

The start of trade and Liverpool's place, a historical background

In the 16th and 17th centuries Africa was very different from how it is today with many countries and regions very unlike the ones there are now. The many regions had connections through trade, the spread of religion, and migration but were mainly distinct and separate from each other.

Europeans and sub-Saharan Africans exchanged goods for hundreds of years along ancient trade routes. In the 16th century European ships began to make regular journeys to West Africa and to form trading relationships with the people there. The different African kingdoms were sophisticated societies, with defined structures, rules, and cultural practices. African craftspeople had a long tradition of creating both beautiful and functional goods. Their metalworkers used techniques in advance of their European counterparts. Music was an integral part of West African cultures. A huge variety of instruments were played at social and religious occasions, as well as for entertainment. Sophisticated systems of worship and spiritual belief formed a regular part of daily life. Initially it was the beautiful handmade pieces that the European traders sought from Africa, goods of carved ivory and wood. However events and discoveries in the New World of the Americas changed that trading relationship.

The transatlantic slave trade came into being because Europeans needed workers for their colonies in the Americas. The Europeans exploited the African systems of slavery and transformed it into a large-scale structured system. In this human beings were treated as property to be traded and forced to labour without any rights at all. The European colonists in the Americas realised that the land was suitable for growing crops that were highly profitable. The Portuguese began growing sugar on Brazil in the 1540s. As demand grew, plantations were established in the European colonies in the Caribbean. They grew cotton, coffee and tobacco.

Sugar growing is hard work and needs a large workforce. The colonists had removed the indigenous people by force or they had died after contracting European illnesses. The early British colonists tried to use the system of indentured labour bringing in workers from the UK, but it failed to provide the numbers required. More importantly it affected the potential profits. Using unpaid enslaved Africans to produce goods meant that the plantation owners kept nearly all the profits. All they had to pay out was the purchase price of the enslaved person (paid of course to another European, not the Africans themselves) and provide them with very basic food and shelter. Successful slave owners were able to amass vast personal fortunes. This wealth was in turn used to build grand houses and invest in other areas, such as iron, coal and banking. The profits from slavery helped change the industrial and economic face of Britain, transforming it into the First Industrial Nation. It was not just the slave owners that benefited from the wealth created by enslaved labour.

Britain's economy was changed by the increased demand for plantation produce. The working classes began to consume sugar on a regular basis: it was no longer a luxury. People wore clothes made of American cotton coloured with American dyes. They smoked pipes filled with Virginian tobacco, drank coffee and chocolate from Cuba and Brazil sweetened with Caribbean sugar, and sat at mahogany tables from the Caribbean and central America. All these goods were the products of slave labour. As supply and demand for plantation produce increased, so did the demand for enslaved Africans to produce it. In addition to the plantation owners and the industries they invested in, other British citizens received a direct financial benefit from the trade. Shipbuilders, bankers, insurers, rope-makers, metalworkers were all needed for the journey itself, whilst the local British merchants produced the goods and weapons that would be used to buy the Africans in the first place.

In 1562 Captain John Hawkins was the first British sailor to travel to West Africa, capture 300 African people, take them to the Americas and sell them as goods. After him the trade escalated, led officially by the port of London. The establishment of the Royal Africa Company in 1672 formalised the trade under a royal charter and gave the monopoly to London. The ports of Bristol and Liverpool in particular lobbied to have the charter changed and in 1698 the monopoly was taken away. Still for some years it was merchants from London and Bristol that profited on any scale.

Liverpool was responsible for transporting nearly 1.5 million Africans into slavery – more than 10% of all Africans transported. The reasons for Liverpool's success were based on its location in Britain's new industrial heartland. It could be easily reached by rivers and canals so that trade goods like cloth, guns and iron were brought cheaply to the port. Also the Liverpool merchants were sharp – they undercut their rivals' costs, reduced turnaround times, and increased the flexibility of their operations. They also developed close relationships with some African traders.