

Excerpts from **Oldfield, John. 'Britain and the Slave Trade'. *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Ed. H. T. Dickinson. Cornwall: Blackwell, 2002. 489-198.**

"The British entered the slave trade relatively late. Estimates vary, but it is unlikely that the number of slaves shipped by the British before 1660 was much in excess of 10,000. Starting in the 1660s, however, the British began to dominate the slave trade. Slave exports rose from 59,900 in 1662–70 to 125,600 in 1700–9 and 273,300 in 1750–9. The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed further expansion. During the 1780s and 1790s, for instance, decades that marked the emergence of the early abolitionist movement, the British exported a total of 656,000 slaves. Overall, between 1662 and 1807 British empire ships carried approximately 3.4 million slaves from Africa to America. This was about 50 per cent of all slave exports during this period.

The British probably tried some slave trading to the Spanish colonies in the West Indies as early as the 1560s. But without major tropical colonies of their own there was little incentive to enter the trade, at least not in a concerted or organized fashion. All of this was to change in the early seventeenth century, however, as the British claimed Bermuda and later, in 1625, Barbados. After initial experiments with tobacco and cotton, Barbados rapidly emerged as a major sugar colony with a rural labour force that was enslaved and African. Barbados, moreover, set the pattern for further expansion in both the West Indies and mainland America. The acquisition of Jamaica in 1655, and the spectacular expansion of tobacco production in Virginia and Maryland, secured the rise of a plantation complex that dominated the Atlantic economy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Spurred on by the success of Barbados, British merchants began to take a much more active interest in the Atlantic slave trade. By the 1630s the British had their first fort in Africa, on the Gold Coast, and two decades later had staked out the Sierra Leone or Upper Guinea Coast. But the real expansion came after mid-century when the state became involved in the slave trade. In 1660 Charles II granted a 1,000-year monopoly of British trade to Africa to the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa. Reconstituted in 1663, the company had its rights transferred to the Royal African Company (RAC) in 1672. Like its predecessor, the RAC was a joint-stock company and enjoyed monopoly control over the British slave trade, as well as Britain's trade with Africa in commodity goods.

Between 1672 and 1713, when the last remnant of crown control over Britain's trade to Africa came to an end, the Royal African Company transported over 350,000 slaves to the British colonies in the West Indies. As such, it helped to establish Britain's position as the leading European carrier of slaves. But like all monopoly companies, the RAC eventually failed. Its monopoly was ended by parliament in 1698 and from 1713 onwards the slave trade was effectively privatized, although the RAC and its successor, the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa (established in 1750), did continue to maintain forts and factories along the west coast of Africa. Part of the reason for this change in the organization of the British Atlantic slave trade was undoubtedly the high fixed costs involved in maintaining the RAC's monopoly. But no less important was the damage caused by interlopers. According to one estimate, between 1674 and 1686 perhaps one in four of the slaves reaching British America arrived illegally.

After 1713 the Atlantic slave trade was carried on largely by private trading partnerships or, occasionally, joint-stock companies. Typically, these partnerships were made up of between two and five merchants, although the same men might have interests in a number of different slaving expeditions. Naturally, the firm or partnership bore the cost of preparing ships for their voyages. While hardly exorbitant, at least in comparison to the India trade, outfitting costs for slavers rose considerably during the course of the eighteenth century, and for most outport merchants represented a sizeable investment. Slaving, moreover, was fraught with exceptional risks. It could take anything up to

eighteen months to complete a successful slave voyage and longer still (perhaps three or more years) to settle one's accounts. There was also the danger of shipwreck or, more likely, disease and death.

Given these risks and the high costs of slaving expeditions, it is not surprising that London merchants dominated the slave trade, at least in its early expansionary phases. The most recent estimates suggest that London merchants financed about 63 per cent of all British slave voyages between 1698 and 1725. By the 1730s, however, London was being challenged by Bristol. Between 1720 and 1749 a total of 975 slave ships sailed from Bristol, marginally more than London during the same period, and by the 1750s Bristol merchants were sinking £150,000 a year into the slave trade. But just as London was eclipsed by Bristol, so was Bristol eclipsed by Liverpool. During the 1750s 521 slave ships cleared the port of Liverpool, more than Bristol and London combined. In the following decades, Liverpool went on to dominate the British Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, between 1780 and 1807, when the traffic was abolished, Liverpool merchants financed 75 per cent of all slave voyages.

The growing dominance of Liverpool in the slave trade can be attributed to its strategic position (the Thames and the English Channel were much more vulnerable to enemy privateering), low wage rates, and the city's ties to Europe's valuable East India trade. But important as Liverpool's ascendancy was, it did not displace London entirely. In fact, London merchants continued to be involved in the slave trade, both as financiers and suppliers of trade goods on credit. Some historians have even gone so far as to suggest a division of labour within slave trafficking from the 1730s, with Bristol and Liverpool merchants acting as shippers of slaves and London merchants providing manufactured goods and financial services. Indeed, there seems little doubt that London contributed greatly to Liverpool's success.

The first leg of a slave expedition, from Europe to Africa, took anywhere from three to four months. Most slave ships made straight for the Atlantic coast of Africa; unlike the French, British slavers rarely ventured beyond the Cape of Good Hope. Statistically, the British took the largest number of slaves (1,172,800) from the Bight of Biafra, that is, the region between the mouth of the Niger River and Cape Lopez in present-day Gabon. But significant numbers were also taken from West-Central Africa (634,000), the Gold Coast (509,200), Sierra Leone (483,100), the Bight of Benin (359,600) and Senegambia (246,800). In fact, it is clear that different regions were important to the British at different times, depending on supply and competition with foreign traders. So, for instance, slave exports from West-Central Africa fell sharply after 1740 in the face of French competition, and recovered only when the French largely abandoned the slave trade in 1793. Correspondingly, British exports from Sierra Leone peaked between 1760 and 1780.

Insatiable as the demand for slaves was, supply was firmly in the hands of African traders and middlemen. The market, moreover, was volatile. African tastes changed, often with remarkable speed. Indian cottons, for instance, were in great demand in the seventeenth century, but gave way to German-produced linens in the early 1700s and, later, East Indian textiles. To be successful, therefore, and to beat off their competitors, British merchants and slave captains needed to monitor African market demands and to be able to respond accordingly. This was why outfitting slave ships was so expensive. Throughout the period of the slave trade Europeans poured into Africa the whole range of European manufactured goods and hardware, some of which became high-demand items while others aroused little or no interest.

Like their European counterparts, British slave ships regularly spent several months on the coast of Africa. Because there were no arrangements for holding slaves on the coast, slave captains were dependent on local African traders. As a result, most slave purchases were made in relatively small lots; it was simply impossible to buy large numbers of slaves from any one African trader. More often than not, slave captains were forced to deal directly with a number of different traders, sometimes visiting the same trading place several times over a period of four to six months. In most cases, the slaves were

held ashore for as long as possible to prevent the outbreak of disease (smallpox was a particular menace), but even so the death rates for this coasting period were relatively high. And this was before the slave ships had even set sail for America.

What followed, the middle passage, was undoubtedly the most testing and, for many, the most horrific part of the Atlantic slave trade. Yet talk of 'tight packing' and dangerously high mortality rates can be misleading. What evidence we have suggests that losses of slaves on British ships roughly halved in the century after the 1680s. That they did so was owing to better provisioning and, in particular, the use of common African foods (rice, yams, beans); and to a shift from very-low-tonnage vessels carrying high ratios of slaves to middle-range-tonnage vessels carrying fewer slaves. Many of these same ships also had special design features, open ventilation ports, for instance, that were intended to improve conditions below deck. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the mortality rate ever fell much below 10 per cent, a figure that for a healthy and economically active population would be considered truly astronomic.

While death, disease and violence were all significant factors in the middle passage, the overwhelming majority of slaves did reach America. Here they were sold directly to planters or their agents as quickly as possible, and on the most advantageous terms. This usually involved a number of sales or 'scrambles' that submitted slaves to further humiliation. Slavers then set out on the return leg to Europe. If a cargo was available, it would be taken, but more often than not slavers returned in ballast, carrying just sand and water. Most West Indian goods, in fact, were shipped to Europe in specially designed merchant vessels that were larger than the typical slaver. In other words, while we can properly talk of a triangular trade between Europe, Africa and America, it was not necessarily the case that the same ship was involved in each leg of the triangle. Indeed, slavers only really made a significant impact on two legs of the trip.

The Atlantic slave trade was a vast commercial enterprise that stretched across three continents and involved complex capital and credit arrangements. Yet for those who could afford the price of entry the benefits were obvious. Slave prices increased steadily during the second half of the eighteenth century, but so too did the gap between American and African prices. Put crudely, a slave bought on the Gold Coast during the 1790s for £25 sold for roughly twice that amount in the West Indies. Against this, of course, investors had to offset outfitting costs and incidental costs on the west coast of Africa. It is also true that American planters were extended lengthy credit terms of between eighteen and twenty-four months, and often paid off their slave debts in colonial goods and not cash. Nevertheless, historians are agreed that during the last half-century of British slave trading profits from slave voyages averaged about 8–10 per cent, not an excessively high return by the standards of the time but still considered very good.

That British merchants made money out of the slave trade is indisputable. But there is very little evidence to suggest that gains from the slave trade were directly invested in industry or that they were responsible for Britain's first industrial revolution; in fact, it has been estimated that slave-trade profits by the late eighteenth century formed only 1 per cent of total British domestic investment. Yet in a broader sense the slave trade did have an immense impact on the British economy and on British commerce. The traffic in slaves was the backbone of an Atlantic economy that not only stimulated British manufactures but also created a seemingly insatiable demand for tropical staples. This voluminous trade in goods back and forth across the Atlantic helped to transform Britain into a major mercantile and naval power. All the more remarkable, then, that during the late eighteenth century many Britons began to question the humanity of the slave trade and to call for its abolition."