

MARITIME ARCHIVES & LIBRARY

INFORMATION SHEET 3

LIVERPOOL AND THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE

During the 18th century Liverpool was Britain's main slaving port. Between 1700 and 1807, ships from Liverpool carried about 1.5 million Africans across the Atlantic in conditions of great cruelty. Most Liverpool ships went to the islands of the Caribbean where captains sold the Africans to plantation owners. The owners and their agents forced the Africans to work as chattel slaves producing sugar and other tropical goods. They treated the enslaved brutally and showed little concern for their personal lives.

The trade generally operated on a triangular basis. Merchants fitted out and supplied their ships in Liverpool. The ships carried goods to West Africa including textiles, firearms, alcohol, beads and cowrie shells. On arrival at the coast, captains bartered and sold these goods for Africans. The voyage across the Atlantic usually took six to eight weeks, but sometimes longer. Conditions on board were appalling and many Africans died. Many Africans resisted enslavement and revolts on the ships were a regular occurrence. When the captains had sold their captives, the ships returned to Liverpool, generally with goods such as sugar, coffee, cocoa, cotton, tobacco and wood.

The first known slave ship to sail from Liverpool was the *Liverpool Merchant*, which left the port on 3 October 1699 and carried 220 Africans to Barbados. The trade grew slowly over the next 20 years but then developed rapidly. By 1750 Liverpool had overtaken Bristol and London, and the town's ships dominated the trade until abolition in 1807. In the 1790s Liverpool controlled 80% of the British slave trade and over 40% of the European slave trade.

The reasons for Liverpool's control of the trade are varied. Her geographical position meant that merchants had easy access to the goods that would sell in Africa. These included textiles from Lancashire and Yorkshire, pottery, copper and brass from Staffordshire and Cheshire and guns from Birmingham. Merchants also strengthened trading links to London, Amsterdam and other European ports to obtain luxury silks and other textiles from India, glass beads from Italy and cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean. But crucially, Liverpool merchants developed expert knowledge of the trade and established good contacts with traders on the African coast. They knew which goods to send to Africa and very importantly which goods would sell on different parts of the coast.

Much of Liverpool's wealth came from slavery. From about 1750 until 1807, between a third and a half of Liverpool's trade was with Africa and the Caribbean. Virtually all the leading inhabitants of the town, including the Mayors, Town Councillors and MPs, invested in the slave trade and profited from it. The prosperity and growth of the town was closely connected with its involvement with slavery. When the campaign to abolish the trade began in the 1780s, opposition in the town was strong. Several Liverpoolians spoke in favour of the trade at the parliamentary inquiries and the most prominent were given valuable gifts from the Town Council and several were given the freedom of the borough. A few local abolitionists, like William Roscoe, worked behind the scenes but generally chose not to engage in public debate.

After the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, merchants in the town used their contacts to maintain trading with Africa and the Americas. Several former slave merchants and captains developed a very profitable trade in African palm oil and by degrees Liverpool came to dominate all British trade with West Africa. This control was maintained until after the Second World War. Whilst sugar and the other tropical goods continued to be imported from the Caribbean, the biggest growth was in imported raw cotton from the southern states of America. This was produced by slave labour on plantations until 1865. Cotton was a major factor in Liverpool's growth in the 19th century and helps to explain why support for the Confederate cause during the American Civil War was so strong. The economic benefits also extended to Manchester, other towns in Lancashire and the wider British economy.

Although the vast majority of Africans transported by Liverpool ships were taken to the Americas, there were a few Black people in Liverpool in the 18th century. Most would have been domestic servants and whilst not treated as harshly as the chattel slaves on the plantations, their lives would have been strictly controlled. There are several documented sales of Blacks in Liverpool - the largest a sale of 11 Africans at the Exchange Coffee House in 1766. A few local Black people today can trace their family back to the late 18th century and many others are descended from Africans who came to Liverpool as a result of the trade between West Africa and Liverpool in the 19th century.

There is still evidence of Liverpool's role in the slave trade around the city centre. Bold, Tarleton and Cunliffe Streets in the city centre are amongst many streets named after merchants who were involved in the trade. Many buildings, including the Town Hall, were built with wealth created by the trade. In 1994 the *Transatlantic Slavery: Against Human Dignity* gallery was opened in the Merseyside Maritime Museum. This has been replaced with the International Slavery Museum, which opened on 23 August 2007.

The Maritime Archives & Library holds many original documents and archives collections related to transatlantic slavery. These include those of the Earle family of merchants, as well as the papers of William Davenport, perhaps the most well-known Liverpool merchant engaged in the slave trade and the Cropper family, leading anti-slavery campaigners. Much of the material is available on microfilm only (for catalogues of microfilms see *Abolition & Emancipation parts 2 and 3: Slavery Collections from the Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool*. Marlborough: Adam Matthew Publications, 1999). This material has now been digitised; together with recent additions to the collection, as an online resource, "Slavery Abolition & Social Justice, 1490-2007" please see Adam Matthews Digital (www.amdigital.co.uk), also available at the Maritime Archives & Library.

Records

For a more detailed list see *Guide to the Records of the Merseyside Maritime Museum*, Vol. II (Canada: Memorial University of Newfoundland), 1999, chapter 2.

Liverpool Statutory Registers of British Merchant Ships

The most important registers relating to the slave trade are the volumes covering the years 1739-1807. These contain details of all the Liverpool slaving vessels, their owners, masters and the ultimate fate of the vessel, as well as their basic dimensions.

C/EX/L/2-6

1739 - 1807

5 Volumes

Earle Family and Business Archive

The collection comprises some seventeen boxes of volumes and documents relating to the family's business, estate and personal affairs, especially their mercantile and shipping interests during the mid-18th century, the period when Liverpool became the country's leading slave port. By this time the Earle family were in business as merchants and

shipowners in a wide range of commercial ventures, including the slave trade. This gives special importance to these archives, which include a number of exceptionally interesting individual items, for example, the log of the *Unity* for a slaving voyage from Liverpool to Calabar, West Africa in 1769 (D/EARLE/1/4).

D/EARLE 1644 - 1930 17 Boxes

Cropper Family Archive

In the saga of the abolition of slavery, the name of Cropper is, unfortunately, barely known. James Cropper (1773-1840) was a successful Quaker merchant. He and his collaborator and friend, Anglican Evangelical, Adam Hodgson, worked together for the abolition of slavery, using not only ethical arguments, but economic ones as well. Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, stayed at Dingle Bank, the home of John, son of James Cropper. James Cropper sent parcels of East Indies coffee and sugar to every M.P., to demonstrate that these commodities could be produced without slave labour. He also had his crockery decorated with vignettes of slaves in iron with the caption: "Am I not a man/woman and a brother/sister?" The archives include correspondence with Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, Zachary Macaulay and others, and also contains many circulars and handbills.

D/CR 1634 - 1926 3 Boxes, 1 parcel

William Davenport Archives

William Davenport (1725-1797) was an important Liverpool merchant and shipowner involved in the slave trade, as well as trading in beads, ivory, sugar, coffee and tobacco. During his career he invested in approximately 160 slaving voyages in 70 vessels. Details of several of these voyages can be found in the accounts books, wages books and correspondence in this collection.

D/DAV 1747 - 1794 13 Volumes, 13 bundles

Miscellaneous Original Manuscripts and Printed Texts

A large number of important documents relating to the slave trade are to be found in the miscellaneous, smaller collections of archives, known collectively as the DX and SAS collections. They include many significant individual items, for example:

Account book of slave ship *Enterprize*, owned by Leyland & Co., Liverpool. This includes descriptions of the taking of a Spanish privateer, and of a voyage to the Congo to collect slaves destined for Jamaica, and also a crew list, details of a slave sale, captain's instructions and voyage accounts.

DX/1732 1794 - 1795 1 Volume

Correspondence relating to the slaver *Kitty's Amelia*, one of the last Liverpool slave ships to sail from a West African port in 1807. Includes letters of instruction to Captain Nuttall, re the sale of slaves, and a crew list for a voyage in 1806.

DX/170 1804 - 1806 11 Items

Printed volume: *Historical account of Guinea its situation, produce, disposition of inhabitants and inquiry into the rise and progress of the slave trade*, by Anthony Benezet, 1772. Includes references to a surgeon's journal for a voyage from Liverpool, 1724, and a voyage account for a slave trader from Liverpool, 1749.

DX/1624/R 1724 - 1772 1 Volume

Framed notice of an auction of 25 Sea Island cotton and rice slaves, Charleston, USA, and an agreement for sale of a female slave, New Orleans.

DX/1551

1852 - 1853

2 Items

Bibliography

Abolition & Emancipation parts 2 and 3: Slavery Collections from the Merseyside Maritime Museum, Liverpool. Marlborough: Adam Matthew Publications, 1999. Also see the online resource, "Slavery Abolition & Social Justice, 1490-2007" from Adam Matthews Digital (www.amdigital.co.uk).

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LITTLER, Dawn. *Guide to the Records of the Merseyside Maritime Museum, Vol. II.* Canada : Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1999.

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WALVIN, James. *An African's Life: Olaudah Equiano.* London: Cassell, 1998.

Useful Addresses

An introduction to transatlantic slavery is found at

www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ism/slavery.

For information on educational visits, teachers' notes and the handling collection related to the International Slavery Museum, please contact: 0151 478 4441.

Anti-Slavery International provides resources and ideas for teachers and educators at

<http://www.antislavery.org/breakingthesilence>.

Wilberforce House, Hull, provides information about William Wilberforce and the slave trade at <http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/wilberforce> and an on line 3D reality tour at

<http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/wilberforcehouse>.

The Black Cultural Archives and Middlesex University offer information on the proposed Archives and Museum of Black Heritage at <http://www.aambh.org.uk>.

The Caribbean, Black and Asian History forum provides links to sources at

<http://www.casbah.ac.uk>.