



ABOLITION

SECTION ONE: SLAVERY THROUGH THE AGES

THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN SLAVERY

It is generally accepted that slavery had its origins in war. The victor having the vanquished's life in his power, decided to let him live at the cost of his freedom. Slavery is mentioned frequently in the Bible but never totally condemned or outlawed. Throughout ancient societies, it was common practice. Slaves generally had no rights but there were sometimes codes of conduct to regulate their treatment.



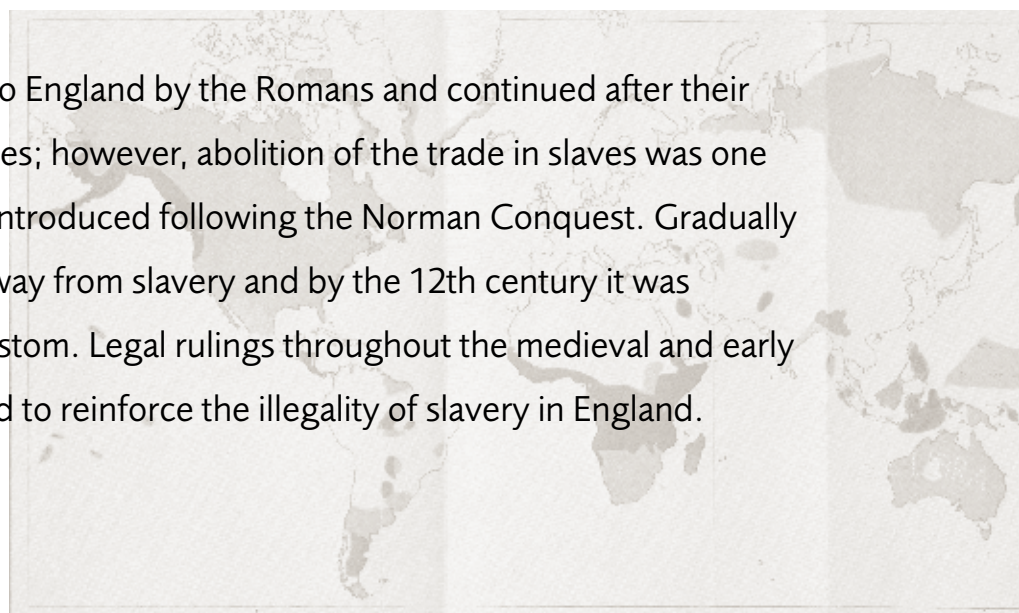
Tissington Hand Well, Tissington, Derbyshire. May 2007. The theme for the 2007 well dressing was the abolition of the slave trade. This well is decorated to illustrate biblical slavery. Well dressing is a traditional spring activity in Derbyshire, that at Tissington being the most famous. The tradition dates back to medieval times.



Roman Slaves. Sale of slaves in a Roman Camp.

In later classical times the practice continued. The treatment of slaves varied considerably but generally improved over time. In Europe, slavery was gradually usurped by the feudal system of serfdom, where the serfs had the basic rights of citizens and were able to sell some of their produce. Slavery still continued where there were disputes between nations as captives could be traded or gifted as tribute, particularly if the opposition were not Christian.

Slavery was introduced to England by the Romans and continued after their departure into Saxon times; however, abolition of the trade in slaves was one of the reforms William I introduced following the Norman Conquest. Gradually English society turned away from slavery and by the 12th century it was considered a barbaric custom. Legal rulings throughout the medieval and early modern period continued to reinforce the illegality of slavery in England.



Distribution of slavery. Slavery as an industrial system by H J Nieboer, 1910 edition. (British Library)

WHERE WAS SLAVERY MOST COMMON ?

Slavery was practised in many societies but it was not universal. The most important areas were the northern half of Africa, the Islamic world, parts of south and east Asia, the west coast of North America, Central America and parts of South America, particularly Patagonia. It survived in Scandinavia after



Distribution of slavery. Slavery as an industrial system by H J Nieboer, 1910 edition. (British Library)

it had disappeared from other parts of Europe, the Vikings being prolific slave traders. It was unknown among the native Australians and most indigenous communities in North America and southern Africa. Colder parts of the world, such as Siberia and Canada, where hunting and trapping were more important than cultivation, had little use for slaves; a slave equipped for hunting might become dangerous.

THE WEST AFRICA CONNECTION, ARABS AND EUROPEANS

During the medieval period the Islamic world became a major user and trader of slaves. As in the Christian world, religious leaders accepted the keeping & trading of slaves, as long as they were not followers of Islam. The source was Central and West Africa, with slaves transported via overland trade routes from Timbuktu and Kano. This trans-Saharan trade continued for more than 1000 years.

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THE WEST AFRICA CONNECTION, ARABS AND EUROPEANS CONTINUED 1

This was a period of conflict between the Christian and Islamic worlds. European crusaders visiting the eastern Mediterranean discovered sugar cane which had been grown there for some time. Europe began to develop a sweet tooth. Slavery, which had previously died out in much of Europe, began to be reintroduced in the Mediterranean to allow for sugar cultivation. By the end of the medieval period, voyages of discovery had reached the Caribbean and South America and the suitability of their climates and soil for sugar cultivation was realised. At the same time, exploration of the West African coast showed the ease with which the sources of slaves could be reached and transported by ship.

The various Northern European powers soon saw they could make considerable money from these new territories. While still opposed to the slavery of Europeans, a different attitude developed towards African peoples. Racist views developed to try to justify this attitude. Slaves were imported into Europe to carry out menial tasks in the homes of the rich. By the early 17th century, Europeans had organised a system to transport Africans across the Atlantic. This was a new form of slavery unlike anything experienced before.

Some attempt had been made by the early settlers to enslave the natives of the Caribbean and other parts of the Americas, but these were in the main unsuccessful. There was no tradition of slavery and the indigenous peoples resisted enslavement strongly. Where they were enslaved they generally refused to work. The European settlers quickly turned to Africa as a source of slaves. Here there was a tradition of slavery and many of the African Kingdoms were prepared to cooperate with the slavers in return for manufactured goods and other items of value. The enslaved Africans initially resisted capture less than the native Americans, making them attractive to the traders and plantation owners. By the time they reached the coastal forts and discovered what the future held for them, it was often too late. Escape was almost impossible. Many African slaves resisted their condition strongly but there was no way of returning home.



*Transporting of slaves. Shackled enslaved Africans.
(Courtesy of Anti-Slavery International)*



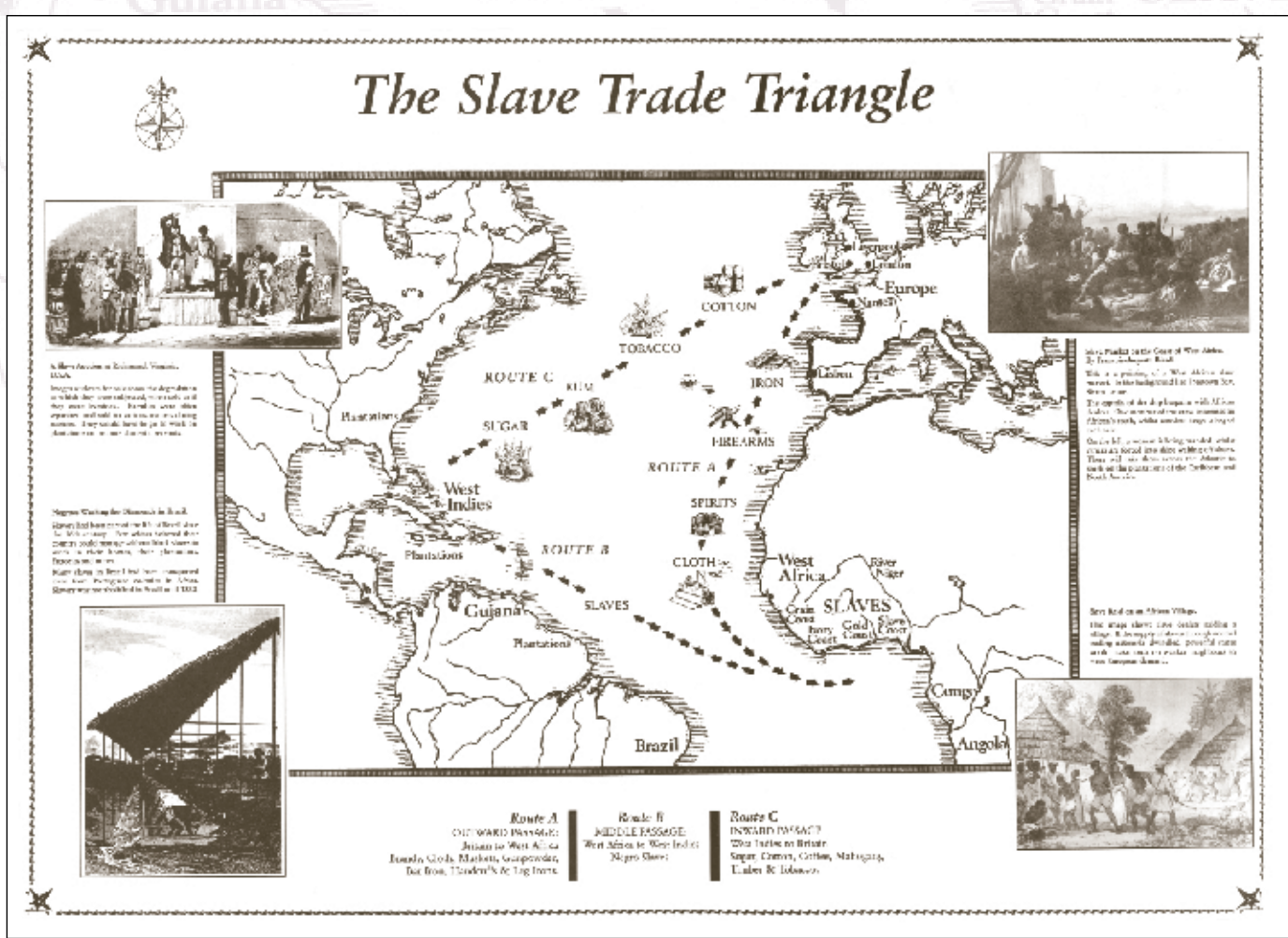
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European traders soon realised the huge fortunes that could be made from the African slave trade. In Britain, London was initially the centre of the slave trade but soon the west coast ports of Bristol and Liverpool joined in. Much of the wealth of these cities was built from what became known as the triangular trade.

The triangular trade involved a trip from a European port, such as London, to the west African coast. Here slaves were acquired through barter with local African leaders. Manufactured goods and ironically African gold re-imported from Europe were often used. Often the slaves had been acquired through warfare with neighbouring Africa Kingdoms. There was as yet no sense of African nationalism. However some leaders, such as King Agaja of Dahomey (d.1740), exposed to the industrial nature of the new slave trade withdrew cooperation.



The Middle Passage. Map of the triangular trade. (Courtesy of Wilberforce House)

As more and more European traders joined the trade to make their fortune the demand for slaves grew. This encouraged the African leaders to indulge in more battles to acquire slaves. They too were making a fortune from the trade.



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The captured slaves were taken to coastal forts where they were imprisoned until the slavers were ready to transport them. The conditions here and on the ships were horrific. Many slaves died from disease and malnourishment. It was

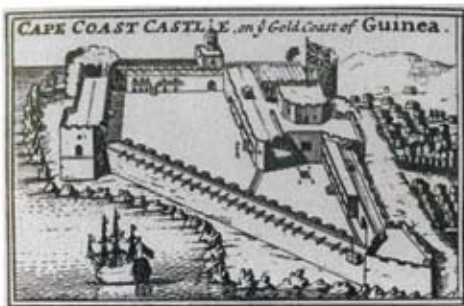
these conditions that first brought home the horror of the trade and the firsts calls for abolition.



The Middle Passage. Slaves in a ship's hold (British Library)



The Middle Passage. **The Brookes:** an infamous slave ship. This horrific image persuaded many in Europe that the slave trade must be abolished (Wilberforce House Museum, Hull City Council, UK)



Cape Coast Castle. (Anti-Slavery International)

The slaves that survived the 'middle passage' across the Atlantic were sold to plantation owners on arrival treatment of slaves varied considerably, but they knew they would be slaves with no rights for the rest of their lives. The same would apply to their children ,who were born into slavery. Although slavery had existed



Slaves in the Caribbean. Slaves working on a plantation. (British Library)

throughout history, these conditions and the permanence of the slaves' plight

was unprecedented. Rebellion became more and more common, but they knew they could not resolve their problems on their own. Fortunately, by the mid 18th century, the mood in Europe was beginning to change.



Rebellion. Insurrection on board a slave ship. (British Library)