

A North East Story

Scotland, Africa and Slavery in the Caribbean

Between 1500 and 1860 Europeans shipped over 12 million Africans as slaves to the Americas. Britain was the biggest slaving nation after Portugal, selling three million Africans into slavery.

After the Union of Scotland and England in 1707, North East Scots eagerly claimed a share of the riches generated by slavery, especially in the Caribbean.

Today, however, the North East's early links with the Caribbean have largely been forgotten. This exhibition reminds us of their importance. It introduces people who prospered from slave ownership, as well as the local campaigners who fought to persuade Britain that slavery was wrong.

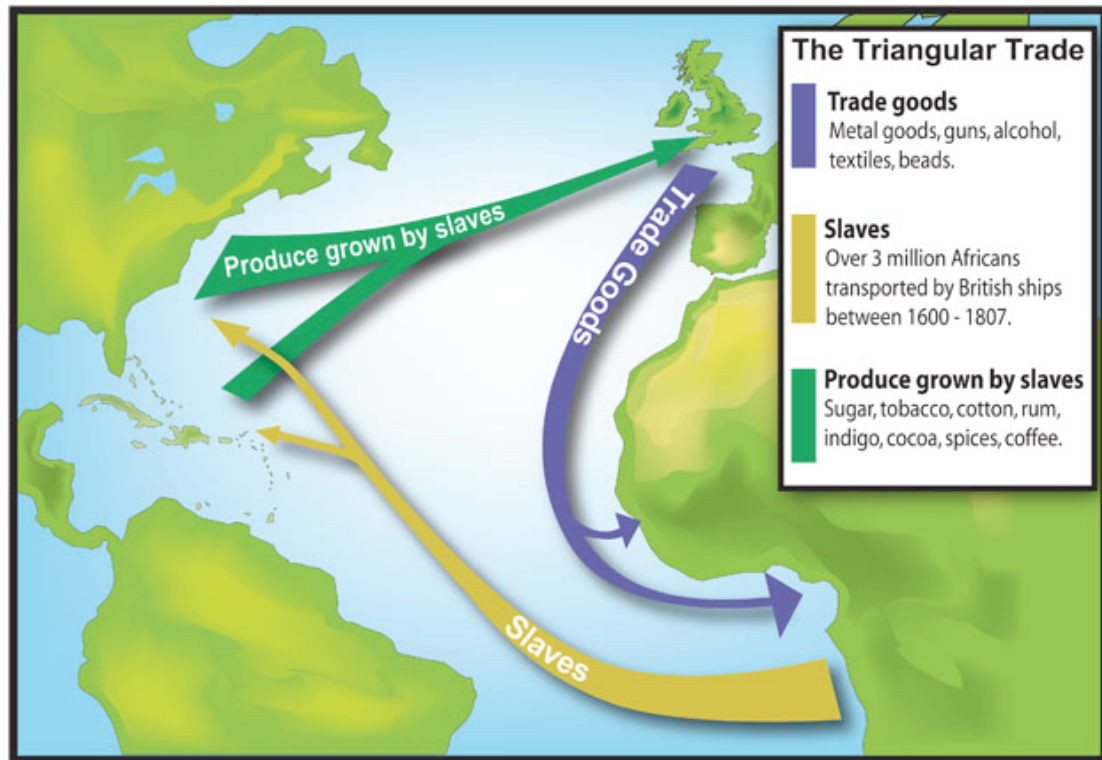
The Atlantic slave trade

Slaving ships made a three-part voyage, which is often called the 'Triangular Trade' [**1B1**]. First, they left European ports laden with goods for sale in West and Central Africa [**Map2**]. In Africa the slavers exchanged the goods for African war captives, whom they loaded onto their ships like cargo.

Second, they sailed across the Atlantic to the Americas. This 'Middle Passage' [**1W3**] was a terrifying experience for the people crammed below decks. Thousands perished in rebellions or from disease and despair.

In the Americas, the slavers sold their surviving captives to European planters as slave labourers. Then they loaded up with plantation produce – sugar, rum, tobacco, coffee and cotton – and sailed back to Europe on the final leg of their voyage.

The Africans they left behind became the legal property of their new owners, with the status of an ox or a mule. Like a work animal, they had to labour for their owners, unpaid, until they died.



1B1 The three-part journey undertaken by British slaving ships in the 'Triangular Trade'.



1B2 Restraining leg irons used on slaving ships.
© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London



1B3 Africans rebel against their captivity on board a British slave ship.

© The British Library Board



1B4 Newly arrived Africans are sent for sale in Suriname, a scene witnessed by a Scottish-Dutch soldier, John Gabriel Stedman. © The British Library Board

Scots in the Caribbean

Until the Union, Scots were unable to share in the commercial opportunities enjoyed by the English in their expanding empire. After 1707, Scottish investment and employment overseas grew rapidly.

The American and Caribbean colonies were especially attractive for Scots who had supported the Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745–6, because people going there did not have to swear allegiance to the crown. In Asia, British commerce was controlled by the East India Company, which required that its employees support the British sovereign and belong to the established church.

In the Caribbean, Scots went in largest numbers to those islands where the land and employment were not already controlled by English investors and settlers. The English had colonised St Kitts, Barbados and Nevis [**Map3**] in the 1620s; hence relatively few Scots went there. But they went in great numbers to the islands Britain conquered after 1750, especially Dominica, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago [**Map3**].

Many also went to Jamaica [**Map3**], which the English had taken from Spain in 1655. This was a large island and at the time of the Union it still had plenty of uncultivated land in the north and west of the island [**1W1**]. It was in these parts that Scottish investors established large and profitable sugar plantations.

Goods exchanged for slaves in Africa

Manufactures exported from Britain for sale in Africa included guns, knives and a wide variety of metal goods [**1W2**], especially iron bars and pewter and brass basins and kettles.

Many of the other trade items were imports that were brought into Britain expressly for re-export to Africa. These included glass beads from Venice and cotton and silk fabrics imported from India by the English East India Company. The East India Company also imported millions of cowrie shells for sale in Africa, where they were used as a form of currency and for personal decoration.

Alcohol was another major trade item. Barrels of beer from Britain, rum from Jamaica and brandy from France were exchanged for slaves or used to win favours from the chiefs who commanded the African end of the trade.

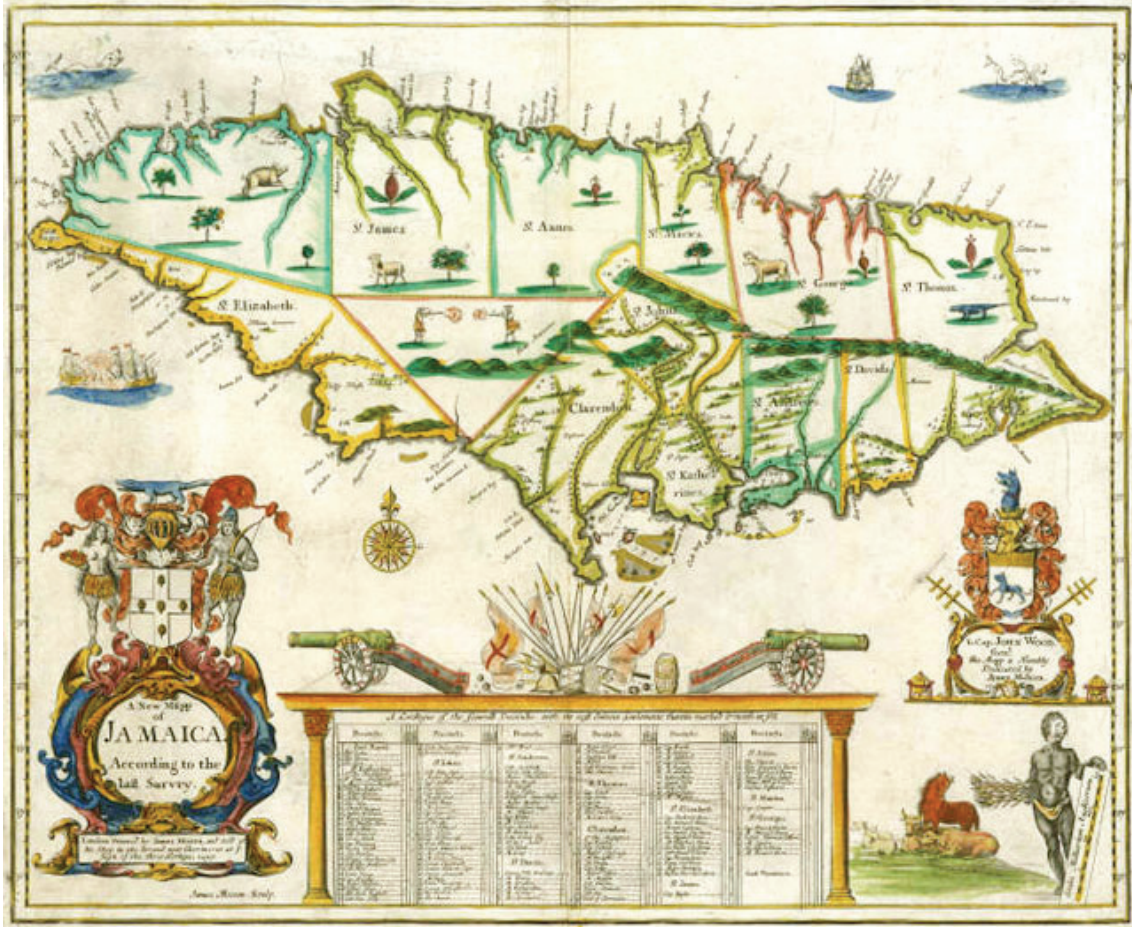
The legal status of slavery

It was legal for one person to own another as a piece of movable or transferrable property in British colonies until 1834, when slavery was prohibited by parliament. This legal right was not restricted to Europeans. Former slaves of African or African-European descent could own slaves too.

In Britain itself the situation was different. In 1772, in a landmark legal case in England, Lord Mansfield ruled that an African American slave who had escaped from his master while visiting England could not be compelled to return to America. This case became known as the Somersett case, after James Somersett, the man who refused to go back to slavery. It undermined the notion that slavery was legal within England and suggested that if an enslaved person could get to England they could claim their freedom there.

The Scottish justice system issued a much clearer ruling against local slavery in 1778 in *Knight vs Wedderburn*. Joseph Knight, an African-born slave, had been brought from Jamaica to Scotland by his owner, John Wedderburn of Ballendean. Once in Scotland, Knight demanded to be treated as a free employee, not a slave. When Wedderburn refused, Knight left his service. Wedderburn had Knight arrested, but after several court cases, the Court of Session in Edinburgh ruled emphatically that slavery was not recognised by Scots law and that Wedderburn could not compel Knight to stay with him.

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1W1 A map of Jamaica from 1677 shows English settlers concentrated in the south and east of the island; after 1707 Scots took up land in the north and west. (Courtesy of John Carter Brown Library, Providence, Rhode Island)



1W2 A brass armlet, or manilla, cast in Nigeria; manillas eventually became a measure of currency for the slave trade. (© The Trustees of the British Museum]

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1W3 The 'Middle Passage': African captives below decks on a Portuguese slaver captured by the Royal Navy in 1845. (© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London)

Map2 (Map of West and Central Africa with slaving locations) and **Map3** (Map of Caribbean with individual islands) available to download as a pdf.

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