

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING SLAVERY – PAST AND PRESENT

It's 200 years since the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act was passed, making the trade illegal in the UK and on Merchant Navy ships. What do we know about Glasgow's role in the slave trade, or its impact on Scotland?

The earliest written records document slavery's existence in ancient Mesopotamia, and slavery has been part of most human cultures since. But the transatlantic slave trade happened on an unprecedented scale, forcibly shipping huge numbers of people from Africa to the West Indies and the Americas. This formed part of a triangular trade. Goods like guns and alcohol were shipped from Europe to West Africa and traded for slaves. Slaves were transported to North America or the Caribbean to work on sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations. Raw materials were shipped back to Europe, processed and sold in turn. Conditions on slave ships were horrific and many died.

Profits from this trade helped to establish Glasgow as a major port – Britain's North American colonies had to ship their produce here first to be taxed. Unlike Bristol and Liverpool, Glasgow was not a major centre of the slave trade. But the wealth of the 18th-century tobacco lords and other Glasgow merchants was ultimately based on slave labour in the colonies. 19th-century Glasgow was staunchly anti-slavery – religious groups, emancipation societies and ordinary people campaigned against it. In 1833 the Slavery Abolition Act was passed and became law in 1834. From now on all slaves in British colonies were to be freed and slavery was abolished.

Why should we mark the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act 1807?

With support from the African and African-Scottish communities, we're running a range of exhibitions and public programmes throughout 2007. This *Towards Understanding Slavery: Past*

and Present initiative aims to increase understanding of the human effects of the transatlantic slave trade, as well as to explore its impact on Scotland's national heritage and Glasgow's history. This Act was also the

first piece of British legislation to recognize universal human rights, an important first step on the path to universal suffrage and human rights in the twentieth century.

There has never been an official apology by Britain for its role in the transatlantic slave trade, although as we go to press, Prime Minister Tony Blair had expressed his deep sorrow for this period of history. We must try to understand slavery, and its relationship to prejudices based on gender, class and ethnicity. Without a better understanding of the ideas used to justify exploitation, segregation and even genocide, we cannot challenge these prejudices and move towards a more just society.

Events

People's Palace & Winter Gardens

A Hidden Legacy – the Glassford Family Portrait explores the legacy of Glasgow's tobacco trade and changing attitudes to slavery. A programme of talks and workshops explores Glasgow's tobacco trade and links with slavery.

St Mungo Museum

A year-long programme of lectures, schools events and exhibitions highlights the life of African communities in Glasgow. We'll be exploring the religious and social legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, including racism and the way African collections have been displayed in museums. Members of the African Scottish community will be re-interpreting objects in the collections from a contemporary viewpoint and we hope to commission an artwork from an artist of African descent.

GoMA

Starting from Scotland's (and in particular Glasgow's) ties to the slave trade, Graham Fagen explores themes of empire, slavery, ownership, power and wealth, and looks at the connections famous Scots like Robert Burns had to the Caribbean.

Kelvingrove and Glasgow Museums Resource Centre

are running talks and tours on Glasgow's African collections, exploring the role indigenous African groups played in the slave trade and its abolition, and the legacy on African-American society.

Slavery: Past and present education programme – see p.35 for further information.

For more information on any of these, please log on to www.glasgowmuseums.com

