

# The Transatlantic Slave Trade

Slavery has existed since ancient times and continues in the modern world. A slave was defined by the United Nations in 1927 as someone 'over whom any or all of the powers attached to the right of ownership are exercised'.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade, in which European states forcibly transported millions of African captives to the colonies, began in earnest in the early seventeenth century and lasted nearly 200 years. It was a systemised and brutal form of slavery on a scale not seen before or since and was based upon a new form of racist ideology that championed white supremacy.

This was a triangular trade of three stages, each of which offered the possibility of a full cargo and a profit. During the first leg, European manufactured goods, including guns, pots and pans, cloth, beads and nails, were shipped to Africa and exchanged at coastal trading posts for slaves, many of whom had been captured during inter-tribal wars. On the second leg, known as the Middle Passage, the slaves were carried in cramped and unsanitary ships across the



Portrait of a slave by an unknown artist, c 1800 (Wilberforce House Museum, Hull City Council).

Atlantic Ocean to North and South America and the Caribbean, where they were sold. For the final leg, the plantation goods of sugar, cotton, coffee, tobacco, cocoa and rum that were dependent on slave labour were loaded on the ships and sent to Europe to be sold.

A round trip from a British slaving port such as Bristol or Liverpool to Africa, the colonies and home again would take about a year to complete. Most ships left Britain between July and September to avoid the treacherous rainy season off the African coast when



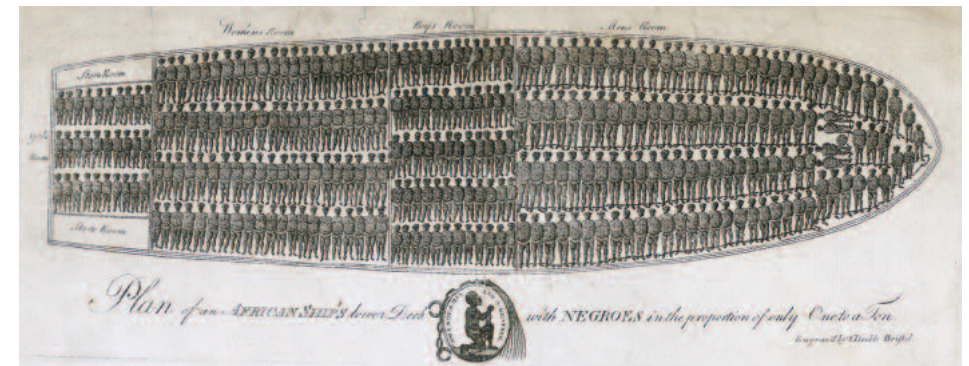
Map of the slave trade routes (Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives).

many British sailors came down with fever. They would aim to reach the Caribbean by the end of April the following year at sugar-making time.

Many profited from this lucrative trade, which contributed to Britain becoming one of the world's wealthiest and most powerful nations. However, on 25 March 1807 the Slave Trade Abolition Bill was passed and although slavery would officially continue in the colonies until 1834, from this point in time no enslaved people could be traded in British ships or by British merchants.

The ending of the British slave trade was dependent upon a number of factors.

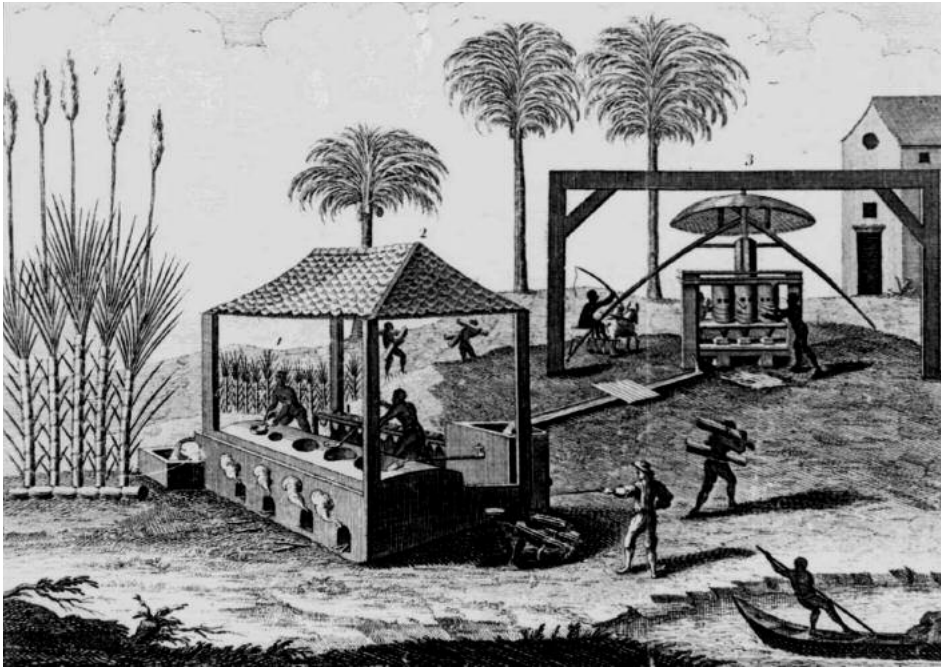
Plan depicting how slaves were loaded on board the Liverpool-registered slave ship, Brookes (Bristol Record Office).



High among these was the work of dedicated campaigners such as Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, who challenged slave traders in the courts, in Parliament, at public meetings, in the press and from the pulpit. They were joined by a grass-roots movement of thousands of people from all walks of life, black and white, appalled by reports of the callous treatment of the slaves.

Evidence of this cruelty was gathered from those with first-hand experience of the trade, including Olaudah Equiano, a former slave, and John Newton, writer of 'Amazing Grace' and a former captain of a slave ship. Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, a campaigner who had been kidnapped and sold into slavery in 1770 at the age of 13, wrote in 1787:

Is it not strange to think, that they who ought to be considered as the most learned and civilised people in the world, that they should carry on a traffic of the most barbarous cruelty and injustice, and that many... are become so dissolute as to think slavery, robbery and murder no crime?

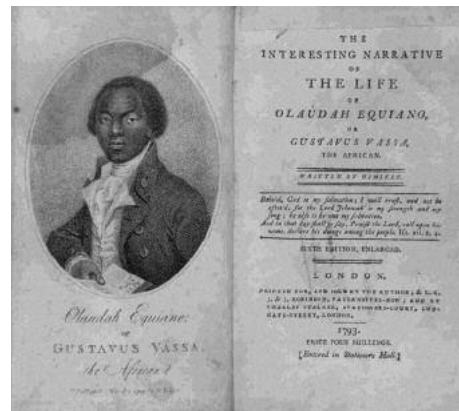


*Eighteenth-century print depicting Caribbean sugar cane and the art of making sugar (Bristol Record Office).*

Other factors leading to the abolition of the trade included the disruption caused by slave rebellions on the plantations, and the realisation by British merchants that it was cheaper to buy sugar from sources other than their own colonies.

When slavery was abolished, compensation was paid to plantation owners at the rate of £20 per enslaved person freed. No compensation was paid to the ex-slaves themselves, most of whom had little choice but to remain working for a pittance for their former masters. In the British Caribbean it was their descendants, hoping for a better way of life, who joined the mass post-war migration to Britain described so evocatively by Andrea Levy in *Small Island*.

In an article in the *Guardian* in 2000 entitled 'This is My England', Andrea Levy wrote:



*Frontispiece from Olaudah Equiano's autobiography, 1789 (National Museums Liverpool).*

There is a tendency to believe that the recent immigration into this country, started by my intrepid dad and others, was where our relationship began. But nothing could be further from the truth. There was an excellent programme on Channel 4 recently about Britain's slave trade, which showed the extent to which many of England's aristocratic families gained their wealth through slavery. Cities such as Bristol and Liverpool were built with the money from the slave trade. What the programme also showed was that not only do black people have ancestors who are white, but also some ordinary British white people are connected by family ties to the black people of the Caribbean or to the estimated 20,000 black people who settled in Britain as a result of the trade. The history of Britain is inextricably linked with that trade, and therefore with somewhere like Jamaica. Indeed, without the trade in slaves Jamaica as we know it would not exist.

It is this connection that will be explored in *Small Island* Read 2007.



*Slave drivers beating slaves, an illustration from the book Brésil, Colombie et Guyane published 1837.*



*One side of a commemorative medallion, celebrating the abolition of the slave trade, 1807. The medallion reads "I have heard their cry. Slave trade abolished 1807" (Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives).*



*A commemorative token depicting the 'Am I Not A Man' abolitionist logo (Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives).*