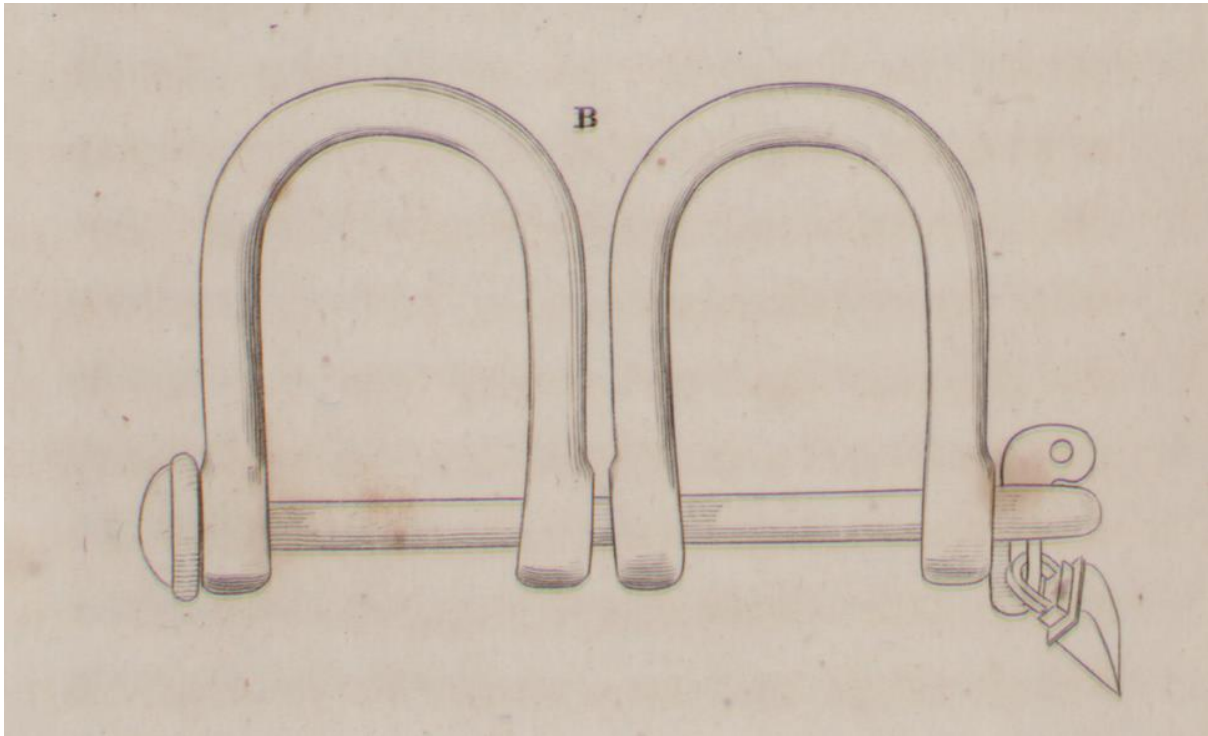


# Britain as a Slave Trader: First-hand Accounts from Africans Who Had Been Enslaved



This resource quotes directly from 18th / early 19th century historical sources and contains language and details about the attitudes towards people who were enslaved and trafficked from Africa during that time which some readers may find upsetting

The treatment of Africans from the earliest days of the Transatlantic Slave Trade suggests that the Africans captured and transported were not held in any esteem, and were regarded as cargo, as chattels and at times as wastage which was a common practice as a way of reducing slavers' costs. The systems used to create and operate the Transatlantic Slave Trade provided only for the basic and functional needs of the enslaved, and this led to many of them not surviving the Middle Passage route to the West Indies and the Americas. Abolitionists sought to bring the inhumane experiences of enslaved Africans to the attention of politicians and the public through statistics, images and descriptions. However, some MPs within Parliament took the opposite approach, by creatively stretching the truth.

## Fact Files: Britain's Role in The Transatlantic Slave Trade

### Attempts to justify the treatment of enslaved Africans

Sir William Pulteney, MP for Shrewsbury, claimed that *“from his own knowledge and means of information,” enslaved people are, “universally much better treated now than they were formerly”, but that it was, “absolutely necessary to use something of compulsion,”* on enslaved people.

Pulteney explained that the use of force on enslaved people is necessary because *“natives of warm countries are not naturally disposed to labour”*.

Many people in Britain were ‘pro-slavery’ because they were profiting from the slave trade. The pro-slavery lobby formed their own trade association known as the West India Committee, with members claiming: *“slaves had sufficient room and provision on board ships, they were well fed and clothed, and amused themselves with dancing.”*

Similarly, a slave ship captain, Thomas Tobin, claimed conditions for the enslaved on-board his ship were just like a *“nursery in any private family”* with the crew *“making everything as comfortable as could possibly be for the slaves.”*

**Did you know?** *Contemporary theories and scientific beliefs during the Transatlantic Slave Trade though now disproved, were used to justify slavery by dehumanising enslaved people.*

### Humanitarian arguments against the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Fortunately, not all Parliamentarians shied away from the truth.

**Did you know?** *John Huddleston MP for the Somerset constituency of Bridgewater labelled the Transatlantic Slave Trade, “the most detestable system of oppression and cruelty that ever disgraced a civilized nation”.*

### An African's tale

Many Africans however gave a very different account to that of the merchants and slave traders, and plantation owners and financiers about the experience of enslavement. Some of the freed Africans wrote their biographies, others published letters, and many toured the country giving talks and sharing their first-hand accounts. Tours and talks reinforced what was written but also gave the public opportunities to ask questions about what they could do to help abolish slavery and gave additional impetus to boycotts and campaigns.

**Did you know?** *The slave narrative is a type of literary genre involving the (written) autobiographical accounts of enslaved Africans, particularly in the Americas. Over six thousand such narratives are estimated to exist; about 150 narratives were published as separate books or pamphlets.*

One such story was, *‘The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African’*. Written in 1789, nine editions were published in his lifetime. In it Olaudah Equiano (1745 – 1797) writes of his time on board a slave ship:

## Fact Files: Britain's Role in The Transatlantic Slave Trade

*“The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential.*

*The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.*

*Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself, I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs.*

*Every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehensions, and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites. One day they had taken a number of fishes; and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on the deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well as we could, but in vain; and some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger, took an opportunity, when they thought no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but they were discovered, and the attempt procured them some very severe floggings.*

*Happily perhaps for myself I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters. In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries.*

*Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself, I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs.*

*Every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehensions, and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites. One day they had taken a number of fishes; and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on the deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well as we could, but in vain; and some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger, took an opportunity, when they thought no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but they were discovered, and the attempt procured them some very severe floggings.*

## Fact Files: Britain's Role in The Transatlantic Slave Trade

*One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea: immediately another quite dejected fellow, who on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed.*

*Those of us that were the most active were in a moment put down under the deck, and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat out to go after the slaves. However two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery.*

*We were not many days in the merchant's custody before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: - On a signal given, (as the beat of a drum) the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make a choice of that parcel they like best. The noise and clamour with which this is attended, and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers, serve not a little to increase the apprehension of the terrified Africans, who may well be supposed to consider them as the ministers of that destruction to which they think themselves devoted. In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again.*

*I remember in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the men's apartment, there were several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion to see and hear their cries at parting. O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends, to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations, now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery with the small comfort of being together and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery."*

Enslaved Africans, on the second leg of the Triangular Trade known as the Middle Passage were kept chained and shackled, in tightly confined spaces, with punishments for disobeying orders, including whipping. The journey was one of misery and suffering, made even more harrowing because families and people from the same tribe were often separated as a way of controlling them, and people were put into the hold with others from different societies and cultures, with different languages, and sometimes with groups who had recently been at war with each other.

Food and water were limited, and physical and mental illnesses were rife, including depression and trauma, known at the time as "Fixed Melancholy". Food usually consisted of

## Fact Files: Britain's Role in The Transatlantic Slave Trade

the same poor quality, starchy rations such as rice, millet, cornmeal, or yams. There were very few, if any, facilities provided for the enslaved to use the toilet and wash themselves. Illnesses such as diarrhoea and seasickness were common, forcing the enslaved to survive in dangerously unsanitary conditions.

Some slave traders also used humiliating tactics to belittle the enslaved forcing them to “dance” as a way of getting exercise when they took them from the hold of the ship onto the deck. This ‘dance on demand’ required the enslaved to bend their bodies and move under the pole held out by the sailors that had been used to undo their chains. This action is remembered when the Limbo dance is done.

Many enslaved people preferred to commit suicide as a way of escaping and resisting the inhumane and horrific conditions they faced. Many also died because of illness and injury. It’s estimated that up to 20% of enslaved people died on slave ships, during the voyage from Africa to British colonies in the Caribbean and the Americas. That’s around 2 million people.

### A surgeon’s tale

Alexander Falconbridge, an abolitionist who had worked as a surgeon on several slave ships, reported on life for the enslaved in his writings, including what life was like for enslaved women aboard:

*“The hardships and inconveniences suffered by the Negroes during the passage are scarcely to be enumerated or conceived. They are far more violently affected by seasickness than Europeans. It frequently terminates in death, especially among the women.”*

Falconbridge also reported on the other hardships facing enslaved African women, including sexual abuse and rape.

*“On board some ships the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they can procure. And some of them have been known to take the inconstancy of their paramours so much to heart as to leap overboard and drown themselves. The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure and sometimes are guilty of such excesses as disgrace human nature....”*

### Children on board

Life for children aboard slave ships was also far from easy, as they were often punished for crying, or for refusing to eat. Around a quarter of those transported on slave ships were children. Slave traders usually considered anyone under 4 foot 4 inches as a child. The voyage from Africa to British colonies in the Caribbean and the Americas took around 80 days. Many children fell ill and died from illnesses like yaws (a skin infection) and intestinal worms, as well as diarrhoea, dysentery, malaria, pleurisy, yellow fever, smallpox and scurvy. Sick children were sometimes thrown overboard to prevent them from infecting others.

Rather than being kept in the hold with enslaved adults, children were allowed on deck. Some were often given old clothes or taught games by the crew, but this doesn’t mean they escaped punishment, hunger, or illness.

## Fact Files: Britain's Role in The Transatlantic Slave Trade

As the slave trade progressed, children became seen as a better “investment” by slave traders and slave owners, because they would live longer.

The African Abolitionist, Ottobah Cugoano (1757 – 1791) was kidnapped and sold into slavery as a child. In his published narrative, *‘Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species’* (1787), Cugoano also known as John Stuart, described his experience as an enslaved person:

*“I was brought from a state of innocence and freedom, and in a barbarous and cruel manner, conveyed to a state of horror and slavery.”*

The Abolitionist, William Wilberforce, MP, who many credit with bringing about the end of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, said:

*“Never can so much misery be found condensed in so small a place as in a slave ship during the Middle Passage.”*