

Scottish slavers in West Africa

Slaving ships did not sail from Aberdeen and few enslaved Africans were sent to North East Scotland. But North East merchants were responsible for shipping thousands of Africans to the Americas as slaves.

One slaving venture involved Sir Alexander Grant of Dalvey. In 1748, with Richard Oswald of Caithness and others, he bought an old slaving fort on Bance Island [**2B1**], at the mouth of the Sierra Leone River.

They repaired the fort partly with money from Oswald's wife, Mary Ramsay [**2B3**]. Her father, Alexander Ramsay of Laithers, near Turriff [**Map1**], had left her a fortune from his planting and business ventures in Jamaica [**Map3**].

Between 1749 and 1784, Grant and Oswald's employees in Sierra Leone [**Map2**] sold over 12,000 African men, women and children to slaving ships. They did not capture the people themselves. Instead they imported guns, alcohol [**2B2**], metal and cloth to exchange with local kings who brought captives to sell at Bance Island.

James Low was an Aberdeenshire clerk who worked at the fort. In 1762 he noted that a 'prime healthy slave' cost 65 iron bars – just over £16.

He also recorded that nearly 100 captives died each year before they could be sold to slaving ships. They are a reminder of the millions of Africans who suffered from the slave trade without ever leaving Africa.

Quotations

2Q1

People inland go to war on purpose to make slaves. If there is no demand they won't go to war. ... The whites make Africans make war on each other, giving arms and ammunition to both parties.

Chief Namina Modoro explains the slave trade in Sierra Leone to Zachary Macaulay, 1793

2Q2

The Masters of African vessels can't persuade the New Negroes that they are not to be killed and eat by White Men – and many of them throw themselves overboard to return to their own country. If you attempt to capture them, they dive and are no more.

Jonathan Troup describes suicides on slaving ships, 1789

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2B1 The slaving fort at Bance Island, Sierra Leone, drawn by Joseph Corry, 1805.
(© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London)



2B2 A Congolese drum from the 19th century depicts a European trader drinking alcohol. (© The Trustees of the British Museum)



2B3 A Jamaican heiress of Aberdeenshire origins – Mary Ramsay Oswald, by Johann Zoffany, c.1764. (© The National Gallery)

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2B4 Fulani traders bringing captives to the coast for sale to Europeans, drawn by a British slaving captain, Samuel Gamble, in 1793. (© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London)

Sir Alexander Grant of Dalvey

Alexander Grant (1705–1772) studied basic pharmacy at Aberdeen, before sailing to Jamaica [Map2] at age 17 to make his fortune. He started work as a doctor to the slaves on sugar plantations owned by his cousins, but within ten years he had bought his own plantation and opened a trading enterprise in Kingston. In 1737 he married Elizabeth Cooke, daughter of a wealthy plantation owner from Bristol. In 1739 they left Jamaica to settle in London, where Grant continued to expand his business, including the slaving venture at Bance Island and contracts with the Royal Navy. In 1752 he bought the estate of Dalvey near Forres, [Map1] Morayshire. He was MP for Inverness Burghs from 1761 to 1768. When he died in 1772 his fortune included six estates in Jamaica, which totalled almost 7,000 acres and held 457 slaves.

Slaving forts in Africa

Bance Island was one of many fortified trading posts [2W1] built around the coast of West and Central Africa by Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, French and British traders. They were not only used for slave trading, as the Europeans also bought gold, spices, ivory, wood and palm oil in Africa. But the biggest forts nearly always included cells or dungeons [2W2] where African captives were kept for months, awaiting sale to passing slave ships.

Many of the forts were large, solid structures, armed with cannons to fight off attackers. Potential enemies included rival European traders arriving by sea. But sometimes African forces attacked from the inland, especially when trading deals went wrong or the Europeans ran short of diplomatic gifts to keep relations running smoothly.

African kings and chiefs in the slave trade

Europeans seldom travelled far inland in Africa during the slave trade era. They had no immunity to local diseases and even on the coast many died from malaria. Instead they relied upon African trading partners to bring captives to them for the slave trade.

These trading partners were powerful kings and chiefs. Sometimes they sold criminals and debtors from their own people into slavery, but most commonly they fought wars

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against neighbouring countries to procure prisoners for sale to the Europeans. Often they conducted these wars with guns supplied to them by the Europeans. Lasting over 300 years, the wars reached hundreds of miles inland and severely damaged many African societies.

Some of the most notorious slave traders were the kings of Dahomey [**2W3**] (today the Republic of Benin). They conducted relentless raids against their neighbours and their port of Whydah became one of the most important calling points for ships looking to buy slaves.

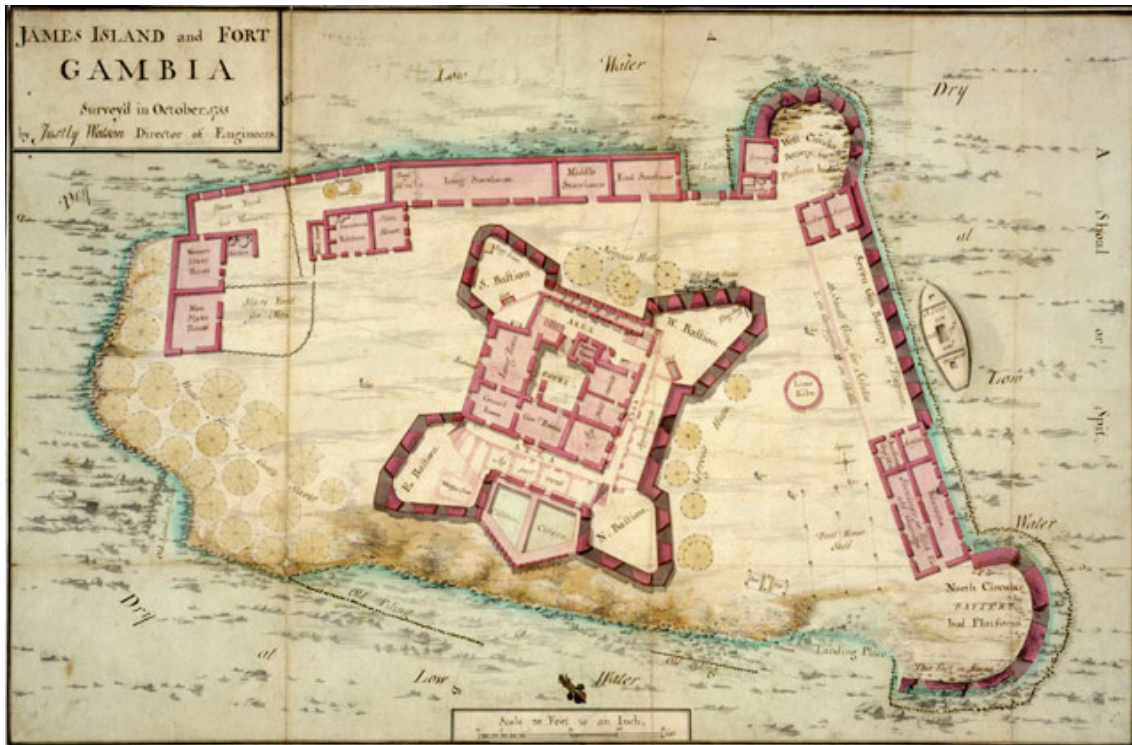
Map1 (Map of West Africa with slaving locations, including Sierra Leone) and **Map2** (Map of Caribbean with individual islands) available to download as a pdf.

<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/slavery/pdf/map1-3.pdf>



2W1 Dixcove, one of Britain's heavily fortified trading posts on the coast of Ghana, c.1800. (© The Trustees of the British Museum)

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2W2 A plan of the British slaving post of James Fort in Gambia, including the holding cells captives awaiting sale to slaving ships, 1755. (The National Archives)

Enlarged version available at – text link “cell or dungeons” at www.abdn.ac.uk/slavery/2p2.htm



2W3 The King of Dahomey receives European visitors at his court, from *The History of Dahomey*, written by Archibald Dalziel, a Scottish slave trader, in 1793. (© The British Library Board)