

Myrtilla's Trail

Guide around the galleries



Leamington Spa Art Gallery & Museum
and
Brenda Tai Layton



Here Lyeth the body of Myrtilla, Negro slave to Mr Tho. Beauchamp, of Nevis Bapt. October ye 20th, buried January ye 6th 1705

Myrtilla is buried in the village of Oxhill in Warwickshire. Apart from her gravestone, she remains anonymous. Her story is one of the millions of hidden histories of those people who were taken from Africa and sold to Europeans as slaves between the 16th – 19th centuries.

Often called the 'triangular trade', manufactured goods were transported from England to trade in West Africa for slaves. The slaves were taken to the Caribbean and the Americas to work on the sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations, being sold in return for sugar, cotton and tobacco which was taken back to England and other parts of Europe.

Although there was slavery in Africa before the European trade in slaves, this was a different kind of slavery. Slaves could marry, own property, were socially mobile and could inherit land and property from their masters. The new kind of slavery on the plantations of the Caribbean and Americas dehumanised people. Slaves could not marry, own property, inherit goods or gain social position.

Warwick District may seem far removed from the horrors of the slave trade, but there are connections with slave owners, those who benefited from the wealth generated by the trade and also with some of the people who campaigned for abolition. We hope that this trail offers you a starting point for exploring these complex and often hidden histories.

Follow the numbered abolition tokens around the galleries. The gallery plan at the back of this leaflet will help you.

Look out for further information near to the objects.





Introduction

Begin the trail at the entrance to the Hammam and then turn right

1 Greatheed busts

Loaned by St John's Museum, Warwick

West Africa

People were taken from a large number of different West African communities to sell as slaves to Europeans.

Go to the Interactive Gallery, find the 'My Museum' cabinet.

2 West African objects

West Indies

West African people were taken to Barbados and other islands in the West Indies on slave ships. These ships were fitted out to hold as many slaves as possible in appallingly overcrowded conditions for up to a year. Many Africans died through neglect, ill treatment and suicide during the journey.

Staying in the Interactive Gallery, look in the 'Coin Cascade'. Find the coin with a pineapple on it.

3 Barbados coin

The economics of the Slave Trade

Despite the brutal consequences of the slave trade for West African people, its economic benefits for England and other European countries were a powerful motivation. The profit for each African person delivered to the West Indies was so great that the death or suicide of a large number of those who were captured was seen as insignificant.

'A 12 percent loss was accepted with equanimity by the slavers'

The Slave Trade, Oliver Ransford, Readers Union Book Club, page 89

Look in the 'Cabinet of Curiosities' (At the front of the Interactive Gallery)

4 Cowrie shells (object 22 in the cabinet)

5 Gun

Myrtilla's Trail

Go into the Art Gallery, Look in the ceramics display cabinet under the left hand archway.



6 Teapot & coffee pot

Now go into the Museum and find the display called 'For Richer'.

7 Sugar nippers & sugar bowl

Slavery

If enslaved Africans survived the brutal journey across the Atlantic from Africa to the West Indies or the Americas, they faced a life of hard labour working on the plantations. Some acted as domestic slaves for masters, but most worked in the fields growing sugar, tobacco or cotton. African families and friends were split up and people were often renamed, which reinforced the idea that they were now the property of their owner.

It was a harsh daily existence for men, women and children. Whipping acted as a punishment and also as a deterrent to prevent escape or uprising. Other punishments included branding, amputation, mutilation and castration. Disease and illness was also very common.

Despite their difficult existence, some enslaved Africans maintained their own skills or learnt new ones. A very few were able to make money to buy their own freedom.

Staying in the Museum, look for the display case in the middle about trade in Leamington

8 Anklet

9 Whip

Go back and look at the doors leading into the Art Gallery.

10 Protest song

Songs were sometimes sung whilst working on plantations. Music and religion were important to the enslaved, they offered ways of expressing resentment, rage and political action. Parents and children tried to remember the names of their families, Almost all slave narratives tell of how they would question travellers for news of relatives.

11 Quote from chapter twelve of the *Interesting Narrative* by Olaudah Equiano



Equiano was an African writer whose kidnapping and enslavement prompted him to become involved in the British abolitionist movement.

Local links

During the 17th and 18th centuries, slavery infiltrated all aspects of society in England:

- Many landed and wealthy families owned estates in the West Indies or the Americas which depended on slave labour.
- It became fashionable to have Africans as domestic servants in England.
- Industrialists and merchants were often involved directly with the trade, or its related manufacturing industries (for example, the Birmingham gun trade).
- There was a growing demand for luxury goods that were products of the trade, such as tobacco, coffee and sugar and a widening section of the population were able to afford to buy them.

The wealth derived from all of this contributed to the rapid development of towns and cities that were a feature of this period. Much of the architecture, streets and gardens created in the Georgian and Regency periods of the 18th and 19th centuries can still be seen today, particularly in spa towns like Bath and Leamington Spa.

Go back into the Art Gallery to the 'Stories' section.

12 Portrait: Guy's Cliffe II & IV by Catherine Yass

Staying in the Art Gallery, find the 'People' section.

13 Mrs Priscilla Kemble

Go back to the beginning of the trail, outside the Hammam.

14 Spa water fountain, used to dispense water at the Royal Pump Rooms

15 19th century prints showing local areas and buildings associated with the Greatheed family

Abolition

In the early 19th century, several factors combined to turn British attitudes against the slave trade.

- Religious – Quakers and Non-conformist churches had been voicing opposition to slavery since the late 1600s (although some Quakers still owned slaves).
- Social – The British public were more aware of the inhumanity of Slavery through some high profile court cases and through former slaves, including Olaudah Equiano, who contributed to the anti-slavery movement by publishing accounts of their lives and making public appearances around the country.
- Political – The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was formed in 1787. Thomas Clarkson was one of a number of abolitionists who worked with William Wilberforce who became its spokesperson, presenting Bills to parliament to abolish the Slave Trade from 1791.
- Revolutionary - Enslaved Africans themselves actively resisted slavery by maintaining their own culture, using their own variations of languages, hindering work on the plantations and by plotting escape and rebellion.
- Economic – some argue that the plantations were becoming less profitable due to the overproduction of sugar.
- Conflict – Britain was also involved in the wars with Napoleon's France and was weary of conflict.



On 25th March 1807 Parliament passed the Act to abolish the Transatlantic Slave Trade in the British Colonies.

Now go upstairs to the Mezzanine, look for the cabinet displaying costume accessories.

16 Abolition token

17 Advert for Moses Roper meeting

Loaned by Leamington Library, Warwickshire County Council

Walk to the middle of the Mezzanine and look at the archway.

18 Freedom song

Extract from an anonymous Caribbean song celebrating the end of the slave trade.



Legacy

After 1807 the Royal Navy patrolled the coast of West Africa, seizing ships conveying slaves. Despite these efforts, a quarter of all Africans enslaved between 1500 – 1870 were transported across the Atlantic after 1807. www.understanding.slavery.com

Slavery itself was not abolished in the British Empire until an Act of Parliament in 1833.

Freedom did not lead to equality for former slaves. Taxes and employment laws in the West Indies made life very difficult. The slave trade had emphasised attitudes about white superiority. These attitudes were used as a justification for colonial expansion throughout the 19th century. It can also be argued that they were the root of the racism and negative stereotypes that continued through the 20th century and even today. Writing in 1984, Peter Fryer said:

'By the 1770s racism was firmly established in Britain a "a principal handmaiden to the slave trade and slavery". The British slave trade was ended in 1807; slavery in 1833. Could racism now be dispensed with? By no means. It was too valuable. A new basis and new purpose for it had emerged. It was to become a principal handmaiden to empire.'

Staying Power, The History of Black People in Britain, Peter Fryer, Pluto Press pg165

Carry on to the end of the mezzanine, before you stop to have a look at the posters, look at the doll in the middle display case on the right.

19 Black doll

Loaned by Brenda Tai Layton

20 Christy's Minstrels poster

21 Travel posters

Please return this leaflet to the beginning of the trail when you have finished.