

Information sheet no 079

Slavery

Britain fully entered the slave trade in 1660 when Charles II helped found a new company called “Royal Adventures into Africa”. The company was granted a monopoly on the British slave trade for 1000 years and its members included the royal family and the aristocracy. Two years after its foundation the company had made a profit of £1m. The company wound up in 1672, but after minor changes in staff, shareholders and its charter, it was reformed as the Royal African Company and once again received Royal Protection. The King’s warrant stated:

“We hereby for us, our heirs and successors grant unto the same Royal African Company of England...that it shall be and may be lawful to....set to sea such as many ships, pinnaces, and barks as shall be thought fitting....for the buying, selling, bartering and exchanging of, for or with any gold, silver, negroes, slaves, goods wares and manufactures....

Witness the King at Westminster the seven and twentieth day of September 1672 by the King.”

By 1689 the company had transported 90,000 slaves from the west coast of Africa to British possessions in North America and the Caribbean. The slave trade continued to grow and the company’s profits were great and during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the entire royal family were involved in slave trading enterprises.

In 1698 the Royal African Company’s monopoly on the slave trade was broken by the Bristol merchants. Bristol merchants were practised in fitting out ships and had experience of sailing the coasts of France and Spain to Africa where they bought copper from the Africans. A common misconception is that their trade was conducted with savages; it was, in fact, with people of similar standing to themselves. They sailed to pre-industrial settlements, not unlike Bristol, carrying quality goods to trade for slaves.

Liverpool followed Bristol’s example from 1700, and became the major slaving port in Europe. With the Mersey estuary being deep, larger boats could be docked there while Bristol’s merchant ships had to contend with the shallow banks of the Severn River and forced to use smaller vessels. The economies of scale this afforded meant that Liverpool could undercut the prices offered by Bristol.

By the early eighteenth century, London, Bristol and Liverpool had developed into prosperous slave ports. Quality British manufactured goods were transported to Africa in exchange for slaves. The slaves were then taken across the Atlantic to the Caribbean plantations and sold in exchange for sugar, molasses, hardwoods as well as cash. Profits were made at every stage of this voyage. This system of trade between Britain, West Africa and the Caribbean became known as the “triangular trade”. By the 1780s, Britain had shipped over 330,000 slaves to the new world and the British economy relied heavily upon the trade.

Conditions for the slaves were appalling. Many slaves died during the journey from Africa to the new world, known as the ‘middle passage’. Slavers packed as many slaves as possible into the holds of their ships to compensate for those that would die. There was no sanitation on board the ships. The slaves were so tightly packed together that they could not move and they were given barely enough food, drink or air to keep them alive. Disease spread rapidly

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and the dead often remained alongside the living for days. It has been estimated that ten percent of slaves died on each crossing and as many as thirty percent on a particularly bad voyage.

While on board, the slaves were kept in ankle fetters to prevent rebellion, escape or from committing suicide. Outnumbered by their human cargo, the crew of the slave ships lived in fear of a revolt. Any rebellions were savagely repressed but there was little chance of escaping from the slave ships. They had more chance of freedom if they tried to escape from the plantation.

On the plantations, slaves were given the back breaking work of cutting sugar cane in tropical heat. African slaves were used for this job because it was judged too hard for the Europeans. Many slaves were literally worked to death on the sugar plantations. New shiploads of slaves were constantly needed due to the high mortality rate among the slave population. Punishment was extremely harsh. The whip was the standard punishment for the most trivial crimes and flogging was so harsh it crippled many slaves. Rebellious slaves were chained together by ankle and neck shackles and made to work in a 'chain gang'.

Ties to particular native cultures were lost as slaves from different regions of Africa were mixed together. Without a common language or background, they came to be identified merely by the colour of their skin by both slavers and owners. Owners regarded them as objects and property rather than human beings as it suited their consciences to do so.

Many people argued that slavery was good for the Africans as it had introduced them to Christianity and civilisation and was widely supported by the church and other religious societies. The Quakers were widely engaged in the trade and a large number of Quaker families made their fortunes from the slave trade. They believed they could bring some humanity to the treatment of the slaves whilst still making a profit from them.

Through the late eighteenth century, opposition to the trade and humanitarian feelings towards the slaves grew and a wave of abolitionist fervour swept the country led in Parliament by William Wilberforce. The Society of the Abolition of the Slave Trade was founded in 1787. It was not until 1807 that the abolition of the British slave trade became law with the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. The Act stated that British involvement in slave trading was to end by the 1 January 1808. The Act banned British ship owners from the physical act of collecting and transporting - "trafficking" - African people as slaves to the West Indies and throughout the British colonies. Ending the transportation of slaves from Africa did not mean the end of slavery itself as it was still legal to own slaves.

With the Abolition Act passed, the Royal Navy formed the West Africa Squadron (or Preventative Squadron) to patrol along the West African coast to suppress British involvement in slaving. This was considered to be one of the worst postings for naval personnel due to the high risk of tropical disease.

In 1823, the movement towards emancipation of the slaves was increased. The Society for Mitigating and Gradually Abolishing the State of Slavery (later the Anti-Slavery Society) was created by William Wilberforce, Thomas Buxton and various Quakers. They demanded that slaves would be free to marry, be able to own property and to be trusted to provide evidence in court. Additionally, they demanded that bible study was promoted amongst slaves and that

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slaves would no longer work on Sundays. In the Society's first annual report it stated that there were 220 branches of the society, and 825 petitions against slavery had been presented to parliament with 168,000 signatures. In 1831, there was a stream of new abolitionist literature written and circulated calling for the total emancipation of slaves. At the same time, slave revolts were taking place in the British dominions - the most famous being Sam Sharpe's revolt in Jamaica.

The Abolition of Slavery Act was passed in August 1833, just one month after the death of campaigner William Wilberforce, and came into force the following year. Although it granted African slaves their freedom, they were to remain "slaves" under an 'apprenticeship scheme'. This allowed planters to have the right to keep their ex-slaves working a ten hour day on their plantations for a period of six years. Absenteeism would result in imprisonment and new jails were purposely built for this. Vagrancy laws were introduced under which ex-slaves attempting to leave the plantations would be penalised and land ownership beyond the range of their plots was illegal. In reality, nothing had changed for the ex-slaves. In addition, £20 million of government money was allocated to compensate the slave owners for their loss of "property". It was not until 1838 after the Anti-Slavery Society had produced a barrage of petitions and pamphlets that the "apprenticeship scheme" was totally abolished in the Britain and the British dominions and slaves were completely free.

Despite progress in Britain, the slave trade continued to flourish in other countries. Buxton founded the Society for the Extinction of the Slave Trade and the Civilisation of Africa in 1839, working for worldwide suppression of the slave trade. It was presided over by the Queen's consort, Prince Albert, and this was the first time that the abolitionist cause had been given the royal seal of approval sixty years after it had begun. Suppression required a combination of diplomatic trips to countries which continued to trade in slaves (especially Africa) and the signing of treaties. It was not until the 1860s that the system of treaties to abolish slavery and the slave trade in foreign countries effectively came into force.