



The Transatlantic Slave Trade

It is estimated that more than 12 million African people were displaced from their homes and forced into slavery in the 300 years during which the Transatlantic slave trade was conducted. This iniquitous trade in humans drove much of the foundation of the British Empire and enabled the creation of the United States, despoiled Africa and its peoples, and gave us our modern notions of racism. For these reasons it is a crucial subject for young people to understand. For the same reasons it is often seen as too difficult or too political to engage with and is therefore left out of the curriculum.

2007 marks 200 years since the passing of the Abolition of Transatlantic Slavery Act by the British parliament. Whilst the Act did not completely eradicate the trade, it marked a major change in British public opinion and the beginning of the end. Here we highlight the key themes in learning about the transatlantic slave trade. It is likely that there will be a great deal of public interest and debate about slavery during 2007 including a number of activities and events to commemorate the passing of the Abolition Act.

Africa before the slave trade

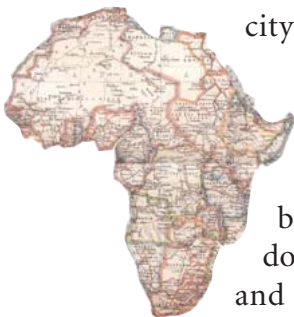
The history of Africa has long been ignored, in part due to the attempts by slave traders to depict Africa as a savage, undeveloped continent in order to justify their actions. In fact by 1500 Africa, the cradle

of civilization, had a number of city-states and kingdoms

including Mali, Songhay, Asante, Ife and Benin.

Extensive commercial links had been developed between the various kingdoms based on trade in gold and other luxury goods.

Chroniclers in the early 16th Century, highlighted the wealth of African rulers and the intellectual achievements in African states. As well as trade links there were also wars and conflicts. Slave trading existed but the arrival of European traders escalated the importance attached to enslavement, and made it a key part of African economies.



Understanding the triangular trade

15th-century developments in maritime technology enabled European sailors to undertake longer trade journeys from the Mediterranean along the African coastline and ultimately across the Atlantic to the Americas. Trade developed around a 'triangle'; from Britain to West Africa taking goods such as ammunition, cloth and glassware, from West Africa to the Americas carrying enslaved people, and finally from the Americas back to Britain with raw materials such as sugar, tobacco and cotton. This triangle made good economic sense as the ships were full on each leg. The triangular trade therefore involved a very wide range of people, not just those who sailed in ships – the British port towns as well as the burgeoning industrial capabilities of the country were made viable through this trade in humans.

Liverpool was the principal slaving port and half of all vessels would dock in the north west of England. London, Bristol and Glasgow

shared the remaining spoils. The triangular trade provided markets and resources to enable the British Industrial Revolution to take hold – increasing urbanization, beginning the decline in peasantry and providing the capital to build grand cities and country estates.



Enslavement and transportation

The British involvement in slavery was late in comparison to some of our European neighbours. Starting in around 1562, the British came to be the biggest power in slave trading by 1730. Between 1690 and 1807, British ships carried over 2.8 million enslaved Africans (about the population of modern Wales).

Enslaved people had been captured inland; force-marched to the coast or ferried along rivers and held in slaving forts – some of

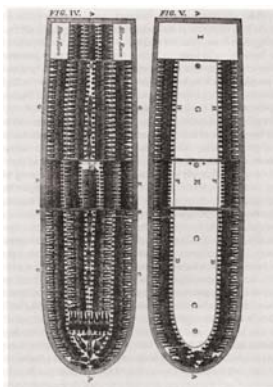


which still exist today along the West coast of Africa. The conditions were squalid. Many perished even before making it to the forts and the enslaved were usually in a much a weakened state when they were boarded onto ships heading for the 'New World'.

The journey to the Americas took in the region of 8 weeks. Since the slave traders saw the enslaved as little more than a commodity, they



were treated like cargo, often branded and usually assigned numbers rather than names. On board ship enslaved Africans were kept below decks; men, women and boys separated. Men were usually kept



shackled by their wrists and ankles. They had so little space they could only lie on their sides and could not sit or stand. The largest ships leaving Liverpool carried over 1000 slaves. Death on what came to be known as the 'middle passage' was commonplace.

Slavery

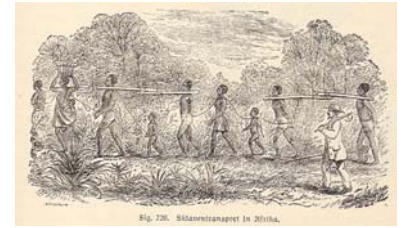
On arrival in the Americas, enslaved Africans would be sold to work on plantations, or in the households of the slave-owners. The plantations grew cash crops – tobacco, sugar, coffee, cocoa – for the European markets. Entrepreneurs on the islands of the Caribbean and in the US depended on slave labour to grow these crops profitably. They would



ensure that the slaves were bought as cheaply as possible and worked as hard as possible to maximize their profits. Slaves were sold in auctions to the highest bidder – the strongest and fittest achieving the best price. The slaves were renamed, often after their 'owner' or ironically after a war hero or Roman Emperor (Olaudah Equiano was given the slave name Gustavus Vassa) to add to the humiliation.

Many enslaved Africans died in the first months after arrival in the Americas – as many as a third of those transported to Virginia in the US died. So there was a constant need for more people to be enslaved and transported. Work was hard – the enslaved would work as long as there was daylight, chopping sugar cane, picking cotton or digging

fields. Men and women usually worked together. They were marshaled into work by an overseer – often an African who was at liberty to beat those deemed to be slacking. Domestic slaves also suffered – being forced to work all hours and often victims of sexual abuse and vicious punishments. By 1788 as much as 25% of the enslaved Africans on the Caribbean island of Barbados were in domestic service. For a period it became fashionable to have a young black boy as a hand-servant both in the Caribbean and in Britain.



Punishments were meted out regularly as the slave owners' worst fear was an insurrection – they were, after all outnumbered by slaves. Runaways were often rewarded with 100-150 lashes, or having an ear cut off. Killing slaves was not seen as murder. Punishments were often carried out in public to remind the other slaves of the consequences of dissent. Even in 1807 when the British parliament passed the Act abolishing the slave trade, it also passed legislation limiting the number of lashes that could be given to a slave to 39.



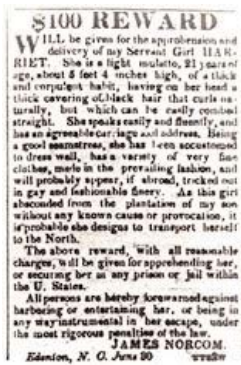
There was life outside of the plantations as enslaved Africans began to organize and use their skills to build lives for themselves amidst such hardship. Some enslaved Africans became skilled artisans and well educated – working alongside white plantation owners and artisans in trades as diverse as cattle ranching and translation. Modern Caribbean and African American cultures still carry the legacy of this period and reflect it in music such as calypso, and folk stories such as those of Brer Rabbit or Anansi. Stories and songs from Africa have been found passed down through generations in America and the Caribbean, for example by the Gullah people.



Resistance and rebellion

The African people who were enslaved did not co-operate willingly in their plight. They resisted at

every stage. Several hundred organized rebellions took place throughout the period of slavery. There were revolts on ships. Ships' crews were advised to



be on watch – there are a number of insurance claims which show that enslaved Africans were willing to fight for their freedom. Many enslaved Africans ran away from plantations – though usually with little success. Owners were keen to ensure that those who ran were caught in order to provide an example for the others so

large rewards were offered for the capture of runaways. A famous escape occurred in Jamaica in the 1650s. 1500 Africans escaped to the mountainous region during wars between the Spanish and British, mostly from the Akan region of West Africa. They evaded capture for over 150 years and acted as a refuge for escaped slaves and undertook guerilla warfare against the plantation owners. Despite the many efforts of British governors of Jamaica to recapture all of the escaped slaves, descendants of the Maroons - as they came to be known - still live in Jamaica today.

The largest and most successful rebellion saw the creation of the independent republic of Haiti. The jewel in the crown of the French Caribbean islands was St Domingue which held unprecedented wealth producing 30% of the world's sugar and half its coffee in the late 18th Century. In 1791 there were almost half a million enslaved Africans on the island. The French Revolution in 1789 created a new French republic but also that of Haiti when the slaves revolted led by the formidable soldier Toussaint L'Ouverture. The French abandoned slavery as part of their republican fervour in 1794. Other European powers thought that Haiti should be in European control partly because of its wealth but also to stop other enslaved Africans from being inspired by the revolt. The British went to war with Haiti raising an army which included over 13 000 enslaved Africans, offering them freedom in exchange for five years' service, and making the British government one of the largest slave-owners.

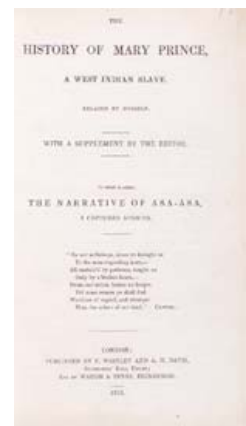


12 000 British soldiers died in Haiti after five years of fighting and the British left defeated. Napoleon managed to capture Toussaint L'Ouverture who died in captivity in 1803, but could not defeat his troops who declared Haiti an independent republic in 1804.

Enslaved Africans also resisted through keeping hold of their African cultures, creating their own languages and religious practices. Subversive acts included sabotage of machinery, withholding labour as far as they dared, and renaming fellow enslaved Africans to ensure they kept their identity.

Abolition

Moving from being the largest slave trading nation in the World to abolishing the trade within less than twenty years is a remarkable moment in the history of British politics. The change came about for a wide range of reasons – economic, religious, social, and political – and involved the creation of a political movement among elites but also, remarkably, among the masses. It is difficult to say with certainty which of the arguments against slavery or events in British politics swayed public opinion – the series of expensive Caribbean wars; the French and American revolutions; the influence of non-conformist churches such as the Methodists and Quakers, increased awareness of the inhumanity of slavery; the speeches and books of former slaves Mary Prince, Olaudah Equiano, and Ottobah Cuguano; or the efforts of Granville Sharp and other members of The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, including the formidable politician William Wilberforce.



Many of the campaigning tools used nowadays were used then in challenging the trade in humans. Boycotts were used to remove the profit from slave traders. 400 000 Britons refused to eat slave-grown sugar – often led by women who decided what sugar to buy. Every major town and city had a branch of the abolitionist movement that would conduct local demonstrations. Petitions including over half a million signatures were submitted to Parliament. Josiah



Wedgwood designed a popular logo, entitled 'Am I not a man and brother?' used as a seal on letters and later on snuff boxes, cufflinks and tea sets.

There was a large and vociferous movement to keep slavery – after all, many towns depended on the trade. The Act was passed in 1807 but did not end slavery – it was merely a stepping stone to that outcome. A quarter of all Africans who were enslaved between 1500 and 1870 were in fact transported across the Atlantic after 1807. The Act also did not end the abolitionist movement which went on campaigning until an Act was passed in 1833 abolishing slavery itself.

Legacy and modern slavery

The legacy of slavery can still be felt today. The forms of racism that slavery encouraged and sustained can still be seen in the language of racists and attitudes towards people of African descent, notions of white superiority, and in the poverty evident in much of Africa. Liberia and Sierra Leone are countries shaped by the transatlantic slave trade –

formed by returning former slaves. It has been calculated that without the slave trade the population of Africa in 1850 would have been 46-53 million instead of 25 million. The effect of losing so many young people over hundreds of years has been cited as a reason for the lack of industrial and economic growth in some parts of West Africa.

Slavery did not stop with abolition and even today there are people trafficked and enslaved. Slavery in the Americas did not formally end until 1888 but the segregation and Jim Crow laws in the southern states of the US lasted into the 1960s. Slavery exists today despite the fact that it has been banned by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1956 UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery. Modern slavery takes many forms such as Eastern European women forced into prostitution in Western Europe, children bought and sold in Africa and China, and men forced into work on Brazilian agricultural estates. The link to race and ethnicity has gone, but the tragedy of slavery continues.

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Resources

During 2007 there is a focus on slavery since the year commemorates the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Abolition of Transatlantic Slavery Act (see <http://slavetrade.parliament.uk/> for information on Parliament and the British Slave Trade, 1600-1807, with an online exhibition). For some, teaching about slavery and the abolition movement may be contentious and thus intimidating. The Real Histories Directory contains a number of resources that may help. **Breaking the Silence** (www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/) is an educational site that aims to help teachers and educators to break the silence surrounding the Transatlantic slave trade by giving a range of perspectives from teacher 'Briefings' contributed by people in Africa, the Caribbean and Americas and Europe to downloadable lesson plans and activities. There are also activities for students or young people that chart a journey from enslavement to emancipation. The **Truth 2007** (www.ligali.org/truth2007/) website has an interesting and useful section on the terminology used to describe this period in history.

Africa before the slave trade

The BBC site, **The Story of Africa** (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/) tells the story of the continent from an African perspective with contributions from Africa's top historians.

Understanding the triangular trade

The Story of Africa also has a section on Slavery that includes, for example, an audio clip from the great grandson of a Muslim slave trader; a BBC dramatisation of Olaudah Equiano's account of his experiences; case studies; Liberian President J.J. Roberts's Independence speech. **History Footsteps** Bristol

Slavery Trail (www.historyfootsteps.net/) discovers what the cities' handsome squares and quaint buildings have to do with the Transatlantic slave trade. **Discovering Bristol** (www.discoveringbristol.org.uk/) explores Bristol's role in the trade, who was involved, what was bought and sold, who stopped it and the effect of the trade today. **Merseyside Maritime Museum's** site (www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/) covers the history and impact of Transatlantic slavery while **Slavery History Tours** (www.slaveryhistorytours.com/) offer walking tours of Liverpool that focus on Black history and the Transatlantic slave trade. The **Slavery and Glasgow** website (www.scan.org.uk/exhibitions/blackhistory/blackhistory_1.htm) has an online exhibition that looks at the links with the city and the National Archives of Scotland website features the 1770 case of **David Spens** (or Spence) - www.nas.gov.uk/about/101006.asp - a black slave who claimed that he was free from slavery because he had been baptised as well as the history of **George Dale**, (www.nas.gov.uk/about/050930.asp) who was transported against his will from Africa aged about eleven, and ended up in Scotland.

Enslavement and transportation

The **didyouknow** website (www.diduknow.info/slavery/), set in the year 1780 follows four enslaved Africans on board a transatlantic slave ship and charts their stories before and after capture. The website www.ship-wrecks.co.uk/GhanaSlaveForts.htm has information on the Ghana slave forts. **Merseyside Maritime Museum's** website illustrates the appalling conditions on board ship en route to the Americas. The Breaking the Silence site (www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence/main/04/index.shtml) has information on the Middle Passage with teaching notes.

Slavery

The **Black History 4 Schools** site (www.blackhistory4schools.com/slavetrade/) points to a number of resources to help teachers and students in learning about the subject. For Key Stages 3-4, **Durham University's 4 schools** site (www.dur.ac.uk/4schools/ks34resources.htm) looks at the reality of slave life using contemporaneous accounts as a starting point for further investigation. **Artefacts To Order** (www.artefactstoorder.co.uk/) are currently supplying a trunk of artefacts to commemorate the abolition of slavery. The US site www.virginiaplaces.org/population/slavery.html has historical information and useful links on the subject of slavery in Virginia while the Yale University site www.yale.edu/glc/gullah/index.htm has information on the Gullah people of South Carolina and Georgia.

Resistance and Rebellion

The BBC **Story of Africa** site (www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/) has a section, 'African Resistance', that charts resistance by Africans on the continent and in the Diaspora. The **Spartacus** site (www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASrunaways.htm) has information on runaway slaves including extracts from their writings, while the **Royal Geographical Society's** site (www.unlockingthearchives.rgs.org/themes/journeys/gallery/resource/?id=443) has useful information on the Maroons of Jamaica.

Abolition

The **Anti-Slavery Arch** (www.anti-slaveryarch.com/history.htm) in Stroud, Gloucestershire, built in 1834, is a monument to the abolition of slavery in the British colonies and is the only one of its kind remaining in Britain. The website has information about the Anti-Slavery Society in Stroud and its pressure on the local Member of Parliament to vote for the abolition of slavery. The British Library's **Images Online** (www.imagesonline.bl.uk/britishlibrary/) site gives instant access to thousands of images from the British Library's collections and has a section on 'Slave Trade + Abolition' that includes paintings, engravings, maps etc. dating back to the 18th century. Brycchan Carey's website has extensive information and links on both **Ottobah Cuguano** (www.brycchancarey.com/cugoano/index.htm) and **Olaudah Equiano** (www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/), enslaved Africans brought to England. The 100 Great Black Britons site has information on Mary Prince (www.100greatblackbritons.com/bios/mary_prince.html). The **National Archives** (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/rights/abolition.htm) also hold information on abolitionists and the abolition movement.

Legacy and modern slavery

The **Africa Centre** website (www.africacentre.org.uk/Unfinishedbusinesspapers.htm) hosts papers from a conference held by the Africa Centre in December 2004, called **Unfinished Business - Tackling the Legacies of Slavery and Colonialism** and **Anti-Slavery International** (www.antislavery.org/), founded in 1839, is the world's oldest international human rights organisation and the only charity in the United Kingdom to work exclusively against slavery and related abuses. The website has a section of the various forms of modern slavery. **Set all free** (www.setallfree.net/) has been established by Churches Together in England to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the Act and its website has a section on 'slavery now' as well as interesting articles on belief and the legacies of the trade. A joint research team, from the University of Hull and Anti-Slavery International, has been exploring the contours of modern slavery in the UK and the results of their research and be found on the **Joseph Rowntree** (www.jrf.org.uk/KNOWLEDGE/FINDINGS/socialpolicy/2035.asp) site.

Activities outside the classroom

The Real Histories Directory's **Events** pages (www.realhistories.org.uk/diary.php) will keep you up to date with exhibitions, discussions, ceremonies and events commemorating this year's anniversary. For example, the **British Empire & Commonwealth Museum's** (www.empiremuseum.co.uk/) major exhibition of the slave trade, 'Breaking the Chains' opens on 23 April. The **International Slavery Museum** (www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/) will open its display galleries on 23 August, which is also Slavery Remembrance Day.

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The Real Histories Directory

The **Real Histories Directory** (www.realhistories.org.uk) has been created as a resource tool for teachers, parents, pupils and the wider community to support them in their teaching and learning about cultural diversity in the UK. The website helps you to locate **resources** in your and other LEAs, such as storytellers, dual language books, culturally diverse toys and relevant **events** taking place in the UK. There are also items of **news** that may be of particular interest to schools and teachers.

You can also submit resources that you would like to include in the directory free of charge by visiting the site, clicking on 'Submit an entry' and following the on-screen instructions.

As well as the varied resources available, each month a new **Topic of the Month** is added with suggestions for using the Directory in the classroom and at home.

We are interested in hearing your views on our Topics and the Real Histories website. You can email comments and suggestions to: realhistories@runnymedetrust.org.