

Bitter Taste of Slavery

In 2010 the 18th October was established as Anti-Slavery Day in Britain. Slavery has existed in almost every culture. It pre-dates historical records and, although the last country in the world abolished slavery in 1981, the United Nations estimates there are over 20 million people still living in slavery. Modern slavery tends to be in the form of debt bondage (theoretically service to repay a loan, but in practice the 'debt' is never considered repaid and the obligation to serve is passed down from generation to generation), the multi-billion pound industry of human trafficking (often for sexual exploitation). Modern slavery differs from historical chattel slavery, which centred on the notion that people were property and could be bought and sold as commodities.

The transatlantic slave trade operated through British-produced goods being transported to the West coast of Africa; slaves were then carried from there on the notorious Middle Passage to the sugar plantations of the West Indies; and the ships returned to the UK with sugar and other slave-produced crops.

Archives held at The University of Nottingham relating to the slave trade include records of aristocratic families who either owned plantations, or were politicians and civil servants who oversaw trade and international relations. In Special Collections, we have published reports about the treatment of slaves and children's books (some factual accounts of the slave trade and others stories promoting the myth of the 'happy slave'). Both pro- and anti-slavery views are represented in the letters, petitions, diaries, debates and other documents in the collections. Anti-slavery campaigners focussed on the immorality of slavery and the horrific treatment slaves endured. Supporters of slavery argued it was economically necessary and if Britain legislated against trading or owning slaves, other nations would have a competitive advantage.

More information about all of our collections, as well as resources explaining how to understand and use historical records can be found on the website of Manuscripts and Special Collections: www.nottingham.ac.uk/mss.

'Image of A Slave Market' from Chambers's Miscellany of Useful and Entertaining Tracts; 1845

On arrival in America or the West Indies, those who had survived the journey at sea would be sold to the highest bidder. Healthy adult men would fetch higher prices than children, adult women or older slaves. Families were often split up. (*Chambers's miscellany of useful and entertaining tracts*, Edinburgh 1845. Briggs Collection LT210.A/C4)



Extract from a report of a Parliamentary debate in 1791 regarding the slave trade; 1839

The slave trade was abolished by Britain in 1807, but it took until the Abolition of Slavery Act 1833 to end slavery itself in most of the British Empire. By this time slavery had been the subject of Parliamentary debates for about 50 years.

This extract from a 1791 debate shows two of the most frequently used arguments. The first was that abolition would damage Britain's trading prospects and lead to unemployment. Part of Britain's wealth derived from slavery, directly or indirectly, and the annual value of the West Indies trade is stated here as £6million. The second argument was that slavery was an accepted and established practice in both African and European society, and foreigners were far less humane in their treatment of slaves than the British slave traders and owners.

Even if this was true – and British plantation owners varied considerably in their observance of the regulations – it was still an admission that the slave trade was fundamentally deeply unpleasant. (T. Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British Parliament*, London 1808. Special Collection HT1163.C5)

the sanction of their trade by parliament, and notwithstanding that such persecution must aggrandize the rivals of Great Britain." Now how did this language sound? It might have done in the twelfth century, when all was bigotry and superstition. But let not a mistaken humanity, in these enlightened times, furnish a colourable pretext for any injurious attack on property or character.

These things being considered, he should certainly oppose the measure in contemplation. It would annihilate a trade, whose exports amounted to eight hundred thousand pounds annually, and which employed a hundred and sixty vessels and more than five thousand seamen. It would destroy also the West India trade, which was of the annual value of six millions; and which employed one hundred and sixty thousand tons of shipping, and seamen in proportion. These were objects of too much importance to the country to be hazarded on an unnecessary speculation.

Mr. Grosvenor then rose. He complimented the humanity of Mr. Wilberforce, though he differed from him on the subject

of his motion. He himself had read only the privy council report; and he wished for no other evidence. The question had then been delayed two years. Had the abolition been so clear a point as it was said to be, it could not have needed either so much evidence or time.

He had heard a good deal about kidnapping and other barbarous practices. He was sorry for them. But these were the natural consequences of the laws of Africa; and it became us as wise men to turn them to our own advantage. The Slave-trade was certainly not an amiable trade. Neither was that of a butcher; but yet it was a very necessary one.

There was great reason to doubt the propriety of the present motion. He had twenty reasons for disapproving it. The first was, that the thing was impossible. He needed not therefore to give the rest. Parliament, indeed, might relinquish the trade. But to whom? To foreigners, who would continue it, and without the humane regulations, which were applied to it by his countrymen.

Copy of the will of Henry, 1st Duke of Portland; 2 July 1726

Henry Bentinck, 1st Duke of Portland (1682-1726), accepted the post of Governor of Jamaica after losing his fortune in the financial scandal known as the South Sea Bubble. He purchased at least one estate there, run using slave labour. When he died there in 1726, his will instructed his wife Elizabeth to sell his estate and slaves, which were considered property, in order to pay off his debts. (Portland Collection PI/F2/7/25)

In the name of God Amen I Henry Duke of Portland being of sound mind and memory do by this my last Will and Testament Give devise and Bequeath unto my dear Wife Elizabeth Duchess of Portland & her Heirs for Ever all the Lands & Negroes of which I shall dye Seized off or any ways Intituled to within this Island and my Will is That she sell the Same as soon as may be after my Decease and apply the money arising thereby to the Payment of my Debts in Case of my other Estates And as to all other my Estate real and Personal whatsoever and wheresoever my Will is that the Same shall go and be disposed off according to the Disposition in a former Will by me made before I left the Kingdom of Great Britain and I do hereby make my said Dear Wife sole Executrix for the Administration of such Estate as I shall leave in this Island of Jamaica In Witness whereof Thereunto put my hand and Seal this Second day of July in the Year of our Lord One Thousand Seven hundred and Twenty Six

And Sealed and Published by the Testator in the presence of Us and by us attested in his Presence

John Stewart
John Herbert
Alexander Reid

Portland

Anti-slavery cartoon by James Gillray, 'Barbarities in the West Indies'; 23 Apr. 1791

British politician William Wilberforce campaigned for the abolition of slavery, and his description of cruel treatment towards slaves described in a Parliamentary debate in April 1791, inspired this cartoon by Gillray. The text at the bottom reads 'Among numberless other acts of cruelty daily practised, an English negro driver, because a young negro through sickness was unable to work, threw him into a copper of boiling sugar juice, and after keeping him steeped over head and ears for above three quarters of an hour in the boiling liquid whipt him with such severity, that it was near six months before he recover'd of his wounds and scalding'. (MS 482/7)



Extracts from a plantation owner's journal from 1816; 1834

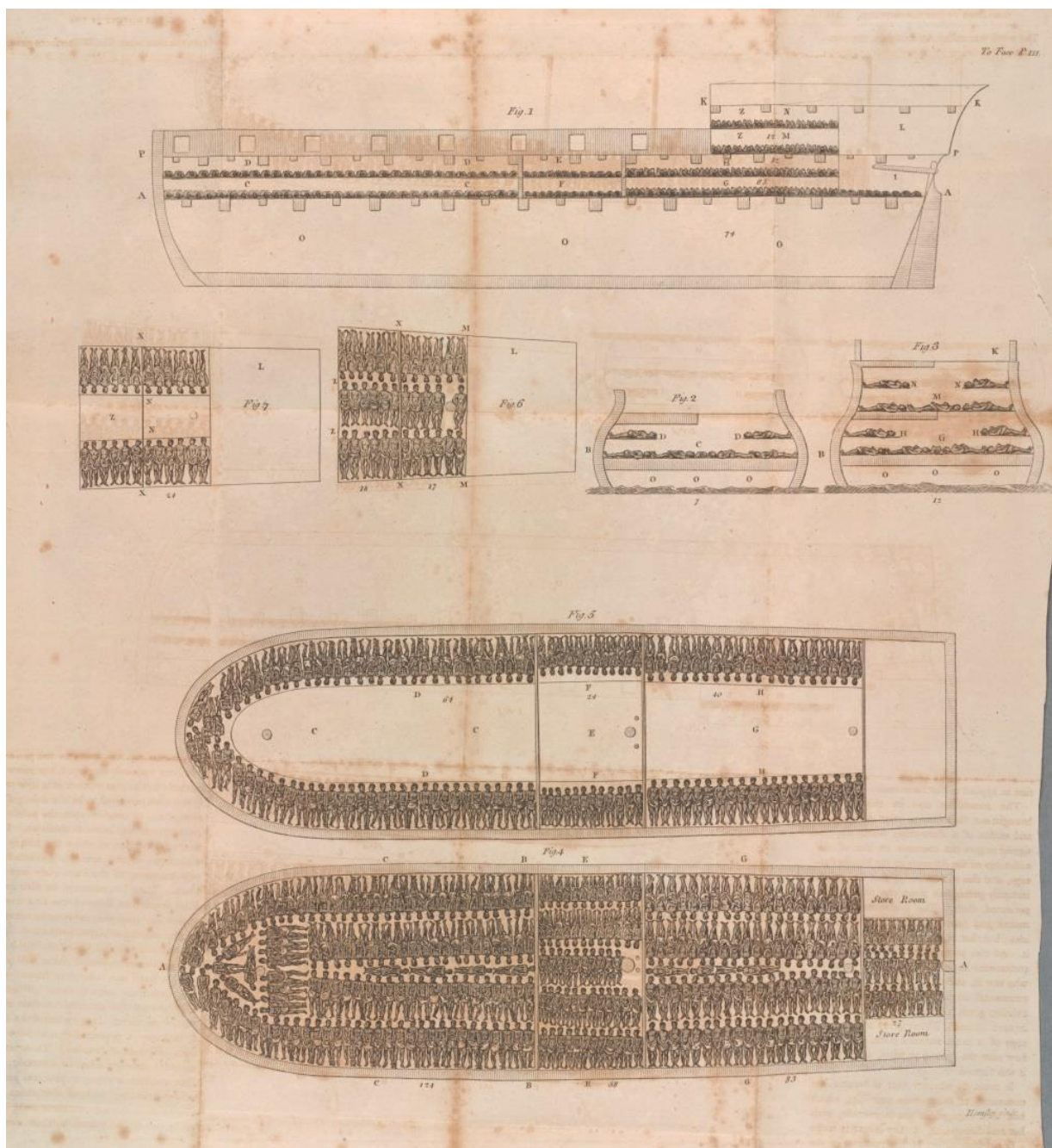
Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818), writer and MP, visited his Jamaican plantations in 1816 to discover his slaves had been ill-treated by the overseer left in charge. Lewis forbade slaves to be whipped as punishment and adopted a paternalistic rather than brutal attitude. Published posthumously, his journal recounts how fellow plantation owners distrusted his methods and productivity (initially) fell as his slaves took advantage of the lack of discipline. This did not trouble Lewis, who prioritised humane treatment over profit and was deeply ambivalent about slavery. (M.G. Lewis, *The Journal of a West India Proprietor*, London 1834. Special Collection PR4887.J6)

However, having been already so grossly deceived, I will never again place implicit confidence in any person whatever in a matter of such importance. Before my departure, I shall take every possible measure that may prevent any misconduct taking place without my being apprised of it as soon as possible ; and I have already exhorted my negroes to apply to the magistrates on the very first instance of ill-usage, should any occur during my absence.

I am indeed assured by every one about me, that to manage a West-Indian estate without the occasional use of the cart-whip, however rarely, is impossible ; and they insist upon it, that it is absurd in me to call my slaves ill-treated, because, when they act grossly wrong, they are treated like English soldiers and sailors. All this may be very true ; but there is something to me so shocking in the idea of this execrable cart-whip, that I have positively forbidden the use of it on Cornwall ; and if the estate must go to rack and ruin without its use, to rack and ruin the estate must go. Probably, I should care less about this punishment, if I had not been living among those on whom it may be inflicted ; but now, when I am accustomed to see every face that looks upon me, grinning from ear to ear with pleasure at my notice, and hear every voice cry "God bless you, massa," as I pass, one must be an absolute brute not to feel unwilling to leave them subject to the lash ; besides,

Plan of the hold of slave trade ship; c.1808

Abolitionist Thomas Clarkson's (1760-1846) research into slave ships on the journey from Africa across the Atlantic revealed the appalling conditions in which the slaves were transported. Many died of disease in the overcrowded, airless holds. Now an iconic image, this diagram is based on the measurements of the slave ship 'Brookes'. Records show that in 1783 it was carrying over 600 slaves, yet was designed to carry 450. (T. Clarkson, *The history of the rise, progress, and accomplishment of the abolition of the African slave-trade by the British Parliament*, London 1808. Special Collection HT1163.C5)



Cartoon entitled 'Slavery. Freedom'; c.1810.

Allegedly depicting the life enjoyed by slaves in the West Indies, cavorting in a carefree manner under the coconut palms, compared to the misery of the English working man seated on a broken chair, unable to feed his family and tax demands at his feet. The argument that slaves were fed, clothed and housed by benevolent masters whilst the English, despite their rights and privileges enshrined under law, suffered in poverty, was a common one. (The Fagan Collection of Political Prints and Caricatures Pol P 24)

