

IPS: Information for teachers

There is a lot of information on RAMM's website about the transatlantic slave trade and its links to south west England. Here is a summary of key information you might want to discuss.

Timespan:

From the 1400s to the 1800s, at least 12 million African men, women and children were enslaved. Generations that followed were born into the brutal system.

A wealth of culture:

There were varied, multi-ethnic, multilingual cultures in Africa and the Caribbean before, during and after the arrival of Europeans. Indigenous cultures were decimated by enslavement and by epidemics brought from Europe.

Devon links:

The geography of Devon – with its long coastline - means the region is connected to the transatlantic slave trade in a different way to Bristol and Liverpool, but it is just as interwoven into local history. Plymouth sailor John Hawkins began England's association with the transatlantic slave trade in 1562 and – along with his cousin Francis Drake - made multiple voyages to trade human beings.

Devon manufacturing & trade:

Objects produced in Devon – such as metal manillas used as currency in West Africa - were traded for people. Devon merchants acquired cotton and tobacco grown by enslaved Africans in the Americas.

Devon land ownership:

Local families owned plantations in the West Indies (including Barbados, Jamaica and British Guiana on the South American coast) – which produced sugar. It's important to remember this is a story of resistance and survival. There were times of rebellion and protest throughout the period of enslavement on Caribbean islands and American plantations.

Sugar:

Sugar – which today is embedded in so much of our food and culture - was once a luxury produced under barbaric conditions. Images of charming coffee houses and ornate silverware appear clean and innocuous, but behind them is a story of profit

through enslaving human beings on the basis of skin colour. Exeter was once one of the top three producers of refined sugar in the country.

Devon infrastructure funded by the trade:

Families (both ultra-wealthy and just moderately well-off) profited from the trade and then also from the compensation paid when enslaved people were released in the 1830s. Compensation – paid only to owners and not to enslaved people - was crucial to achieving agreement for abolition. This money – now a valuable method of tracking the ownership of enslaved people - was invested and therefore embedded in Devon. Many civic institutions and leaders were connected directly and indirectly, including cathedral and churches, country houses, the university, the museum and city mayors. The evidence is hidden in plain sight all around us, on streets and buildings named after influential families.

The campaign for freedom:

This was led by African formerly enslaved people, as well as some white abolitionists. There is evidence of protest and boycotts around the West Country. Famous abolitionists visited on speaking tours, including Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho and later the American Frederick Douglass.

Abolition:

When discussing the slave trade, it is important to humanise the enslaved and not validate the perpetrators. Capturing and enslaving people in Africa and transporting them to British colonial territories was banned in 1807. It continued to be legal to own and use the labour of enslaved people in overseas territories until 1834. Enslaved labour continued to be legal in the United States until 1865. This means that many tobacco and cotton products used in Devon before these dates (to make Honiton lace, for example) were still connected with the slave trade.

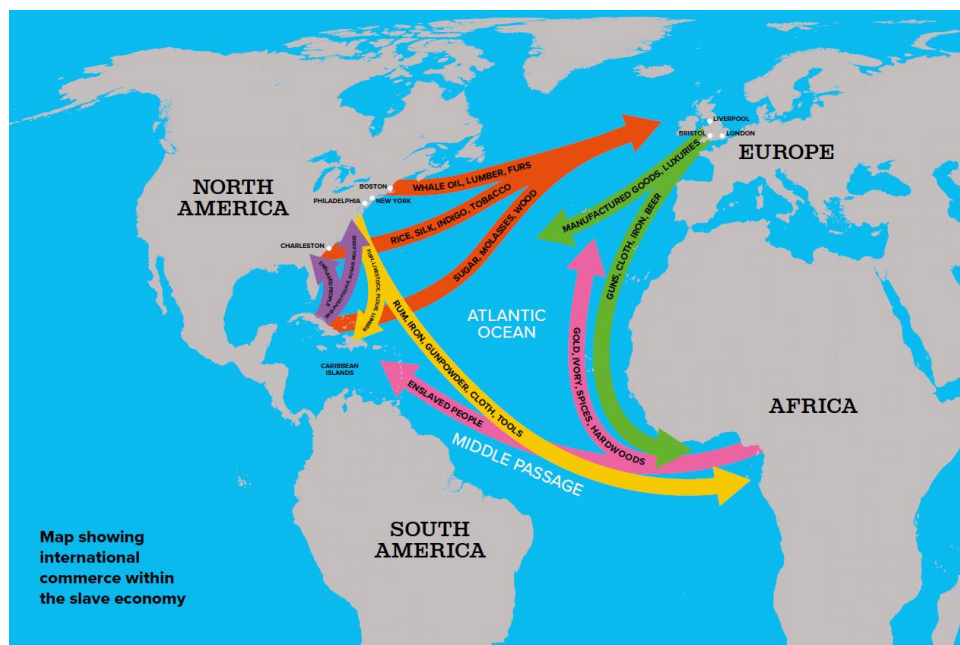
Devon residents:

There were people of colour in Devon for centuries, although documentation is heavily skewed towards white and wealthy residents.

This is our shared history. Here is a bit more detail.

The Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery (RAMM) in Exeter, held an exhibition in 2022 – called **In Plain Sight** - about Devon connections with the transatlantic slave trade. RAMM's **collections provide evidence of the slave trade in Devon and Exeter**. The research and community conversations behind that exhibition [In Plain Sight - Transatlantic slavery and Devon - Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery \(rammcollections.org.uk\)](https://rammcollections.org.uk/collections-stories/in-plain-sight-transatlantic-slavery-and-devon/#event-originsatimeline) <https://rammcollections.org.uk/collections-stories/in-plain-sight-transatlantic-slavery-and-devon/#event-originsatimeline> are the basis for the information presented here.

Timespan:



Map of triangular trade with British colonies

- ▶ Over four centuries of trade in enslaved human beings across the Atlantic Ocean, more than **12 million people** were captured in Africa and shipped to European colonies in the Americas.
- ▶ The **European trade started in 1441** when the Portuguese first brought enslaved West Africans to the Cape Verde Islands. The trade itself was **abolished in Britain in 1807** but it continued to be **legal to own people until 1833**. Enslaved people were not free in the United States until the end of its civil war in **1865**.

A wealth of culture:

- ▶ **Thriving indigenous cultures in the Caribbean** were decimated by the arrival of Europeans, who brought **deadly diseases** to their shores. **Carib** and **Taino**

peoples on the islands and **Arawak** peoples on the coast of what is now South America were enslaved until their populations declined to crisis point. Objects from these areas are held by RAMM, including shell axes probably used by indigenous Carib people to cultivate plants.



Carib axe crafted from the great conch shell (*Strombus gigas*)

- ▶ **Complex cultures and languages of West Africa** endured through the centuries. In the face of dehumanising treatment, enslaved Africans in the Americas also **developed their own cultures** including **stories, songs, rituals, music, medicine, religion, family names** and values.
- ▶ The **loss of original languages** and the **need to communicate** led to new patois languages based on English and French. These **creole languages** were also a **form of resistance** that enabled enslaved people to interact with each other while making it hard for owners to understand.



This arched harp collected in Colombia, South America, matches instruments traditional in Sierra Leone, West Africa

Devon links:



This cotton lace sprig was made around 1861

- ▶ Some well-known local traditions such **Honiton lace** - so highly prized it was used for Queen Victoria's wedding dress – were closely connected to enslaved labour. Much of the **cotton** that replaced the use of flax in lace-making was **grown by enslaved people** until the American Civil War brought slavery in the Southern States to an end in 1865.
- ▶ Trafficking humans across the Atlantic left an enormous economic and social legacy **not just in the major slave ports of Bristol and Liverpool**, but in cities and towns throughout Britain, hidden in plain sight for us all to see. The history

of the **seafaring** region of the West Country (Devon, Cornwall and Somerset) is intertwined within the trade.

- ▶ **Local families** and the **south west** region **profited from the wealth generated**, and from the compensation paid when the trade was finally abolished. The trade had an impact on working people too, in poorly paid jobs in industrial mills and factories.
- ▶ Devon sailor **John Hawkins** (raised in Plymouth) was given permission by Queen Elizabeth I in 1562 to work as a privateer and **plunder enemy ships**. Hawkins seized over 300 enslaved people aboard a Portuguese ship and sold them to plantation owners in the West Indies, **beginning England's association with the transatlantic slave trade**.
- ▶ Hawkins and his **cousin Francis Drake** made further voyages together from 1562 to 1567, exchanging enslaved African people for pearls, hides and sugar in the Americas. Hawkins' coat of arms incorporated an enslaved person bound with ropes.

Devon manufacturing:



Manilla and manilla mould in red Devon clay

- ▶ African traders exchanged captives for **firearms, brass pots, cowrie shells, cloth** and **manillas**. Manillas were a form of money usually made of copper alloys cast in moulds. They look like C-shaped bracelets. Thousands were manufactured in European cities. In 1505 an enslaved African would be sold for 10 manillas in Calabar (in present-day Nigeria). You can see examples of manillas – and moulds made from red Devon clay – in the museum in Exeter. The Exeter **foundry** stood in St Thomas close to the current train station.
- ▶ The first record of enslaved Africans being landed in the **English colony of Virginia** to work on **tobacco plantations** dates from 1619. This is when

tobacco exports to Britain began. There were tobacco traders in the north Devon town of Bideford. In 1700, **Exeter tobacco merchants** Daniel Ivy and Henry Arthur used their wealth to **finance a ship**. The ship, named the Daniel and Henry, brought them profit from its use in buying and selling sugar and people.

Devon land ownership:



Ceremonial headdress acquired through plantation owners in Demerara, made of toucan and scarlet macaw feathers, prized by peoples speaking Akawaio and Arekuna

- ▶ Devon residents included men and women linked to the trade through **owning land in the Caribbean**. Sometimes they took wealth from England to the Caribbean, and sometimes they used the money from their plantations or compensation to live in Devon.

- ▶ The Retreat in **Topsham** can still be seen today, along the riverside path next to the playground. It was built on the **site of a refinery** opened in 1684 by Samuel Buttall, who had a sugar plantation in South Carolina. Charles Buttall, his brother, also supplied the factory from his plantation in Barbados. In the 1780s the house belonged to Sir Alexander Hamilton, who had a sugar plantation in Grenada.
- ▶ Sugar exports from **Barbados** made it **England's richest colony in 1648**. In 1660, the acting governor was Thomas **Modyford** (son of the **Mayor of Exeter**) who had arrived in Barbados 13 years before. Modyford was responsible for laws known as the '**Slave Codes**' which described the way that enslaved Africans could be treated as '**chattels**', that is, as goods without human rights.



Artist Joy Gregory next to The Retreat in Topsham, built on the site of a sugar refinery and originally owned by Caribbean plantation owners

Sugar:



Fragments of sugar refining vessels excavated in Devon

- ▶ Dark, **semi-refined sugar was sent from the plantations**. It was melted in large pans, poured into ceramic moulds and left to crystallise to be sold in cone-shaped loafs. Any remaining sugar syrup was drained out into syrup pots in which the moulds stood. This could be made into **rum**.
- ▶ After sugar had crystallised in the moulds it was **refined, or whitened, by repeatedly pouring a solution of pipe clay** through it. The syrup pots came from kilns in **Somerset** and the sugar cones were made in Portugal.
- ▶ **Exeter was the third busiest site in the sugar trade** in 1720, behind only Bristol and Liverpool.
- ▶ Refinery locations provide concrete **evidence of Exeter's connection**, and the increase in local sugar production after 1680. A spot in Goldsmiths Street has been excavated, and there was a refinery behind Exeter Cathedral in the 1650s at the site of the Bishop's Palace (although not then under the control of the bishop).
- ▶ In the 1500s, **sugar was only available to very rich** people. Sugar cane was grown in Mediterranean countries and the islands of West Africa, where enslaved Africans were used as labour. When Europeans began new plantations in the Americas and the Caribbean, they were able to produce much

more sugar, still using enslaved people working for nothing. This meant the cost went down and by the 1600s ordinary people in Europe were enjoying sweet treats.

- ▶ From the 1660s, **coffee houses** were a focus for men to gather and discuss trade, politics and culture. They were places to smoke tobacco and drink coffee and rum made with sugar – all reliant on plantations using enslaved labour. **Mol's Coffee House** still stands in Exeter's Cathedral Close.
- ▶ After 1700, sugar was in great demand in households too, as a sweetener for the **new drinks of tea and coffee**. RAMM has examples of silverware from this period, as skilled **Exeter and Devon silversmiths** capitalised on the fashion.



Mol's Coffee House still stands in Exeter's Cathedral Close

Devon infrastructure funded by the slave trade



The Durbania genus was named in honour of butterfly expert William D'Urban, who had experienced the wildlife of South Africa since childhood.

- ▶ The transatlantic slave trade was connected in many ways to the **people and institutions at the heart of society** at the time, **from church and country house to museum and education**. The income from human beings and compensation at the end of the trade helped to fix their high status. These are some examples.
- ▶ **RAMM's first curator, William D'Urban**, and his wife came from families whose profits from slave plantations and compensation helped them to establish a privileged place in society. The South African city of Durban was named after his grandfather, Major General Benjamin D'Urban. Benjamin D'Urban was the first governor of British Guiana, on the **South American coastal** edge of the Caribbean.
- ▶ Demerara, now part of **Guyana**, might be familiar to you as a type of sugar. Both the father and uncle of William D'Urban's wife, Gertrude Porter, owned large plantations there, and spent much of their fortune on large county estates near Exeter. Henry Porter (her father) purchased **Winslade House and Park**, and Thomas Porter owned **Rockbeare Manor**.
- ▶ The Praed family established the Exeter Bank in 1769 on the site of what became the **Royal Clarence Hotel** in Exeter. Their assets included enslaved people in Jamaica.
- ▶ Peter Lear was a wealthy owner of sugar plantations in Barbados. He bought and rebuilt Lindridge, which was later owned by the **Baring banking family**. Barings opened the Devonshire Bank in Exeter in 1770.
- ▶ John **Rolle** was an MP for Devon, and the largest owner of enslaved people in the Bahamas. He built **Bicton** House near Exmouth around 1800.
- ▶ Maristow House in Bickleigh parish (painted by artist John Swete) was owned in turn by the Modyford, Heywood and Lopes families, who all owned Jamaican estates. Henry Lopes, Lord Roborough, was a benefactor of **Exeter University**, and the namesake behind **Lopes Hall** and the **Roborough Library**.

The campaign for freedom



Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit

- ▶ **Africans had long resisted capture and enslavement.** When kidnapped, they would fight to escape, and aboard ship they might **rebel and reject food**. **Suicide and infanticide** – killing their own children to save them from a life of enslavement – were desperate ways of refusing to be owned and controlled. On plantations, people might work slowly on purpose as a form of **protest**. **Resistance** by enslaved people was **brutally repressed**.
- ▶ Enslaved people sometimes managed to **escape** from plantation life and took refuge in areas such as nearby mountains. They joined with surviving indigenous Taino people and became known as **maroons**. While the names of some leaders are known, **countless unnamed people died in defiance**, resisting enslavement and insisting on their humanity. In British-held Jamaica and Demerara there were around 50 major revolts between 1731 and 1832 alone.

- ▶ The discovery of a planned uprising in Antigua in 1736 led to the execution of 88 people. Devon artist and vicar **Reverend John Swete** owned a sugar plantation in Antigua. He painted many local houses, rarely referring to the plantations or enslaved labourers that allowed him so much leisure and wealth.
- ▶ Enslaved workers were sometimes able to escape from their workplace or buy their freedom. Two examples of **former enslaved people who became free** were **Ignatius Sancho** and **Olaudah Equiano**.
- ▶ The painting now known as **Portrait of a Man in a Red Suit** is one of the most famous pictures in RAMM's Fine Art collection. Its subject, artist, date and meaning are all currently unknown and under debate. It was **once thought to show Olaudah Equiano or Ignatius Sancho**, both **freed people** who had significant roles in London society and the **abolitionist movement in the late 1700s**. For this reason it was known for some time as **Portrait of an African**.
- ▶ **Ignatius Sancho** was born around 1729 on a slave ship heading for the plantations of South America. As a toddler he was presented as a gift to a group of sisters in Britain. He lived with and served some wealthy families before setting up a shop with his wife, Anne Osborne, in London in 1773. As an independent businessman, Sancho was the **first known black Briton to vote**, in 1774. A composer, actor and writer, Sancho also made a significant impact on the abolition movement and was painted by famous artist **Thomas Gainsborough**.
- ▶ **Olaudah Equiano** (also known as Gustavus Vassa) was born in 1745 in West Africa and taken by force to the plantations of Barbados and Virginia. After travelling widely, he settled in Britain and married Susanna Cullen. As a youth he came to Falmouth and London. In 1777, he **visited Plymouth and Exeter**. Equiano, along with **Granville Sharp**, raised public awareness about the 1781 atrocity of the slave ship **Zong**, whose captain threw 133 **captives overboard** to claim £30 per head insurance money.

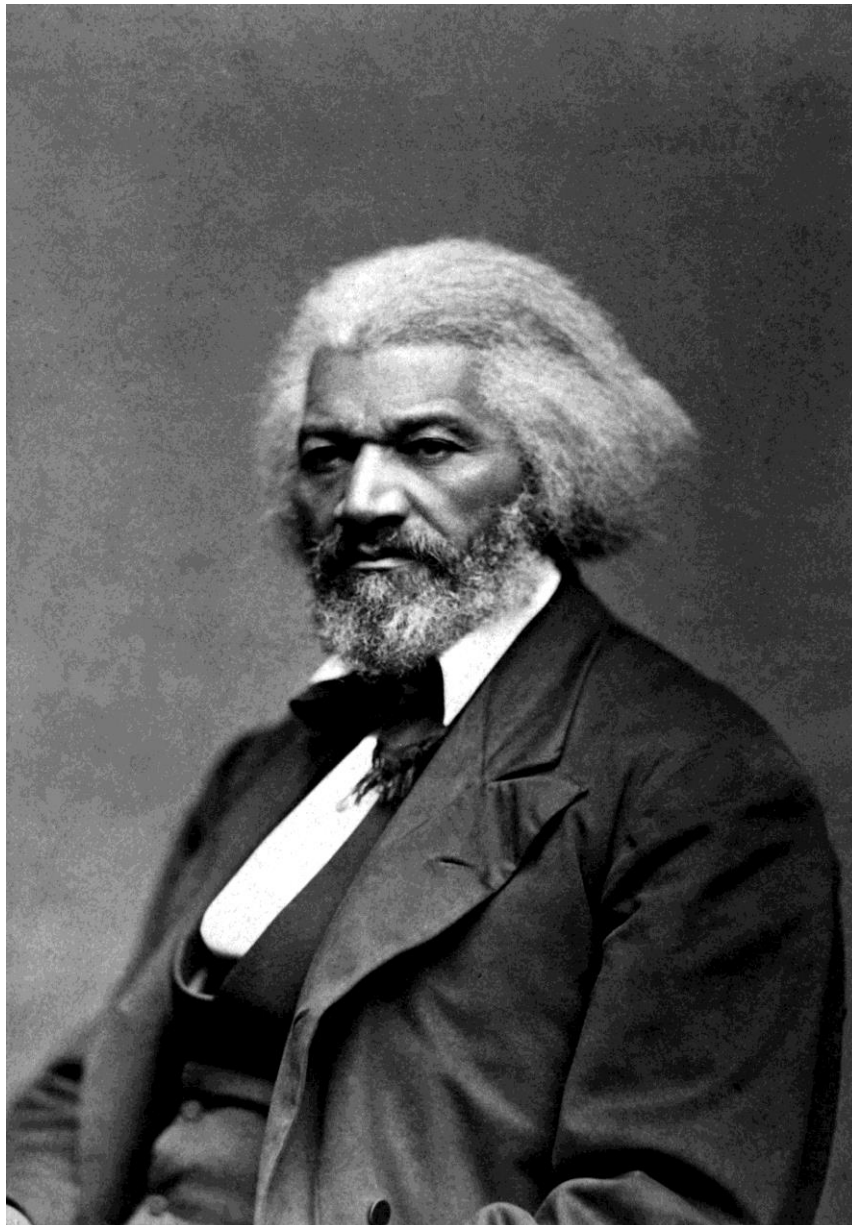
Abolition:



Silver sugar bowl, tongs and teapot, made between 1750 and 1800.

- ▶ By the 1760s **taxation on imported sugar was enough to maintain the whole British navy**. This highlights the important role of enslaved people in Britain's economic success.
- ▶ But not everyone in Britain approved of the transatlantic slave trade. From the 1780s, abolitionists were calling for Britons to **refuse to use sugar** grown by enslaved people, and some people chose **not to consume tobacco in protest**.
- ▶ Various places around the West Country were linked to prominent abolitionists and the campaign to end the slave trade. The **Plymouth Abolition Committee** published a **1788 pamphlet** showing the below-deck layout of a slave ship which became an **iconic and influential** pro-abolition image.
- ▶ An **1807 Act abolished the slave trade to British colonies**, but it was not until 1833 that slavery itself was abolished. Emancipating enslaved people would inflict huge financial losses on the enslavers so the government's solution was to **pay compensation to the slave owners** for their loss of 'human property'.
- ▶ Under the **Slavery Abolition act of 1833, £20 million was paid out** to slave owners. The promise of this compensation was crucial to securing abolition at this point. The government debt for these payouts was only **paid off in 2015**.

- ▶ **No money was paid to the enslaved people and liberated slaves were expected to work for another six years** on plantations serving an unpaid apprenticeship. **Protests** by abolitionists and freed people led to the **government ending the apprenticeship two years early**, in 1838.
- ▶ In later years, the West Country remained connected to the wider world. **Frederick Douglass**, an orator and black abolitionist who had been born into slavery in America, came to Devon in 1846 to generate support for abolition of slavery in the US.



Frederick Douglass (circa1879), Source: wikicommons, from U.S. National Archives and Record Administration (NARA).

Devon residents:



A mid-18th century embroidery shows a black servant holding a parasol over a finely dressed white woman.

- ▶ While many people of African heritage were made to work as **unpaid ‘servants’ or domestic labourers**, others became free and **were influential writers, musicians, traders and abolitionists**.
- ▶ Many **family portraits from the period show black people** - including children - dressed in the livery or uniform of the people they had to serve. **Contemporary artist Joy Gregory** responded in 2021 to an embroidery in RAMM’s collection depicting a black servant from a grand house near Exeter called Combesatchfield.
- ▶ Only a **few black people who were living in Devon** at the time of the slave trade **had their names documented**. There is a Werrington record of Philip Scipio in 1784 and Katheren Blackmore at Shute in 1619.
- ▶ Many **other stories have been lost** because the lives of these unpaid domestic labourers did not receive the same attention as their wealthy owners. So although there has been a **black presence in Devon for hundreds of years**, it is hard to calculate the total number of black residents before the 20th century.