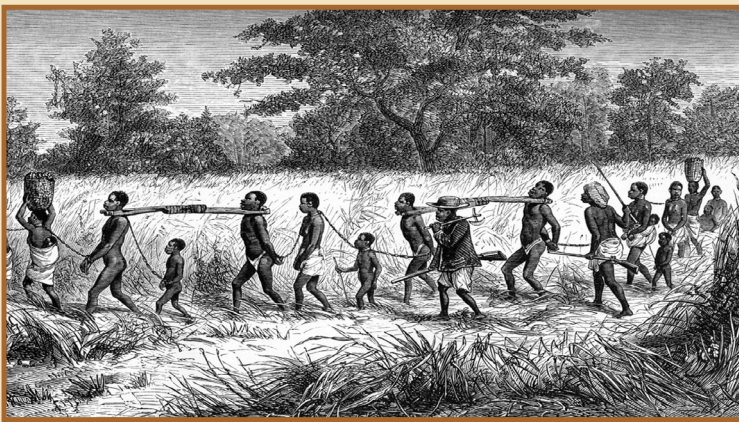


SLAVERY

2007 marked the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slave trading within the British Empire, although Slavery was not finally abolished within the British Empire until 1833.

Slavery has existed since ancient times in many civilisations, such as the Egyptians and the Greeks.

The trade in enslaved people was not viewed as morally abhorrent and inhuman, instead slaves were viewed as possessions to be traded and exploited for profit, their worth seen only in monetary terms.



Slaves being transported in Africa
Courtesy of John Murray : London, 1857



A slave trading castle in Ghana
Courtesy of Dave Ley

Olaudah Equiano's autobiography 'The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano' (1789), was an early first-hand account written by a former slave who experienced the triangular trade. Here he describes the 'middle passage' from Africa to the Americas:

"The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers

.... The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable."

(Olaudah Equiano, 1789)



The Amistad ship, made famous by slave uprising.
Contemporary painting of the sailing vessel La Amistad, in 1839
Courtesy of New Haven Colony Historical Society and Adams National Historic Site

Between 1699-1807, British colonial ports mounted over 12,000 slaving voyages. The transatlantic trade was highly profitable to Britain and the other colonial powers.

The transatlantic trade was known as the 'triangular trade', as it was based upon pre-existing sailing routes linking Europe to Africa and the Americas.

Ships carried goods to trade on the West coast of Africa, from where they would collect enslaved people who would then be taken across the Atlantic and traded. Goods produced by slave labour would then be collected from the Americas and taken back to Europe. Slaving voyages were very profitable, the ships were full on each stage of the voyage.

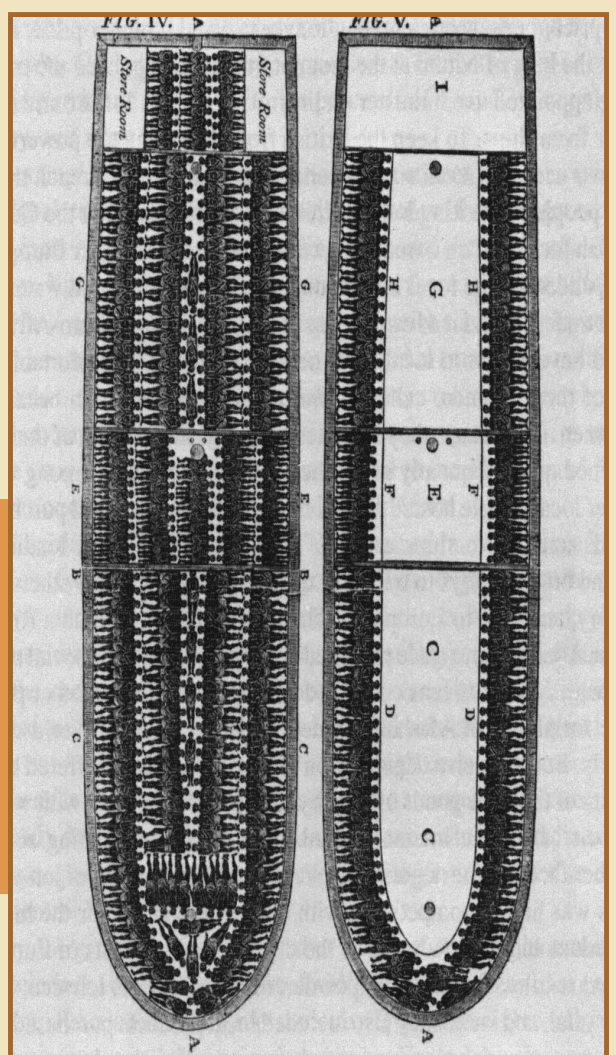
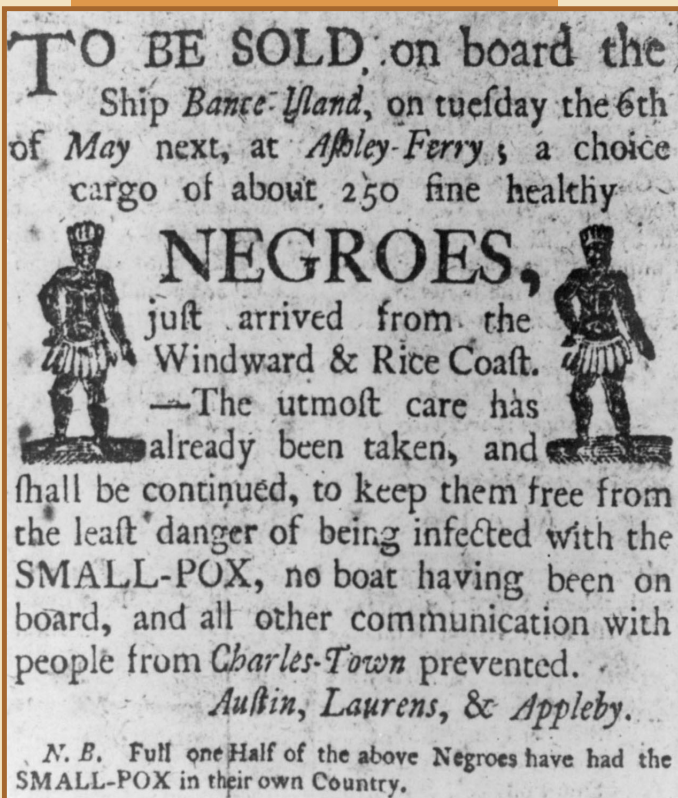


Diagram of a slave ship from the Atlantic slave trade
Courtesy of the Lilly Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Indiana University

BRITAIN'S ROLE

It is estimated that between 1662 and 1807 British ships purchased 3,415,500 Africans. 450,700 did not survive the middle passage to the Americas.

Average life expectancy of a slave was 7 years in the Caribbean, 4 in America. Slave owners calculated this was enough time to make a profit on each slave, and thus a sound investment. Life on the plantations was harsh and cruel.



Advertisement for a slave auction
Courtesy of Library of Congress

The horror and inhumanity of the slave trade was ignored as Britain and the other colonial powers sought to exploit the economic gains of trading in enslaved people.



Mistreatment of a slave
Courtesy of National Archives and Records Administration

Although Portugal commenced its transatlantic slave trading as early as 1444, John Hawkins made the first successful British slaving voyage in 1562. It wasn't until the 18th century that Britain started making major inroads into the transatlantic slave trade.



Manillas used to purchase slaves
Courtesy of the Lilly Library of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Indiana University

"It was very common in several of the islands, particularly in St Kitt's, for the slaves to be branded with the initial letters of their master's name, and a load of heavy iron hooks hung about their necks.

"Is not the slave trade entirely a war with the heart of man?"
(Olaudah Equiano. 1789)

Britain established its Caribbean and American colonies in the 17th Century (Jamaica was captured in 1655 from the Spanish). It was from this base that it developed the plantations powered by slave labour. A growing market for sugar was supplied by an increasing number of enslaved Africans who were transported to the Caribbean to work in bondage on the plantations.

Between the 1710s and 1720s, nearly 200,000 enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic in British ships. Britain's involvement in slavery reached its peak by the end of the 18th century, when it controlled 40% of the transatlantic slave trade.



Men cutting cane and women gathering the stalks at a sugar plant
Courtesy of University of Virginia Library

LONDON'S ROLE



A replica of the Zong slave ship at Tower Bridge in 2007

Not only did London's port launch slaving voyages, but London's financial institutions, such as Lloyds insurance, the City of London, and the Bank of England were the main centre of funding and insuring the slave trade. Funding the slave trade was expensive and risky considering the length of time the voyages took and the risk of losing ships, and the large number of enslaved people who died on route.

London's role in the slave trade has sometimes been overlooked. Both Bristol and Liverpool have long been associated with the trade. London had a significant involvement in and benefited from Slavery. In the 1720s, around 50 ships a year left London's port on slaving voyages. London was later usurped by Bristol and Liverpool, nevertheless it mounted approximately one third of Britain's 12,103 slaving voyages between 1699 and 1807.



The Bank of England

Their successes in doing this contributed to their economic prosperity, and that of London as a whole. London also provided the base from which the movement of cargo was orchestrated. Voyages were planned, and sugar was brought to London by companies such as Tate & Lyle, before being processed and traded throughout Britain and its empire.



Maroons (escaped slaves) on the march in the Caribbean
From the book Voyage a Surinam (Bruxelles, 1839)

London also played an important role in the abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire. Parliament and the City's financial institutions became the focus of the abolition campaign. The slave trade reached its peak in the 1780s, a time during which many people were finally questioning the barbarity of the trading system, and the morality of prospering from it.



Thomas Clarkson by Carl Frederik von Breda, 1788
National Portrait Gallery, London

Quakers actively opposed the trade, and in 1787 Thomas Clarkson established the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in London, and began building a case against slavery on moral and economic grounds. He began publicly touring his case against slavery extensively throughout Britain.



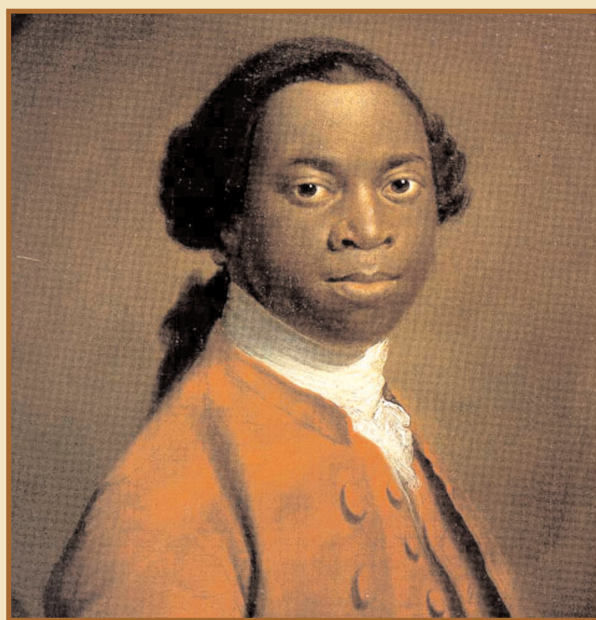
Artist image of slave revolt
Taken from Histoire d'Angleterre (Paris, 1800)

There were a number of rebellions and revolts by slaves in the colonies, notably Grenada in 1795, which contributed to people in Britain re-evaluating the trade, and demonstrated the struggle of enslaved people in the British Empire.

ABOLITION

The abolitionist movement grew significantly in the 1790s. Quakers and other Christian groups, politicians, activists - including ex-slaves - and grass-root support all contributed to a dynamic campaign, which resulted in the abolition of slave trading in 1807.

A popular campaign to boycott sugar came to a head in 1791, when 70,000 pamphlets advocating the boycott were sold in 4 months. Thomas Clarkson estimated that 300,000 people participated in the boycott, with the aim to damage the profits. This was the first occurrence of popular protest against a company's immoral actions overseas.



A portrait of a freed slave, possibly Olaudah Equiano

"Tortures, murder, and every other imaginable barbarity and iniquity are practised upon the poor slaves with impunity. I hope the slave-trade will be abolished. I pray it may be an event at hand."

(Olaudah Equiano, 1789)

Olaudah Equiano was also a key figure in the abolitionist campaign. His autobiography was a best-seller and a strong campaigning tool. Equiano managed to buy his freedom:

"I could scarcely believe I was awake. Heavens! who could do justice to my feelings at this moment?"

...all within my breast was tumult, wildness, and delirium! My feet scarcely touched the ground, for they were winged with joy, and, like Elijah, as he rose to Heaven, they "were with lightning sped as I went on."

(Olaudah Equiano, 1789)

Equiano died aged 52 in 1797, and therefore did not live to see the end of Slavery.

Parliament stalled on ending slavery, but, by 1807 plantation rebellions and the costs of maintaining the trade lead to an Act being passed in Parliament outlawing the trading of slaves within the Empire, but not Slavery itself. This was a half-measure, because enslaved people were still not free, but was an important milestone in the story of abolition. In 1833 Slavery was finally abolished within the British Empire.



A woodcut print from 1792, used by the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade on pamphlets and for campaigning

Courtesy Library of Congress

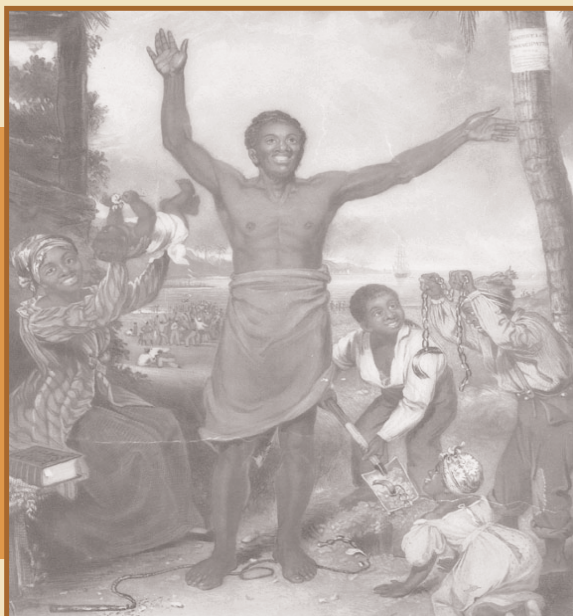
The slogan 'Am I not a Man and a Brother' was adopted as an attempt to humanise the plight of enslaved people to the British public, and was often accompanied by a picture of a slave in a subservient position, apparently appealing for manumission.



William Wilberforce

By Karl Anton Hickel, ca 1794

In 1792 William Wilberforce (MP for Hull) introduced an unsuccessful Act to Parliament proposing a ban on the slave trade. Wilberforce took on the role of the campaign's parliamentary spokesman.



"To the friends of Negro emancipation, this print is inscribed"
Painted by Alexr. Rippingille and engraved by David Lucas (London, 1834)