

Great Britain and the Atlantic slave trade

A Before you start

What do you already know about the Atlantic slave trade? How long did it last? Who took part in it and how did it work? What was life like for enslaved Africans in European colonies? How did European nations benefit from slavery? Collect questions and discuss them in class. Find out the answers to any of your questions that are not answered below.

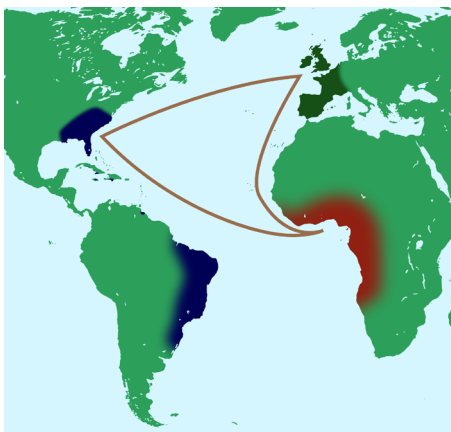
B Reading

In recent years, some of Britain's oldest companies and other organisations – including the Church of England – have apologised for their role in the Atlantic slave trade. A number of these have also agreed to pay millions of pounds to help people whose ancestors were enslaved. There have been similar initiatives in other rich nations which benefitted from the Atlantic slave trade. This newsletter discusses these questions:

- What was the Atlantic slave trade?
- How did it change Britain and other slave-trading nations?
- What effects did it have on enslaved people and the places from which they were taken?
- How do governments and organisations today try to neutralise the past horrors of slavery?

The origin of the Atlantic Slave Trade and how it worked

In the 17th century, the first colonies of the British Empire were founded on Caribbean islands and in North America. Other European nations (including France, the Netherlands and Spain) also had colonies in the region, and Spain and Portugal had colonies in South and Central America. The climate in much of this land was ideal for growing crops like sugar, cotton and tobacco. In Europe, these crops were popular with consumers but not easy to grow. That's why they were a key part of the 'triangular trade', a phrase which described



the triangle-shaped route of many of the ships that were involved. In a typical journey, a ship sailed from Europe to the west coast of Africa with goods from European factories. When it arrived, the traders sold the goods on the ship to the local merchants and then filled the empty space with people whom local slave traders had captured. Sometimes African tribes captured people from neighbouring tribes and sold them to the European slave traders. The ship took the enslaved people to colonies in the Caribbean and the Americas to work on plantations and in other industries. Finally, it returned to Europe with crops and other goods that had been harvested or produced by enslaved people.

An estimated 12 – 15 million Africans were transported away from their homes and into slavery. Many died on the long voyages, which could last for several months. The survivors then spent the rest of their lives working in terrible conditions, often with extreme violence from their “owners”. Their children and their children's children were born into slavery. Some escaped and some took part in slave rebellions, but for the majority of people, enslavement ended only with death.

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The effects of the Atlantic slave trade

While enslaved Africans suffered, the owners of the plantations, the slave traders and the businesses back in Europe profited. They were able to buy cheap raw materials and made huge amounts of money. The effects of profits from slavery can still be seen in Britain, from grand public buildings to the fine private houses of the upper classes. However, it was not just rich business owners who benefitted. Many middle-class British people also “owned” slaves (sometimes just one or two) in colonies far away. From the early 17th century for more than 300 years, the money from slavery helped Britain to develop its economy and was a major reason why Britain was able to develop and maintain the richest and most powerful empire the world had ever known – with competition from other European nations which had their own colonies and slavery-based industries.



Monument to freedom from slavery, Senegal, West Africa

After decades of political protest slavery was finally abolished in the British Empire in 1833. In the USA it was officially abolished after the Civil War, which was fought, in part, because of the situation of enslaved people there. Millions of formerly enslaved people were at last free, but they continued to be “second-class citizens” and suffered very badly from discrimination, especially in the USA (which declared independence from Britain in 1776). People who are descended from enslaved people may still face racist prejudice and discrimination today.

The Atlantic slave trade was very damaging for Africa too. It affected the development of the parts of Africa which lost many active young people to the slave trade, and it played a key role in European colonisation with all its many very negative effects, such as civil wars, state violence and unequal treatment.

Changing perspectives

Slavery dates back to the start of civilisation. For example, it was not unusual for wealthy Roman families to have several slaves living in their homes to do all the housework. The form of chattel slavery used after 1500, however, meant that one person could practically “own” another and force them to work without receiving any payment. This form allowed the purchase and sale (like a piece of furniture) not only of the enslaved people but also of their children. The plantation slave system, which was based on the idea of “cheap” labour being performed by enslaved people, was soon reflected in society in general, with ideas and practices being used to separate people based only on skin colour.

As mentioned above, Britain was only one of several European countries that became involved in the Atlantic slave trade (the first slave ships were Portuguese) and slavery still existed in many other parts of the world at that time. Ideas concerning human rights and freedoms have developed throughout history. Even when legal slavery was finally abolished, ending most activities of the Atlantic slave trade, it was partly done for economic reasons: changes in international trade meant that Britain’s colonial plantations were no longer so profitable and slave rebellions had become an expensive problem.

Since the end of slavery in the USA and in other European colonies, a common view was that abolition was enough, and even deserved praise. In recent years, though, there has been more awareness of how the negative effects of slavery continue to the present day and of how unfair it is that some rich nations continue to benefit from the past profits of slavery.



A key event in Britain happened in 2020 when protestors in the port city of Bristol threw a statue of Edward Colston into the river. Colston (1636 – 1721) had been considered a local hero for giving a lot of money to schools, hospitals, churches etc. However, his fortune had come from the slave trade. A long series of actions that rejected Colston as someone to be celebrated had gone nowhere. This final protest attracted a lot of media attention and increased debate about Britain's slave-trading past and reparations (paying money as compensation for the damage caused). There have been similar shifts of perspective in other former slave-trading nations.

Some organisations that profited from slavery have given or have promised to donate money for development projects in former colonies which enslaved people. But is this really reparations? The Church of England is not using the word and instead says it will support projects that are “focused on improving opportunities for communities adversely impacted by historic slavery”. Some critics have called all this “reparations washing” – giving comparatively small amounts of money in order to be seen as “doing the right thing”.

The real debt has been calculated as trillions of pounds/dollars/euros that are owed by each of the countries involved – and that is just payment for unpaid work, without any damages for the suffering caused. In both Britain and the USA, payment of major reparations by the central government has been discussed for many years, but seems unlikely to happen in the near future, if ever. The situation is similar in other countries with Atlantic slave-trading histories.

Some people argue that the events were so long ago that reparations would be too difficult to calculate now. Others argue that any amount of reparations would not be enough to compensate for the terrible suffering and damage that was caused. Another point of view is that money alone can never truly compensate for what happened, and it is wrong to put a price tag on the lives that were destroyed by slavery. A further problem is deciding how and to whom any reparations should be paid. The debate on this issue seems likely to continue for many years to come.

C Comprehension

1. Skim the text to get the gist. Choose ✓ the two main things that the text aims to do.

- a) ☐ to sum up the history of slavery since the start of civilisation
- b) ☐ to discuss slavery from a British point of view
- c) ☐ to describe the Atlantic slave trade and especially Britain's role in it
- d) ☐ to report current issues that relate to the Atlantic slave trade
- e) ☐ to give an opinion about reparations for victims of the Atlantic slave trade

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2. Now read the text in more detail and choose ✓ *true* or *false* for each statement.

1. Some British organisations have decided to give financial help to people who are descended from victims of the Atlantic slave trade. ☐ true ☐ false
2. The Atlantic slave trade was almost entirely a British activity. ☐ true ☐ false
3. The ships used in the Atlantic slave trade often did the journey in three parts, and transported different things for each part. ☐ true ☐ false
4. Most of the profits from slavery in British colonies stayed in those colonies. ☐ true ☐ false
5. Only the richest people in Britain were connected with slavery. ☐ true ☐ false
6. When slavery was finally abolished, life suddenly became much better for everybody who had been enslaved. ☐ true ☐ false
7. The Atlantic slave trade caused serious problems in Africa. ☐ true ☐ false
8. The history of slavery is almost as long as history itself. ☐ true ☐ false
9. When slavery in European colonies ended, most European people wanted to help the former slaves. ☐ true ☐ false
10. A recent protest highlighted the issue of Britain's role in slavery. ☐ true ☐ false
11. All the countries that were involved in the Atlantic slave trade have agreed to pay at least some reparations. ☐ true ☐ false
12. There is still a lot of disagreement about whether or not reparations should be paid. ☐ true ☐ false

Correct the false statements:

D Vocabulary

1. Fill in the columns with terms related to the slave trade. You can write down words from the text to help in your class discussions and add other words you already know.

nouns (person)	nouns (idea)	verbs

2. Use the words below to make sentences with the same meaning.

Change the form of the verbs.

to abolish | to apologise | to capture | to estimate | former | property | rebellion | to transport | voyage

1. Jamaica was a British colony.

Jamaica is _____.

2. Slave traders in Africa made a lot of money from catching and keeping people to sell.

Slave traders in Africa made a lot of money from _____.

3. The enslaved Africans were taken to another place in extremely bad conditions.

The enslaved Africans _____.

4. We can guess that two million Africans died on the long sea journeys.

An _____. (two words from the list)

5. It was normal for plantation owners to think of slaves as things that they owned.

It was normal for plantation owners to think of slaves as _____.

6. Sometimes enslaved people fought against the people who controlled their lives.

There were some _____.

7. Most enslaved people's lives did not improve much when slavery officially ended.

Most enslaved people's lives did not improve much when _____.

8. In 2008, the US Government said it was sorry for American slavery.

In 2008, the US Government _____.

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3. Put the words into the right categories (six in each).

crop | fortune | to compensate | debt | goods | to grow | plantation | raw materials | to owe | to produce | profit | valuable

money	agriculture / industry

E Language

1. Look at the text and find words and phrases in quotation marks (“-”). Match them with the reasons for using quotation marks.

A: To quote something that was said (or not said) by somebody else

B: For informal words/phrases that are not normally used in serious writing

C: To show that the writer disagrees with the way a word or phrase is/was used by somebody else

word / phrase in quotation marks (“-”)	reason for using quotation marks (A, B or C)

2. The text describes victims of the Atlantic slave trade as “enslaved people” or “enslaved Africans” rather than “slaves”. Why do you think this is? Explain your ideas.

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F Speaking

Discuss these questions in class.

1. Should nations that profited from the Atlantic slave trade pay reparations? Give reasons.
2. To whom should any future reparations be paid?
3. How could the amount of money be calculated?
4. What problems may be caused by (a) paying reparations and (b) not paying reparations?
5. How far back in history should we look when we talk about getting justice for victims?

G Writing

You are interviewed for a podcast about young people's opinions on topics in the news. Write the interview dialogue with the answers that you gave to the questions in F above. You can start:

PODCASTER: In your opinion, should nations that profited from the Atlantic slave trade pay reparations?

YOU: ...

A Before you read

Students may already have some basic knowledge of the topic from Green Line books they have used so far.

C Comprehension

1.

c & d

2. (With model corrections of false statements)

1. True

2. False (Several other European countries were involved.)

3. True

4. False (Most of the profits landed in Britain.)

5. False (Middle-class people also "owned" slaves.)

6. False (Former slaves suffered badly from discrimination.)

7. True

8. True

9. False (People typically felt that abolition was enough.)

10. True

11. False (It has been discussed, but no money has been paid yet.)

12. True

D Vocabulary

1.

nouns (person): slave, trader (also possible: slave trader, enslaved person, enslaved African)

nouns (idea): slavery, enslavement, trade

verbs: to enslave, to trade

2.

1. Jamaica is a **former** British colony.

2. Slave traders in Africa made a lot of money from **capturing** people to sell.

3. The enslaved Africans were **transported** in extremely bad conditions.

4. An **estimated** two million Africans died on the long voyages.

5. It was normal for plantation owners to think of slaves as **(their) (personal) property**.

6. There were some **(slave) rebellions** (against the people who controlled their lives).

7. Most enslaved people's lives did not improve much when **slavery was abolished**.

8. In 2008, the US Government **apologised** for American slavery.

(Some variations are also possible.)

3.

money: to compensate, debt, fortune, to owe, profit, valuable

agriculture/industry: crop, goods, to grow, plantation, raw materials, to produce

E Language

1.

A: "focused on improving opportunities for communities adversely impacted by historic slavery" / "reparations" (penultimate paragraph) / "reparations washing"

B: "second-class citizens" / "doing the right thing"

C: "owners" / "owned" (paragraphs 3 & 4)

2. (Writing or speaking)

Answers should include the idea of not defining people with terms that can be dehumanising.

F Speaking / G Writing

Individual responses

Further information

✦ The way that **different types of slavery** operated in terms of scale, racial status, human/property status, and legalities have varied widely in the past in different regions.

<https://ldhi.library.cofc.edu/exhibits/show/africanpassageslowcountryadapt/introductionatlanticworld/slaverybeforetrade>

✦ **Edward Colston's** legacy has been an ongoing issue in Bristol for decades.

<https://www.brh.org.uk/site/articles/edward-colston-a-century-of-dissent-and-protest/>

✦ A venue called Colston Hall was renamed the Bristol Beacon.

<https://bristolbeacon.org/about-us/our-new-name/>

✦ Coleston's statue was later retrieved from the harbour and displayed as part of an exhibition at a museum.

<https://exhibitions.bristolmuseums.org.uk/the-colston-statue/>