

Britain's slave past

How much do you know about the Britain's involvement in Africa and slavery?

Here are 15 facts

1. Britain was the largest European slave-trading nation. It is estimated that British ships captured and transported more than three million West African people across the Atlantic Ocean.
2. Members of the British royal family were the first European royalty to go to West Africa. In 1660, after the Restoration of Charles II, a new slave-trading company was set up in London called the Royal Adventurers into Africa. The Duke of York - brother of King Charles II - was the president of the new company which was given a monopoly of the English African trade for 1,000 years.
3. Queen Charlotte, who was married to King George III, is listed as one of the 100 Great Black Britons of all time. Born in 1744, Charlotte was a direct descendant from Margarita de Castro y Sousa – a black branch of the Portuguese Royal House. If in doubt about her ethnicity there are portraits of the queen with her 'negroid' features in Kensington Palace.
4. More than 10 million tons of sugar cane was exported from the Caribbean during the slave trade. However, once the abolition movement came into full swing spearheaded by the Quakers, 40,000 Britons refused to eat plantation-grown sugar following their campaign in 1791.
5. The Royal Geographical Society (RGS), which was established in 1830 to advance geographical science around the globe, paid respect to slaves James Chuma (1850-1882) and Abdullah Susi also known as David (died 1891) for their Christian missionary work educating fellow liberated Africans. Both slaves belonged to Dr David Livingstone, who was and still is regarded as the most famous explorer of the RGS. He was the first European to cross the African continent from the Atlantic to the Indian coast.
6. Saartje Baartman was caged and shipped from South Africa to Piccadilly Circus for Londoners to gawk at. People came from far and wide, including scientists, to look at the Khoikhoi woman nicknamed 'Hottentot Venus' due to her bottom, which they considered to be extremely large. She was later taken to Paris where she received further humiliation until she died. Rather than being laid to rest, her body was dissected, and her brain and genitalia pickled and displayed until 1974 in the Musee de l'Homme.
7. George VI was blown over by the talent of George Bridgwater (1779-1860) talent who played the violin in Paris, aged nine, with Italian composer Giovanni Giordano. Determined to nurture his musical gift, George VI paid for the best tutors to nurture the mulatto violinist's talent. Bridgewater, who was born to a Bajan father and Polish mother, played in the Prince of Wales's band at the Royal Pavilion, including Covent Garden, Drury Lane and Haymarket theatres for 14 years. He is best remembered today for his association with Ludwig van Beethoven. Comparable to Mozart, despite his success as a musician he died an old man living in poverty in Peckham, south London. He is buried in Kensal Green cemetery, in west London.
8. The popular Christian hymn Amazing Grace was penned by one of Britain's biggest slave merchants, John Newton (1725–1807). Returning from Sierra Leone with a cargo of African men and women, a terrible storm battered his ship forcing him to cry out to God for mercy. It was a moment that marked the beginning of his spiritual conversion. His career in slave-trading lasted a few more years until he quit going to sea and began studying theology.
9. Penny Lane, the street made famous in a song by The Beatles, is named after Liverpool slave ship owner James Penny, who made his fortune in the slave industry. Today there are countless streets in Liverpool like Penny Lane that reveal its slave past, such as Earle Street, Water Street, Cunliffe Street, Dale Street, York Street and Gildart Street.
10. Barings Bank (1762-1995) was the oldest merchant bank in London until its collapse in 1995. Its founder, Sir Francis Baring, earned nearly £7 million from a business of dealing in slaves that went back 70 years. Baring Road in south London is named after him. He was said to have started trading in slaves when he was just 16, indicating his family's immense wealth and business connections with the West Indies.
11. The founding collection of pictures at the National Gallery in London was given by John Julius Angerstein. Angerstein built up his art collection with the money made from the slave trade, and his activities as one of Lloyd's underwriters insuring the slavers.
12. Many historians argue that the Bank of England should well have been called the Bank of the West Indies, because of its involvement in slavery. The Bank's governor, Humphrey Morice, owned six slave ships between 1716 and 1729. Sir Richard Neave, a director for 48 years, was chairman of the Society of West Indian Merchants. Slaves were sold on the London Royal Exchange and "other places of public resort", many of them children.
13. The Royal Dockyard at Deptford played a significant role in the slave trade. In 1553, The Primrose, a ship built at Deptford, in south London, provided the first contact between the English and African Kingdom of Benin. The journey was a business enterprise that involved the young adventurer, Martin Frobisher. Although he is known for his voyages to the Arctic and China (from which he was seen off from Deptford by Elizabeth I in 1576), he spent his early years sailing around the coast of West Africa involved in the slave trade.
14. The first record of African slaves in south east London was on November 2, 1501, when Catherine of Aragon arrived in Deptford with two slaves from Spain to marry Henry VII's eldest son, Arthur.
15. Britain's slave trade began in Mincing Lane, central London, 450 years ago, when resident John Hawkins planned the first English slaving trips to Africa. Hawkins sailed from The Barbican in

Plymouth in 1562, kidnapping 400 Africans from Guinea, which he later traded in the West Indies. Hawkins' personal profit from selling slaves was so huge that Queen Elizabeth I granted him a special coat of arms. He was appointed as Treasurer for the Navy in 1577 and knighted in 1588. He is remembered today in his hometown, Plymouth, where there are numerous public monuments to his achievements, including Sir John Hawkins Square. However, there are no public monuments to the thousands of Africans killed and enslaved by Hawkins.