

Atlantic slave trade: investigating primary sources

The abolitionist campaigns

This resource can be used alongside the *Scotland and the Caribbean* resource.

Introduction

The anti-slavery movement began to gain momentum in Britain towards the end of the 18th century, as more people and groups began to speak out against slavery and the slave trade.

The arguments against fell into three categories – economic (enslaved people were the most inefficient and costly form of labour), humanitarian (enslaved

people were denied their freedom) and Christian (Bible teaching emphasised that people should be treated with kindness and love). Crucially, the terrible treatment of enslaved people and the first-hand experiences of those formerly enslaved fuelled support for the abolition of the slave trade.

People who sought the abolition of the slave trade were known as abolitionists and a number of them had connections with Scotland.

These included:



Olaudah Equiano (c.1745–1797)

A formerly enslaved person and well-known abolitionist, whose autobiography, published in 1789, related first-hand the horrors of slavery and proved immensely popular with the public, helping to support the cause of abolition. He toured Scotland in 1792, giving speeches in a number of Scottish cities, going as far north as Aberdeen.



Robert Wedderburn (1762–1835/6)

The son of an enslaved woman and a Scottish plantation owner. Although born free, he was raised on a plantation by his enslaved mother, and later left Jamaica to become a revolutionary speaker, minister and author in Britain. He wrote a book called 'The Horrors of Slavery' published in 1824, which details his visit to Inveresk, in East Lothian, to approach his Scottish father for support and being turned away with nothing.



Zachary Macaulay (1768–1838)

From Inveraray, he had become horrified by the conditions and treatment of enslaved people after working on a plantation in Jamaica. In 1804, he became a member of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, working closely with the well-known abolitionist MP William Wilberforce.



Henry Brougham (1778–1868)

From Edinburgh, he wrote 'A concise statement regarding the abolition of the slave trade' in 1804, arguing in favour of its abolition. Later, when an MP, he consolidated the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade Act by introducing the 1811 Slave Trade Felony Act, effectively making involvement in the slave trade illegal.



Frederick Douglass (1818–1895)

Whilst slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833, it still existed elsewhere, and abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, raised awareness of this fact. A formerly enslaved person and prominent abolitionist in the USA, Douglass delivered numerous anti-slavery speeches in towns and cities across Scotland during his tour of Britain and Ireland in 1845–1847 and again in 1859–1860.

There are some objects in the collections at National Museums Scotland which can shed light on the methods and narratives abolitionists used. Like written documents, when placed in the context of the wider historical period, they can reveal attitudes towards slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries. They also raise important questions which may encourage further research.

Silver brand



What is it?

This brand was gifted to what is now National Museums Scotland by Thomas Chapman Jr, an Edinburgh auctioneer. Very little is known about the history of where it came from, but we can see that it carries the initials 'I.S.' and it is said to have been a brand for marking enslaved people – from St George, West Indies. The initials were most likely those of the enslaver. The heart symbol was commonly used across different types of objects, sometimes to indicate property. As a precious metal, silver is an expensive material. That objects like this contained such a material underlines the wealth generated by the exploitation of millions of enslaved people.

Date:

Unknown.

Materials and dimensions:

Silver.

Length: 11.0cm

Width: 6.0cm

Connection to the slave trade:

Brands like this were used to mark enslaved people as the property of enslavers. They were also used to mark those who attempted to escape slavery and find freedom, as punishment and to ensure their return should they escape again. This concept of people as possessions that could be owned and traded, and how horrific that was, became a key part of the abolition debate. Objects like this – as well as chains and whips – were used by abolitionists to draw attention to the horrors of slavery.

The brand is displayed near two silver communion cups from Kilmadock Parish Church in Doune, Stirlingshire, in the same display case at the National Museum of Scotland (more information on these can be found in the ***Scotland and the Caribbean*** resource).

They were gifted to the church by William Mitchell, a Scot who owned plantations in Jamaica.

He was known there as 'King Mitchell' because of his wealth and power, generated from the exploitation of enslaved people.

The contrast between the silver brand and cups acts as a striking reminder that goods and wealth generated in Scotland were often the result of human suffering on the other side of the Atlantic and in Africa.

See this object on display at the National Museum of Scotland, in the Scotland Galleries, Level 3, **Scotland Transformed: Trade and Industry**.

Discussion questions:

- 👁️ Look at the object. On first impression, what words might you use to describe it?
- ❓ After reading the information about the brand, what is your personal response to this object? How does it make you feel or how would you describe it now?
- ❓ Why would enslavers want to use a brand to mark people?
- ❓ What does this tell us about the status of enslaved people and how their humanity was viewed?
- ❓ Why do you think a brand might be an effective tool for the abolitionist movement? What effect do you think they wanted this to have on audiences?
- ❓ As an abolitionist tool, which group of arguments – economic, humanitarian or Christian – do you think a brand would most support? Why do you think this?
- 🔍 Objects like the brand could be used by abolitionists to demonstrate the horrors involved in the slavery system. Investigate some of the other methods used by abolitionists to achieve their goal of ending the slave trade.

Ivory plaques



What are they?

Two anti-slavery plaques. Both show enslaved people kneeling with metal shackles and chains, and two slave ships in the distance. Both also display a motto above, one reading 'THANK GOD FOR LIBERTY', the other, 'O LORD SET US FREE'. There is a watchful eye depicted above the figures.

Date:

Early 19th century.

Materials and dimensions:

The plaques are made from ivory, with additional materials including glass, alabaster and parcel gilt.

Diameter of top plaque: 6.4cm

Diameter of bottom plaque: 10.5cm

Connection to the slave trade:

As the abolitionist movement grew, decorative objects such as these acted as important visual symbols to publicly declare support for the cause.

Images like those on the plaques were created and used by the abolitionist movement to appeal to British audiences. Presenting enslaved people as passive and pleading – victims who required saving – would prove far more effective with an audience who might view the idea of enslaved people passionately fighting for their own freedom as unsettling or threatening. It could be argued, therefore, that this type of object reinforced racial divisions and stereotypes.

Such anti-slavery imagery proved successful in building public support and reflects the period in

which it was created. However, it has also shaped how enslaved people and abolitionism are viewed up to the present day. In recent years, more focus is being placed on the work of black abolitionists such as Mary Prince and Olaudah Equiano and the resistance of enslaved people themselves. This is a move towards a fuller representation of the role of enslaved and formerly enslaved people in the struggle for emancipation, and away from their more problematic representation on abolitionist objects.

Discussion questions:

- ❓ What do these objects remind you of?
- ❓ How would you describe these objects and this imagery? Do you think that, if we were creating these today, we would use similar imagery or how might it be different?
- ❓ 'Abolitionist' was a term used in the 19th century. What modern day terms might we use now?
- ❓ Arguments against the slave trade could be grouped into three categories – economic, humanitarian and Christian. Which do these plaques feed into? What leads you to think this?
- ❓ Religious imagery would have been very familiar to people in the early 19th century. What images and symbols can you see on the plaques which would have been recognised by a Christian audience? Why do you think the figures were depicted in a passive pose?
- ❓ Ornaments, plaques and fashion accessories were used as visual symbols to publicly declare support for a cause. Can you think of any modern-day equivalents?
- ❓ The imagery on these plaques helped to create an idea of enslaved people as passive, which can now be viewed as both problematic and unrepresentative. Enslaved people did resist and fight against slavery – in what ways do you think they did this?
 - 🕒 A number of former enslaved people went on to become abolitionists. Research the work of people such as Olaudah Equiano, Ottobah Cugoano, Mary Prince, and Ignatius Sancho or the organisation 'Sons of Africa', considered to be Britain's first black political organisation.

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