

Manchester, cotton and the transatlantic slave trade

Manchester is a city shaped by cotton. From the late 18th century, the manufacturing of textiles in new, machine filled cotton mills transformed the town into a booming industrial centre, creating new patterns of life, generating great wealth for some, and shaping the city's growth. Yet innovation and profits went hand in hand with exploitation, on a local and a global scale. In Manchester's mills, thousands of people, including children, worked long, dangerous and exhausting days, providing the labour needed to keep the machines churning out cloth.

Manchester's transformation was also heavily reliant on the transatlantic slave trade, and on the exploitation of millions of enslaved African people who were forced to grow the cotton which supplied Manchester's mills. The story of Manchester's growth into the world's first industrial city cannot be understood without an appreciation of the African men, women and children and their descendants whose labour and exploitation fuelled the city's industrial expansion.

Cotton textiles were some of the most in-demand of all goods on the western coast of Africa where European slave traders operated. Slave traders purchased Indian cotton textiles, which they transported to West Africa and sold in exchange for captured human beings. In the 18th century, the demand for cotton goods as part of the transatlantic slave trade played a significant role in stimulating the early growth of Manchester's textiles industry. As while Indian textiles continued to be traded, increasingly, British slave-traders purchased Manchester-made cotton goods, produced in imitation of Indian textiles, which they loaded onto ships at Liverpool's port and transported to the western coast of Africa to be traded for captured African people. In 1788, Manchester's annual exports of textiles to Africa were estimated to be worth £200,000, around £24 million today.

Some of Manchester's wealthiest and most influential people were involved in the manufacturing and trading of such textiles, which were often known as 'Africa goods'.

Even after the British slave trade was abolished in 1807, merchants and manufacturers in Manchester continued to supply goods to Spanish and Portuguese slave traders until at least the mid-19th century.

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