitting him with everything he had to hand, he struck him with a red-hot stick from the fire. This time, Baker, who must have been suffering some kind of madness, even brought gunpowder on deck and threatened to blow the sloop up, because he feared a Spanish ship was about to take her. Olaudah defended himself and the ship with an axe, but after a long stand-off, as night fell Baker relented. In the morning, the Spanish ship was found to be an English sloop, which pulled up close by.

To Olaudah's surprise, he discovered that his old friend Dr. Irving was on board and on his way to Jamaica. Baker would not allow Olaudah to leave his ship so Olaudah sent a message, begging the Doctor to intervene. Irving, as a passenger was unable to help, but supplied Olaudah with some provisions. He told him that after he left the plantation, he had taken on a white overseer to look after the African slaves to whom Olaudah had been such a kind master. The white man beat them unmercifully, and the slaves attempted to escape in a large canoe, but having no experience of such a vessel they capsized it and were all drowned. Dr. Irving's plantation was presently uncultivated, and he was on his way to Jamaica to purchase more slaves.

Olaudah was forced to stay on board *The Indian Queen* when she sailed for Kingston on 14th October, where he demanded that Baker paid him what he owed him. Baker refused to give him anything. Although Dr. Irving attempted to help, it remained the law that a black man's word could not be taken against that of a white man. By now Baker was threatening to beat Olaudah for causing him so much trouble. Thankfully, Dr. Irving managed to secure him the protection of one Captain Douglass of *HMS Squirrel*, a man of war, but

Olaudah resented Douglass's use of free men as labour. The oppression of black men in the vicinity was quite clear. Olaudah once accompanied a black tailor called Joe Diamond, who was a free man, to collect a debt due to him. His request for what was owed to him was met with the threat of a horsewhipping, so that the tailor had to run away without his money.

Fearing for his own safety, Olaudah now sought a ship to take him off the islands as soon as possible. In November, he chanced upon a fleet leaving for England, and was able to secure himself a place. He bid farewell to his friend Dr. Irving for the last time - Some months after his arrival in England, news would arrive, to Olaudah's great sorrow, that he had died as a result of eating some poisoned fish. There is some confusion however to whether this was merely gossip as Irving's death was not recorded as happening until 1794. It being winter, the voyage was stormy but only one incident occurred of any note, and that was the sinking of an American privateer that manoeuvred amongst the fleet in an attempt to break up their convoy. The victorious ship was *HMS Squirrel* which had joined the fleet in Jamaica. They arrived at Plymouth on 7th January 1777 and shortly afterwards, Olaudah made his way to London.

Chapter 11: A Mission in Life

Until 1784, Olaudah would earn his living as a servant. In 1779 he was in the service of Governor Matthias MacNamara, who had maintained connections with Africa despite having been dismissed from service. On noting Olaudah's religious disposition, he asked whether he would consider spreading the faith amongst the African people as a missionary. Olaudah said he would, and a petition to this effect, in the form of a letter proposing Olaudah for missionary service, was presented to Robert Lowth, Bishop of London in March 1779. If accepted, Olaudah would have to be ordained as a missionary, but the Bishop declined saying that no new missionaries were to be sent to Africa. Olaudah left MacNamara's employment soon afterwards and went into the service of George Pitt, Baron Rivers, colonel of the Dorset militia, spending several years working for him at the militia camp at Coxheath, near Maidstone, Kent. Although this was one of the largest camps set up to defend England from a possible French invasion, Olaudah tells us nothing about it. He recorded that 'operations there were too minute and uninteresting to make detail of'. We might conclude from this that he found life in service a little beneath his dignity.

In 1783, Olaudah recorded that he visited Wales as a tourist, and narrowly escaped being trapped underground when visiting a coalmine, stating that one man who was quite close to him was buried alive.

In the spring of 1784, the temptation to go back to sea became too much, and Olaudah secured a place as steward on a new ship called *The London* under the command of Martin Hopkins destined for New York. Finding Hopkins very likeable, Olaudah stayed with him, undertaking a second voyage, this time to Philadelphia in March 1785. They had not long passed Lands End when a ship approached them head on. Neither seeing the other due to their strange and deadly navigational course. They collided head on and both ships were badly damaged. Olaudah stated that, as they passed, the crew of the other ship called out for *The London* to hoist her small boats, but its own crew were too busy engaged in making the vital repairs to stop their own vessel from sinking. After a short time they lost sight of the other ship although Olaudah does not comment on whether she sank.

Olaudah was glad to arrive in Philadelphia, 'a favourite old town', and he admired the work the Quakers were doing in educating black children there. By October 1785, he was back in London where he and some other African's, known collectively as 'The Sons of Africa' presented a letter to the Quakers in the vicinity of Gracechurch Street, thanking them for their work 'towards breaking the yoke of slavery'. The Quakers in return promised to support their cause.

Following the trip to Philadelphia, Olaudah secured a position as steward on an American ship, *The Harmony*, under Captain John Willett, which left London for Philadelphia in March 1786. It was an ill-fated trip. After eleven days at sea, the foremast was lost, and they made slow passage, taking nine weeks to arrive at their destination, which meant that they missed their market and failed to trade as they wished. Following this, Willett began to treat Olaudah like a slave, and once again, Olaudah's indignation at his rough treatment was awakened.

On his return to London, Olaudah discovered that the English Government had adopted a plan to resettle poor Africans living on the streets of London, in Sierra Leone. In November 1786, Olaudah was sought out by the Government committee and persuaded to take the position of 'Commissary on the part of the Government'. Until March 1787, he was employed in preparing the vessels to be used in the voyage, for departure. During this time, he discovered that the agents acting on behalf of the Government were not providing the essential clothes and provisions that they had been paid for. Although Olaudah tried to improve the situation and bring it to the attention of his employers, it was once again a case of a black mans word holding no weight. The voyage went ahead but the people had suffered dreadfully from having been kept waiting in port for too long, and for want of necessary items such as bedding, clothes and provisions. Those that had waited the longest for departure had been kept in poor accommodation on the ship for more than eight months before sailing. Some did not survive the voyage, and their arrival at Sierra Leone in the rainy season meant that crops could not be planted, and that food was scarce.

The mission was a complete disaster and once again, many black Africans, including some who had served England in the American War of Independence and been granted the freedom of their sovereign country, and some poor couples of mixed race who had been shunned by society, lost their lives.

Olaudah was dismissed on 24th March and faced many allegations, including inciting the black refugees to sedition, or attempting to influence the refugees to rebel against their rough treatment. Olaudah believed that his efforts had been misrepresented by those who had disrupted the success of the mission. He wrote a series of letters in his own defence, including one to the Government in May 1787, and one to Queen Charlotte in March 1788. At the same time, he took it upon himself to raise awareness of the plight of the black people.

Olaudah now seized upon the prospect of the abolition of the slave trade as little by little the abolitionists won small victories and support in Government. Olaudah promoted the value of Africa for commercial purposes, believing that Africa could significantly contribute to Britain's manufacturing success. He saw the exploitation of African resources and raw material in industry as a way for both black people and white people to prosper.

Chapter 12: An Interesting Narrative

Whether Olaudah produced his autobiography on his own initiative is not known, but his tales of adventure may well have led to his acquaintances persuading him that his account of a life in the slave trade would improve the chances of the abolition movement succeeding. The first edition of *The Interesting Narrative...* was published in two volumes in 1789. Olaudah travelled throughout Britain and Ireland promoting his book. He was invited to speak on the subject of slavery in all circles of society and he did so willingly in the knowledge that for the first time in his life, the word of a black man could be heard. He attended a debate on the Slave Trade in the House of Commons on 2nd and 3rd April 1792 before travelling to Soham in Cambridgeshire where he was married to Miss Susannah Cullen, daughter of James and Ann Cullen on 7th April.

Although *The Interesting Narrative...* had gone through nine editions and numerous revisions by the time of his death, the last chapter of Olaudah's life was never recorded as part of his story. We cannot say how he came to meet Susannah, she may have been an acquaintance as she appears on his list of subscribers for the first time in the third edition, published in London 30th October 1790, as Miss Susan Cullen, and again in the 4th edition of 1791, or she may simply have answered a request he made in the early editions of his book, which he deleted from the later ones, stating that he was available for marriage should any women care to present a proposal to him. *The Cambridge Chronicle*

recorded the wedding as follows, 'On Monday fortnight Gustavus Vassa the African, well known in most parts of this kingdom as a preacher, was married at Soham, to Miss Cullen, daughter of the Late Mr. James Cullen of Ely.'

The marriage was carried out by licence, which had to be obtained from the Bishop on the production of two documents; an allegation, swearing that there was no legal impediment to the marriage, and a bond of monies to be paid in the instance that the marriage did not take place, this also dispensed with the need for calling the banns, a process by which the marriage was advertised for three weeks prior to the event in both the bride's and the groom's own church. The main reason for a marriage by licence in this case however was that both Olaudah and Susannah were non-conformists. The Cullen family were clearly non-conformists as they were the chief benefactors of Soham Methodist Chapel erected in the 19th century (their names are still visible on the foundation stones), and the newspaper announcement suggests that Olaudah may have been acting as a Methodist Lay Preacher in the area. Lord Hardwicke's marriage act of 1752 decreed that non-conformist marriages took place by licence on the premises of a church or chapel, according to Church of England rites.

It is a romantic notion that Susannah was perhaps once amongst a congregation which heard Olaudah speak as a preacher, and that this is how they met. The marriage certificate reads, 'Gustavus Vassa (an African) of the Parish of St. Martin in the Field in the County of Middlesex, Bachelor and Susannah Cullen of this Parish, Spinster, were married in this Church by Licence from the House of Commons this seventh day of April in the Year One Thousand seven Hundred and ninety two By me Charles Hill, Curate'. Olaudah signed himself Gustavus Vassa and Susannah signed her full name. The witnesses were Francis Bland, and Thomas Cullen.

Evidence to suggest that the couple took up residence in Soham comes from the fact that both of their children were born here. Their firstborn, Ann Mary arrived on 16th October 1793, and was baptised in St Andrews Church on 30th January 1794. Another little girl, Joanna was born on 11th April 1795, and baptised in the Church on 29th April 1795. Susannah was always thought to have died during Joanna's birth, however, records show that she died a year later and was buried in Soham as Susanna Vassa, wife of Gustavus the African on 21st February 1796, aged 34. On 20th February, *The Cambridge Chronicle* announced the death of 'Susannah the wife of Gustavus Vassa of Soham in the County of Cambridge, Gentleman,' having taken place the previous Tuesday 'after a long illness, which she supported with true Christian fortitude'.

In 1794, Olaudah published the ninth and final edition of his original manuscript. After his marriage he spent much less time writing political letters although he continued to seek a market for his book. The abolition movement had gained pace but in light of the instabilities in Europe, restrictions were put in place regarding freedoms of speech for

political reformers. Agitators who spoke up too loudly were imprisoned for high treason, this included Olaudah's friend, Thomas Hardy. Although he was later acquitted, it is not surprising that Olaudah took this as a warning. His withdrawal from public life was not complete however, and he continued on his book tours until the death of Susannah. Susannah left Olaudah everything she owned or could claim title to. This included some copyhold land in Sutton, Cambridgeshire which could be appropriated after the death of her mother, as tenant. In the event, the land passed to Joanna on Ann Cullen's death - Susannah's mother having outlived her own daughter, son-in-law and grandchild by more than twenty years. A codicil prevented her daughter Mary from inheriting due to a criminal record. According to the sources, Mary was transported to Australia for shoplifting, although this must have been under a different name, as the name 'Cullen' or variations do not appear in the Criminal Register Indexes.

Olaudah left Soham soon after the death of his wife, and we must consider that his children remained in the care of their grandmother. He had always maintained property in London, significantly at Plaisterers Hall, the lease for which he sublet from 1790. In October 1796, Olaudah had re-let the Hall through an advertisement in *The Times*. It was advertised as 'Very desirable, roomy, convenient, substantial brick-built premises, called Plaisterers Hall, very advantageously situated in Addle-street leading from Aldermanbury to Wood-street, Cheapside, containing numerous convenient apartments, a spacious Hall, upwards of 40 feet in length, with a Music Gallery, a large yard, a store cellar, capable of holding 100 butts, and a fore-court, enclosed with folding gates...' Olaudah had lived the life of a Gentleman here, perhaps intending to keep the house on so that he might bring his family to London on occasion. Unfortunately, however, his health was beginning to deteriorate, and he took a smaller house in John Street off Tottenham Court Road.

Olaudah would never return to Soham or see his daughters again. He died the following March, at a house in Paddington Street, nursed by a Mrs Edwards. Granville Sharp recalled visiting him as he lay dying, he wrote to his niece, 'He was a sober, honest man, and I went to see him when he lay upon his deathbed, and had lost his voice so that he could only whisper.' He died aged 52 on 31st March 1797. *The Gentlemans Magazine* April 1797 announced his death in the 'Obituary of remarkable Persons' as follows, 'In London, Mr. Gustavus Vasa, the African, well known to the publick by the interesting narrative of his life, supposed to be written by himself.'



The details of his funeral and the whereabouts of his burial remain unknown.

Ann Mary or Anna Maria Vassa, died aged 4 years old, possibly as a result of a measles epidemic, on 21st July 1797, just four months after her father. She was buried at St Andrew's Church, Chesterton, Cambridgeshire, in an unknown grave. A plaque on the wall of the church reads, 'Near this place lies interred Anna Maria Vassa, Daughter of Gustavus Vassa, the African...' below it is inscribed a beautiful poem in remembrance of the child and her father.

Olaudah left an inheritance of £950 for his surviving daughter Joanna to claim on her 21st birthday. Nothing is known of Joanna until 1816 when it is recorded that John Audley, co-executor of the will with Edward Ind, carried out his friends wishes, leaving Joanna a wealthy woman. She married a Congregationalist Minister, The Rev. Henry Bromley of Northam, Devon on 29th August, 1821 at St. James' Church Clerkenwell, London. John Audley and Henry's sister Catherine acted as witnesses. Shortly after the wedding, the couple moved to Appledore, Devon, where Henry had been ordained as Minister of the Independent Chapel.

On 30th September 1827, Henry was inducted as Minister of the Congregational Church of Clavering, Essex. He was a popular Minister, at times preaching to upwards of four hundred people. Joanna was a subscriber to the Sunday school, and the Bromley's provided the children's books. They remained in the parish until 26th October 1845 when Henry officially resigned his post, due to concerns about his wife's health. In a letter to his congregation he wrote that 'Mrs Bromley's health is very seriously suffering from the injurious influence of the situation as connected with the peculiar state of her constitution, and I fear that passing another winter here would so fix some complaints from which she suffers, as to render their removal afterwards very difficult if not impossible.'

It is thought that the Bromley's moved to London where Henry took up a post as secretary to The Provident Society for Widows of Dissenting Ministers. He later became Minister to The Providence Chapel at Harwich, where he is recorded on the census of 1851. Joanna was no longer with him, instead she had retreated to the parish of Stowmarket, Suffolk, where she was attended by a maid called Mary Mumford. It is likely that the country air was perceived to be good for her health, but by 1857, she had returned to London, perhaps in search of a Doctor that could cure what had become a serious illness. Joanna died of 'uterine disease' on 10th March 1857 at 21 Benyan Terrace, Buckingham Road, Hackney. Her death was reported by a Sarah Durrant. She was buried at Abney Park Cemetery, Stoke Newington, London. Records suggest that there were no children born to Henry and Joanna, although miscarriages and stillbirths were unlikely to be recorded. Joanna's condition may have been caused by repeated unsuccessful pregnancies, or by

complications during childbirth. Henry's obituary in 1878, pays tribute to his wife, 'This lady always retained a high place, not only in Mr Bromley's regards, but in the admiration of the Bromley family. It was a very happy union.' Even after her death, Joanna was remembered as the daughter of Gustavus Vassa, the African.

Chapter 13: African Slave or Propagandist ?

One of the main issues surrounding Olaudah's *...Interesting Narrative...* concerns his identity as an African slave. Vincent Carretta, noted biographer of Olaudah Equiano, argues that the muster rolls for Olaudah's Arctic voyage in 1773 suggest that he was born, Gustavus Vassa in South Carolina, indicating that his claim of African birth was potentially made up. He concludes that *The Interesting Narrative...* was consequently 'a remarkable literary achievement' derived from conversations the writer had had with African slaves. It is curious then that Carretta supports the accuracy of Olaudah's account of his early life, commenting only that 'deviations from the truth seem more likely to have been the result of artistic premeditation than absent-mindedness'. Olaudah kept a journal, which he mentions on several occasions. Initially however, he was unable to read and write. He must therefore have written up some of his memories several years after the fact, thus accounting for what Carretta perceives to be 'deviations', although we must also consider that some of the historical sources Carretta uses are unreliable.

Olaudah appears as Gustavus Vassa in a number of records. Whilst these corroborate much of his story, the differences in the spelling of his name suggests that most clerks just wrote down what they heard and that their version of spelling was phonetic. The worst spelling of 'Gustavus Vassa', is recorded in the muster rolls of *The Carcass*, the source which Carretta uses to contest Olaudah's African birth. Here Olaudah is listed 'Gusts Weston', and his place of birth is recorded as South Carolina. The slave trade in South Carolina had become established by the late 17th century. Initially planters used slaves to clear land to enable large scale farming of crops. Whilst it is possible that the child of a plantation worker was sold back into slavery, it is unlikely as natural increase was a recognised way of increasing the workforce for free. The question of Olaudah's identity as Gustavus Vassa must therefore be addressed by Pascal's having sworn him to take up the name during his first voyage to England.

The British Navy looked upon their ships as a symbol of England, where black men were considered free. To have a slave on board a vessel of the British Navy went against a moral code and only free born black men were considered fit to crew. Pascal therefore had to give the impression that Olaudah had been free born. He selected a topical name for him; *Gustavus Vasa, The Deliverer of his Country* was a controversial play of the period. It was first published in 1739 and then repeatedly throughout the century, but its political

content prevented it from being performed until 1805. Gustavus Vassa was a sixteenth century Swedish nobleman who led a successful uprising of the Swedish people against Danish rule and placed himself on the throne of Sweden. In the climate of revolutionary Europe, the British government prohibited all demonstrations of political subversion. The name Gustavus Vassa in conjunction with the banned play was repeatedly in the news from where Pascal must have lifted it, adding South Carolina as a plausible place of birth. Olaudah initially resisted Pascal's demands, preferring to remain as 'Jacob', and it took some persuasion for him to accept his new identity, suggesting that this took on a different, perhaps more official and permanent meaning. In fact when Olaudah received his freedom, his manumission or official papers acted to confirm the details of his assumed identity. Olaudah therefore had no choice but to remain loyal to what had become his legal identity, throughout his life.

It is apparent that much of the early part of Olaudah's text is derived from memory. Some of his dates are sketchy and his account lacks the sort of detail one might associate with an autobiography. Carretta is quick to use this as evidence of Olaudah's 'false claim' to African birth. We might however consider, that by the time Olaudah began to write his journal, which the increased detail in his account appears to dictate was during the siege of Belle Isle, that he had only a dim memory of his former life. He may well have been too young to have had knowledge of some aspects of tribal culture, and would certainly not have been aware of the passage of time, or the significance of dates, but the detail he does record is very specific, and the native customs, practices and beliefs he relates are unique to the Eboe region. Chaba A Umaru, cultural expert, and native of Nigeria, has been able to corroborate this, observing that it would be impossible for a non-native of the region to fabricate the level of incidental detail that Olaudah included in his account (*Sachaba Arts 4 Culture*). Some of the customs he bore witness to remain integral to the belief systems of the indigenous peoples of the region.

The repercussions of the African slave trade still reverberate around the world today. In an attempt to explain the slave trade in Africa, Carretta states that 'Equiano's initial encounter with slavery is reportedly in Africa'. He argues that in 'its native African form', slaves were merely domestic aids living in close quarters with their owners, and treated like members of the family. He states that 'it seems benign, and not obviously dehumanizing', and that within African society, slavery was merely 'one of the many levels that constitute the apparently healthy social order in which Equiano finds himself near the top.' Carretta considers that the European slave trade spread into Africa like an infectious disease destroying the balance of native African culture. This is a misleading viewpoint. Olaudah observed that many slave owners were African and at a time when no white men had safely travelled into the interior of Africa, the slave trade carried on there much as it had done since the time of the Romans. Children were as likely to be sold

into slavery by their parents or the tribal chief as they were to be kidnapped. The sad fact in Olaudah's story is that he being the youngest son, and his sister were left alone when the 'kidnapper's' climbed over the wall of their family enclosure. Had a family needed to sell their children in order to secure their own survival, perhaps due to famine or other hardship, any daughters or the youngest sons would have been the most dispensable.

Olaudah claimed to have been sold for 172 cowry shells at Timmah. In his notes, Carretta suggests that Olaudah must have meant 172 pounds in weight, of cowry shells. However, the first surviving explorer of the African 'interior', on behalf of the African Association, Mungo Park, writing around forty years later traded between 100-200 cowries for lodgings (Mungo Park, *Travels in the Interior of Africa*, Wordsworth Editions 2002). He recorded that cowries were normally used as currency, and that a measure known as a 'bar' was used nearer to the coast for larger transactions. A slave whose price was set at £15 would be worth 150 bars, although the white traders only gave 'two shillings sterling' per bar. The value of a fit and healthy adult male might have been as high as £15 in 1795, but the majority of slaves fetched lower prices. Olaudah was no more than eleven years old when he was sold at Timmah, and having travelled hundreds of miles on foot, over many months, with very little food, he was probably in poor condition. He was obviously purchased by the widow slave trader with a profit in mind, suggesting that at the time he was worth very little. This, and the fact that it would be almost impossible for traders to carry multiple hundreds of pounds of shells in addition to their provisions and equipment would suggest that Olaudah's account is correct.

The reality that the life of a slave had very little monetary value was fundamental to the slave trade. In Africa, the slavers profit came from buying cheap and selling in bulk. Carretta argues that 'the price of slaves during the century ranged between 100 and 300 pounds (of cowry shells) a piece', but he does not give his source. There is also a question of relative values. Park stated that in some areas slaves were commonly bartered for high value goods such as salt, but that where they had a currency value, it was very low. He recorded that 'at Kamalia' the price of a slave 'was from nine to twelve minkallies' - a currency based on black beans. One black bean was called a *teeleekissi* and could provide 'common provisions for one day' or one live chicken. A sheep was worth three *teeleekissi*, and one minkalli was equal to six *teeleekissi* or two sheep, and could buy 48 tobacco leaves, 18 gun-flints or a bullock. A 'prime' slave was worth a maximum of twelve minkallies or 72 black beans. A horse cost between ten and seventeen minkallies, and was worth more than the life of a man (*Travels in the Interior of Africa*, pp.271-272).

Carretta often highlights discrepancies in Olaudah's account in an attempt to discredit his authenticity. During Olaudah's voyages between Montserrat, Georgia, and Charlestown

on the *Prudence* in 1765, Olaudah recalled watching the celebration of the Repeal of the Stamp Act at Charlestown, stating 'I saw the town illuminated; the guns were fired, and bonfires and other demonstrations of joy shewn on account of the repeal of the stamp-act'. Carretta argues that Olaudah must have been mistaken as to the date of these voyages, as news of the repeal didn't reach America until May 1766. This however would contradict with Olaudah hearing the Rev. George Whitefield preach at Savannah in February 1765, which we know is accurate. The American objection to English taxation without fair Parliamentary representation would ultimately cause the American War of Independence. The Stamp Act was implemented by the British as tax on printed documents, causing resentment amongst the most powerful colonists, especially lawyers and businessmen. Although it took effect on 1st November 1765, it was only enforced in Georgia where loyalty to Britain remained strong. This being the case, it is more likely that Olaudah witnessed Pope Day celebrations, the American equivalent to Guy Fawkes Night, which on 5th November 1765 at Charleston, North Carolina, took the form of a protest for liberty, in response to the attempted enforcement of the Stamp Act.

As for the rest of Olaudah's escapades during his voyages, some historians argue that certain accounts were merely other peoples experiences passed off as his own, *The Interesting Narrative...* being branded a work of fiction and propaganda. Whilst it seems likely that Olaudah used Phipps account of the Arctic voyage to embellish his own story, perhaps due to the extreme conditions preventing him from writing, or the loss of the journal, which he is so specific about, other accounts were few and far between at the time, especially those of slaves. Olaudah writes with such passion and is so indignant about his rough treatment that close reading of his autobiography makes him a very believable character. Surely it is not possible that so much misfortune could befall one man in a lifetime, but we all know that truth is stranger than fiction, and whatever his treatment, Olaudah was constantly tempted to go back to sea, to a life that was familiar to him, and his only reliable source of income. Perhaps he simply enjoyed adventure and the feeling of belonging that being part of a ships crew gave him. One thing is certain however, that the treatment he received at the hands of white men was not exceptional for that period in time. He was repeatedly tricked and cheated throughout his career. He was beaten, tied up, kidnapped, held prisoner, and received all manner of other abuse which he declined to put into print. Because he was black, his free status meant virtually nothing. He could not speak out against his rough treatment and he could not demand justice in a world dominated by white men. His story or elements of it are undoubtedly similar to those of countless others because racial abuse was endemic.

If Olaudah's autobiography was merely a clever work of fiction, his account of the work he carried out for white slavers is remarkably honest for someone claiming to be an abolitionist. During most of the time he spent in the West Indies, he was involved in



transporting 'live cargo'. He even employed slaves for Dr. Irving, although this was certainly part of a scheme to improve conditions for slaves. Nevertheless, Olaudah records himself as having corroborated in human trafficking and the employment of slaves, which it seems he accepted as a mere fact of life. Whilst he speaks out about his disgust at the abuse slaves were caused to suffer in the hands of the majority of slave owners and their employees, he seldom criticizes the principles of the Atlantic slave trade. He is however most indignant about the fact that once freed from bondage, he and other slaves were not given the respect that as free men they felt they deserved. What concerned him most was that black men remained at the bidding of white men, and that free or not, white men could treat them how they pleased.

The first indication of Olaudah speaking up for his fellow native African's is in 1785 as one of 'The Sons of Africa', a lobbying group who were instrument in raising awareness of the plight of slaves. His most moving speeches were however delivered in letters published after the failure of the Sierra Leone mission, where he saw at first hand how a good plan could become a bad plan in the hands of discriminate and disloyal white men. Although arguments for the abolition movement had begun to be heard in

government, the argument for the continuation of the slave trade was supported by some of the most powerful and influential men in the country. Entire country estates can be attributed to commercial success in the West Indies and the America's, and the new wealth this brought directly influenced the industrial revolution in England.

After the publication of *The Interesting Narrative...* and its unmitigated success, questions regarding the true identity of Olaudah began to be raised by those acting in opposition to the abolition movement. This argument although at the time quashed by Olaudah's constant presence in the press and the level of support for his authenticity, raised its head again in the 1960's when *The Interesting Narrative...* was once again found to be a useful tool in the march against black oppression, especially in America. Carretta suggests we may never know the truth about Olaudah's identity, although he maintains a stand against any claim for Olaudah's African birth. The contradiction that despite his reservations, Carretta continues to champion Olaudah's account of the Atlantic slave trade is worth noting. No other black writer wrote so passionately or honestly about their experience of life in slavery.

The Interesting Narrative... was written according to 18th century European literary conventions. It fits very well into the categories of memoir, travelogue, exploration and adventure that were so popular with readers at the time. These would certainly have been educated and, socially and politically aware and a new book, undoubtedly one which made such an impact, would have been the subject of much conversation and debate. The inclusion of Olaudah's list of high profile subscribers is incontrovertible evidence of an element of intended propaganda. This is substantiated by the process of revision, which he applied to every new edition of his book. As the abolition movement achieved momentum, he was able to include more contentious material in order to raise awareness of the plight of slaves. The abolitionists certainly recognised the value of his account, and it seems that he was happy to work for the cause. His retention of copyright ensured that he received all the profits from his book, and its success inadvertently made him very wealthy. There is no question that Olaudah knew what he was doing when he wrote his autobiography, but this should not detract from the authenticity of his account. There is every reason to believe that *The Interesting Narrative...* was a true record of his life. Olaudah Equiano used his own experiences to inspire powerful people to support the abolition movement, had he been free born we might argue that he could not have demonstrated such passion and integrity.

Chapter 14: Discovering Olaudah

In 1943, The Royal Albert Museum, Exeter, was given a painting identified as 'Black Boy by Joshua Reynolds' by a London art dealer named Percy Moore Turner (1). The painting received very little attention until 1961, when a curator of the British Museum named William Fagg suggested that it might be a portrait of the abolitionist, Olaudah Equiano. Fagg had noticed a resemblance between the painting and an engraving of Olaudah by Daniel Orme which was used on the frontispiece of *The Interesting Narrative...* (4) and can be attributed to Olaudah Equiano with some certainty.

Catalogued as *Portrait of a Negro Man* and now attributed to Reynolds contemporary, Allan Ramsay, the colour portrait (1) appears on the cover of practically every book written about Olaudah Equiano, but in recent years its provenance has been increasingly disputed. Although it is used on both the front cover of the Penguin edition of *The Interesting Narrative...* edited by Carretta, and Carretta's own biography of Olaudah, he claims 'The painting on the cover of the Penguin edition... is almost certainly not that of Equiano... The resemblance between the sitter and Equiano's frontispiece is merely superficial, and the sitter's dress indicates that the portrait was very probably painted before 1765, a period when Equiano was usually outside of England.' John Madin, Curator of Art at The Royal Albert Museum who is responsible for attributing the painting to Ramsay c. 1759, suggests that the sitter is another black writer of the period, Ignatius Sancho. But a surviving etching of Sancho shows a large man whose main facial

characteristics are Hispanic, with noticeably long eyelashes. The sitter for *Portrait of a Negro Man* is defined by his African characteristics and has no eyelashes (1).

The following experiment proves conclusively that the sitter for this painting was Olaudah Equiano, more surprisingly, it shows that this was the painting from which the engraving by Daniel Orme was taken. Using a computer programme, I compared the painting (1) and the engraving (4) as black and white images side by side. In the painting, the sitter is seen facing right, however, in the engraving the sitter is seen facing left. Having re-oriented the etching to face right, the similarity of the posture of both sitters became apparent. Once I had converted the colour image to greyscale, and applied texture, it was possible to compare and match specific features. I then took the process further (2) by applying an airbrush technique in order to recreate light and shade in the same way that an engraver would have done. It soon became apparent, that not only were the images of an identical sitter, but that the features were completely aligned with eyes, nose, and mouth occupying the same space within an identically shaped face. The artist, William Denton, who was responsible for creating the image for Orme, was able to create a high collared jacket which not only improved the composition but portrayed Olaudah in the role of a preacher. He also removed Olaudah's wig and added a biblical text, which although clearly imaginary, represented that which Olaudah quoted from Acts IV. The addition of the jacket to the illustration (2) although only roughly sketched (3), demonstrates the identical composition of both pictures.

There can be no doubt that one was the source for the other as it is impossible that any sitter would be drawn twice from such a precise angle. *Portrait of a Negro Man* actually dates from around 1772-73, as a painting by Reynolds of that date portraying, *David Garrick and his wife Eva Maria Garrick, nee Veigel*, (National Portrait Gallery) shows Garrick wearing a similar jacket, waistcoat, and collar to that in which Olaudah is dressed for *Portrait of a Negro Man*. A successful actor, Garrick would have been highly fashionable. Olaudah must therefore have had his portrait painted before or after the arctic expedition during the time he spent with his friend Dr. Irving in London between 1772-73. This might suggest that the painting can be attributed to Reynolds after all, as Ramsay was forced to give up painting in 1773 due to a serious accident.

1



Portrait of an African
c.1757-60, attributed to
Allan Ramsay (1713-84)
Royal Albert Memorial
Museum, Exeter, Devon/
The Bridgeman Art Library
EX17082

2



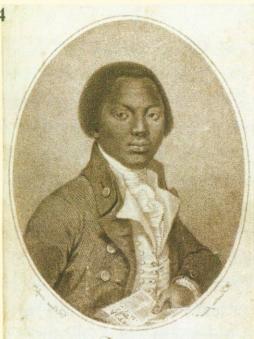
*Artists impression -
Background lightened,
and outline of hair
sculpted to replicate
that of engraving - some
shading to face*

3



*Artists impression -
Jacket partly overlaid to
show the
similarity of pose to that
of the engraving*

4



*Olaudah Equiano alias
Gustavus Vassa, a slave, 1789
(mezzotint) British Library,
London/©British Library
Board. All Rights Reserved/The
Bridgeman Art Library BL11791*

Chapter 15: Olaudah and his Faith

By Linda Homan & Rev. Tim Alban Jones of Soham

Olaudah had an awareness of God from an early age. His faith was important to him, as it would have been to most people in the eighteenth century, but he never took it for granted. Olaudah constantly questioned his place in the world and his significance as a disciple of God. The following passages from his life story concern his faith, his quest for salvation, his love of God, and some examples of incidents, which he interpreted as the work of God.

Olaudah introduced his *Narrative* with the words *I regard myself as a particular favourite of Heaven and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life.* His perception of religion in his native land focused on there being no concept of the eternal life that conversion to Christianity had taught him about, *As to religion, the natives believe that there is one Creator of all things, and that he lives in the sun... They believe he governs events, especially our death or captivity, but as for the doctrine of eternity, I do not remember to have ever heard of it...* Even though he was very young when he was kidnapped, Olaudah attributed any happy occurrence to the efforts of his Creator. Once in Pascal's hands, he commended *the kind and unknown hand of the Creator (who in every deed leads the blind in a way they know not) now began to appear to my comfort...* From this point forward, he was to become increasingly acquainted with the teachings of Christianity. During his time in the service of the Miss Guerin's he was told by the other servants in the house, that he could not go to heaven unless he was baptized. This upset him because by now he understood there to be a future state of existence for Christians. Having communicated his anxieties on the matter to the kind Miss Guerin's, they ensured that he was baptized and educated him in the principles of the Bible so that he might not longer be frightened by superstition.

One of the stories that Olaudah told of seeing God's hand at work, concerned a naval man 'of indifferent morals' named John Mondle who served with Olaudah on *The Aetna* but had faced a court martial for 'Breach of Discipline and other Misbehaviour'. One night this man had a dream in which St. Peter told him to repent his sins. Mondle was deeply affected by this and immediately gave away his store of liquor. He tried to read the Bible to put his mind at rest but remained unable to sleep. As dawn broke, *The Aetna*, ran into the path of *The Lynne*, a heavy, forty-gun, ship. Cries went up from the deck 'The Lord have mercy upon us! We are all lost!' and Mondle ran from his cabin to see what the commotion was. Simultaneously, *The Aetna's* hull was rammed through by *The Lynne's* cutwater, or pointed part of her prow, at the exact place where Mondle had been lying only seconds before. Olaudah believed that this 'act of Providence... had a great influence on (the) life and conduct (of Mondle) ever afterwards.'



Impression of Olaudah dressed as a lay preacher of the period

Amongst the miracles that Olaudah recounted was the story of a woman with a child at her breast, who fell from the upper deck of *The Aetna* into the hold. All aboard were certain that the mother and child would be ‘dashed to pieces’ but to their astonishment, neither was hurt. On the same ship Olaudah himself fell into the hold and escaped without injury. With regard to these events, he stated that he ‘could plainly trace the hand of God, without whose permission a sparrow cannot fall.’ Olaudah had been taught to read the Bible aboard *The Aetna*, where some of the crew called him ‘the black Christian’. But it would be some time before he was able to buy his own Bible, under the guidance of Captain Farmer at St. Kitts, who lent him five bits towards the cost of a Bible at sixteen bits, eleven of which Olaudah had earned by his own enterprise.

Olaudah must have had a solid religious aspect to his character to have warranted the attentions of the black woman, in Georgia, who pleaded with him as a man of the church, to give her infant a Christian burial. Olaudah humbly undertook this sombre duty in front of a ‘great company both of white and black people’. He considered his duty to God a great responsibility. He spoke to many people about their devotion, and struggled with the question that good works alone could not bring him salvation. The frontispiece of *The Interesting Narrative* is a portrait of Olaudah holding the Bible open at Acts, Chapter IV, verse 12, as this was the very page he was reading when he felt God enter his soul, *It was given to me at that time to know what it was to be born again...* Olaudah included everything in his *Narrative* which he felt to be of any significance, in his closing passages he stated, *After all, what makes any event important, unless by it’s observation we become better and wise, and learn ‘to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God!’*

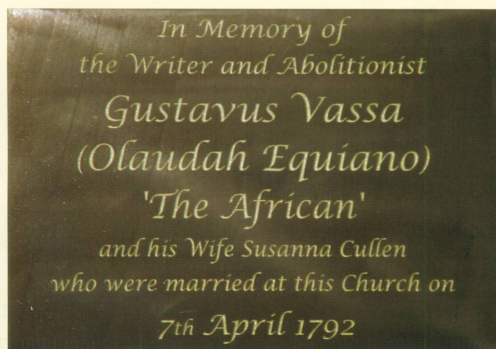


'The Abolitionists' by Gilly Carrington.

The above men, Granville Sharp, Zachary Macaulay, William Wilberforce, TV Buxton, and Thomas Clarkson, were crucial to the abolition of slavery. Inspired by the stories of former slaves across England and their own observations of a cruel trade, their constant pressure for abolition and the evidence they had collected would eventually force Parliament into passing a Bill to abolish the Slave Trade in 1807.

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**Plaque unveiled
by Arthur
Torrington at
the Church of St.
Andrew, Soham,
in celebration
of Soham's
connection with
Olaudah Equiano.
Photograph by
Chris Scurrah**

Acknowledgements

Soham at the Time of the Abolition has involved a number of community groups working together, this book 'Oludah' being the final episode of a project, which has raised awareness of cultural issues to an extent not previously known in the small Cambridgeshire town of Soham. We have enjoyed a number of multi-cultural events, the most memorable of these being, 'Remembering Equiano' the re-enactment of the marriage of Oludah to his bride, Susannah Cullen, at the church of St Andrew, 215 years after they originally joined hands in the same church. For this my thanks go to; the Reverend Tim Alban Jones for allowing us to use this fine church as a setting; to Patricia Lashly and Aiysha Malik of Momentum Arts for staging a wonderful cultural celebration which incorporated the intellect of Arthur Torrington, with the literary talent of Angelina Osborne, and entertainment in the form of Southern Gospel singing and African drumming and dancing, not to mention a delicious Caribbean feast; to my own daughter Susannah Martin and Marlon Highland of Stage Chance youth theatre group for providing such a moving portrayal of Gustavus Vassa and Susannah Cullen; to Daniel Bell, Craig Carpenter, and Katherine Hickmott of Stage Chance for directing and producing the period wedding to such a high standard, Dan taking the part of bridegroom man, Craig, Thomas Cullen, and Kat, Mrs Cullen, as well to all the young actors and actresses who took part in the re-enactment including, the pages, Lucy Bell, Dorigen Bell, Emily Johnson, and Tilly Burn, the narrator, Laura Winter, the bridesmaids, Naomi Rogers and Lydia Jellyman, and bridegroom man, Francis Bland played by Sam Levitt, Stephanie Martin as Cousin Floe, not to mention Harry Seal who played such a convincing portrayal of the 18th century curate, Charles Hill. I would also like to thank; my friend and Vice Chairman of Soham Community History Museum, Jim Ames for researching the appropriate 18th century wedding hymns and providing authentic organ music for the event; Chris Scurrah of Soham Online for a wonderful photographic record, and the effervescent Louise Sarll for going beyond the call of duty on so many occasions, especially in sourcing the traditional orange blossom used in 18th marriages, and having it flown in all the way from Italy. Thanks also go to Gunel Salih for her help and support, Sarah Varey of BBC Radio Cambridgeshire, and Rob Nurden of The Independent for their interest and enthusiasm, plus countless others most of whom gave their time and energy in the excellent spirit of community.

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Donna Martin

History Co-ordinator, Soham at the Time of the Abolition

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Re-enactment of Olaudah's Marriage at Soham 17th April 2007
by Stage Chance youth theatre group, Soham Village College

Soham at the Time of the Abolition

2007 was the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in England. Across the country people have celebrated their cultural heritage through recognition of links with slavery in order to raise awareness of the abolition movement and the beginnings of human rights. During the 18th century, the small Cambridgeshire town of Soham was a thriving market town. On 7th April 1792, the leading black abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, known as Gustavus Vassa, The African, married a spinster of the parish, named Susannah Cullen at St Andrews Church. Both of Olaudah's daughters were baptised at the same Church, and sadly only four years after their marriage his wife was buried there. Olaudah's autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African* begins in the 1740's in Africa, and tells the story of Olaudah's experience as a slave and of life as a black man in a world ruled by white men. When it was published in 1789, it created mass interest in the plight of slaves and helped to persuade influential people to join the abolition movement. Olaudah spent most of his life at sea, and his taste for adventure took him to the very top of the world. *The Interesting Narrative...* was a diary, a travelogue, and tale of adventure. This book is an accessible retelling of an amazing life story.



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