

Infosheet No. 39 The Slave Trade

The history of slavery dates back thousands of years, but rose to its most devastating level with the discoveries of the West Indies and the Americas. From c1500 to 1900, Europeans (principally the Portuguese, Spanish, British, French, Dutch, Danish and Swedish) forcibly uprooted people from West Africa and West Central Africa, as slave labour. European shipping records show that at least 12 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic as slaves. Some scholars argue that this a gross underestimate and put the figure closer to 20 million. Countless others died either on awaiting transport on the African coast or during the Atlantic passage.

The Beginnings of the Slave Trade

It was in 1501 that the Spanish Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella granted permission to the colonists of the Caribbean to import black slaves. 1518 saw the landing in the West Indies of the first black cargo from Africa. This spread rapidly from the Spanish island of Hispaniola (Haiti) to the islands of Jamaica, Puerto Rico and Cuba, to the mainland colonies of Mexico and Peru and then throughout Spanish America. It was the French, English, Portuguese and Dutch who took the greatest part in delivering Africans to the Americas. The Spaniards, although major purchasers of slaves, did not trade on the African Coast until the late 1700s.

The slaves' experience

Some Africans were captured during European raids along the African coast, but many were bought from local African or Afro-European dealers who had a sophisticated network of trading alliances bringing

groups of people together for sale. Up to 80 per cent were captives taken in African wars and then sold by the victors as their booty. Some of those sold as slaves were done so as a form of punishment or because they were in debt and some were sold by their own parents or guardians.

Most slaves were men - women and young children were less likely to be offered for sale. The greatest number of slaves came from the Congo-Angola region of Africa. The Senegambia, Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast also provided a large proportion, while others came from Mozambique, Madagascar, the Cameroon and what is now Nigeria.

"I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me." Olaudah Equiano, 1789¹

The voyage to the Americas was the first test of survival for the captives. Slaves were generally chained securely together in the hold, often with hardly any room to move, creating unbearable heat. Epidemics of fever, scurvy, dysentery (the 'Flux') and small pox were rife as was sea-sickness. Even convicts en route to Australia were given twice as much space as slaves. In 1726 the *Sea Horse* and the *St. Michael* lost more than 600 of the 1030 slaves they were carrying from Madagascar to Cartagena due to the horrendous conditions on board. Severe

Lloyd's Register Foundation
Information Centre
71 Fenchurch Street
London
EC3M 4BS
United Kingdom

T: +44 (0)20 7423 2475
F: +44 (0)20 7423 2039
E: histinfo@lr.org
www.lrfoundation.org.uk

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malnutrition also meant that many slaves were half-dead when they finally reached their destination.

Before the 1750s it is recorded that one in five Africans on board ship died from the poor conditions. Some European governments (including the British and the French) introduced regulations to improve the conditions onboard ship by reducing the number of people carried and insisting that a surgeon be present for the voyage. These surgeons (though often unqualified) were paid 'head money' to keep the captives alive.

In Britain an Act of 1788 provided that the height in the slave deck must not be less than five feet. Before this, an intermediate platform had been erected in the 'tween decks to create an additional deck on which to place the slaves, doubling the potential number to be carried. This same Act limited the number of slaves carried to the proportion of 5 males for every 3 tons. Regulating Acts helped reduce the slave per ton ration from 2.6 per ton before 1788 to one per ton after 1799. Also, by the eighteenth century, ships customarily had portholes to aid ventilation, and while slaves were on deck the crew would disinfect their quarters with vinegar to try and combat the spread of disease.

The construction of faster ships during the eighteenth century also helped to reduce the death rate and by c1800 the number of Africans who died on board had been reduced to one in eighteen.

Destinations

95 per cent of slaves from Africa were transported to the Caribbean and Latin America. The largest proportion, about 5 million, was shipped to Portugal's Brazil. The Spanish Colonies received about 2 million, while most of the remainder

went to British, French, Dutch and Danish colonies in the Caribbean. Only about 500,000 slaves were transported to the mainland north of Spanish Florida. Most of the 4 million slaves in the United States in 1860 were actually American born.

The trading triangle

European merchants transported goods such as textiles, iron, firearms, alcohol, beads, and cowries (shell of a small gastropod found in the Indian Ocean) to Africa. They also brought gold and copper bracelets, leg bands and necklaces called Manillas. These copper bracelets appear to have been named by the Portuguese, whose early explorers of the 1470s observed as the principal currency along the West African coast, usually worn by women to display their husband's wealth. The Portuguese crown later contracted with manufacturers in Belgium and elsewhere to produce the crescent rings and they gradually became the currency of the slave trade.ⁱⁱ

These goods were bartered for enslaved African people, who were then sold to planters and mine owners in the Americas for gold, silver, sugar, coffee, rice and tobacco and later cotton – or sometimes a bill of exchange that could pay for goods on later voyages - which they took back to Europe. After 1783, Americans imported slaves direct, often making great profits.

The height of the atrocity

Colonists became more active in the trade as the demand for labour grew with the American Plantation Economies. The years 1740-1810 saw the peak of the slave trade, with an annual average of about 60,000 slaves delivered to the Americas. This trade was enabled by the Forts constructed along the West African Coast - for example, the fifty along just 300 miles of the Gold Coast. Cape Coast Castle could

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accommodate more than 1,000 slaves, who existed in horrific conditions.

Britain and the slave trade

The first English slave traders were private adventurers. In 1554 Captain John Lok returned from the Guinea Coast with “five Blackamoor slaves” in addition to the usual cargo of elephants’ teeth and palm oil.ⁱⁱⁱ Queen Elizabeth famously stated “if the negroes were carried off by force it would be detestable and call down the vengeance of heaven upon the undertakers”. In 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada, she granted patent to the African Company of Merchant Adventurers for trade only and disallowed all traffic slaves.^{iv}

“Nevertheless” as Lubbock has written, “in a very short time the English were as deeply dyed in the blood of the West African [slave] as the Spanish, Portuguese, French and Dutch ...”^v Private trading companies in Britain instigated the nation’s entry into large-scale slavery in the 1640s. The Royal African Company, London, was infamous and by 1672 operated a monopoly in slave trading. This was ended in 1698 subsequent to opposition by other merchants who wanted a part of such a lucrative trade.

By the 1700s the majority of British slave merchants were based in Bristol and London, and from about 1730 Liverpool merchants began to outstrip their rivals. Although London and Bristol still sent ships to Africa, Liverpool dominated the trade from this point and until its abolition in 1807. The Earl family, whose archives are held by the Merseyside Maritime Museum, were a local family prominent amongst slave traders.

The ships

Between 1785 and 1787 some 500 ships sailed from Liverpool to collect African slaves to take to America for

trade, making up 12% of all non-coastwise ships departing from that port.

British slave ships were commonly known as “Guineamen”. The earliest type was a snow (two-masted vessel) of about 60 feet in length, 21 feet breadth and 9 feet depth. Lubbock sites the Guineaman *Brooks*, which was measured by Captain Parrey for the Government in 1786 as they wished to know the particulars of a typical slaver. She was frigate-built and had 20 guns, with a tonnage of 297. She was 100 feet long, had a breadth of 25 feet and 4 inches, a depth of 10 feet and a height between decks of 5 feet. With 14 air ports each side she had superior ventilation to most slavers. She carried 609 slaves in 1786, though only licensed for 450. 351 men were carried in space of just 46 feet by just of 25 feet (14 x 7.7m); 90 boys in 13 feet 9 inches by 25 feet (4.24 x 7.62m) and 168 women and girls in 28 feet 6 inches by 23 feet 6 inches (8.71 x 7.2m).^{vi}

The largest British slaver was said to be the *Parr*, built at Liverpool in 1797 of 566 tons with a loaded draft of 17ft. Lloyd’s Register records that she was heavily armed, with twenty 18-pounder cannon and twelve 18-pounder carronades. A ship of this size would carry a crew of 50-70 men. West Indiamen carried most of the cargoes in a direct two way trade to and from England, and they rarely deviated from it.

The average size of slave ships increased steadily, from 172 tons in 1782-88 to 294 in 1800-08. Ships in the 100-200 tons range were preferred because their smaller draft meant that they could easily sail along rivers and close into the coast to obtain their cargo.

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The end of slavery

In Britain attitudes to slavery started to change towards the end of the 18th century. Religious groups, including Quakers, protested against ill treatment of slaves – although it must be said that some Quakers, notably Woodes Rogers, were purportedly amongst those profiting from the slave trade. The Methodist John Wesley furthered the campaign for slaves by calling for their emancipation. The slave trade legally ended in the British Caribbean in 1807 and in the United States in 1808, but not until the 1850s in Brazil. This was largely due in Britain to the campaigning of William Wilberforce (1759-1833) who led the British parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade and slavery. His house in Hull is now maintained as a museum. Also Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), who was a founder member of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 along with Granville Sharp and James Ramsey. It should be noted, however, that slavery continued legally elsewhere for some 60 years. For example the Captain of HMS *Nilus* reported continuance of the slave trade in Zanzibar in 1813. Liverpool merchant families, such as the Croppers and Rathbones, were instrumental in the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833.

Today, descendants of Africans forced into slavery find it almost impossible to trace their lineage to any specific ethnic group, as for the most part adequate records simply do not exist. Slave traders generally noted the geographic area from which the slaves were taken but failed to identify their ethnic backgrounds. The renaming of slaves by their purchasers complicates genealogical research still further.

One man who went back to Africa and actually managed to successfully

trace his background is Alex Haley. His trip to the Gambia took him to a small village where a village elder keeps history alive by the oral tradition of telling stories of the past. It was there that he discovered the story of his ancestors. His journey of discovery is told in the book *Roots*. Unfortunately, the majority of descendants are not so fortunate. Thus an inhuman practice that changed the destinies of millions of people around the world has left a legacy of unknown roots, tragic stories lost forever, but above all, survival.

The coolie trade

With the cessation of the British slave trade, labour was required for the sugar, cocoa and coffee plantations. The emancipated Africans were unwilling to engage in field labour, while the white man was physically incapable of so doing. Recourse was had to the overpopulated empires of China and India, as the most likely sources from which to obtain that supply of workers upon which the very existence of some colonies, notably in the West Indies, depended.

At first Chinese “coolies” (a term generally applied to Asiatic labourers belonging to the unskilled class as opposed to the artisan, and employed in a special sense to designate those natives of India and China who leave their country under contracts of service to work as labourers abroad) were tried but the conditions of transportation and employment were not better than that of the slave trade. The ships were badly equipped and overcrowded, and many coolies died before the end of the voyage.

Indian coolies were then taken in first class sailing ships to the plantations and put to work under an indenture system regulated by the British Government. In 1837 the first Coolie

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Emigration Law was instituted, requiring that: a permit for emigration was necessary; contracts were limited to five years; a return passage was guaranteed; and emigrant ships were allowed to carry just one coolie per 1½ tons burthen. At the expiration of their terms, the labourers were free to re-indenture or to seek other employment. They frequently became peasant proprietors, although they were entitled to return passage to India. In 1838 25,000 coolies were taken to Mauritius and by 1856 at least 134,271 Indian immigrants had settled there. The first half of 1859 saw 20,000 coolies imported and the revenue of the colony doubled between 1853 and 1859. The coolie trade carried on into the Twentieth century, until discontinued by the British Indian government, which in 1922 prohibited assisting the emigration of unskilled labourers, except to a few countries.

Sources for researching slavery and tracing African ancestors

National Archives

Ruskin Avenue
Kew, TW9 4DU
T: +44 (0)20 8876 3444
E: enquiry@nationalarchives.gov.uk
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

The National Archives holds numerous references to people who lived in the West Indies, including adventurers, slaves, sailors, soldiers, transported criminals and Indians who emigrated. Information is held on Antigua, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, Nevis, St. Christopher, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Tobago, Trinidad and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The following records are held:

- **Records of the Colonial Office.**
Original correspondence between the Colonial Office and the governors of particular colonies, Entry Books, Acts, Sessional Papers, Government Gazettes, colony statistics, Naval Office Returns, Registers of Correspondence and Registers of Out-Letters for each colony.
- **Records of how people got to the West Indies.**
Passenger Lists, Indentured Servants, Transportation, Slave Trade, Liberated Africans, East Indians, American Loyalists.
- **Life Cycle Records.**
Records of births, marriages and deaths of slaves and free persons, plus Censuses and wills.
- **Land and Property.**
Land grants, maps and plans, Plantation records.
- **Military and related records.**
Army: records of regiments, pension registers and casualty returns. Militia, Navy, Dockyards, Royal Marines, Colonial Marines and Merchant Navy.
- **Slaves' Records**
Slave Registry and Slave Compensation Commission 1812-1834.

For further information the interested researcher should obtain a copy of Guy Grannum's *Tracing Your West Indian Ancestors (Public Record Office Readers' Guide No. 11)* Second edition (Public Record Office, Kew: 2002).

Merseyside Maritime Museum

Pier Head
Liverpool
L3 1DN
www.nmgm.org.uk

The Merseyside Maritime Museum holds a specialist collection on slavery, including records of the Earl family who were prominent

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London
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merchants in the slave trade. Helen Threlfall has compiled a bibliography of works held by the Maritime Archives and Library at the museum entitled *Slavery*, which can be viewed there or at Lloyd's Register's library. In addition the Peter Moores Foundation has produced a useful booklet, *Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity*, which summarises the history of slavery and the Liverpool connection.

Guildhall Library

Aldermanbury
London, EC2 2EJ
T: +44 (0)20 7332 1868
F: +44 (0)20 7332 1870

The Guildhall Library holds the historic records of Lloyd's of London, which have information on slave trade voyages.

Major building work is taking place which affects access to these collections

National Maritime Museum

Park Row
Greenwich
London, SE10 9NF
T +44 (0)20 8858 4422
www.nmm.ac.uk
library@nmm.ac.uk

The National Maritime Museum purchased the Michael Graham-Stewart collection in August 2002. Built up privately over more than twelve years, the collection contains paintings, prints and drawings, artefacts, coins and medals, photographs, manuscripts, newspapers, ephemera and rare books, offering a unique insight into this important and difficult subject area.

Online database:

This database was compiled by various institutions, academics and contributors. It consolidates the information from several archives

and lists hundreds of slave trade voyages.

<http://slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces>

Other useful collections:

Bristol Record Office

'B' Bond Warehouse
Smeaton Road
Bristol
BS1 6XN
T +44 (0)117 922 4224
F +44 (0)117 922 4236
bro@bristol.gov.uk
www.bristol.gov.uk/recordoffice

Lancaster Maritime Museum

Custom House
St George's Quay
Lancaster
LA1 1RB
T +44 (0)1524 64637
F +44 (0)1524 841692
lancastermaritimemuseum@lancashire.gov.uk
www.lancashire.gov.uk/education/museums/lancaster/maritime.asp

The National Archives

Rappaport Centre
Victoria Park
St John's Antigua
West Indies
T + 268 462 3946

The Registrar General's Office

High Court
High Street
St John's Antigua
West Indies
T + 268 462 3929

Museum of Antigua and Barbuda

Long Street
Box 103
St John's
Antigua and Barbuda
West Indies
www.antiguamuseums.org
nicholson@candw.ag

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Information Centre**
71 Fenchurch Street
London
EC3M 4BS
United Kingdom

T: +44 (0)20 7423 2475
F: +44 (0)20 7423 2039
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General reference books on the slave trade:

R. Anstey, *Liverpool: The African Slave Trade and Abolition* (Liverpool 1976)

Cameron & Crook, *Liverpool: Capital of the Slave Trade* (Liverpool, 1992)

P. Curten, *The Atlantic Slave Trade - A Census* (Madison, 1969)

P. Edwards *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* (Longmans, 1988)

P. Fryer *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (Pluto Press, 1984)

G. Grannum, *Tracing Your West Indian Ancestors* Second edition (PRO Readers' Guide No. 11) (PRO Publications, 2002)

P.E. Lovejoy, *Transformation in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1983)

B. Lubbock *Cruisers, Corsairs & Slavers: An Account of the Suppression of the Picaroon, Pirate and Slaver by the Royal Navy during the 19th Century*

B. Lubbock *The Coolie Ships and Oil Sailers* (Brown, Son & Ferguson, 1981)

Mannix & Cowley, *Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1518-1865* (Longmans: London, 1963)

S. I. Martin *Britain's Slave Trade* (Channel Four Books, 1999)

Merseyside Maritime Museum *Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity* (guide to the gallery supported by the Peter Moores Foundation)

K. Patience *Zanzibar: Slavery and the Royal Navy* (Zanzibar Publications, 2000)

E. Reynolds *Stand The Storm: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Allison & Busby, 1985)

A. Tibbles (ed), *Trans-Atlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity* (National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, 1994)

J. Walvin, *Black Ivory: A History of British Slavery* (London, 1992)

G. Williams, *History of the Liverpool Privateers* (London, 1897)

Researchers should check availability, accessibility and opening times with the repositories listed before making a personal visit.

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ⁱ As quoted in *Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity* Peter Moores Foundation, National Museums Liverpool

ⁱⁱ See www.coincoin.com/1024.htm for a full description and history of the manilla.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lubbock, B. *The Coolie Ships and Oil Sailers* (Glasgow: Brown, Son & Ferguson, 1981), p2.

^{iv} Lubbock, 1981, p3.

^v Lubbock, 1981, p3.

^{vi} Lubbock, 1981, p9.