

Liverpool and the slave trade

During the 18th century, Liverpool made about £300,000 a year from the slave trade. In the 1780s Liverpool-based vessels alone carried more than 300,000 Africans into slavery. By 1795 Liverpool controlled over 60 per cent of the British and over 40 per cent of the entire European slave trade. Although Liverpool merchants engaged in many other trades and commodities, involvement in the slave trade occupied the whole port. Nearly all the main merchants and citizens of Liverpool, including many of the mayors, were involved. The wealth acquired by the town was substantial. The slave trade made a great deal of money for the city's docks. The stimulus it gave to trading and industrial development throughout the north-west of England and the Midlands was to have significant impact.

In 1700 Liverpool was a fishing port with a population of 5,000 people. By 1800, 78,000 people lived and worked in Liverpool. Thousands found work because of the slave trade: ships were needed which had to be built and equipped. Carpenters, rope makers, dock workers and sailors were all in demand. Others found work in banking and insurance.

Liverpool was prosperous and booming, and its success was the result of its involvement in the slave trade.

The Middle Passage

Conditions

The voyage from Africa to the New World of the Americas was called the Middle Passage. Slave ships usually took between six and eleven weeks to complete the voyage. Slave ships made large profits by carrying as many people as possible across the Atlantic to sell at auction. There were two methods of loading the ship:

Tight pack - this method involved packing as many enslaved people into the hold as possible. It was expected that some would die but a large number would survive the voyage. A ship's hold was cramped – only five feet high, with a shelf running round the edge to carry yet more enslaved people. People were loaded in so close together that one captain described them as being 'like books on a shelf'.

Loose pack – fewer enslaved people were loaded, giving them more space to lie out. More enslaved people survived the voyage, so less money was lost.

Cramped Enslaved people were chained and movement was restricted.

Enslaved people were unable to go to the toilet and had to lie in their own filth. Sickness quickly spread. Enslaved people were all chained together. If a slave died, the body could remain in the hold for hours, still chained to other living people. The state of the hold would quickly become unbearable – dark, stuffy and stinking. Aside from the heat and the foul air, there could be so little oxygen that a candle would not burn.

Food

African people were often unable to digest the food carried by the European crew, making the sickness worse. Many weakened quickly and died. Enslaved people who became sick were often denied food and left to die.

Mistreatment and humiliation

The crew's treatment of enslaved people was often horrific. Enslaved people were sometimes forced to dance on deck for an hour a day to keep them fit. Any resistance was dealt with harshly by **floggings** from the crew. Some enslaved people chose to take their own lives, sometimes by throwing themselves overboard, rather than endure such brutal treatment.

Sickness

Sickness on board a slave ship would often spread to the crew as well, killing many. The death rate among the enslaved people however, was horrific. It is estimated that 15–16 per cent of enslaved people died on the Middle Passage.

Slave Trade Act, 1788 - Dolben's Act

In 1788 British MP William Dolben put forward a bill to regulate conditions on board slave ships. He described horrors of enslaved people chained hand and foot, stowed like herrings in a barrel and stricken with putrid and fatal disorders. The Slave Trade Act, 1788 was passed and controlled the number of captives a ship was permitted to carry, according to its weight. Dolben's Act also ordered all slave ships to carry a doctor who had to keep records about the enslaved Africans on board.

These doctors received bonuses according to the number of Africans who survived the journey. Conditions however remained appalling.