

Timeline of the transatlantic slave trade

The trade in enslaved people across the Atlantic Ocean took place over four centuries. This timeline gives further details of the many events that took place during this time.

It is not an exhaustive list but complements the dates and information found on the [Information for Teachers page](#) and an interactive timeline with images on the In Plain Sight exhibition website [In Plain Sight - Transatlantic slavery and Devon - Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery \(rammcollections.org.uk\)](#)

Other sources – or you – could continue to trace the legacy of this history through the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.

Dates	Timeline text
1441	The start of the European trade in Africans, via the Cape Verde Islands. A Portuguese ship brings a cargo of enslaved Africans to Lisbon from Arguin on the West African coast.
1460	The Portuguese begin growing sugar on the Azores islands and Madeira.
1471	The Portuguese establish contact with 'the village of two parts' on the Gold Coast. This was the place known later as <i>El Mina</i> , the mine.
1480	The Portuguese make contact with the Kingdom of Loango in Central Africa, and begin a trade in enslaved captives who are taken to <i>El Mina</i> to be sold.
1492	Christopher Columbus sails to the 'New World', landing first in the Bahamas. He builds the first European settlement at <i>La Navidad</i> , on the island of Hispaniola. When the French took over the western part of the island, that part is called Saint Domingue and later becomes Haiti, while the eastern part is called Santo Domingo. Santo Domingo now refers to the capital of the Dominican Republic.
1498	The Spanish begin to take enslaved Africans to Jamaica. This continues until the English invade Jamaica in 1655.
1510	King Ferdinand of Spain orders enslaved Africans to be shipped to Hispaniola.
1562	Devon sailor John Hawkins is given permission by Queen Elizabeth I to work as a privateer and plunder enemy ships. Hawkins initially seizes over 300 enslaved people aboard a Portuguese ship and sells them to plantation owners in the West Indies. This begins England's association with the transatlantic slave trade. Hawkins and his cousin Francis Drake make more voyages together from 1562-67, exchanging enslaved African people for pearls, hides and sugar in the Americas. Hawkins' coat of arms depicts an enslaved person bound with ropes.

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1607	The first English colony in the Americas is founded at Jamestown in Virginia. Tobacco becomes increasingly popular as a trade item in the Americas, and is even used as currency in Jamestown.
1609	Sugar plantations are established by the English on Bermuda.
1619	First record of enslaved Africans being landed in Virginia to work on tobacco plantations, and tobacco exports to Britain begin.
1623	The British annexe the island of St Christopher in the Caribbean, also known as St Kitts. The first ship carrying enslaved Africans arrives three years later.
1625	The first English settlement on Barbados is founded.
1647	Thomas Modyford, son of the Mayor of Exeter, arrives in Barbados. Modyford takes his capital to the Caribbean to avoid reprisals in the English Civil War and to make his fortune from the trade in enslaved people and sugar. With fellow Devonian Royalists, John Colleton and Humphrey Walrond, Modyford becomes powerful in the Caribbean. He is acting governor of Barbados in 1660 and made a baronet by Charles II. Modyford establishes legislation in the sugar islands known as the 'Slave Codes'. These rules describe the way enslaved Africans can be treated as 'chattels', that is, as goods, and therefore without rights.
1648	Sugar exports from Barbados make it England's richest colony.
1668	The demand for sugar in Europe means that 20,000 new captured Africans are called for each year to work on England's Caribbean sugar plantations.
1674	The English establish Cape Coast Castle, on the coast of Ghana, to imprison kidnapped Africans before taking them by ship to the Americas.
1675	A rebellion in Barbados is brutally suppressed. As punishment, 11 people are beheaded, 6 burned alive, 25 executed and 70 flogged or deported.
1684	Samuel Buttall, owner of a sugar refinery in South Carolina (America) opens a sugar refinery in Topsham, near Exeter.
1688	English playwright Aphra Behn publishes her novel <i>Oroonko</i> about a royal African, one of the first published attacks on the transatlantic slave trade.
1699	The Swete family of Modbury in Devon take over the lease of a plantation in Antigua in the Caribbean.
1700	Exeter tobacco merchants Daniel Ivy and Henry Arthur finance a ship, the <i>Daniel and Henry</i> , to purchase sugar and slaves.
1700	Enslaved Africans now make up 80% of Caribbean residents.
1730	A female Maroon leader called Nanny organises and leads battles against the British in the Maroon War in Jamaica. Maroons are enslaved Africans who escaped from plantations to the hills. Jamaican Maroons win their freedom in 1739.

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1731	Ignatius Sancho is brought to England. Sancho was born around 1729 on a slave ship heading for the plantations of South America. As a toddler he is presented as a gift to a group of sisters in Britain. He lives with and serves various wealthy families before setting up a shop with his wife, Anne Osborne, in London in 1773. As an independent businessman, Sancho is entitled to vote, and votes in the elections of 1774 and 1780. A composer, actor and writer, Sancho also makes a significant impact on the abolition movement.
1735	Captain Mayne Swete, from Modbury in Devon, leaves his 337-acre sugar plantation in Liberta, Antigua, to his much younger wife, Esther. This inheritance later passes on to the artist and vicar Rev John Swete, in 1781.
1736	A planned uprising in Antigua is discovered, leading to the execution of 88 people.
1737	100 African captives attempt escape by jumping overboard, when Bristol ship <i>The Prince of Orange</i> arrives in St Kitts. Most are recaptured and 33 drown.
1750	Major slave revolt aboard the Bristol ship <i>King David</i> .
1753	Africans on board the <i>Adventure</i> seize the ship and run it aground.
1756	Olaudah Equiano is kidnapped and enslaved as a child. Born in 1745 in the Ibo region of Africa, Equiano is taken by force to the plantations of Barbados and Virginia around 1756. Although most enslaved Africans are made to work the plantations, Equiano is able to work on ships. As a youth he comes to Falmouth and London. He then travels widely in the Mediterranean, Caribbean, Atlantic and North Sea before buying his freedom in 1766. He settles in Britain and marries Susanna Cullen. He is active in the antislavery movement and uses his own first-hand experiences to educate abolitionists.
1760	A woman called Cubah helps to plan a rebellion in East Jamaica. Her clothes and regalia are rooted in West African traditions and she is known among enslaved people as the 'Queen of Kingston'.
1767	Jonathan Strong, who had been enslaved in Barbados, is prevented from being sold back into slavery in London. Strong is defended in court by abolitionist Granville Sharp. Sharp also successfully defends another former slave, Thomas Lewis, in 1771.
1768	Thomas Gainsborough paints <i>Portrait of Ignatius Sancho</i> while Sancho is valet to the Duke of Montagu.
1772	Lord Mansfield rules on slavery in England in the James Somerset Case. He finds that slave owners cannot force enslaved people living in England to return to plantations.
1772	Quobna Ottobagh Cugoano is brought to Britain. Born around 1757 in a Fante village in present-day Ghana, Cugoano is enslaved at 13 and initially taken to Grenada. In Britain he becomes a domestic servant to the Devon-born painter Richard Cosway and his wife Maria. Like many

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	Africans, Cugoano is given a European name when enslaved and is known to the Cosways as 'John Stuart'. Cugoano is a friend of abolitionist Granville Sharp and publishes influential anti-slavery books in 1787 and 1791.
1774	A major uprising occurs in Tobago; those who are recaptured are burned alive or have their hands cut off as punishment.
1774	Ignatius Sancho becomes the first known black Briton to cast his electoral vote.
1774	John Wesley publishes his anti-slavery tract, <i>Thoughts Upon Slavery</i> .
1777	Olaudah Equiano visits 'pious friends in Plymouth and Exeter'.
1778	Parliament appoints a committee to investigate the British slave trade.
1781	Luke Collingwood, Captain of the slave ship Zong, throws 133 captives overboard and claims £30 per head insurance money (the equivalent of around £2,000 today for each enslaved person killed). The Zong case comes to court twice, thanks to the efforts of Olaudah Equiano and Granville Sharp, and raises public awareness.
1782	Ignatius Sancho's letters are published posthumously as the <i>Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho</i> .
1783	The British lose the American War of Independence. Britain recruits 3,000 enslaved people offering them their freedom in exchange for fighting. On Britain's defeat, many of the black loyalists come to Britain. Others go to Nova Scotia and the West Indies.
1785	Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846) begins to publically argue for the need to end the slave trade and publishes his <i>Essay on Slavery and Commerce of Human Species</i> . His work influences William Wilberforce MP.
1787	In May, the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade is set up in London; it is made up largely of Quakers, and has Thomas Clarkson as Secretary.
1787	Quobna Ottobah Cugoano's highly influential book against the slave trade is published. <i>Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species</i> is widely read, translated into French, and reprinted three times in 1787. A second version is printed in 1791.
1787	Hannah More, a Bristol writer and socialite, publishes <i>The Black Slave Trade</i> , which is distributed by the Abolition Committee.
1788	In November, Thomas Clarkson visits Tiverton, Exeter and Plymouth to raise awareness of the abolitionist cause.
1788	The Plymouth Abolition Committee publishes a pamphlet with plan of the <i>Brookes</i> slave ship. It becomes an iconic and influential pro-abolition image.
1789	William Wilberforce MP tables a bill to abolish the slave trade but the pro-slavery lobby delays its debate for two years.

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1789	Olaudah Equiano publishes the book of his life: <i>The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African</i> . The text is critical to the campaign for abolition.
1791	Rebellion on the island of Dominica lasting four years. Some rebels evade capture until 1814.
1791	William Wilberforce presents his Abolition bill to parliament. The motion is defeated by 163 votes to 88.
1791	William Fox anonymously publishes a pamphlet, <i>On Abstaining from the Use of Sugar</i> , and starts a boycott of sugar in Britain.
1791	A slave revolt in Saint Domingue (modern-day Haiti) is led by black general Toussaint L'Ouverture. The rebellion successfully defeats the French in 1793 and 500,000 slaves are emancipated. Britain's contribution of 20,000 troops – at the request of plantation owners – is a complete failure, with most dying of yellow fever and few returning home.
1792	Anti-slavery meetings are held in Crediton, Exeter, Moretonhampstead, Plymouth, and Topsham.
1792	Wilberforce introduces a new bill to abolish the slave trade. This version is passed by the Commons, but blocked by the Lords.
1796	The ship London is wrecked off the north Devon coast near Ilfracombe at Raparee Cove, causing the death of 60 enslaved Africans.
1797	Samuel Mitchell, maternal grandfather of RAMM's first curator WSM D'Urban, becomes Acting Governor of Grenada in 1797 following a major uprising in 1795.
1797	Wilberforce tables the Slave Trade Abolition Bill. He repeatedly brings the bill to Parliament for the rest of his political career. The Act is eventually passed in 1833, just three days before his death.
1804	The Republic of Haiti is established on 1 January by formerly enslaved people. The rebels were led by Toussaint L'Ouverture.
1807	The Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade is passed. This bans the British from continuing to trade in enslaved people but existing enslaved people are not liberated and continue to rebel.
1816	A rebellion in Barbados led by Bussa is the largest in Barbadian history. Hundreds of enslaved people are killed or executed.
1819	The West Coast of Africa Squadron is established by the Royal Navy, with six ships. Its remit is to suppress the slave trade operated by ships of other countries.
1823	Uprising in Demerara (now part of Guyana) involving more than 10,000 enslaved people. It lasts two days; 27 are executed and their bodies displayed in public for months afterwards as a deterrent to others.
1831	Demerara and Essequibo are joined with Berbice to form British Guiana, and Major General Benjamin D'Urban, paternal grandfather of RAMM's first curator, is appointed the first Governor.

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1831	Sam Sharpe leads a rebellion in Jamaica but British troops regain control after two weeks. Over 500 enslaved people are killed or executed, including Sharpe. His owners are paid compensation for their loss.
1831	Mary Prince, an abolitionist and former slave in the West Indies, has her story published in England. <i>The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave</i> contributes to the growing abolition of slavery campaign.
1833	The Slavery Abolition Act is passed, agreeing to liberate some 800,000 enslaved people. However, a six-year 'apprenticeship' is imposed before the formerly enslaved can have full freedom.
1833	Revolt in St Kitts against the imposition of the six-year apprenticeship.
1834	The Slavery Abolition Act comes into force on 1st August. Twenty million pounds in compensation (around 1.3 billion today) is paid to the slave owners from 1835, but the previously enslaved receive nothing.
1839	The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society is formed. It continues as Anti-Slavery International.
1839	Enslaved Africans on <i>La Amistad</i> mutiny when the Spanish ship founders off Long Island. They are eventually allowed to return to Africa.
1840	Abolitionist artist J.M.W. Turner paints <i>Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on)</i> in a response to the Zong atrocity.
1846	Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), an orator and black abolitionist who had been born into slavery, comes to Devon to generate support for abolition of slavery in the US.
1865	Previously enslaved people in Morant Bay, Jamaica, protest against working conditions. Governor Eyre responds violently and his actions provoke fierce debate in Britain about empire and government in the colonies.
1865	William Stewart Mitchell D'Urban is the first curator of Exeter's Royal Albert Memorial Museum from 1865 to 1884.
1865	Victory of the Northern States in the American Civil War leads to the end of slave ownership in the United States, when the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution officially abolishes slavery.
1867	The West Coast of Africa Squadron is withdrawn. About 1,600 slave ships had been captured and nearly 150,000 Africans liberated between 1807 and 1860. About half of those 'recaptured' spend some time in Sierra Leone.