

The 'Slave Trade'

In the bigger picture, the 'slave trade' as a whole begins in the 1440s with a route opened between West Africa and Portugal, a country with a great presence in Africa in the modern period. The African slaves would then be marketed to England by the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and Italians.

In 1501, Catherine of Aragon arrived in Deptford bringing with her a number of her Black slaves, and the 16th century is full of stories of Black court musicians and entertainers in Britain. For example, both Henry VII and Henry VIII both employed a Black trumpet player named John Blanke.

At the Royal Dockyard, Deptford, 1562, Captain John Hawkins founded the British slave trade. He sailed from (what is now) Sierra Leone and displaced 300 Africans, selling them into slavery in Jamaica. Elizabeth I permitted more ventures like this because Hawkins had earned a profit. So, in 1585-6, Sir Francis Drake returned from Santa Domingo and Cartagena, bringing slaves to Portsmouth.

From 1587 comes a story of Spaniard Hector Nuñez: he bought an 'Ethiopian' (African) from an English sailor for £4.10s but asked for a refund, complaining that the man protested against being enslaved. This story is one of many which demonstrate the ambiguity over the status of slaves in England, while, in Africa, the West Indies and North America, slavery was simply thought to be inescapable for people of certain backgrounds.

Another good example of the long-running confusion over the status of slaves is the 'Somerset Case' in 1772 in which Lord Mansfield approved the freedom of servants in England and Wales. Regardless of the laws that were in place in the colonies, ex-slave James Somerset could not be shipped back to Jamaica from London against his will. 'It was impossible he could be a slave in England,' said Lord Mansfield at the end of the hearing; slavery had never been lawful in England and the Somerset case seemed to clarify that.

In 1600, London's sudden intake of freed slaves from Spanish ships after recent victories over Spain provoked the first strong reaction to their presence in Britain. In 1602, according to the Cecil papers (held in Hatfield House), Robert Cecil argued for their repatriation but this never happened.

The year 1660 saw the British slave trade really begin to make a difference both at home and in the Atlantic. The Royal Adventurers into Africa and the Royal African Company formed, giving London a monopoly over the slave trade and keeping the activity of Black immigration close to London. From 1660-90 many of London's mayors and sheriffs had a stake in the plantations of Jamaica and the companies that sailed across the Atlantic.

The Atlantic slave trade is commonly thought to take the form of a one-way triangular route in the Atlantic Ocean. The idea is that European ships (British

included) landed on the West African coast, offloaded goods for their settlements there and for trade with Africans; the same people then seized Africans fit for labour or bought them in the existing African slave market. They then and took them to the plantations in the West Indies and North America where the ships would finally load with sugar and other West Indian produce and return home.

This common idea of a trade-triangle view of the Atlantic is simple but not necessarily accurate. In reality, plantations in the West Indies relied on many English and Irish provisions and the movement of Africans themselves varied; some – such as Kingston’s Cesar Picton, abolitionist and religious Nonconformist Robert Wedderburn or author Olaudah Equiano (author of *The Interesting Narrative*, 1789) – were brought home directly from West Africa; others rode as crew or as servants to naval captains, merchants or plantation owners and arrived in Britain from the Western side of the Atlantic.

Legislation in 1698 brought an end to London’s docks’ monopoly of the British slave trade, when M.P.s and lobbyists won their right to make the trade more competitive and economically productive. Bristol and Liverpool also began to take part in the trade. The ideals of profit from competition and free trade and other similar pecuniary arguments were repeated to the abolitionists in the next century – though the abolitionists, many from Christian backgrounds, were arguing from a different perspective altogether.

Books:

Dabydeen, Gilmore & Jones, *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Macdonald, Roderick A., *West Indies Accounts* (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 1996).

Websites:

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