

# CHASING FREEDOM

The Royal Navy and the Suppression of  
the Transatlantic Slave Trade



## Further information trail

Follow the directions to discover more  
about the Royal Navy and slavery



Exit the Chasing Freedom exhibition on the left – do not go downstairs – and go towards the ‘Ship Decoration’ display.

Look for the figurehead of HMS Albatross

1

The previous HMS Albatross, a brig launched in 1842, was on the West Coast of Africa Station from 1842 until 1846. HMS Albatross was in the second division of the station, patrolling the coast between Sierra Leone and the Gallinas River. Records show the ship captured at least six slave vessels between July 1844 and October 1845. One of these, the Albanez, had 705 Africans on board.

Continue along the display to HMS Actaeon

2

HMS Actaeon, commanded by Captain George Mansel, was on the West Coast of Africa Station from 1844 to 1847. In the space of just one week in December 1845 HMS Actaeon captured two slave ships, the Gago and Esperanza. In April 1846, HMS Actaeon captured another brigantine off Cabenda.

In September 1847 HMS Amphitrite, formerly of the ‘Experimental Squadron’, took HMS Actaeon’s place on the squadron.

Go downstairs. With your back to the entrance, walk to the right-hand side of the gallery. Find the display ‘The British sailor in popular art’ and the pull-out drawers.

3

‘A Sailor’s Yarn’ is by the famous caricaturist George Cruikshank. It recalls the kind of tale Cruikshank would have heard in his local tavern. The black sailor is a regular feature in many of his illustrations throughout the 1820s, demonstrating the multicultural nature of the Navy at the time.





Staying in the same area, locate the 'Who was at Trafalgar' interactive. Click on the 'FAQ' button, followed by 'Where were the men born?'

4

The answer reveals that of the men who took part in the Battle of Trafalgar, 191 joined the fleet from the West Indies and 27 from Africa. Contemporary records from HMS Victory state that amongst the crew there were two sailors that 'give Africa as their birthplace'.

Whilst records cannot provide conclusive evidence, of those men who enlisted in the West Indies, it is probable that some of them were formerly enslaved men who had either escaped or succeeded in buying their freedom.

Now leave the building, turning right as you exit. Enter the next building 'Storehouse II'. Storehouse II was the 'present use' storehouse.

5

To lighten the load of ships whilst they were in dry dock for a refit, the Navy removed equipment such as sails and ropes and stored them here until they were needed again. Many of the ships of the West Coast of Africa Station were refitted in Portsmouth and then 're-stored' from this building.

Now enter the 'Nelson gallery' on the right. Turn right and locate the 'Nelson and Wedgwood' display.

6

Josiah Wedgwood joined the Society for the Abolition of Slavery in 1787 and was an active member of the movement. His most important contribution, the so-called Slave Medallion, brought the horrors of the slave trade to the attention of the public.

The medallion, based on the emblem of the Society, featured the famous words, 'Am I not a man and a brother?' with an image of a kneeling African in chains. It was worn as a hat-pin or brooch to promote the abolitionist cause. In 1788 Wedgwood sent a number of the medallions to Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia. He replied 'I am distributing your valuable present of cameos among my friends in whose countenances I have seen such marks of being affected by contemplating the figure of the Suppliant. .... I am persuaded it may have an effect equal to that of the best written pamphlet in procuring honour to those oppressed people'.



Walk towards the back of the Gallery.  
Find the 'Frances Nelson' display

7

Frances 'Fanny' Nelson was a planter's daughter from Nevis in the Caribbean. Nevis, with its several hundred plantations, had a thriving sugar trade and was one of the richest islands in the area.

Fanny's uncle, John Herbert, was President of the Council of Nevis and owned the Montpelier Plantation along with a large number of enslaved workers. Fanny managed his household and frequently welcomed foreign visitors. It was on this sugar plantation that she met her future husband, the Captain of HMS Boreas, Horatio Nelson.

Continue to the display 'Nelson: the Patron and Friend' and the letters to Hercules Ross.

8

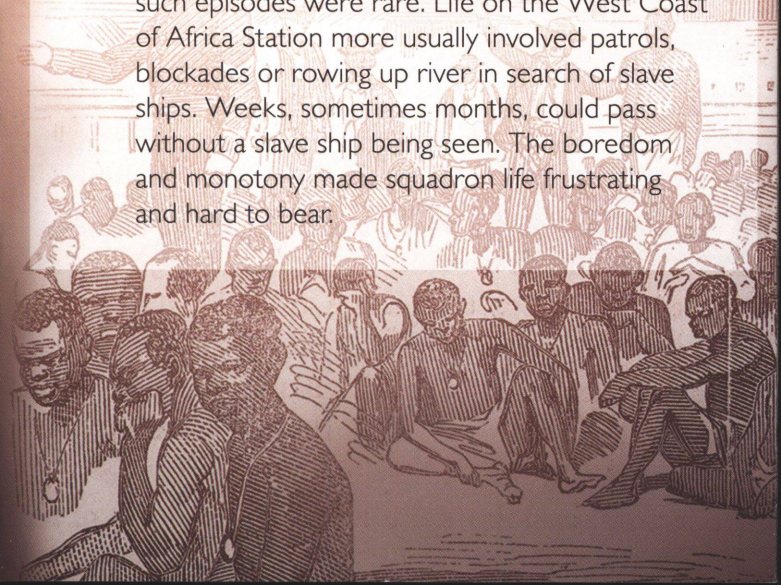
Hercules Ross was a Scottish sugar planter in Jamaica. He met Nelson in the West Indies when he was a young lieutenant and they corresponded over a 22-year period until 1802. Ross used the money he made from sugar to buy an estate back in Scotland and built Rossie Castle near Montrose.

Leave this gallery and enter the 'Sailing Navy' gallery opposite. On the right is the display 'The fight against the slavers'.

9

The model depicts an action at sea in 1835. To avoid being stopped the slaver displayed false flags. This was just one of the methods used by traders after 1807 to deceive the Royal Navy and escape capture.

The scene also shows hand-to-hand fighting but such episodes were rare. Life on the West Coast of Africa Station more usually involved patrols, blockades or rowing up river in search of slave ships. Weeks, sometimes months, could pass without a slave ship being seen. The boredom and monotony made squadron life frustrating and hard to bear.





Look at the next display 'Piracy and Slavery'.

10

In the eighteenth century one of the Navy's duties was to protect Britain's commerce, including the slave trade, from pirates. After 1807, this role changed and the Navy started to patrol the coast of West Africa in search of ships suspected of illegally transporting Africans into enslavement across the Atlantic.

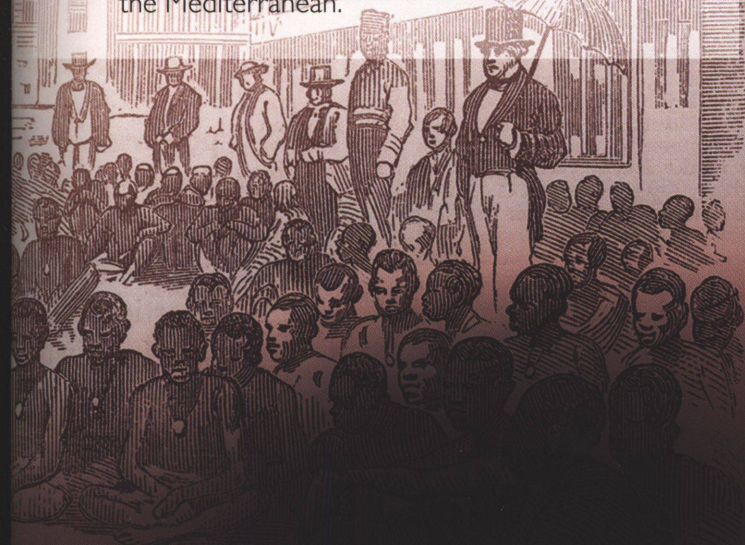
Piracy and people trafficking still exist today. Like its predecessors on the West Coast of Africa Station, the Royal Navy therefore works closely with government agencies and international partners to prevent illegal activity at sea, including the trafficking of humans, drugs and arms and undertakes wider maritime security operations such as fighting piracy.

Walk towards the middle of the gallery and the 'Boats in action' display.

11

Boats like these were essential to the West Coast of Africa Station, as they were often the only means by which the Navy could enter shallow rivers and creeks. Men frequently spent days away from their ships in open boats, suffering bad weather with little food or water. The most serious aspect of boat duty, however, was the fact that it forced them to work and sleep in the open.

This exposed them to attack from mosquitoes and the diseases they carried. West Africa was one of the worst areas in the world for fatal diseases. Deaths from malaria and yellow fever meant the mortality rate was 55 per 1000 men on the West Coast of Africa Station, compared with only ten for men in home waters and the Mediterranean.





Now go to the 'Uniform and medals' display on the back left hand-side of the gallery. Find Commander Henry Raby's medals.

12

Rear Admiral Henry James Raby was a crew-member of HMS Wasp on the West Coast of Africa Station before serving in the Crimea, where his bravery resulted in his receiving the Victoria Cross.

After his promotion to Commander in 1855, Raby left HMS Wasp to return to the West Coast of Africa Station. Here he took command of several ships including HMS Alecto, which was involved in the capture and destruction of Porto Nova. Raby received a mention in Dispatches for this action. After becoming Captain of HMS Adventure in 1868, he was again rewarded with recognition for actions against the slave trade. He also received the thanks of the Foreign Office for concluding a treaty with the Chiefs of Old Calabar River to stop slave trading. Up until then this had been one of the main centres of the slave trade.

Walk towards the front of the gallery.  
Find the display 'The sailor's table'.

13

Tobacco and rum were both part of daily life in the Navy. Both were the result of the hard labour and suffering of enslaved workers on plantations.

The link between tobacco and slavery began in sixteenth-century Brazil. Here the Portuguese enslaved the native tribes and integrated their tobacco crops into the colonial economy. As the quality of the tobacco was poor, it could not be sold in Europe and the Portuguese traders began to include it as a trade item with West African dealers.

Tobacco soon became a sign of social status in West Africa and in some regions it was legal currency. As they entered the trade other countries also exchanged tobacco for people. Virginia tobacco produced on British plantations was preferred in the Senegambia area. In Guinea it was reported that an African cost six or seven rolls of tobacco.

Some slave ships used tobacco, along with rum and brandy, to sedate their captive cargo during the Middle Passage. For the Europeans tobacco or 'green gold' led to huge profits. For the enslaved workers and Africans it increased the misery.



Rum is made from molasses, a by-product of sugar production. It was produced in the Caribbean, where the insatiable demand for sugar from Europe had led to the establishment of hundreds of sugar plantations.

In the Caribbean, rum was a cure-all for the aches and pains that afflicted those living in the tropics. Plantation owners began to sell it at discounted prices to naval ships on station in the area to encourage their presence in local waters, and thus discourage pirates. By the 1730s the Navy had added rum to its daily rations. This naval connection introduced rum to the outside world.

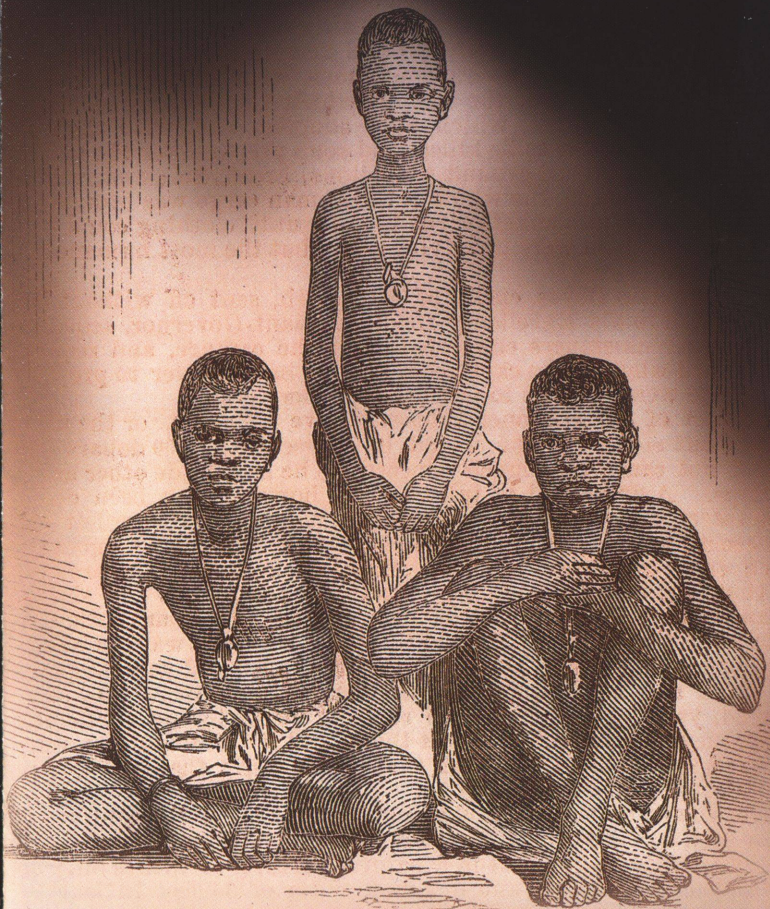
Rum was also sent to Africa to purchase more workers for the plantations of the Caribbean and South America as part of the 'triangular trade'. 'Here merchants could buy an adult for about 120 gallons of rum.' Children cost 80 gallons. In America, the slave traders of Newport owned and operated their own distilleries. It is estimated that this city alone exchanged rum for over 106 000 Africans.

Now leave this building, turning right after you exit. Enter the next building towards the end of the colonnades. Go to the display on the modern Navy at the back.

The modern Royal Navy has a justifiably proud history associated with the abolition of slavery and the pursuance of humanitarian rights. Today, it continues to support the UK's ongoing commitment to the global humanitarian principles of freedom and security.

The UK is a signatory to the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which prohibits the transport of slaves by sea. Whilst the Royal Navy does not have a specific role with regards to human trafficking, its wider maritime security/policing role means that action would be taken in accordance with international law if it encountered a ship engaged in any illegal activities, including the rendering of humanitarian assistance to victims of human trafficking.



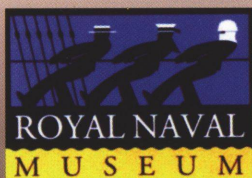


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